

Socialization and Social Justice

A Reflection on Teaching and Designing a Sociological Theory Course

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Abstract

Students are often told that social justice is both the ideal and the reality to which they should strive and contribute to as scholars and citizens. However, they are often not given the space—or the challenge—to grapple with what social justice means to, and for, them. This paper shares the design of an upper-level sociological theory assignment, Socialization as an Investigation of Social Justice Response Papers, that aims to do just that. The course units and theoretical texts are detailed, along with the response paper scaffold assignments, with special emphasis on a structured peer review process aligned with the assignment rubric. Now that the course has been taught nine times, memorable student contributions to the course, along with an excerpt from the most memorable student response paper, are shared with the aim of inspiring faculty modification, particularly in the social sciences.

Introduction

SUNY Old Westbury's mission is grounded in a commitment to civic engagement and social justice by creating an environment that demands academic excellence, fosters intercultural understanding, and endeavors to stimulate a passion for learning and a commitment to building a more just and sustainable world ("Mission & Vision," n.d.). These principles are institutionalized in the college's curriculum and programming and are referenced in nearly all official college communications. When I arrived at the college in the Fall of 2014 and was tasked with teaching an upper-level Sociological Theory II course, I began the first day by prompting students to respond to a single question: What does a socially just world look and feel like to you? The long silence, and palpable feelings of bewilderment and hesitation, made clear to me that while the principle of social justice is commonly held and shared as a goal among the campus community, students had not had many opportunities to grapple with the actual meaning of social justice—much less, as I was asking, what it looks and feels like to them.

On that day—my very first day at the college—I scrapped the generic reflection paper assignments I had originally planned and instead crafted the Socialization as an Investigation of Social Justice Response Papers. These two, six-to-eight page papers center students' socialization as the point of entry for them to grapple with social justice. Civic engagement is, after all, just one way students may operationalize social justice. The sociological theory assigned in the course is their tool with which to do so.

Course Design

The sociology department gave me the flexibility to design the course as I saw fit, including the theorists and corresponding assignments, so long as it aligned with our program's learning outcomes. As such, in designing the course, the guiding questions for me included the following: How will the theories I assign enable students to reflect upon how their socialization informs their foundational understanding of social justice? How will the theories I assign enable students

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to reflect upon their socialization as both sites of privilege and oppression? Ultimately, how will the theories I assign enable students to reflect on our college’s mission centered on social justice and civic engagement?

I had used Bobbi Harro’s (2000) “Cycle of Socialization” in prior Introduction to Sociology courses and found it useful in introducing students to the concept of socialization. The Cycle visually represents that we are born into a specific set of social identities and that they predispose us to unequal roles into an “oppressive system.” Harro describes this process as pervasive, consistent, circular, self-perpetuating, and usually invisible (Harro, 2000). I used the Cycle as a source of inspiration for Socialization as an Investigation of Social Justice Response Papers in Sociological Theory II, in which students focus on the “Institutional and Cultural Socialization” portion of the cycle. Institutions may be churches, schools, television, etc.; and cultures may be practices, song lyrics, languages, social movements, etc. In no way are these institutions and cultures exhaustive; instead, they are used as inspiration to spark students’ brainstorming on what has had the greatest impact on their own socialization.

Then, I decided on four course units:

- Unit 1: Sociology of Knowledge—How Do We Know What We Know?
- Unit 2: Sociology of Identity—Who and What Constructs Who We Are?
- Unit 3: Social Constructions of, and Interactions between, Race and Class
- Unit 4: Social Constructions of, and Interactions between, Gender and Sexuality

Collectively, the units meet the aims detailed in the college’s course description; individually, each unit enables students to reflect upon key social justice-grounded questions: Whose knowledge is canonized? Whose experiences do dominant knowledge systems reflect? Whose experiences are ignored or deemed inferior? How are race, class, gender, and sexuality social constructs that privilege the experiences of some while oppressing others? Admittedly, these questions are ones that I wish my professors had reflected upon—and asked students to think about—while I was pursuing my doctorate in Sociology, and instructed us, as students, to do the same. As a Black woman, I needed and wanted to see myself reflected in the discipline and have Black sociologists be intentionally and seriously studied. In order to operationalize social justice as a concept, students must first grapple with some of these fundamental questions. I must do the same.

