COURSE TITLE: Contemporary Cultures in the United States  
COURSE NUMBER: SW 620, Fall 2005  
Friday 9 AM-12 PM  
INSTRUCTOR: Michael S. Spencer  
2728 Social Work Building  
(Office) 764-7224  
(Email) spencerm@umich.edu  
OFFICE HOURS: Wednesdays 11-12 (Rm. 2728)  
By appointment preferred  

1. Course Description:  

This course explores the origins and development of selected social variables characterizing racial, ethnic, religious, class and other cultural groups in contemporary U.S. society. Social and behavioral science theories and research findings on the allocation of different roles, status and opportunities to these populations are studied. A multidimensional, social justice and multicultural framework is established to examine privilege, discrimination and oppression. The course will emphasize that effective social work practice with diverse cultural groups involves understanding professional ethics in the context of the values of both the dominant society and the ethnic community.  

2. Course Content:  

The course content includes an exploration of historical, social, and political contexts for the study of diverse cultural groups, as gleaned from contemporary social science theories and conceptual frameworks. The various components that make up a culture will be examined in conjunction with a survey of selected racial, ethnic, class, immigrant, sexual orientation, and gender groups in the United States. The current status of these cultural groups are studied, including constructs such as the family, economic and educational attainment, development of informal and formal institutions within the cultural community, and modes of spiritual expression. The course also explores the impact of multiple social group memberships on social roles, help seeking and coping behavior, attitudes and values. In addition, the course contains a review of the contemporary conceptual frameworks influencing social science knowledge about
intergroup relations and conflict including, but not limited to, culturally sensitive, culturally competent, and ethnoconscious practice. The course examines the relationships among privilege, discrimination and oppression for selected cultural groups, and the implications of these forces for social work practice, the administration of human service organizations, and the formulation of public policies. Individual and small group activities related to the construction of critical consciousness in social work are also included.

3. Course Objectives:

Upon completion of this course, students will be able to perform the following skills:

1. Identify the historical, social, and political forces influencing the social constructions of diverse cultural groups in the United States by:
   a. Evaluating social science frameworks for the discussion of culture
   b. Distinguishing differences among culturally sensitive, culturally competent, multicultural and ethnoconscious frameworks in social work;
   c. Differentiating the experiences of indigenous and immigrant populations;
   d. Reviewing one’s own social group memberships and how they have influenced students’ opportunities and challenges.

2. Discuss the influences of discrimination, oppression and privilege on life experiences of diverse cultural groups by:
   a. Labeling forms of discrimination, prejudice and oppression as these differentially affect U.S. cultural groups including the poor, gay/lesbian/bisexual, ethnic, gender, racial, and social class groups;
   b. Identifying sources of intragroup and intergroup conflict stemming from cultural group membership;
   c. Describing social welfare policies and programs designed to address issues of differential treatment of cultural groups. Contrast these social welfare policies with those of other countries.
   d. Testing ones group participation and conflict management skills in an educational setting.

3. Review the potential between- and within-group similarities and differences among ethnic and racial groups in the United States and identify key variables to be considered by individuals attempting to work with these populations by:
   a. Examining historical, social and political forces influencing the current contexts these groups;
   b. Locating the intersections of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation for these groups;
   c. Critiquing the social science literature on ethnic and racial groups;
   d. Examining such variables as immigration and migration, cultural norms and roles, acculturation and assimilation, help-seeking behaviors, spirituality, employment and income, educational attainment, and the establishment of informal and formal institutions within these cultural groups;
e. Comparing and contrasting the experiences of at least two different racial and/or ethnic groups discussed in class, using an ethnoconscious framework.

4. Course Design:

This course uses various pedagogical strategies, including lecture, didactic and small group exercises, and video. The course will emphasize the use of dialogue to examine the multiple social identities we will study and to engage in self-exploration. Experiential learning will also be emphasized through a host of activities designed to elicit dialogue and self-exploration. Finally, the use of videos will also act as a trigger for dialogue and debriefing.

5. Source Materials:

Required Texts:


Suggested readings:


Available at Ulrich’s on S. University.

6. Assignments:

A. Attendance and participation is required and will consist of 25% of your final grade. Participation includes being present, on time, active, and prepared for class and group discussions. Attendance includes active participation in your dialogue groups as well. Active discussion includes asking questions or providing critical perspectives on your personal experiences and the readings, but may also include e-mail contact with the instructor or the class e-mail group (which will be created the first week of class). Refer to your student manual for further criteria.

