

# SOC6516: Culture I

Instructors: Professors Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann

Class: Wednesdays and Fridays, 2-4pm, room 17146

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## Course Description

This seminar provides an introduction to some of the principal approaches to the sociological study of culture. The course is designed to equip students with an overview of how sociologists conceive of culture, the methodological approaches they use to study it, the major debates within the field, and an appreciation for how the field has evolved in the past few decades. Emphasis is on understanding how culture influences action, the relationship between culture and social inequality, how culture is produced and consumed, and how to measure meaning. Along the way, students will learn what the sociology of culture offers for studying a range of cultural objects, such as food, music, scents, and books, and also the cultural dimensions of diverse phenomena such as networks, bodies, and families.

## Course Format

This class is run entirely in-person and there is no option for remote attendance. The instructional design places a significant emphasis on regular and sustained involvement with course topics and readings throughout the semester. The intention is to encourage a consistent and thoughtful in-class dialogue, taking advantage of in-person, small class learning and interaction. The course requires regular reading and reflection, and is designed to discourage a high-stakes, end-of-semester orientation which we find less helpful for learning.

## Session Topics & Readings

### (1) Introduction (May 1)

Back, Les, et al. 2012. "Defining Cultural Sociology." Pp.19-30 in *Cultural Sociology: An Introduction*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Wohl, Hannah, and Gary Alan Fine. 2016. "Reading Rites: Teaching Textwork in Graduate Education." *The American Sociologist*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12108-016-9322-0>.

Please read for the first class. Related to the reading by Back et al., we will discuss the distinction between the sociology of culture, cultural sociology, and cultural studies. The sociological study of culture concerns two separate, but interrelated areas of study. The first area involves studying culture as a kind of norm, value, or belief system – as in, “I eat meat because it is part of my culture”. This is often referred to as cultural sociology, and frequently addresses the collective impact, and structural implications of collective belief systems. Cultural sociology prioritizes interpretive analysis. The second area – the sociology of culture – involves scholarship on cultural phenomena/objects: art museums, restaurants, Hollywood films, and opera. The sociology of culture prioritizes enlightened positivism, of the sort that we would see in other sociological subfields. The Wohl and Fine article takes on the topic of “how to read” in graduate school. We will use this piece of a jumping off point to discuss today (and throughout the semester) the most effective way to read articles, take notes, and keep track of our ideas. (This is especially important for PhD students who are planning to take comprehensive exams.)

## (2) How is Culture Related to Action? A Deceptively Complex Question (May 3)

Lizardo, Omar. 2017. "Improving cultural analysis: Considering personal culture in its declarative and nondeclarative modes." *American Sociological Review* 82: 88-115.

Vaisey, Stephen. 2009. “Motivation and Justification: A Dual-Process Model of Culture in Action.” *American Journal of Sociology* 114(6):1675–1715.

Swidler, Ann. 2001. *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp. 1-40.

*One vein of discussion in the sociology of culture is to categorize different kinds of culture in order to understand variation in how culture matters for social life. This can be helpful, allowing us to have focused and coherent conversations. But it turns out that we don't have full agreement on how to identify the variations of culture, because there are competing and complementary conceptualizations of culture. The above readings highlight that it can be helpful to parse out how different forms of culture do different things. Further, instead of a focus on what is or is not culture, these readings highlight that we can use cultural sociology as an approach that can illuminate the cultural dimensions of all kinds of behaviours.*

## (3) The Empirical Study of Culture (May 8)

Mohr, John W., Christopher A. Bail, Margaret Frye, Jennifer C. Lena, Omar Lizardo, Terence E. McDonnell, Ann Mische, Iddo Tavory, and Frederick F. Wherry. 2020. *Measuring Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press. Intro and chapters 1 – 3.

Pugh, Allison. 2013. "What Good Are Interviews for Thinking About Culture? Demystifying Interpretive Analysis." *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 1(1): 42-68.

