

SOCI 202

Constructing Social Problems



Monday/Thursday 1-2:20pm

Course Description

SOCI 202 focuses on how social problems are socially constructed. The social construction of social problems is not about people making problems up. It's not even about subjective interpretations of otherwise objective problems. The social construction of social problems is about the ways in which human beings identify and come to think about certain issues as social problems at particular times, in specific places, and with different levels of intensity. It's also focussed on how we avoid thinking about otherwise problematic issues as social problems by denying, rationalizing, justifying or downplaying their significance.

We will examine the social construction of the following social problems: popular hazards, terrorism, the fight against breast cancer, asylum seekers, serial killing, Halloween sadism, infectious diseases, surveillance, and public shaming. We will also consider different kinds of media messaging and how perceived problems that at some points in time occupy a considerable amount of attention and debate habitually decline in importance (only to be replaced by new issues and concerns).

Instructor/Contact Details



Professor Sean Hier
shier@uvic.ca

Readings

There is no textbook for this course. There are several academic papers assigned for weekly reading. All papers are available online (through Brightspace).

Evaluation

Midterm Exam 1	20%
Midterm Exam 2	20%
Midterm Exam 3	15%
Term Paper Proposal	15%
Term Paper	30%

Midterm Examinations (55%)

Three non-cumulative midterm exams will be administered throughout the semester. Students will be permitted access to one piece of paper (8.5 x 11) with anything written on it during each midterm. Midterms will consist of multiple choice/true and false questions.

Term Paper Proposal (15%)

By the end of October, you will need to demonstrate that you have identified a viable topic to write on, gathered appropriate research materials, and developed an understanding of what your paper will look like. Proposals will likely span 2 or 3 pages, including references. Details will be provided.

Term Paper (30%)

A final term paper will be submitted in December. The paper will span approximately 8-10 pages. Specifics for writing the paper will be provided.

What will I write on? Papers can be written on a wide range of topics. Students in the past have enjoyed writing on serial killing, shark attacks, PTSD, climate change, violence in video games, school shootings, bullying, sexualized violence, body image, doping in sport, sport protest, natural disasters, child obesity, Black Lives Matter, veganism, and terrorism.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, students might wish to write on the social construction of essential workers, disease transmission, infectious disease risk, vaccine hesitancy, and/or disease mitigation. There is an emerging sociological literature on the social construction of COVID-19. Especially interesting is the new language we use to navigate everyday life (e.g., distancing, spreading, flattening the curve, masking, shedding, vectors, clusters, how we are all in this together).

A fuller list of potential topics will be available when the Brightspace course site opens.

Who Can Take This Course?

Students from outside Sociology and/or the Faculty of Social Science regularly ask if they can handle this course. The answer is yes! Some of my favourite students come from the engineering and the natural sciences.

What Student Said About This (Online) Course in Fall 2020

Comments

Very interesting lectures

He very clearly explained concepts and phenomena's

Quick to respond to emails, engaging

This is the 1 of 2 classes I had with professor Hier this semester and I thoroughly enjoyed them both! The content was very interesting and I feel like the lecture videos were thorough and at times very entertaining. To be honest I began looking forward to watching them each week.

I enjoy writing weekly quizzes I think it is a very effective way of measuring understanding, participation and knowledge of concepts, especially in an online learning format. Thank you!

Responded very fast to questions and emails

Sean Hier was very prepared and organized. The structure of the course was clearly laid out and there were no surprises or scares that come with many online classes. The term paper was structured in an excellent manner and provided the opportunity for some self-directed learning and a demonstration of level of understanding core concepts from the course.

Hier was super engaged in everything he has taught us and managed to make every lecture very interesting or funny in some way! I'll be lucky if I can have him as a prof again in the future!

He provided great support students in particular when I am not a sociology student. When I asked him for feedback, he replied promptly with guidance

He is clearly very passionate about the material and that motivated me to learn more.

Professor Hier's instructional videos were well thought out and engaging.

Professor Hier is very passionate about the material he is teaching. I was nervous at the beginning of the course because I was not quite grasping the material quite well and I do not think it helped that the class was remote. Although as the class carried on I found his video and papers to be very useful in understanding each week's topics. He provided perfect feedback for my assignment to help steer me in the right direction and reach my end goal. I in the end really did enjoy his class.