Course Readings

In the first semester teaching the course, I identified the theories to be assigned for each unit and did not seek student input. I had a list of “non-negotiable” theorists in mind. That is, I considered these theorists essential to meeting the assignment and course learning objectives. For each reading, I gave an “Introduction to the Theorist” lecture which highlighted key aspects of their identities and biographies to help students understand that theories emerge from lived experience. I also assigned guided reading questions for each reading. I facilitated in-class assignments such as individual writing reflections, text rendering, and group discussions (“Text Rendering Experience,” 2021). I have continued these same practices each time I have taught the course. However, while I was pleased with students’ engagement with the theorists in the Fall 2014 semester, my teaching philosophy places primary value on student input in course design, and I did not honor that at the time.

I have taught the course nine times since Fall 2014 and have, each time since, incorporated brainstorming exercises during the first week with the intention of understanding topics, ideas, concepts, theories, and theorists that are of interest and importance to my students. Sociological Theory I, the first required theory course for the major, focuses on what is described

as “canonical theories.” Students are introduced to the work of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim. Each of these theorists are white European men. I challenge students to think about how the sociological canon is defined and from whose voices we have not yet heard. I welcome and encourage interdisciplinary contributions, especially Critical Race, Feminist, Queer, and Disability Theories.

Two student contributions have been most insightful. I had originally thought that W.E.B. Du Bois, a sociologist and the first African-American to earn a doctorate from Harvard, was taught in each section of Sociological Theory I. Yet, students lamented that his work was not consistently introduced in each section of the course, so I incorporated *Souls of Black Folk* (1903/1986) and *Dusk of Dawn* (1940/1986) into Unit 1, which led to substantive conversations about systemic racism and knowledge erasure in disciplinary canonization. Another contribution came from an Indigenous student who expressed not feeling seen and represented in the Sociology curriculum. This was especially salient because she was a student in my course during the height of the Dakota Access Pipeline protests in 2016. She brought the contribution of Gloria Anzaldúa’s (2012) *Borderlands/La Frontera*, also incorporated into Unit 1, which led to substantive conversations on the intersections of epistemology and colonialism. The readings are curated by students and me, thus contributing to a greater sense of buy-in and accountability. The diverse selection of readings reflects both a diverse student population and my direction as the professor; notably, to date, I am also the only Black faculty member in the department. (A complete list of unit readings is available in Supplementary Material.)

Response Paper Assignments

Response Paper 1 corresponds to Unit 1 and Unit 2. The central questions for Response Paper 1, grounded in the unit titles, include: How do you know what you know? What has had the greatest impact on who you are? Response Paper 2 corresponds to Unit 3 and Unit 4. The central questions for Response Paper 2, grounded in the unit titles are: What has had the greatest impact on your understanding of race, class, gender, and/or sexuality? Students have the flexibility to focus on a single identity (e.g., race or class) or focus on multiple identities (e.g., race, class, and gender).

Both papers are scaffolded:

- *Scaffold Assignment 1*: Institution(s)/Culture(s): Theorist and Institution(s)/Culture(s) Brainstorm
- *Scaffold Assignment 2*: Conference to Discuss and Finalize Theorists and Institution(s)/Culture(s)
- *Scaffold Assignment 3*: Submission of Complete Final Paper Draft in Peer Review Group
- *Scaffold Assignment 4*: Submission of Peer Review Feedback in Peer Review Group
- *Scaffold Assignment 5*: Submission of Final Version

Students complete Scaffold Assignment (SA) 1 in class. They identify (a) two institutions, (b) two cultures **or** (c) one institution and one culture from Harro’s cycle (or another that has had the largest effect on their socialization) **and** the two theorists (one from Unit 1 and one from Unit 2 for Response Paper 1; one from Unit 3 and one from Unit 4 for Response Paper 2) that have been most important to them. Then, I reserve a week of class time for each student to have a twenty-minute conference with me where I ask them to explain their brainstorm. This is SA 2. My role in these conferences is to listen to their ideas, offer suggestions, help clarify their theoretical application and conceptualization of social justice, and support them in drafting a rough outline of their paper. While I do provide an assignment outline, I allow students the

flexibility with which to order their theoretical application. I consistently remind students that this is their assignment, and I want them to have as much flexibility as possible, while meeting the assignment learning objectives.

SA3 and SA4 represent the peer review process. Using Blackboard Groups, I place students in groups of no more than four. Each group represents a variety of skills in theoretical application, concept development, and writing. Students post a complete draft of their paper (excluding a references page) in their peer review group and then reply to each group member using the provided peer review feedback questions. The questions reflect the criteria in the assignment rubric. Though often hesitant at first, students really enjoy this process. It helps to clarify their ideas and make overall improvements to their papers before final submission, SA5.

