

THE NATURE OF THE BEAST: SOCIOLOGY & C.J.

(Dr. James B. Harrill at Northeastern Technical College)

Welcome: I would like to welcome you to the academic study of sociology and criminal justice at the two-year college level. I would also like to personally thank you for having selected this course. Throughout this semester I will do my best to teach you the basic concepts found in each course(s) you are taking with me. The teaching techniques I will be using have been honed over nearly thirty years of teaching, at levels ranging from middle school to the senior university. While the traditional lecture/discussion is at the center of my instructional methods, I also try to incorporate other teaching strategies as well. These other instructional formats might include any of the following: videos, supplementary books (which you must highlight/underline and make marginal notes in), fieldtrips (in CRJ 135), and magazine article reports (in CRJ 101 and SOC 101). **I also try to provide at least one “free copy” of each course(s) textbook for two -hour checkout from the Reserve Section of the NETC Main Campus Library.** While not absolutely required, I certainly encourage reading the reserved text for students desiring more clarity or wanting to explore topics in further depth. Additionally, all my formal “*Lecture Notes*” are available for student purchase in the **NETC Bookstore**. These notes are the basis for both each day’s lecture as well as being the source for all tested information.

Building “Your House”: The best analogy for understanding how to take notes in my classes is probably that of “building a house.” When we construct a house we first lay a foundation and build a basic framework, then we build onto that base to finally construct a completed unit. In a similar way each course’s “*Lecture Notes*” provides the foundation upon which you will need to build by adding your own notes in the margins (or on separate notebook paper). Since it is extremely important to have adequately constructed notes to study for the tests, it is your responsibility to obtain any missed notes from other students who were in class on that day. Just as a completed house should be inspected for problems before the purchaser accepts it, I will try to rapidly review the most important items on the “*Lecture Notes*” during the class (or hour) before the actual testing class day. This review will help you identify any content you may be missing that is needed for proper test preparation. In rare circumstances I may have to combine the lecture and review together due to time constraints. Should I need to resort to this lecture/review combination, I will go slower and repeat my critical points. Finally, please keep in mind that you will need to add more detailed, instructor-supplied definitions to your own copy of the “*Lecture Notes*” (i.e. **the brief descriptions sometimes provided in parentheses ARE NOT all you need to know about a topic**).

Subjective vs. Objective: I try to make every effort to test and assign grades objectively (as appropriate for any science-based academic discipline). The test items that are either “*matching*” or “*fill-in-the-blank*” require specific responses from the lecture material. The “*discussion*” test items require you to clearly indicate your understanding of the material presented in the lectures. While I am not expecting verbatim renditions of my lecture content, what you write must have the following qualities: (1) your written answers must be close enough to the actual lecture’s wording for me to see you clearly understand what was presented in class, (2) your written responses must follow generally-accepted sentence structure and the use of nouns for initial identification of your subject, and (3) you must use statements that “make sense” when read as specific test responses.

“Can’t We All Just Get Along?” (as spoken by Rodney King): By definition, Sociology is a very potentially controversial subject area. All sociology courses, whether taken at NETC or elsewhere, involve lecture/discussion topics that often have multiple, academically acceptable viewpoints. Whether the possibly offensive subject is race, age, gender/sex, social class, religion, social problems, or other sources of potential debate, a good teacher can’t simply ignore the material if the student is to gain a college-level social science education. I try to present all controversial subjects with academic honesty and, when I think it will help to understand national social issues from a more local (and/or historical) perspective, I include my observations (reinforced by objective demographic data) of social situations from our own communities. Of course, since my family has lived in Bennettsville for nearly 80 years and I spent the first 18 years of my life there (graduating from Bennettsville High School), my local knowledge is perhaps more valid, at least in some ways, for the social climate and history of Marlboro County.

Marlboro and Dillon counties are, unfortunately, significant areas of long-standing social pathology. While this is an objective fact that has been well documented over the last few decades, it nevertheless remains painful to confront. However, avoiding objective social reality, while perhaps less potentially painful, would amount to academic dishonesty. Therefore, while I will not completely ignore the numerous social problems found in the Chesterfield-Marlboro-Dillon service area, I do hope my students will be intellectually and socially mature enough to understand I am not simply trying to disrespect our local citizens. Similarly, I hope students will realize that I may choose rather extreme examples of local social conditions, for clarity in class lectures, only because doing so will provide a much clearer picture of the point(s) I am reinforcing.

