

Flexibility, Inequality, and the Self

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Sociology 190.6
Spring 2019
Thursdays, 4-6pm
Barrows 104

Course Overview

Today we must often navigate diverse social contexts as we move between different jobs and interact with a range of co-workers and peers. Leaders of firms and universities are increasingly recruited from outside the organization. College students have become more likely to double major as they face the prospect of moving through several employers and occupations during their working lives. The ability to navigate social heterogeneity and demonstrate wide-ranging competence has become a particularly important dimension of inequality today.

In this course we will examine this rising value for flexibility in several areas of American life. After an introductory discussion about changing definitions of talent and skill, we begin by focusing on the labor market. We will spend five weeks discussing sources of rising labor market flexibility—financialization, the rise of the tech industry, changing expectations about management—and their implications. (One area we will not cover, however, is flexibility about *time*—variable schedules, flex-time, work-life balance—since this is somewhat distinct from the social flexibility required to navigate diverse contexts, groups, and tasks.) We will then turn our attention to universities by examining the rising prestige of interdisciplinary research and increases in double majoring. After this, we consider two forms of cultural flexibility not tied to particular institutional contexts. In the realm of cultural consumption, “omnivorous” tastes that span many different genres are now the dominant cultural marker of high status. We then explore how flexibility interacts with racial difference and hierarchy in the United States by discussing code-switching.

Throughout the course, we will not just document the rising value for flexibility but will also highlight the consequences this has for inequality and conceptions of the self. Who has the resources to demonstrate this flexibility? Who faces especially high demands to be flexible? How does a rising value for flexibility change our conceptions of ourselves, of success, of status? We will conclude the course by considering alternatives presented by other countries and discussing how a world that demands flexibility can be made more humane and equal.

Learning Goals

1. Students will learn to recognize demands for flexibility in various areas of life and be sensitive to how it shapes inequality and our conceptions of the self.
2. Students will learn to read academic texts effectively with an eye toward preparing for group discussions in a seminar-style class.
3. Students will improve their writing skills by completing a research paper over the course of the semester, incorporating feedback to produce a polished paper that makes a strong, original argument.

Course Requirements

Participation: This is a capstone course for the sociology major meant to give you a chance to engage with a specialized topic through group discussion in a seminar. Participation is therefore crucial for success in this class. You are expected to attend every class meeting having completed the readings. You are allowed one absence without penalty to your participation grade. There are many ways to demonstrate your engagement with class. Contributing to class discussions is central, but I understand that this comes more easily to some than others. Showing you are actively listening to your classmates and trying to respond to their points can make up for less frequent participation in class. Coming to office hours is another way to show you are actively engaging with the course material.

Weekly Reading Response Memos: In order to facilitate class discussions, you will write a reading response memo each week before class. These will be short write-ups (250-500 words) meant to help you reflect and document your reactions to the week's readings. Please do not summarize the readings; the point is to respond to them. These response memos will also provide you with material you can bring up to contribute to class discussions. (During lulls in our discussion I may ask people to share what they wrote in their response memos for that week.) These will be due on Wednesdays, the day before we meet for class, and should be posted on the Discussions section of the bcourses website.

Final Paper: The two main components of the course are the class discussions of the readings and a research paper you will write over the course of the semester. You will produce a 15-20 page paper that draws on academic literature to make an original argument about the growing demand for flexibility, wide-ranging competence, and navigating diverse social contexts. You can choose to focus on one of the areas we discussed in class—the labor market, the university, cultural consumption, code-switching—or you can look at another area of life—romantic relationships, gender, social networks, politics. You could also focus on consequences for inequality, or for conceptions of the self, across multiple domains. You will have to draw on at least 5 scholarly articles or books in addition to any of the course readings you wish to reference. One option (not required) for this paper is to write a research project proposal: in this case you would make an argument using academic literature that motivates a specific research question, and then you would describe a research design that could help answer that question.

You will complete the final paper in steps over the course of the semester in order to help you pace yourself and to have the opportunity to get regular feedback from me. First, you will turn in a memo on your proposed topic (at least 500 words); then you will write an outline of your argument with citations to academic literature you plan to draw on (3-5 pages); and finally you will turn in your final paper. In between each of these steps, I would encourage you to come to office hours to discuss my comments on your memo or outline—at minimum, you must meet with me once during the semester to discuss your paper.