The paper has always been scaffolded but, over time, I have modified the assignments. At first, I did not include the twenty-minute conferences but have conducted them every time since. This opportunity to listen and connect with students is essential to the process. It also provides substantive direction, in the form of an outline, to guide the writing of their first draft. I have also modified the Peer Review Feedback Questions nearly every time I have taught the course to better support and train students in how to answer the questions and offer substantive feedback. Using a prior assignment, I even do an in-class practice session to instruct students on the peer review process. I highly recommend this.

Student Responses

Teaching this course, and navigating students through these assignments, is a privilege. Each time, it feels like a transformative learning experience. Students' personal reflections of the criminal justice system and mass media as agents of socialization into systemic racism; family and religious practices as agents of socialization into toxic masculinity; schools and New York City subways as agents of socialization into ableism; schools and family as agents of socialization into heteronormativity; and schools and churches as agents of socialization into colonialism are just some of the most insightful paper topics.

The most memorable paper was written in the spring of 2017:

Growing up and living as a Black man within this morally derelict society is a difficult existence. Living within this darkened body, I am surrounded by numerous obstacles and assailants. These struggles range from an oppressive regime that seeks to attack and destroy the Black body and mind via state/reactionary forces, to a social incoherence amongst those who share my struggle, but not my history. In schools and the mass media, dangerous and abusive images of Black people are produced and widely disseminated. Within Black communities, capitalist state violence is distributed to subvert and exploit Black people. These images and racist myths are developed and distributed to maintain and shamefully justify a white supremacist, patriarchal, and capitalist system of violence. All at the expense of Black people, and at the expense of my own existence.

Black children are made to believe that they are solely targets of the state's gun, that their value is only within what can be taken from them, such as what we produce, what we contribute to society, our welfare, or our very lives. We are more than what we've been made out to be. We are not the stepped-on shadows of white people. We are a force, we are an aspect of history, and we are an international community. If we do not challenge the material and ideological conditions of our oppression, if we divide ourselves due to the historical distinctions between U.S. and Caribbean slavery, as I have been forced to deal with, we will forever be shackled. In this paper, I will discuss my socialization, as a Black man, via mass media and schools in the United States using the theories of Antonio Gramsci (1970) and

Michel Foucault (1980)....

Social justice, then, is the complete social re-imagination of racist images and media perpetuated in mass media and schools. This requires a revolutionary body of the working class and oppressed people around the world that challenges the roots of white supremacy, patriarchy and capitalism. Social justice tears asunder a system developed from the bondage and objectification of Black people. Social justice replaces practices and ideas of repression, punitiveness, and subversion with community, restoration, and camaraderie between fellow people and cultures.

Focusing on the intersections of race and gender, this student's paper is a reflection on schools and mass media as significant agents of his socialization, incorporating theorists Antonio Gramsci (1971/2012) and Michel Foucault (1977/2012). I think about this powerful paper often, particularly as I prepare my classes each semester.

Three former students of mine have served as teaching assistants because they enjoyed the experience and want to support their peers in the course. I had two former students, based on response papers theorizing their socialization of racial injustice through the Black Lives Matter Movement, lead and participate in a committee to design a two-day, interdisciplinary Teach-In during the spring 2017 semester where faculty, staff, and students offered open classes, workshops, and performances. Additionally, I have supported many students in using these assignments as inspiration for senior seminar projects and application essays for graduate degree programs and law schools. The primary limitation of this assignment is that because there are four course units, two response papers—each with five scaffolded assignment—the course is fast-paced within a standard 15-week semester. With the exception of peer-reviewed academic journal articles, students were assigned excerpts from books as opposed to complete books which would have, ideally, led to more substantive and nuanced theoretical applications.

Suggestions for Further Development

I encourage faculty, especially in the social sciences, to modify and develop this assignment, keeping in mind that key elements of power, privilege, oppression, and justice are central—no matter the discipline. The theoretical application component, for example, could be modified for other disciplines. Again, social justice is a concept that students must grapple with in order to make it accessible and operationalized. At the end of the semester, I take excerpts from students' social justice conceptualizations in their response papers and put them on a handout to identify themes and commonalities, but also consider reflect upon the various meanings people hold when theorizing the college's mission of a more just and sustainable world. I learn so much from my students each semester. Now, the world is experiencing two, interconnected, public health pandemics of COVID-19 and a reckoning of legacies of systemic racism. As the world grapples with what social justice means, an assignment such as this one provides meaningful opportunities to do this important work.

