

**SUPPLEMENTARY WEB MATERIAL FOR
COURSE PREPARATION ASSIGNMENTS:
A STRATEGY FOR CREATING
DISCUSSION-BASED COURSES**

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by

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This document contains the following supplementary material:

- (1) Five examples of “course preparation assignments” (CPAs), several of which are referred to (if only briefly) in the article itself. All references to the course textbook are to: David Newman, *Sociology: Exploring the Architecture of Everyday Life*, 5th edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2004).

- (2) An empirical assessment of the extent to which the lecture and discussion classes described in the article satisfied the three basic objectives of the course.

CHAPTER 2 COURSE PREPARATION ASSIGNMENT
SEEING AND THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY:
THREE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Background: The literary critic Kenneth Burke has famously argued that “every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing,” that “every insight contains its own special kind of blindness.” This means that our analyses of social phenomena involve a creative act of interpretation based on an *a priori* perspective which structures our vision (like wearing sunglasses with colored lenses). These lenses—our perspective—allow us to see some things, but also filter out or blind us from other things.

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Introduction: Following Burke, we recognize that there are multiple and competing theoretical perspectives through which scholars view the social world. Conventionally, sociology is seen as having three dominant theoretical perspectives—three “ways of seeing”: structural-functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.

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Objective: The purpose of this assignment is to help you to see how the same phenomenon can be interpreted in different ways based on the theoretical “lenses” through which it is viewed.

Assignment:

(1) Read the section of Chapter 2 of the textbook on sociology's “Three Perspectives” (pp. 36-9). And check out Douglas Harper's photo essay on “The Old Ball Game” (pp. 42-9).

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(2) Briefly analyze your favorite team sport (except baseball) from each of the three theoretical perspectives: structural-functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.

(3) What are the strengths and weaknesses (the “insights” and “blindnesses”) of each perspective in understanding your chosen sport?

(4) Which of the perspectives do you find most useful for viewing this sport, and why?

CHAPTER 5 COURSE PREPARATION ASSIGNMENT
BUILDING IDENTITY: SOCIALIZATION

Background: "Socialization" can be defined as *the process by which one acquires a sense of personal identity and learns what people in the surrounding culture(s) believe and how they expect one to behave*. This is a continual process which knows no institutional boundaries, though sociologists are particularly interested in the role of major institutional "agents of socialization" in the process. The family, schools, religion, peers, the workplace, and mass media are the primary agents of socialization that sociologists study.

Introduction: The textbook contains an extensive discussion of the socialization of gender in some of these institutions (pp. 142-6). Our gender is clearly an important part of our identity and we face different cultural expectations depending on our gender. This assignment asks you to consider the question: to what extent the same is true of religion?

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Objective: To help you gain a better understanding of socialization by reflecting on the process by which religious identity is formed in various institutions, including family, schools, peer groups, and mass media.

Assignment:

- (1) Read Chapter 5 of Newman and do the following:.
- (2) Describe your religious identity (including a consideration of the cultural expectations which are attached to that identity).
- (3) Discuss how your religious identity has been shaped by the following four institutional agents of socialization: (i) family, (ii) schools, (iii) peers, and (iv) mass media.
 - (a) Which institution has been the most important?
 - (b) Are these institutional agents of socialization mutually reinforcing, in conflict, or something else? What aspects of your religious identity do you get or take from each?
 - (c) Does your religious identity differ from that of your parents? If so, why? If not, why not?

CHAPTER 7 COURSE PREPARATION ASSIGNMENT
WHAT IS A "FAMILY"?

Introduction: According to Newman, families are designed to meet basic societal needs, and are thus found in every human society. The structure and significance of family, however, varies considerably across cultures. Monogamous marriage is an institution in our society, but many societies allow or encourage polygamy. Cultures also differ in terms of rules of residence and child rearing philosophies. Furthermore, families do not exist in isolation from other institutions. Legal and political concerns affect the family. "Family" has increasingly functioned as a political buzzword, particularly in the context of debates over "traditional family values." For example, whether same-sex marriage represents "family values" or the opposite is among the most pressing social issues confronting our country today.

Objective: The purpose of this assignment is to help us get beyond our commonsense understanding of "family" and to see it as an important and complex socio-political issue.

Assignment:

- (1) Read Chapter 7 of the textbook, focusing especially on the family as a social institution, and do the following:
- (2) Analyze the debate over what defines a "family" and "family values" by comparing the web sites of interest groups who have staked out positions in this debate. Look at the web sites of at least three different groups. For example: Alternative Family Matters, Eagle Forum, the Family Research Council, the Lambda Legal Defense Fund, the National Organization for Women, or the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Committee on Marriage and Family. You may know of other sites as well. Choose sites that offer different perspectives on the issue.
- (3) For each web site, answer the following:
 - (a) How does the group define "family"? Why is family important for this group?
 - (b) According to the group, what is the basic problem or problems for families or "the family" today?
 - (c) What is the group's solution to the problem(s) it identifies?
- (4) Is there a common ground of understanding among the groups you studied?
- (5) Which group's understanding of family do you find most compelling, and why?