Grade Breakdown:

Participation:	25%
Weekly Response Memos:	30%
Research Paper:	45%
<i>topic</i>	5%
<i>outline</i>	5%
<i>office hours</i>	5%
<i>final paper</i>	30%

Course Policies

Classroom atmosphere: Creating an encouraging environment where everyone feels free to share their thoughts, feelings, interpretations, and questions will be extremely important for this class. Please engage with each other respectfully and attentively during discussions. I understand that some will be more comfortable with participating in group discussions than others, but I hope we can all push ourselves—and encourage each other—to step out of our comfort zones, whether that be by speaking up more, listening more carefully, or trying to recap and engage with comments made by others in class.

Computers and Phones: Laptops can be used in class for class-related activities only (referencing readings, taking notes, etc.). Please do not use your cell phone during class

Academic Honesty: It is important that you do your own work and properly cite the work of others that you draw on—academic honesty will be taken seriously in this course. Please see UC Berkeley’s Code of Student Conduct: <https://sa.berkeley.edu/code-of-conduct>.

Accommodation: If you require accommodations in class or on assignments, please let me know about them as early in the term as possible and I will be happy to work out arrangements with you.

Course Outline and Weekly Readings

INTRODUCTION

Week 1 (January 24): Course Introduction

(no readings)

Week 2 (January 31): New Definitions of Talent and Skill

Sennett, Richard. 1998. "Talent and the Specter of Uselessness" (selections). Pp. 83-86, 103-131 in *The Culture of the New Capitalism*. Yale University Press.

Khan, Shamus Rahman. 2011. "Beowulf and Jaws" (selections) and "Conclusion." Pp. 151-162, 178-199 in *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School*. Princeton University Press.

THE LABOR MARKET

Week 3 (February 7): Rising Instability and Mobility in the Labor Market

Hollister, Matissa. 2011. "Employment Stability in the U.S. Labor Market: Rhetoric versus Reality" *Annual Review of Sociology* 37:305-324.

Heller, Nathan. 2017. "Is the Gig Economy Working?" *The New Yorker*. May 15. [<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/05/15/is-the-gig-economy-working>]

Gig Economy Data Hub, from the Future of Work Initiative of the Aspen Institute: <https://www.gigeconomydata.org/basics>

Week 4 (February 14): Flexibility As a Part of the "New Spirit of Capitalism"

Boltanski, Luc, and Eve Chiapello. 2005. "General Introduction" (selections) and "Management Discourse in the 1990s." Pp. 3-12, 57-101 in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Verso Press.

Fligstein, Neil. 2006. "Review of *The New Spirit of Capitalism* by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello." *Contemporary Sociology*, 35(6):584-585.

Week 5 (February 21): The Tech Industry

Saxenian, AnnaLee. 1996. "Introduction: Local Industrial Systems" and "Silicon Valley: Competition and Community" (selections). Pp. 1-9, 29-37 in *Regional Advantage: Culture and Competition in Silicon Valley and Route 128*. Harvard University Press.

Benner, Chris. 2002. "Understanding Flexibility" and "Silicon Valley: Changing Industry Structure and Employment Practices" (selections). Pp. 21-49 in *Work in the New Economy: Flexible Labor Markets in Silicon*. Blackwell Publishing.

Fagan, Kaylee. 2018. "Here's how long the average employee stays at the biggest tech companies." *Business Insider*. April 16.

[<https://www.businessinsider.com/average-employee-tenure-retention-at-top-tech-companies-2018-4>]

**DUE FEBRUARY 21: MEMO ON RESEARCH PAPER TOPIC*

Week 6 (February 28): Financialization

Krippner, Greta R. 2011. "What is Financialization?" (selections). Pp. 27-39 in *Capitalizing on Crisis: The Political Origins of the Rise of Finance*. Harvard University Press.

Ho, Karen. 2009. "Liquid Lives, Compensation Schemes, and the Making of (Unsustainable) Financial Markets." Pp.249-294 in *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*. Duke University Press.