While students are certainly welcome to disagree with my local observations, please understand that the “observations” I use as examples in class are not merely “opinions.” Rather, my observations are made based on factual events whose significance/meanings may sometimes be open to different interpretations. This is in marked contrast to subjective “opinions” typically lacking adequate factual support. I welcome you to share your own observations, interpretations, and even opinions with me in my office during scheduled hours. However, unless I ask for student opinions during class (which I often do in SOC 102 and 205), I would prefer your saving subjective discussions for non-class times. This approach allows us to address any problems you may have with the course content while not potentially confusing your fellow students with non-testable information.

Finally, please understand that I make every effort to be accurate and timely in my teaching content. When possible and relevant, contrary views may be presented in class. **If you are personally offended by anything I say in the lectures, I STRONGLY URGE YOU TO CONTACT ME.** *Give me a chance to explain my reasoning behind why I said what has offended you. Let me have the opportunity to explain why the academic discipline of sociology must incorporate such subject matter in college classes. Allow me to clarify whatever questions or concerns you have and make a response to them. If I believe I have said something inappropriate, inaccurate, or objectively offensive, I will be happy to offer you and/or the entire class my sincere apology. On the other hand, you must realize that just because your opinion of the class content/teaching is one of being personally offended, it doesn't necessarily follow that your personal opinions are objectively correct (and therefore in need of a genuine apology).*

Turning Mole Hills into Mountains (and vice versa): After many years teaching I have concluded that students often require very clear examples of social concepts for comprehension. Therefore, I have a tendency towards selecting examples that are local expressions of national social phenomena. My examples are factual, though sometimes reflective of extremes. In short, I often look specifically for very clear-cut, often extreme, examples that lack the ambiguity many students find confusing in introductory classes. While you (as one of my students) might have chosen a different example to represent the topic under discussion, I chose the example for very valid instructional purposes. **I would be happy to explain my reasons for citing any examples (which you disagree with) during my office hours.**

Before jumping to the conclusion that I am inaccurately portraying local or national social phenomena, please let me defend my instructional choices to you. **Given the chance to explain my reasoning and instructional purposes, I believe you will find that everything possible is done to avoid any objective accusations of racism, prejudice, discrimination, sexism, ageism, or any other social sins.** However, at the same time, a college-level sociology class can't avoid all potentially socially-sensitive topics in the name of what is often called "political correctness." To fearfully avoid socially-sensitive topics and/or examples, simply to avoid facing objective social truths which may be potentially painful for some members of a society, is to practice academic dishonesty in the college classroom!

Especially for Criminal Justice Students: Everything previously mentioned in this handout also is true for my criminal justice courses. However, because the C.J. courses are also designed to occupationally (as well as academically) prepare students for specific careers, I believe it is vitally important to be as brutally honest as possible with students regarding the day-to-day realities of such work. Unfortunately, the historic realities of criminal justice have always included the worst mankind is capable of. Therefore, my C.J. classes must often include very graphic (though entirely accurate) descriptions of crimes, prison life, infamous criminals, etc. **While you may well find some of the information disturbing, I can assure you that my using examples that might shock you is always done for very valid instructional reasons.**

Frankly, if such classroom information is overwhelming emotionally for you (and, of course, assuming that you can't eventually overcome your initial revulsion), it might be in your best interest to avoid many (though not necessarily all) C.J.-related careers. Such career self-appraisal is better done while in school, before you devote extensive time and money to preparing for a career whose psychological requirements may not be right for you!

As previously mentioned, if you would like me to further explain why I chose certain examples or teaching strategies, please make an appointment to talk with me in my office. I'll be happy to explain anything I do in the classroom. Once you have heard my explanations, I think you will see that everything I do in the classroom has a very valid, objective reason behind it. There is never any intention to unnecessarily offend you!!!

An "End" to the "Beginning": I sincerely, professionally care about every one of my students and former students. I feel good when you succeed and regret when, despite my best efforts and your diligent work, you don't do as well as both of us might have liked. While I do everything possible to organize and present these courses so they are simultaneously of high academic quality, yet simple enough for students to not feel overwhelmed, the unavoidable fact remains that you must put forth some effort, too. I am here to help you in any way I realistically can, so don't hesitate to ask for my assistance. Also, since I never feel my professional relationship with students ends simply because I no longer have them sitting in a particular semester's class, please don't hesitate to come to see me later if I can possibly help you with academic advice, etc.

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