B. Papers and Presentations.

Paper 1. Contextualizing a Life. (25% of final grade)
a. The purpose of this paper is to examine your family history and critically analyze how you, your family, and members of your social identity group came to be. Connecting with who we are both historically and in contemporary society can give us a perspective on how our views, attitudes, and opinions are shaped.

b. First, this paper invites you to take what you have learned thus far in this class and the readings, and to apply it to your own life. Begin the assignment by going back to at least two generations beyond your own and address place of residence, migration and immigration patterns, class, sexual orientation issues, gender, race and ethnicity. While it is not necessary to write about every parent or grandparent, choose at least one member from each generation to write about in greater depth. Sometimes students have found it useful to interview their family members for this assignment. I encourage you to do so if time and circumstances allow.

c. Next, I would like you to list two core values held by one member of each generation in your chart including yourself. Discuss how and why these values were important to each member. What were the attitudes of these members towards less privileged groups, for example, people in poverty or on welfare, ethnic and racial minorities, gay/lesbian individuals, persons with disabilities, persons of a different spiritual background, etc.. Discuss the social, historical and political climate experienced by each cohort and its impact on the values chosen by you and selected family members. Discuss how these values, attitudes, and environmental contexts influenced how you see yourself, your values, and your attitudes. Use concepts from the readings to help you understand what might contribute to these values and why they exist.

d. In discussing these core values, consider the following questions. How has membership in multiple social identity groups differently affected outcomes for you and your family members? What specific family influences and values are currently present in your own interactions with others? What do you attribute any differences between you and your family to? Please reference the readings from class to help you make these connections as well.

e. Points will be given based clarity and comprehensiveness in each area, particularly with reference to the readings. The paper assignment must not exceed 7 pages and is due October 7 at the beginning of class.

Paper 2. Integrative assignment. (25% of final grade)

a) The paper is designed to help you integrate the themes of the course with a professional area of interest. First, select a social work content area of interest to you (i.e., social problem, policy issue, specialization, practice population, etc.) Present a literature review of the content area and why it is of interest to you. You will need to provide academic references that substantiate your evidence (minimum of 3 research or journal articles).
b) Describe the role of culture, as defined broadly in the course (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, spirituality, nation) in your area of interest. While it is impossible to provide the necessary coverage, it is important to demonstrate thoughtfulness of how different cultural groups play a critical role in your interest area.

c) Critically analyze and reflect on the ways in which oppression and oppressive practices impinge upon your interest area and the environment of the individuals with whom you hope to work with as a social worker or other professional.

d) Critically analyze how your participation in the course and outside of class this term has promoted the process of better understanding the role of culture in your interest area and in yourself. Describe your personal struggles and accomplishments this term regarding self-reflection.

e) Describe at least two ways in which you feel you will be able to promote social change and social justice in your specific area of interest. Describe a specific plan of action, including at least two short term and two long term goals, which will allow you to promote social change and social justice in your area of interest. Include in this plan, goals for your own continued personal growth and promotion of social change/action after the course.

f) Points will be given based clarity and comprehensiveness in each area.

g) The second paper assignment must not exceed 7 pages and is due November 18 at the beginning of class.

Paper 3. Taping Assignment (see handout in class) 25% of final grade

All papers must be typed double-spaced, using a clear, readable 12 point font, one-inch margin, page numbered, and edited for spelling and grammatical errors. Points will be taken from a paper that is difficult to read or contains numerous spelling or grammatical errors. In addition to the stated criteria, papers will be graded for quality and clarity. Refer to “General Requirements for Class Papers in the School of Social Work” section of your Student Guide.

Late papers will be reduced two points per day. Papers not received at the beginning of class are considered late. If you have any concerns about your paper, you should see me before the paper is due. I will be willing to read drafts and provide comments up to one week before the paper is due. I will need at least 3 days to read it and return comments. I will not read and comment on drafts during the week prior to the date the paper is due, but will discuss any issues or problems you are encountering.