ASSIGNMENT

Social Justice Response Papers

Learning Objectives

In each of the required two, six-to-eight page response paper assignments, you will:

- identify the institutions and/or cultures that have had the greatest impact on an aspect of your socialization;
- apply sociological theory to your reflections of your institutional and cultural socialization;
- formulate what social justice means to you, based on your experiences; and,
- write a complete draft of your paper, and evaluate at least two peers' papers in a structured peer review process, before your final submission.

Assignment Overview

SUNY Old Westbury's mission is grounded in a commitment to civic engagement and social justice by creating an environment that demands academic excellence, fosters intercultural understanding, and endeavors to stimulate a passion for learning and a commitment to building a more just and sustainable world (State University of New York College at Old Westbury Mission Statement). You are often told that social justice is both the ideal and the reality to which you should be striving, and contributing to, as scholars and as citizens. However, you are often not given the space-and the challenge-to grapple with what social justice means to, and for, you. These papers aim to do just that.

Bobbie Harro's "The Cycle of Socialization" visually represents that we are born into a specific set of social identities and that they predispose us to unequal roles into an "oppressive system." Harro describes this process as pervasive, consistent, circular, self-perpetuating, and usually invisible (Harro, 2000).

You will focus on the "Institutional and Cultural Socialization" portion of the cycle, which details institutions and cultures. Institutions may be churches, schools, television etc., and cultures may be practices, song lyrics, language etc. In no way are these institutions and cultures exhaustive; instead, they are used as inspiration to spark your brainstorming on what has had the greatest impact on your socialization, and ultimately your conceptualization of what social justice means to, and for, you.

There are four units in the course:

- UNIT 1: Sociology of Knowledge—How Do We Know What We Know?
- UNIT 2: Sociology of Identity—Who and What Constructs Who We Are?
- UNIT 3: Social Constructions of, and Interactions between, Race and Class
- UNIT 4: Social Constructions of, and Interactions between, Gender and Sexuality

You will produce two six-to-eight page response papers, each of which are scaffolded.

The first response paper corresponds to units 1 and 2. The central questions, grounded in the unit titles above, are as follows: How do you know what you know? What has had the greatest impact on who you are?

The second response paper corresponds to units 3 and 4. The central question, grounded in the unit titles above, are as follows: What has had the greatest impact on your understanding of race, class, gender and/or sexuality? You have some flexibility here to focus on a single identity (e.g. race or class), or focus on multiple (e.g. race, class and gender). This is *your* theoretical application of your socialization; you know best.

Response Paper 1 Assignment Prompt

Our work in Unit 1: Sociology of Knowledge: How Do We Know What We Know? and Unit 2: Sociology of Identity-Who and What Constructs Who We Are? has been designed to prepare you for this assignment. The central questions, grounded in the unit titles above, are as follows: How do you know what you know? What has had the greatest impact on who you are? What does social justice mean to you?

Unit 1: Sociology of Knowledge-How Do We Know What We Know?

- Anzaldua, G.(1987). *Borderlands/La frontera: The new mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books.
- Foucault, M. (1977/2012). Truth and power. In C. Calhoun, J. Gerteis, J. Moody, S. Pfaff, & I. Virk (Eds.), *Contemporary sociological theory* (3rd ed., pp. 305-313). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. (M. Ramos, Trans.), Herder and Herder (Original work published 1968)
- Gramsci, A. (1971). On hegemony. In C. Calhoun, J. Gerteis, J. Moody, S. Pfaff, & I. Virk (Eds.), *Contemporary sociological theory* (3rd ed., pp. 237-250). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Smith, D. (1990). The conceptual practices of power. In C. Calhoun, J. Gerteis, J. Moody, S. Pfaff, & I. Virk (Eds.), *Contemporary sociological theory* (3rd ed., pp. 398-406). Wiley-Blackwell.

Unit 2: Sociology of Identity-Who and What Constructs Who We Are?

- Blumer, H. (1969). Symbolic interactionism. In C. Calhoun, J. Gerteis, J. Moody, S. Pfaff, & I. Virk (Eds.), *Contemporary sociological theory* (3rd ed., pp.62-74). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Collins, P. H. (1990). Black feminist epistemology. In C. Calhoun, J. Gerteis, J. Moody, S. Pfaff, & I. Virk (Eds.), *Contemporary sociological theory* (3rd ed., pp.407-416). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Goffman, E. (1956). Presentation of self in everyday life. In C. Calhoun, J. Gerteis, J. Moody, S. Pfaff, & I. Virk (Eds.), *Contemporary sociological theory* (3rd ed., pp.46-61). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self, and society: From the standpoint of a social behaviorist* (C. W. Morris, Ed.) University of Chicago Press.