*One key dimension of cultural phenomena is that they are understood to have meaning for people. Methodologically, the challenge is that meaning is created inside people's heads, and it's different for each person. It's not straightforwardly observable and measurable. These readings advise sociologists about how to best tackle this challenge: how to empirically capture and analyze complex meaning systems. Culture is also understood to be a dimension of objects and relationships, and we will discuss how to observe and measure the cultural dimensions of objects and relationships.*

#### (4) Culture as Capital (May 10)

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. "The Forms of Capital," In *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by John G. Richardson, 241–58. New York: Greenwood Press.

Carter, Prudence L. 2003. "'Black' Cultural Capital, Status Positioning, and School Conflicts for Low-Income African American Youth." *Social Problems* 50(1):136-155.

Prieur, Annick, Mike Savage, and Magne Paalgard. 2023. "Distinctions in the Making : A Theoretical Discussion of Youth and Cultural Capital." *British Journal of Sociology*, no. May 2022: 1–16.

*The English-language subfield of the sociology of culture was transformed in the 1980s by the incorporation of Bourdieusian analysis. A tremendous amount of contemporary cultural analysis is influenced by Bourdieu, and Bourdieusian concepts and vocabulary have filtered out into general usage -- especially the influential idea of cultural capital, which has expanded to include aesthetic capital, racial capital, bodily capital and sexual capital. For these reasons, it is useful to gain an acquaintance with Bourdieu's core cultural ideas early on in the course.*

#### (5) How Does Culture Generate Inequality? (May 15)

Small, Mario Luis, David J. Harding, and Michèle Lamont. 2010. "Reconsidering Culture and Poverty." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 629(1):6-27. [1]

Lamont, Michèle, Stefan Beljean, and Matthew Clair. 2014. "What is missing? Cultural processes and causal pathways to inequality." *Socio-Economic Review* 12,3: 573–608.

Lareau, Annette. 2002. "Invisible Inequality: Social Class and Childrearing in Black Families and White Families." *American Sociological Review* 67(5):747–76.

*The concept of a "culture of poverty" was proposed in the 1960s to understand persistent inequality in the United States. The idea was quickly critiqued as an instance of blaming the victim, because it suggested that poor people were doing things that caused their own poverty. As we know, poverty has structural roots (i.e., our current capitalist system is set up so that there will always be poor people). How can we bring our cultural perspectives to bear on this problem in a productive way? These readings demonstrate recent advancements in conceptualizations of how culture works, and the relationship between culture and structure, while avoiding the problem of victim-blaming.*

## (6) How Does Culture Legitimate Inequality? (May 17)

Sherman, Rachel. 2018. "A very expensive ordinary life': consumption, symbolic boundaries and moral legitimacy among New York elites." *Socio-Economic Review* 16,2: 411-433.

Johnston, Josée, and Shyon Baumann. 2007. "Democracy vs. Distinction: A Study of Omnivorousness in Gourmet Food Writing." *American Journal of Sociology* 113,1:165-204.

*Although it is socially unacceptable to be a discriminatory snob and to flaunt disparities in wealth and power, inequality is pervasive and its magnitude is growing. How is inequality perpetuated in the face of social norms of equality? These articles explore cultural frames that people employ in order to legitimate inequality. Through cultural consumption, values, and tastes, people achieve distinction (à la Bourdieu), but they can also frame their consumption, values, and tastes as morally acceptable even when they work to enable inequality and to reinforce hierarchical boundaries.*

## (7) Cultural Production (May 22)

Peterson, Richard A. and N. Anand. 2004. "The Production of Culture Perspective." *Annual Review of Sociology* 30:311-334.

Childress, Clayton. 2017. *Under the Cover*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. "Introduction. The Estrangement of Creation, Production and Reception."

Menon, Alka V. 2019. "Cultural gatekeeping in cosmetic surgery: Transnational beauty ideals in multicultural Malaysia." *Poetics* 75, 101354.

