



SOCI 131: Social Relations in the Workplace

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COURSE INTRODUCTION

Why do humans work? Is it because we enjoy it or because we have to? What determines when it is one or the other? A sociological approach to these questions starts by examining the social circumstances where humans are motivated, mobilized, and ushered into work. Consider this: The human genome probably has not changed much in the past 40,000 years, yet the kinds of human beings that exist today represent a drastically different order than the kinds that were possible five, ten, or even a thousand years ago. What has changed, if not the raw biological material by which humans are made? Let us look at social structures, which have evolved much more dramatically than our DNA.

The social structures of our contemporary period are characterized primarily by capitalism. Not long ago, humans recreated society through small villages and farms—through a feudal economic system. The material production of social structures occurred within tightly bound social networks; you personally knew almost everyone who did the work necessary for existence, meaning, and purpose in life. The material reproduction of society was thus a collective process. Social identities existed at the level of the group; an individual sense of self was less developed.

The spread of capitalism during the Industrial Revolution, along with rational structures such as bureaucracy and democracy, are the basis of modern societies. The traditional way of life gave way to these kinds of structures. What does that mean for how humans experience work?

This course considers several sociological approaches to rational, capitalist work structures, and how human beings experience them. This is mostly a theory-based course. Because it is also a sociology course, however, plenty of empirical examples—both from published sources in the discipline and from your own experiences—will inform our semester-long inquiry.

We begin the course by considering the “founding fathers” of sociology: Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber. While the prevailing intellectual climate of the Industrial Revolution celebrated the progress of modernity, these three raised some concerns. They critically analyzed the structural violence, especially in relation to work, and its impact upon traditional society. The founders’ conceptions—contradictory and overlapping as they may be—will form the touchstone of our examination of capitalistic work structures.

For the remainder of the semester, we delve into the workplace. While the founders theorized about structure, they said little about *experience*. How do these socially shaped bundles of human flesh—workers—deal with the structural conditions capitalism demands? Abstract conceptions of reality, sprouting from the pens of academics, do not inscribe themselves onto the bodies of human beings.

So, to really examine how work is experienced under capitalist conditions, we will learn exactly how these structures are designed, both by those with the resources to create them (owners and managers of capital) and by the workers who go to work each and every day. We will learn about the founding of managerial strategy and the record of workers’ responses to those strategies. We will also read ethnographic research in the workplace. Ethnography is a form of research that attempts to characterize the essence of social phenomena from the perspective of actors engaged in those phenomena. Do the founders’ conceptions capture the whole story? From the tone of this introduction, you will have probably guessed that they do not. However, we will see that their conceptions form a critical foundation for investigating the experience of work.

Even more could be learned if the aggregate record of ethnographic research were systematically coded and analyzed. One of the required texts for this course, Randy Hodson’s *Dignity at Work*, has done so. As we read ethnographic studies in another required text—*The Cultural Study of Work*, a reader—we will also read chapters from Hodson’s comprehensive analysis of workplace ethnographies. At the end of the semester, you will have learned how to critically examine strategies for creating positive experiences of work.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

By taking this course, you will

- develop an understanding of general conceptual “tools” for analyzing social phenomena (in this case, the workplace)
- apply those tools to ethnographic descriptions of various workplaces
- improve your active reading and communication skills
- critically reflect upon and write your own ideas
- develop the ability to contribute and reflect upon the writing of others.

REQUIRED TEXTS

See the course description for an up-to-date list of materials.

LESSON STRUCTURE

You will complete roughly one lesson per week during the semester, requiring you to make your own use of concepts and demonstrate mastery of the material presented. Without taking the readings very seriously, you cannot do well in this class.

Here is how you should approach each lesson:

- **Read the introductory notes**, which provide an overview of the readings assigned for the lesson. In your notes, jot down some impressions that they leave upon you. Try and restate the main themes of the lesson.

Read the reading questions.

- **Complete the reading assignment**, taking good notes as impressions come to you. Obviously, you cannot write down everything, but you should take note of connections, examples, or contradictions that occur to you. Always restate the main arguments of the selection in your own words, and try to summarize those main arguments in a sentence or two. The mental process of writing these sentences will deepen your understanding of the reading, as well as allow you to make connections with the other material in the course.
- **Take the reading question quizzes in Sakai.** See Reading Question Quizzes section below for more information.
- **Complete the writing assignment.** This assignment generally alternates between participating in the discussion forum and writing an essay. Both assignment types are described in greater detail below.
- **Keep up with the established schedule.** An online course allows you greater flexibility, but it does not mean that you should wait and do all your work at the last minute! Assignments are due on a weekly basis, so establish a schedule that fits your life and stick with it.

Reading Question Quizzes

For each reading that is assigned, there are two to four corresponding reading questions. These are meant to focus your attention on specific points, evidence, or themes that are relevant to the broader issues of the course.