ALTERNATIVE: I see all students as responsible for their learning experience. We, as a community of learners, contribute to the experience, but the student is ultimately responsible for the depth, challenge, and enjoyment of learning. If you are interested in discussing alternative or additional assignments, I welcome you to speak with me about the ideas you have. I must
approve an alternative assignment. If you choose to do an alternate in place of one of the assignments listed above, a written proposal must be presented for my approval at least three weeks prior to the date the above assignment is due. No alternative assignments will be given for missed or late assignments.

7. **Evaluation:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GRADING</th>
<th>100-98</th>
<th>A+</th>
<th>85-83</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>97-94</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>82-79</td>
<td>B-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>93-90</td>
<td>A-</td>
<td>78-75</td>
<td>C+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>89-86</td>
<td>B+</td>
<td>74-70</td>
<td></td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

COFFEE/LUNCH BREAK! In addition to regular office hours, I will reserve at least one hour after class or at another designated time to have coffee/lunch with a group of students each week. This is an open invitation to meet in a less formal setting to discuss the class or get to know each other better. Depending on the response, I may have to limit the number of students so that the group remains small. Coffee time attendance is not required and non-attendance will not affect your grade.

8. **Logistics:**

*Accommodations for students with disabilities*

If you need an accommodation for a disability please let me know as soon as possible. Many aspects of this course, the assignments, the in-class activities, and teaching methods can be modified to facilitate your participation and progress throughout the semester. I will make every effort to use the resources available to us, such as the services for Students with Disabilities, the Adaptive Technology Computing Site, and the like. If you disclose your disability, I will (to the extent permitted by law) treat that information as private and confidential.

*Religious Observances*

Please notify me if religious observances conflict with class attendance or due dates for assignments so that we can make appropriate arrangements.

*Electronic Devices*

In consideration of your classmates and your own learning please turn off all telephones and pagers during class. I prefer that you receive no messages during class time, if you must be on call for an emergency, please let your home or office know that you are only available for emergencies that no one else can handle. If you must carry a pager, please set it to vibrate only.

9. **Schedule of Topics and Readings for the Term:**

**Week 1. September 9, 2005**
Overview of course
Introductions, pretest, concentric circles, syllabus, expectations for class

Week 2. September 16, 2005
Contemporary cultures and its social construction
Andersen and Hill-Collins: Part 1, ch. 1-7
Johnson: Introduction and Ch. 1

Week 3. September 23, 2005
Multiple Social Group Identities: Who are we and why is it important?
Andersen and Hill-Collins: Ch. 45-46
Johnson: Ch. 2, 3

Week 4. September 30, 2005
Racism
Andersen and Hill-Collins: Ch. 8-13, 47-19
Johnson: Ch. 4, 5

Week 5. October 7, 2005
Sexism
Paper 1. Contextualizing a Life due
Andersen and Hill-Collins: Ch. 19-23
Johnson: Ch. 6-7

Week 6. October 14, 2005
Heterosexism
Andersen and Hill-Collins: Ch. 50-59, 33
Johnson: Ch. 8

Additional readings will be put on reserve

Week 7. October 21, 2005

Classism

Andersen and Hill-Collins: Ch. 14-18, 27, 42, 43

Johnson: Ch. 9

Week 8. October 28, 2005

Ableism

Adams, Blumenfeld, et al – Chapters 21-31 (on reserve)

Additional readings will be put on reserve

Week 9. November 4, 2005

Religion and spirituality

Adams, Blumenfeld, et al – Chapters 60-72

Additional readings will be put on reserve

Week 10. November 11, 2005

Models of Change and the Promotion of Justice

Andersen and Hill-Collins: Ch. 60-64, 37-41, 44

Week 11. November 18, 2005

Paper 2. Integrative research paper is due.

Dialogue on Hot Topic

Andersen and Hill-Collins: Ch. 29-32, 34-36

No Classes, Thanksgiving Break: November 25, 2005

Week 12. December 2, 2005
Dialogue on Hot Topic

Andersen and Hill-Collins: Ch. 24-28

Week 13. December 9, 2005

Speak Out and potluck
Final taping paper due.
Purpose: The purpose of this assignment is for you to conduct an initial assessment of your own ideas, experiences and expectations about dialogue group work. In order to do this project, you will need the interview guide that follows, a tape recorder, and a blank tape of at least 90 minutes length. A subsequent assignment at the end of the term will build upon this initial assignment.