*The sociological study of culture has a long history of studying cultural objects, that is, things that are widely understood to be primarily vehicles of meaning. Art works, such as novels,*

*paintings and television shows, are primary examples. But almost anything people make can be a cultural object if we adopt a cultural perspective for analysis. This week's readings provide a framework for understanding the importance of studying the processes through which cultural objects come into being. The production perspective encourages scholarship to understand the linkage between the conditions of production and the eventual shape that cultural objects take, including the meanings they can carry.*

## (8) Consuming Culture (May 24)

Pugh, Allison J. 2011. "Distinction, Boundaries or Bridges?: Children, Inequality and the Uses of Consumer Culture." *Poetics* 39(1):1–18. [1]

Thumala Olave, María Angélica. 2020. "Book Love. A Cultural Sociological Interpretation of the Attachment to Books." *Poetics* 81: 101440.

Rawlings, Craig M., and Clayton Childress. 2019. "Emergent meanings: Reconciling dispositional and situational accounts of meaning-making from cultural objects." *American Journal of Sociology* 124.6: 1763-1809.

*In these readings, we learn about various ways to conceptualize the process of consuming culture. These authors provide novel ways for understanding the causes and consequences of how people make meaning from cultural objects. How do people consume in different ways? To what extent is consumption structured by social context? To what extent do people more agentically "use" culture for their own ends?*

## (9) Classifying and Evaluating Culture (May 29)

Zelizer, Viviana. 2011. *Economic Lives: How Culture Shapes the Economy*. Princeton University Press. Princeton: Princeton University Press. "Introduction" (pp. 1-12), "Human Values and the Market" (pp. 19-39), "The Price and Value of Children" (pp. 40-60).

Baumann, S., M. Szabo, and J. Johnston. 2019. "Understanding the Food Preferences of People of Low Socioeconomic Status." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 19 (3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540517717780>.

Baumann, Shyon, Emily Huddart Kennedy, and Josee Johnston. 2022. "Moral and aesthetic consecration and higher status consumers' tastes: The "good" food revolution." *Poetics* 92: 101654.

*How and why do we place things in categories? Why are these categories often hierarchical? What are the consequences of evaluations? How do those placements relate to social distinctions and patterns? If cultural reception involves individual-level interpretations, why do we see clear patterns and agreement in how cultural objects are perceived? How are these patterns accomplished?*

## (10) Taste & Group Boundaries (May 31)

Banks, Patricia A. 2010. *Represent: Art and Identity Among the Black Upper-Middle Class*. New York: Routledge. Chapters 1, 4, 5, and 6, pp. 1 – 12, 55 - 96.

Oshotse, A., Berda, Y., & Goldberg, A. 2024. "Cultural Tariffing: Appropriation and the Right to Cross Cultural Boundaries." *American Sociological Review*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00031224231225665>

Childress, Clayton, Shyon Baumann, Craig Rawlings, and Jean-François Nault. 2021. "Genres, Objects, and the Contemporary Expression of Higher-Status Tastes." *Sociological Science* 8,12. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15195/v8.a12>

*While Bourdieusian analysis highlights the "homology" between class and culture, a long line of empirical research complicates the Bourdieusian perspective. Bourdieu specialized in classed tastes, but others have expanded on his work to understand other axes of differentiation, such as race and ethnicity. Bourdieu also emphasized that high status people prefer to consume the most consecrated, highest status culture. Although Bourdieu's theories have received a lot of empirical support, this research has been hampered in various ways. Methodologically, past work has had to rely on quite crude measures of cultural consumption and cultural consecration. Substantively, Bourdieu neglected close analysis of the aesthetic preferences of people with low levels of economic and cultural capital. This week's readings seek to build on Bourdieu's work on taste by making both theoretical and methodological innovations.*

June 5-7: Work on final paper and presentation

## (11) Issues in Culture and Cognition (June 12)

Leschziner, Vanina and Adam Isaiah Green. 2013. "Thinking about Food and Sex: Deliberate Cognition in the Routine Practices of a Field." *Sociological Theory* 31(2):116-144.