Each set of questions corresponds to a reading quiz in Sakai. Essentially, by trying to answer each reading question yourself, you will be given a chance to see how I would answer the reading question. This quiz is optional and does not count toward your course grade. For each reading question, you will be given a space to write your answer. Once you submit your answer, you will be shown my answer—although that will certainly not be the only way the question could be answered.

The reading question quizzes are available for the duration of the semester. You can only attempt each quiz once, but after you have completed the quiz you can return to it at any point to see my answers and your answers. Just go to the Tests & Quizzes section of Sakai and scroll to the Submitted Assessments section at the bottom of the page.

I encourage you to take all of the quizzes. The midterm and final exams are multiple choice, but very challenging. Students who do not take the reading quizzes often fail the exams. The reading question quizzes are designed to help you prepare for the exams. That is how I designed them. I could just write these answers into the lesson notes, but I feel that is not the best way for you to learn. You need to spend some time wrestling with these questions on your own, trying to answer them, and then see my response. This makes the learning more interactive.

Reading question quizzes are meant to simulate active discussion and dialog on specific, key elements of the assigned material. If you have questions about your responses to the reading questions, please post them to the Reading Question Discussion Forum. Be sure to include the title of the reading in the subject heading. In your own notes, cut and paste the question, your response, and my response. Use these to help you study.

ASSIGNMENTS AND EVALUATION

Your course grade will be based on the following breakdown. Each of these assignments is explained in more detail below.

Assignment	Percentage of course grade
Discussion Forum sessions (eight total)	20 percent (each is 2.5 percent)
Essays (five total)	50 percent (each is 10 percent)
Midterm and Final Exam	30 percent (each is 15 percent)

Grading Scale

Grading is on the +/- system. The breakdown is as follows:

Assignment	Value
A	93–100
A-	90–92
B+	87–89
B	84–86
B-	80–83
C+	77–79
C	74–76
C-	70–73
D+	67–69
D	60–66
F	0–59

Discussion Prompts and Responses

Each of the eight discussion assignments (prompt and response) is graded on a ten-point scale, for a total of eighty possible points.

In this class, *you* write the discussion prompts! (It is kind of like a “choose your own adventure,” if you ever read any of those books.) What prompts your curiosity? What seems out of place in the readings? What did you agree or disagree with? What connections or contradictions can you make between the readings? These can cut across the lessons, as the readings are meant to build upon one another. You will decide, and you will write a prompt for stimulating discussion!

Discussion Prompt

Follow the five guidelines below when writing your prompts.

1. **Frame the issue you want to discuss.** This could be a connection between readings, ideas of how something—anything—from the reading could apply to your experiences and observations in society, or a contradiction—some sense of conflict between the readings. Draw from your own working experiences. You may also point out something in the readings you do not agree with. Put the readings into context and explain what’s important about them. You may use quotes from the readings, but quotes should be no longer than two sentences and you should define what they mean.
2. **End with a question your classmates can use as a springboard for addressing your prompt.** This question can be as simple as: Do you all think this example works? Or, why would this author make such a ridiculous point? Or, do you think people are really like this in certain workplaces? The question should give your classmates a definite starting point for addressing your thoughts and ideas.
3. **Make it topical:** Your prompt should primarily address the readings assigned for that week, though you may make connections with previous course readings.
4. **Follow the length requirement:** Your prompt should be 300 to 400 words.

5. **Be timely:** Your prompt must be posted by the due date on the schedule.

Scoring: You can earn a maximum of eight points for a prompt that follows all of the above guidelines. You will lose one point per guideline that's not followed. You will receive zero points if you do not submit a prompt.

Response

In addition to writing a prompt, you must respond to one of the prompts your classmates have written. Your response should

1. **Address your classmate's question with a well-formed response.** You should show an attempt to answer the question with a clear line of reasoning, demonstrating a good understanding of the issue(s) the student raised and the question that was asked. In other words, I do not want to see things like: "Wow! I completely agree. Very fascinating!"
2. **Follow the length requirement:** Your response should be at least seventy-five words.
3. **Be timely:** Your response must be posted by the due date on the schedule.

Scoring: You can earn a maximum of two points for a response that follows the guidelines above. You will lose one point per guideline that's not followed. You will receive zero points if you do not submit a response.

Submitting the Prompt and Response

During lessons where a discussion prompt has been assigned, your initial prompt is generally due seventy-hours before the end of the lesson. You must respond to one other student's discussion prompt by 11:30 pm on the last day of the lesson. There are exceptions to this structure as a result of holidays, so check the schedule regularly to make sure you meet the deadlines.

The Lesson 1 discussion post prompt is written for you to get things going. For Lesson 1, you will just respond to the prompt and then respond to a classmate's response.

Writing an Effective Prompt

In order to write an effective discussion prompt, you will need to be an active reader. Review the McGraw Center's Active Reading Strategies handout for helpful tips on reading actively.

