

Logic of Cultural Comparison

Course Description

In the social sciences, explanations that rely on the cultural attributes of entire social groups, such as nationalities, ethnicities, or economic classes, have been heavily critiqued for being empirically flawed and morally objectionable (see, for instance, the “culture of poverty” debate in the 1960s). More recently, however, sociologists have begun developing new tools for conceptualizing culture in subtler and less essentialist ways, resulting in the proliferation of research that rigorously examines cultural differences in an effort to explain group outcomes. We will study these advances in cultural sociology and discuss how they can inform our understanding of the social world. We will consider questions such as: What is culture? How can different manifestations of culture be measured? What is a cultural group and how can we define its boundaries? What kind of outcomes can culture explain and how can we go about formulating and testing such explanations? How do sociological understandings of culture differ from those routinely employed in public discourse?

In addition to providing a partial overview of cultural sociology, the course will give students an opportunity to conduct their own empirical research. Building on the assigned readings, students will design and carry out projects that compare cultural phenomena across groups. Examples of possible units of analysis include countries, neighborhoods, organizations, or sociodemographic categories. All methodological approaches will be welcome, but students will be encouraged to choose those methods that are the most suitable for their particular topics. The basics of research design will be discussed during one of the sessions in the first half of the semester.

Requirements

1. Students are expected to have read the material in advance of the weekly meetings and to actively participate in class discussions. Attendance and participation will account for 20% of the final course grade.
2. Students will post weekly responses that will serve as starting points for class discussions. In some weeks the responses will critically evaluate the assigned readings; in other weeks they will report on students’ progress with own empirical projects. The responses will account for 20% of the final grade.
3. The major assignment, due at the end of the semester, will consist of a paper (15-20 pages) reporting the findings of the independent research project. In preparation for the paper, students will produce a research proposal that outlines the research topic, identifies the relevant literature, and describes the data collection strategy. The proposal and paper will count for 15% and 45% of the final grade, respectively.