Johnston, Josée, Shyon Baumann, and Merin Oleschuk. 2021. "Capturing Inequality and Action in Prototypes: The Case of Meat-Eating and Vegetarianism." *Poetics* 87 (November 2020): 101530. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2021.101530>.

*In addition to the Bourdieusian concepts, another foundational set of concepts come from the vein of research that can be called "culture and cognition." We will discuss how these concepts can help explain the relationship between culture and behavior. We will also work to appreciate how this literature emphasizes an understanding of culture that is quite different from the study of cultural objects.*

(12) Final Presentations (June 14)

## Course Requirements

Reading Memos (8 minimum); graded as ✓(8.5/10), ✓+ (9/10), check-✓- (7.8/10); post on Quercus discussion board	35%
Class Presentation on Weekly Topic	15%
Class Participation	20%
Final Writing Assignment and Presentation	30%

## Reading Memos

Each week you will prepare a brief reading response (approximately 500-750 words, or 2-3 double-spaced pages) for each class that will help you digest the readings. You will post this response on the course website under "Discussions". You must post a minimum of **8 responses** in the semester, but we encourage you to check in on the website discussion board weekly.

Reading memos constitute the heart of the work in this course. They reflect the intellectual work of reading, note-taking, and reflecting on the assigned materials. Through memo'ing, you will hone your skills reading sociological texts and parsing out the most important pieces for your own research, writing, and interventions in the field.

As part of the weekly memo'ing process, we encourage you to experiment with and develop your own system of note-taking. We will spend class time discussing what works (and doesn't work), and share our ideas for effective reading.

Think of your reading memos as "works in progress", rather than final masterpieces. They are a way to focus your reading and reflections. In your memos, include what you think are the key

points for each reading, but you should also focus on developing your analytical skills by synthesizing key themes, comparing readings, and asking critical questions.

## Evaluation

Your reading responses for the semester will be evaluated as **check (85%)**, **check – (78%)**, and **check + (90%)**. Please come to office hours for feedback on the quality of your posts. Your reading response must be submitted on Quercus the day before class (by 5:00 p.m.), since they will inform our class discussion and debate.

## Memo Format

Please avoid using point form, and organize your ideas into coherent paragraphs. Subtitles are acceptable, and using a catchy title is encouraged. Don't be afraid to be provocative in your responses, and connect the reading to your own research interests.

Each memo should contain the following: **3 keepers, 2 questions, and 1 'so what'**. You don't have to present your memo in this order, but it should contain these component parts.

**3 Keepers: A brief assessment of (at least) three key ideas in the readings.** To come up with these "keepers", ask your questions like the following: What ideas and theories of culture are being invoked, or challenged? What empirical questions are being asked? What are key arguments? What are key concepts, and how are they defined? What connections can you make across the readings?

- Please touch briefly on all the assigned readings in your memo, even if you decide to put most of your focus on one reading.
- Because space is limited, you can focus on what you find particularly interesting, important, and relevant for your own research agenda.

**2 (minimum) Discussion Questions.** Your discussion questions help generate class discussion, but also give us a sense of how you are engaging with the course readings.

- Good questions focus on core and critical issues or make connections between different readings.
- Avoid questions that can easily be answered in a sentence or two and yes/no questions.
- To generate questions, you might want to reflect on what is strong or weak about the article(s). You might also want to think about how the article(s) connects to other larger issues in sociology, or broader social problems.

**1 'so what' evaluation:** tell us why the topic matters. Explain why you think it is (or is not) sociologically relevant.

**Relevant Context (optional).** Include any related links, video, photographs or academic articles you think are relevant or connected. The memos are most interesting (and generative) when people view them creatively, and use the texts as a jumping off point to think about other ideas, theories, and social phenomena.