Week 7 (March 7): The Mobility of Executives

Khurana, Rakesh. 2004. "The Rise of the Charismatic CEO." Pp.51-80 in *Searching for a Corporate Savior*. Princeton University Press.

Tuchman, Gaye. 2009. "Outsiders and the New Managerialism." Pp.69-87 in *Wannabe U: Inside the Corporate University*. University of Chicago Press.

UNIVERSITIES

Week 8 (March 14): Interdisciplinarity

Jacobs, Jerry A., and Scott Frickel. 2009. "Interdisciplinarity: A Critical Assessment." *Annual Review of Sociology* 35:43-65.

Rawlings, Craig M., Daniel A. McFarland, Linus Dahlander, and Dan Wang. 2015. "Streams of Thought: Knowledge Flows and Intellectual Cohesion in a Multidisciplinary Era." *Social Forces* 93(4):1687-1722.

Week 9 (March 21): Double Majoring

Pitt, Richard N., and Steven A. Tepper. 2012. "Double Majors: Influences, Identities, & Impacts" (selections). The Curb Center, Vanderbilt University. Pp.8-31.

Del Rossi, Alison F., and Joni Hersch. 2008. "Double Your Major, Double Your Return?" *Economics of Education Review* 27(4):375-386.

Zafar, Basit. 2012. "Double Majors: One for Me, One for the Parents?" (selections). *Economic Inquiry* 50(2):287-308.

**DUE MARCH 21: OUTLINE OF RESEARCH PAPER WITH REFERENCES*

Spring Break (March 28): No Class

CULTURAL FLEXIBILITY

Week 10 (April 4): Cultural Omnivorousness and Flexibility

Peterson, Richard A. 1992. "Understanding Audience Segmentation: From Elite and Mass to Omnivore and Univore." *Poetics* 21(4):243-258.

DiMaggio, Paul. 1987. "Classification in Art." *American Sociological Review* 52(4). (*only read pp.442-3.)

Erickson, Bonnie H. 1996. "Culture, Class, and Connections." *American Journal of Sociology* 102(1):217-251.

Week 11 (April 11): Cultural Openness and Its Limits

Bryson, Bethany. 1996. "'Anything But Heavy Metal': Symbolic Exclusion and Musical Dislikes." *American Sociological Review* 61(5):884-899.

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

Week 12 (April 18): Code Switching

Du Bois, W.E.B. 2018 [1903]. "Of Our Spiritual Strivings." Pp.1-12 in *The Souls of Black Folk*. University of Massachusetts Press.

Carter, Prudence. 2005. "New 'Heads' and Multicultural Navigators" and "School Success Has No Color" (selections). Pp 137-142, 149-164, 171-174 in *Keepin' It Real: School Success Beyond Black and White*. Oxford University Press.

Alim, H. Samy, and Geneva Smitherman. 2012. "'Nah, We Straight': Black Language and America's First Black President." Pp.1-30 in *Articulate While Black: Barack Obama, Language, and Race in the U.S.* Oxford University Press.

BROADER REFLECTIONS

Week 13 (April 25): Consequences for the Self – Comparative Perspectives

Sharone, Ofer. 2013. "Why Do Unemployed Americans Blame Themselves While Israelis Blame the System?" *Social Forces* 91(4):1429-1450.

Vallas, Steven, and Angele Christin. 2018. "Work and Identity in an Era of Precarious Employment: How Workers Respond to 'Personal Branding' Discourse." *Work and Occupations* 45(1):3-37.

Week 14 (May 2): Conclusions and Potential Responses

Rodgers, Daniel T. 2011. "Prologue." Pp.1-14 in *Age of Fracture*. Harvard University Press.

Kalleberg, Arne. 2011. "Chapter 10: Confronting Polarization and Precarity." Pp.179-194 in *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs: The Rise of Polarized and Precarious Employment Systems in the United States, 1970s-2000s*. Russell Sage Foundation.

Fishman, Robert M., and Omar Lizardo. 2013. "How Macro-Historical Change Shapes Cultural Taste: Legacies of Democratization in Spain and Portugal." *American Sociological Review* 78(2):213-239.

**FINAL PAPER DUE MAY 9 AT NOON*