

Flexibility, Inequality, and the Self

Instructor: Matthew Stimpson
mstimp@berkeley.edu
Office Hours: Tuesdays, 10-11:30am (and by appointment)
Office Hours Sign-up: <https://wejoinin.com/sheets/xrset>

Sociology 190.7
Spring 2022
Wednesdays, 2-4pm
151 Social Sciences

Course Overview

How do Americans try to achieve success today? Workers browse job listings during their break; parents sign their children up for a range of activities and lessons; college students pick up a minor or a second major. Success today means being flexible, able to navigate diverse contexts, and prepared for unpredictability. Who has the resources to meet these demands for flexibility? How has the pressure—and the desire—we feel to be flexible changed our conceptions of success, status, and ourselves?

In this course, we will examine how this flexible ideal permeates our lives, from how we learn to how we form relationships, from how we work to how we spend our free time. We begin with the socialization that occurs in families and schools, where exposure to diverse experiences and disciplines signals prestige and generates ease and entitlement. Next we turn to the labor market, where flexibility can be both a buffer from insecurity and a tool for seizing lucrative job opportunities. We then consider two forms of cultural flexibility: the “omnivorous” cultural consumption common now among educated professionals; and code-switching, where demands for flexibility interact with racial inequality in the United States. Finally, we look at the role of technology, specifically social media and the algorithms that shape more and more of our lives.

Over the course of the semester, you will complete a research paper in which you examine the pressures and desires individuals feel to demonstrate flexibility. (See below for a detailed description of this key assignment.)

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 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 and analytic skills by completing a research paper over the course of the semester, incorporating feedback to produce a paper that makes a strong, original argument, hopefully based on an empirical analysis.

Course Requirements

Participation: This is likely a different type of class than others you have taken in the sociology department. This is a capstone seminar for the sociology major meant to give you a chance to engage with a specialized topic through group discussion. Participation is therefore crucial for success in this class. You should attend every class meeting having completed the readings. You are allowed two absences without penalty to your participation grade. (I do not distinguish between excused and unexcused absences.)

There are many ways to demonstrate your engagement in the course. 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. Attending office hours is another way to show you are actively engaging with the course material.

Reading Responses: In order to prepare for class discussions, you will write 7 reading response memos over the course of the semester. You will select two quotations from the week's readings and discuss how they relate to each other and to the main themes of the readings. These are short write-ups (250-500 words, not including the quotations) meant to help you reflect on and document your reactions to the week's readings. You will lose points if you simply summarize the readings, if you fail to engage with the readings, or if you submit your response memo late (one purpose of these response memos is to allow you to see how others in the class responded to the readings before our class meeting).

These will be due 24 hours before our class session, at 2pm on Tuesdays, and should be posted on the Discussions section of bCourses. In general, you can choose which 7 out of the 14 total weeks you will complete a reading response; however, you must submit at least 3 response memos by the middle of the semester (week 7). You cannot turn in more than 7 response memos over the course of the semester.

Final Paper: The two main components of this course are 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 makes an argument about the pressures and desires individuals feel to demonstrate flexibility.

You can write an empirical research paper or a bibliographic research paper. I highly recommend choosing the first option. What this involves is simply obtaining and analyzing data about people's experience trying to be flexible. You can use any data source—interviews might be easiest (2-3 would be sufficient), but you could also use participant observation (~4 hours), a dataset like the General Social Survey, etc. This is not a research design course, and you will not be graded on how well you execute whatever method you choose. This is an opportunity to connect themes from the course readings to real pressures and desires people feel at work, at home, with their friends, and so on.

You also have the option of writing a bibliographic research paper in which you make an original argument based on a synthetic review of prior research. I would caution that this might be the more difficult option. In the past, I've found that students often struggle crafting an original argument that does not simply summarize prior research.

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. First, you will turn in a

memo on your proposed research question and either how you plan to collect data (if you write an empirical research paper) or what prior research you will synthesize (if you write a bibliographic research paper) in order to answer your research question (1-2 pages). Second, you will write up a preliminary description of your results (empirical research paper) or a detailed summary of the prior literature you will use (bibliographic research paper) and describe how they address your research question (5-7 pages). Please note that these first two assignments will help you develop text that—with slight revision—will form the core of your final paper. Third, you will complete a rough draft and a peer editing exercise a couple weeks before the final paper is due in order to have an opportunity to make revisions. Finally, you will turn in your final paper at the beginning of finals week.