At a minimum, being an active reader means keeping a pen handy and writing down ideas as they come to you. Try to come up with your own examples, make connections to other things you have read, and even question the author's analysis. It means engaging the reading in an effort to make your own understanding of it, rather than just passively absorbing it. Active reading enables you to more quickly connect the material to existing knowledge structures in your brain, and is thus a powerful learning technique.

Essays

You will write five essays over the course of the semester, in which you will respond to prompts designed to compare, contrast, evaluate, or synthesize concepts across the readings. These specific prompts are available in the Sakai Assignments section.

Each essay is graded on a 100-point scale. A successful essay will include

- an argument (main point) that is set up in the introduction and demonstrated throughout the essay
- specific references to the reading material to support the argument
- addressing the issue raised in the prompt in a manner that demonstrates an understanding of the relevant reading material, concepts, or theoretical issues of the class
- a word count between 800 and 1,200 words
- high-quality writing: sentence structure and grammar do not impede the readers' ability to understand your argument.

Midterm and Final Exam

You will take a midterm and a final exam. Each exam consists of thirty multiple-choice questions and a short essay. Each exam constitutes 15 percent of your final grade.

You will take the exam in the Tests & Quizzes section in Sakai, and it will be timed. Once you open an exam, you will have seventy-five minutes to complete it. The time allotted gives you one minute per multiple-choice question and twenty minutes to write the two-paragraph essay. If you are prepared, that should be more than enough time.

The exams are open-note. I encourage you to take good notes throughout the course, keep them organized, and have them on hand when taking the exams. I allow you to use your notes because the process of preparing for an exam is when the majority of learning occurs, so I am giving you a tangible reason to prepare extensively. *Do not be fooled into thinking that "open note" means you do not have to prepare. The exams require you to synthesize, evaluate, and compare/contrast the class material. Very few questions are simple recall. Moreover, the exam is timed, so you will not have time to re-read material to figure out the answers.*

The exam questions will be derived primarily from the assigned readings. Information presented in the lesson introductions also be tested, but far less extensively. Anything in the readings is fair game for the exams, but the lesson introductions, reading questions, and key terms will provide you with clear guidelines for what to focus on as you read. Be sure you understand the main arguments and the main concepts of each assigned reading.

If you miss an exam deadline, you will receive a zero for that exam (unless otherwise discussed with the instructor prior to the deadline).

Late Work

In a perfect world, everyone would submit their assignments in on time. I would be able to grade them all at once, and you would stay engaged with the collective learning of the class. However, life happens. I expect you to handle problems with late work by notifying me ahead of time. I will accept or reject any late work, with or without penalty, on a case-by-case basis.

ACADEMIC POLICIES

By enrolling as a student in this course, you agree to abide by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill policies related to the acceptable use of online resources. Consult the Acceptable Use Policy on topics such as copyright, net-etiquette, and privacy protection.

As part of this course, you may be asked to participate in online discussions or other online activities that may include personal information about you or other students in the course. Make sure you are respectful of the rights and protection of other participants under the UNC-Chapel Hill Information Security Policies when participating in online classes.

When using online resources offered by organizations not affiliated with UNC-Chapel Hill, such as Google or YouTube, please note that the terms and conditions of these companies and not the University's Terms and Conditions apply. These third parties may offer different degrees of privacy protection and access rights to online content. You should be well aware of this when posting content to sites not managed by UNC-Chapel Hill.

When links to sites outside of the unc.edu domain are inserted in class discussions, be mindful that clicking on sites not affiliated with UNC-Chapel Hill may pose a risk for your computer due to the possible presence of malware on such sites.

Academic Integrity/Honor Code

All students are expected to uphold the Honor Code of the University of North Carolina at all times. Please visit the Office of Student Conduct website or read the Instrument of Student Judicial Governance (PDF) to review your responsibilities under the Honor Code. Please read carefully the provisions of the Honor Code, make certain you understand and adhere to them, and ask me to clarify any questions you have regarding the Honor Code. The Honor Code is a long and valuable tradition at UNC—protect it!

An especially serious Honor Code violation is plagiarism. The UNC-Chapel Hill Honor System has found that 90 percent of the cases brought to its attention involve plagiarism. Please read the items below and make sure you understand how to avoid plagiarism.

- Plagiarism handout from the UNC-Chapel Hill Writing Center
- Plagiarism Tutorial created by the librarians of UNC-Chapel Hill, Duke University, NC State University, and NC Central University.

Office of Accessibility/Special Accommodations

If you are a student with a documented disability, you can receive services through Accessibility Resources & Service. You must self-identify through Accessibility Resources to receive services or accommodation from either of these offices. Accessibility Resources works closely with programs, offices, and departments throughout the University to help create an accessible environment.

The office is located in Suite 2126 of the Student Academic Services Building (SASB), 450 Ridge Road, Chapel Hill, NC, and is open from 8 am to 5 pm Monday through Friday. You can contact them by phone at 919-962-8300 or 711 (NC-RELAY) or by email at accessibility@unc.edu. For more information, visit Accessibility Resources & Service.