For this assignment, you are required to apply **two theorists**, one from Unit 1 and one from Unit 2. Application includes a general introduction into each theorist's main ideas; a connection of the dots between your experience and some of the theorist's key concepts; and, incorporation of direct quotations to support your discussion.

Paper Outline and Rubric

I will speak with each of you regarding the outline for your *specific* paper, but the *general* format is as follows:

- an introduction that is creative and engaging, concluding with a thesis statement that specifies the institution(s)/culture(s) and theories to be explored in your paper;
- an autobiographical sketch that provides substantive detail to convey to the reader why the institution(s) and/or culture(s) you will develop in your paper have shaped your response to the paper's central questions;
- a discussion and theoretical application (incorporating direct quotations) of institution(s)/culture(s) # 1;

- a discussion and theoretical application (incorporating direct quotations) of institution(s)/culture(s) #2;
- a discussion of what social justice means, given the previous explorations of theoretical application to socialization; and,
- a thoughtful conclusion.

Please see the assignment rubric.

Scaffold Assignments

- *Scaffold Assignment 1:* Institution(s)/Culture(s): Theorist and Institution(s)/Culture(s) Brainstorm
- *Scaffold Assignment 2:* Conference to Discuss and Finalize Theorists and Institution(s)/Culture(s)
- *Scaffold Assignment 3:* Submission of Complete Final Paper Draft in Peer Review Group
- *Scaffold Assignment 4:* Submission of Peer Review Feedback in Peer Review Group
- *Scaffold Assignment 5:* Submission of Final Version

Peer Review Instructions

1. Click on “Peer Review” on the Course Navigation Panel. This will take you to your Response Paper I Peer Review Group. You’ll see the “Group Properties,” which is a Group Description with each group member’s name and “Group Tools,” which includes the Group Discussion Board. You will work in the Group Discussion Board for this peer review.
2. Create a new thread in your Group Discussion Board. Upload your paper as a Microsoft Word attachment or PDF.
3. Read each of your group members’ papers in their entirety. Once you have done so, reply to their post answering the Peer Review Feedback Questions below. These questions are aligned with the assignment rubric, which I use to evaluate and grade the final version of your paper. Please answer these questions in a constructive manner. These questions will help your peer produce an “exceptional” final paper, per the assignment rubric. Please **clearly label** your responses to the questions:
 - (a) What do you observe as the most interesting and engaging components of the introduction?
 - (b) Please, cut and paste the author’s thesis statement that identifies the institution(s) and/or culture(s), along with the two theorists, to be addressed in the paper. If you are unable to identify it, please indicate that. This is very helpful to the author!
 - (c) Does the autobiographical sketch illustrate why the institution(s) and/or culture(s) to be explored in the paper are most impactful to the author’s socialization? What are your recommendations for how the author may improve the autobiographical sketch? Please, explain.
 - (d) Would you characterize the discussion of Institution/Culture # 1 as clear, informative and substantive? Please, explain.
 - (e) Would you characterize the discussion of Institution/Culture #2 as clear, informative and substantive? Please, explain.
 - (f) Does the application of theorist #1 generally introduce the theory, incorporate key concepts and adequately apply the theory to the writer’s autobiography? Please, explain.
 - (g) Does the application of theorist #2 generally introduce the theory, incorporate key concepts and adequately apply the theory to the writer’s autobiography? Please, explain.
 - (h) Which two theorists have been introduced in the paper?

- (i) In a paragraph, discuss your understanding of the author’s conceptualization of social justice. Please, write a complete paragraph as it should be clear to you, having read the paper. If it is not clear, please communicate that.
 - (j) Does the conclusion adequately “tie-up” the paper, i.e. revisiting key points from the introduction, autobiographical sketch, theoretical application and social justice conceptualization? What does the paper need to better conclude the paper? Please, explain.
 - (k) Is the paper a complete six-to-eight pages of text? A reference page is not text. NOTE: You will need in-text citations and a references page for the final version of the paper.
 - (l) Other thoughts/comments: Please share any other constructive thoughts/comments you have on the paper.
4. When you receive feedback on your paper, please review it and incorporate as you see fit. Review the assignment rubric and submit the final version of your paper via “Response Papers” on the Course Navigation Panel. Please do not submit in your peer review group!

Supplementary Material

For supplementary material accompanying this paper, including a PDF facsimile of the assignment description formatted as the author(s) presented it to students, please visit <https://doi.org/10.31719/pjaw.v6i1.92>.

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