Grade Breakdown:

Participation:	15%
Weekly Reading Responses:	30%
Research Paper:	55%
<i>research question</i>	10%
<i>results or lit. review</i>	10%
<i>rough draft/peer edit</i>	10%
<i>final paper</i>	25%

Class Policies

Class Discussion: Creating an environment where everyone feels free to share their reactions, 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.

Communication: The best time for substantive questions is during class. Emails are best for administrative questions; please check the syllabus and notes from class before emailing me.

Getting Help: College can be difficult, especially if you are dealing with stressors in other areas of your life. Please let me know if you are falling behind or facing some obstacle to full participation in the course. For an exhaustive list of campus resources, please see: <https://recalibrate.berkeley.edu/one-click-mode/one-click-resources-undergraduate-students>

Writing. Writing pushes us to think more clearly and critically, and I hope you enjoy the opportunity this class offers to practice writing as you grapple with the course material. I can work with you on your papers in office hours, but I will not be able to read full drafts or look at your work more than once. If you are looking to improve specific aspects of your writing, ask me and I can provide those comments on your assignments. Please consider utilizing the writing tutoring offered at the Student Learning Center (slc.berkeley.edu).

Readings: Course readings will be available electronically on bCourses.

Academic Honesty: It is essential that you do your own work and properly cite the work of others that you draw on—academic honesty will be taken extremely 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.

Course Outline and Weekly Readings

Week 1 (January 19): Course Introduction

(no reading)

SOCIALIZATION AND EDUCATION

Week 2 (January 26): Ease and Entitlement

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.

Lareau, Annette. 2002. “Invisible Inequality: Social Class and Childrearing in Black Families and White Families.” *American Sociological Review* 67(5): 747-776.

Week 3 (February 2): Interdisciplinarity and Double Majoring

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

Pitt, Richard N., and Steven A. Tepper. 2012. “Double Majors: Influences, Identities, & Impacts” (selections). The Curb Center, Vanderbilt University. Pp.7-31.

THE ECONOMY

Week 4 (February 9): Labor Market Insecurity and Instability

Sennett, Richard. 2006. “Talent and the Specter of Uselessness” (selections). Pp. 83-86, 103-131 in *The Culture of the New Capitalism*. Yale University Press.

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

***** DUE FEBRUARY 9: MEMO ON RESEARCH QUESTION *****

Week 5 (February 16): Flexible Selves As a Buffer Against Work Insecurity

Pugh, Allison. 2015. "Introduction." Pp.1-16 in *The Tumbleweed Society: Working and Caring in an Age of Insecurity*. Oxford University Press.

Silva, Jennifer. 2013. "Coming of Age in the Risk Society" and "Hardened Selves: The Remaking of the American Working Class" (selections). Pp.3-24, 81-98 in *Coming Up Short: Working Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty*. Oxford University Press.

Week 6 (February 23): Shareholder Value

Ho, Karen. 2009. "Liquid Lives, Compensation Schemes, and the Making of (Unsustainable) Financial Markets" (selections). Pp.249-271, 285-294 in *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*. Duke University Press.

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

Week 7 (March 2): Flexibility As a Part of the "New Spirit of Capitalism"

Boltanski, L., and E. Chiapello. 2005. "General Introduction" (selections), "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.

CULTURAL FLEXIBILITY

Week 8 (March 9): 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 9 (March 16): 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.

***** DUE MARCH 16: EMPIRICAL RESULTS / PRIOR LITERATURE SUMMARY *****

Spring Break (March 23): No Class

Week 10 (March 30): 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.1-25 in *Articulate While Black: Barack Obama, Language, and Race in the U.S.* Oxford University Press.

TECHNOLOGY

Week 11 (April 6): The Society of Algorithms

Burrell, Jenna, and Marion Fourcade. 2021. "The Society of Algorithms." *Annual Review of Sociology* 47(1): 213–237

Week 12 (April 13): The Hyperconnected Self

Brubaker Roers. 2020. "Digital Hyperconnectivity and the Self." *Theory and Society* 49(5):771–796

Recommended:

Hawgood Alex. 2020. "Everyone Is Gay on TikTok." *The New York Times*, October 24.

***** DUE APRIL 13: ROUGH DRAFT *****

BROADER REFLECTIONS

Week 13 (April 20): Cross-National Comparisons

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 (April 27): Course Conclusion

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 MONDAY, MAY 9 AT NOON *****