Rationale: The taping project builds on several elements that are important in intergroup relations. One, it allows you to tell your own story in relation to the questions provided. You can, therefore, keep a recorded entry of your thoughts and feelings at a particular moment in time. Two, it embraces the idea of praxis, that is continuous action and reflection. We are continually in the process of weaving more threads into our stories with different interactions, experiences and reflections. Thus, a taped story at one moment in time allows for reflecting back and charting your knowledge, skills and awareness development at another point in time. We will, therefore, have a second assignment that will require you to reflect on your initial taping. Last, the assignment as a whole allows you to chart your learning process with particular attention to growth and development factors in doing social justice-oriented work.

Instructions

1. Answer each of the questions in the attached interview guide as though you were being interviewed by someone else. Try to make your answers as complete as possible so that if someone else were listening, s/he would understand what you meant by your response.

2. Be sure to tape all of your answers. If you need to go beyond 90 minutes, please use an additional tape.

3. Turn in the tape to the instructor by the second class session. Label your tape clearly with your name.

4. Although the tape will be collected, you will be the only person who will listen to it. Your confidentiality is assured. Feel free to be as candid in your responses as possible. The tapes will be returned to you toward the end of the term. At that time, you will be asked to listen to your own tape and do a written reflection and analysis of it according to guidelines provided at that time.
INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. **Background**
   Please elaborate on your salient identities including any of following:
   a) Age
   b) Birthplace
   c) Racial identity
   d) Ethnicity
   e) Gender
   f) Sexual Orientation
   g) Religion
   h) Social class
   i) Ability status

2. **Identity and Awareness**
   a) What does it mean to you to be a person from these social identity groups? Is this a source of pride for you? Do you think it has made any difference in your life? What are the positive aspects about your social identities? What are negative aspects?
   b) What has been your personal journey in learning about issues of oppression and privilege? What were key formative experiences in your learning? What are continuing issues you want to address or work through in regards to social identities, oppression and privilege?
   c) What impact does your social identity have on your:
      i. communication styles?
      ii. conflict styles?

3. **Knowledge and Attitudes about Contemporary Issues**
   a) Select a targeted/oppressed social identity group to talk about more. In general, what do you think about the experience of people from this group in this society, that is, how they are perceived and treated?
   b) Select a privileged/agent identity group. In general, what do you think about the experience of members of this group in this society, that is, how they are perceived and treated?
   e) What are the most pertinent issues facing us--society and the US--in regards to diversity in this country?
   f) Do you think there has been much progress on issues of social justice? If yes, what are some examples of this progress? If no, what are some examples?

4. **Learning from previous experiences on intergroup relations**
   Intergroup interactions
   a) Describe three experiences with people from different social identity backgrounds--one that was positive, one that was negative, and one that was ambiguous.
      What made these positive, negative, ambiguous? Please describe the dynamics in these interactions. How are these representative of the dynamics of intergroup relations in the US presently? What lessons did you take from these?
Talking about intergroup issues

b) What have your experiences been in discussing intergroup issues, in the classroom? What made these experiences positive? negative?

c) What have your experiences been in discussing intergroup issues, outside the classroom? What made these experiences positive? negative?

5. Social Justice and Social Change

a) How comfortable are you discussing social justice issues?

b) What would be the consequences (i.e., costs) of acting against oppression of a particular target group that you do not belong to? With family? Friends? At school? At work?

c) Do you currently challenge or reinforce oppression? What else can you do? What holds you back from action?

d) In your opinion, what does it take to be a good ally in social justice work? What do you bring in terms of being an ally? What do you need from others to form alliances?

6. Reflecting on the interview

a) What was it like for you to answer these questions in taped interview format?

b) Any other comments?

---

ii The idea for this assignment comes from an exercise developed by Beverly Daniel Tatum and is described in Tatum, B.D. (1992). Talking about race, learning about racism: The application of racial identity development theory in the classroom. Harvard Educational Review, 62(1), 1-24. The assignment was adapted by Dorothy Van Soest, University of Texas at Austin, and described in Garcia, B., & Van Soest, D. (1997). Changing perceptions of diversity and oppression: MSW students discuss the effects of a required course. Journal of Social Work Education, 33(1), 119-129. This specific interview protocol has been heavily modified by Ratnesh Nadga of the University of Washington, but includes some questions from Van Soest’s adaptation. The assignment was further modified for the purpose of our SW 620 class.