CHAPTER 8 COURSE PREPARATION ASSIGNMENT
FOLKWAY VIOLATIONS

Introduction: In an earlier version of your textbook, David Newman wrote: “The acceptability of certain acts or thoughts is socially constructed. We as a society decide what is and isn’t appropriate, like how to shake hands, how close to stand to someone when conversing, and so forth. These norms form the basis of a taken-for-granted reality that underlies all we do but that remains largely unnoticed and unquestioned. These rules of conduct add predictability and order to our encounters with others. They are so common that they are noticed only when violated. The best proof of the existence of these norms lies in our reactions when they are violated.”

Objective: The purpose of this assignment is to help bring the existence of powerful social norms to the surface of our consciousness by purposely violating seemingly trivial folkways and examining people's reactions to those “folkway violations.”

Assignment: This exercise is adapted from the “Your Turn” section of Chapter 4 (pp. 114-15). During your time off from class, do the following:

(1) Choose one of the folkway violations listed below, or come up with your own. As Newman notes, “It is particularly important that this behavior be neither flagrantly bizarre . . . nor a violation of the law. Such acts do not address the power of the subtle, unspoken norms that, symbolic interactionism argues, make social life orderly. Also, do not do anything that might seriously inconvenience or humiliate someone else or put you in danger. Finally, make sure the norm has something to do with keeping order in face-to-face interactions. For instance, coming to class 10 minutes late violates a social norm, but it doesn't disrupt interactional order. Above all, remember to treat your violation as perfectly normal. You must give the impression that what you are doing is perfectly acceptable and ordinary.”

(2) Violate the folkway several times with different people and observe their reactions to your folkway violation.

(3) Write a three-part response considering three sets of questions:

(a) First, do as Newman suggests: “As you conduct your exercises, record your own feelings and reactions as well as those of the subjects. What were people's initial reactions? What did they do to try to 'normalize' your behavior?” (Note: If it is easier for another person to gauge the reactions, you can team with another student in the class on this assignment.)

(b) Second, in addition to gauging the reactions of others, consider also, “How did you feel breaching this norm? Was it uncomfortable? If so, why?”

(c) Third, address the following question: “What are the implications of these sorts of ‘experiments’ for understanding human behavior and the nature of social order in this society?”

CHAPTER 11 COURSE PREPARATION ASSIGNMENT
PUBLIC POLICIES TO REDRESS RACIAL INEQUALITY

Introduction: In your previous course preparation assignment and in our class discussion, a number of hypotheses were stated which seek to explain why such considerable racial inequality in income exists in the United States today.

Objective: The purpose of this assignment is to help you understand the possibilities for redressing racial inequality as well as the profound challenges to realizing those possibilities.

Assignment:

(1) Choose at least three of the plausible hypotheses that were generated in class (either by you, your group, or some other group in class). Choose the three that you believe best account for the sharp differences in median income between Black and White households in America.

(2) For each of the three hypotheses, determine what public policy initiative you would implement to eliminate the source of inequality you identified.

For example, because I hypothesize that Blacks are excluded from many good jobs by not being a part of the “old-White-boys” network, I propose a strong program of affirmative action in the hiring process.

Remember: since you want to generate policies which can be implemented, you need to be as specific as possible in formulating your ideas.

For example, “I would make the schools less racist” is not a policy proposal which can be implemented directly.

(3) For each public policy initiative, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the policy in redressing racial inequality.

(4) For each public policy initiative, discuss whether you believe the policy is politically feasible, and why or why not.

ASSESSMENT: MEETING COURSE OBJECTIVES

An important starting point in evaluating the success of the discussion-based approach is to assess the extent to which the course satisfied the three basic objectives of the class. Supplementary Table 1 (below) gives the course objectives and shows the extent to which each of the two courses satisfied these, in the students' opinions.

For each of the three objectives, a minority of students in the lecture course reported that the course satisfied the objective "very much," while a majority of students in the discussion-based course answered "very much." Moreover, the largest gap in the average response (1.56 compared to 1.93) is in what I take to be the most important objective: understanding oneself better by using a "sociological imagination."

I also asked students to respond to the following statement: "This course made me want to learn more about sociology." In the discussion-based course 61.8 percent of the students strongly agreed, compared to only 38.6 percent of the students in the lecture course. The mean response also differed significantly: 1.53 for the discussion course versus 2.04 for the lecture course, where 1 = strongly agree ($t = 3.03$, $sig. = .003$).

Although the lecture course was not entirely without merit, on every count the discussion-based course realized the course objectives more fully.

Supplementary Table 1. Satisfaction of Course Objectives by Type of Course

Please indicate to what extent the course satisfied each objective. By the end of this course, I expect you to be able to:	Level of Satisfaction	Lecture Course	Discussic Course
(A) Describe and defend sociology as a discipline; that is, to describe what sociologists do and explain why it is important.	% Very Much	27.1	52.9
	Mean (Std. Dev.)	1.83 ^a (.59)	1.49 ^a (.53)
(B) Analyze the world--both broadly and in the everyday-- sociologically; that is, in terms of sociological theories and concepts, and employing sociological methods.	% Very Much	48.6	64.7
	Mean (Std. Dev.)	1.57 ^a (.60)	1.40 ^a (.58)
(C) Understand yourself better by examining your own life and experience using a sociological perspective, what has been called "the sociological imagination."	% Very Much	30.0	55.9
	Mean (Std. Dev.)	1.93 ^a (.73)	1.56 ^a (.70)

^aResponse Categories/Coding: 1 = Very Much, 2 = Quite a Bit, 3 = Some, 4 = Very Little, 5 = Not at All