## Why a discussion board?

We are making use of the Quercus discussion board tool to allow your responses to be dialogical, and to provide a space for you to post any cultural observations, questions, or random thoughts that occur to you throughout the week. We will check in regularly on the discussion board, and will expect you to read and comment on each other's posts. Your comments on other students' posts will be factored into your participation grade.

## Class Presentation

Students are expected to introduce the day's topic with a short presentation (10-15 minutes maximum). How often each student offers an introduction will depend on the course enrollment. You should connect with other students presenting on the same day so you can organize, divide up the readings, and decide who will present first. You can coordinate your presentation or complete the task relatively independently.

## SUBSTANCE OF PRESENTATION

These presentations are not intended to be onerous research projects. Instead, think of it as an opportunity to gain experience introducing complex topics, writing concise oral overviews, generating discussion questions, and communicating academic ideas in a clear, accessible way. Student presentations can include a small amount of summary to refresh the collective memory of the class, but in general, presenters should assume that the class members have done the readings. Remember that a key goal of a class presentation is to *energize* class discussion. For that reason, always try to avoid too much repetition, rambling, and monotone reading.

When it comes to organizing the presentation, you have some creative license. Your presentation strategy will depend on your general presentation style and skill-set. I recommend including the following: brief summary; methodological issues; key substantive points; connections to other course concepts/readings; questions for discussion. Above all, you should come to class prepared to answer the question, "why does this topic matter?". I encourage you to come to class with a cultural artifact (e.g., an advertisement, a video-clip, food), if you are inspired to do so. This is not required, but can be a useful way to introduce the relevance of the topic.

## GRADING CRITERIA

Your presentation will be graded on 1) comprehension of the reading(s); 2) sociological imagination; 3) presentation style (e.g., eloquence, timing, clarity); 4) quality of handout.

## PRESENTATION HANDOUT

You are required to circulate a short handout (1-2) for your presentation. You can also use a PowerPoint presentation, but please arrange to have the projector available and working. The format of the handout is up to you. Please treat the handout (or slide show) as a map of your presentation, and not a transcript of your presentation.

## Class Participation

Participation in the seminar is valued at 15%. Students are expected to come to class having done the readings, reviewed your fellow classmates reading responses (see below), and participate actively in class discussions.

If you find classroom discussions a challenge for some reason, please speak with me at the beginning of the semester. If you must miss a class, please inform us beforehand. Unexcused absences and not engaging in classroom discussions will negatively impact your participation grade.

## Final Writing Assignment & Presentation: Cultural Object Analysis

Your final writing assignment is an analysis of a cultural object of your choosing. Remember that a cultural object is primarily defined by the application of a lens of cultural analysis, so you are not limited in the object you choose. Remember also that cultural objects can be material or ideational. Your assignment should incorporate at least three course readings, and you should incorporate at least two readings from outside the syllabus as well. You can pick a physical object (e.g., a designer handbag, a hamburger, a pair of sneakers), or a cultural concept (e.g., art museums, diets, marriage). Your analysis can focus on cultural production, cultural reception, or cultural content. For example an analysis of “marriage” as a cultural object might explore the different meanings people hold of marriage, or the historical or contemporary conditions that shape the nature of marriage. Furthermore, you might want to explore how understandings of marriage are linked to class inequality or gender inequality. Although we do not have any readings on marriage per se on the syllabus, you could draw on concepts from readings that you are able to apply to the case of marriage. For example, you might draw on “the production of culture perspective” from the reading by Peterson and Anand, if you were analyzing the forces shaping the form of modern marriages.

In your final presentation you will present your final paper to the class. The format of the presentation is up to you, but you should aim to use this presentation to practice your oral presentation skills. Your presentation will be short (exact timing will be determined by class enrollment) and will be followed with a short Q&A session. You need to be able to explain and elaborate on your analysis.

Your assignment should be 2000-2500 words in length, and it is due by 11:59pm on June 17. Your final presentation will be given in class on June 14. Submit your slides and your assignment to Quercus.