Module Rationale

In this module we will try to introduce some ideas from contemporary theoretical sociology. We do this in the hope of encouraging students to see the absolute necessity of connecting social theory to social research. Of course, without a credible theoretical base, all social research can take the form of mere ‘abstract empiricism’ (C. W. Mills’ term for pointless, story-telling social research that fails to explain). We will draw upon recent theoretical and empirical work conducted by members of the department and try to extend your understanding of contemporary social theory.

The module will be structured around a combination of current worldwide developments in sociology research and the most recent research findings arising from work undertaken the Department of Sociology at York. These may include initiatives and investigations in the areas of urban, neoliberalism, culture, sociological history, medical sociology.

Tutorial Supervision

All members of the course team are willing to discuss your assessment with you. It is best to contact them by email in order to set up a meeting. If you have any questions about the practical content of this module, please address these to the module convenor. If you have any questions about the intellectual content of this module, please address these to the most appropriate team member.

Lectures

1: Introduction (Sharon Macdonald)  Week 2 - January 14th

This week Sharon Macdonald will provide an introduction to the module, setting out its aims and objectives. We will also discuss some of the nature and range of contemporary sociological research, including that undertaken in the department of Sociology at York.

2: The Sociological Imagination as Popular Culture (David Beer)  Wk 3 Jan 21st

This session will focus on the way that the sociological imagination, in many different forms, might be found within popular culture. The session will be used to question and reflect on this observation. We will explore what this means for academic sociology and how sociology might fit into these dense sociological narratives. We will ask what sociology might offer that is distinctive and explore how our jurisdiction is being challenged. We will also attempt to critically reflect on the strengths/qualities and weaknesses of these popular forms of sociological commentary. Can we learn anything from the sociological imagination as popular culture? Can we offer something that responds to it?

3: Using conversation analysis to make effective practice recommendations: analytic, political and ethical issues (Merran Toerien)  Wk 4 - Jan 28th

This session will focus on my experience of working as a full-time research fellow on a project funded by the UK’s Department for Work and Pensions. We were commissioned to use conversation analysis to examine approximately 200 recordings of adviser-claimant interactions in Jobcentres and private ‘Employment Zones’. The goal was to provide effective practice guidelines grounded in real life evidence of how these interactions work in practice. To my knowledge, this is a unique dataset, analysed in a way
that is significantly different from standard approaches used for research in this field. I'll discuss how the project came about and how it was shaped by our relationship with our funder. We'll focus especially on issues relating to the translation of findings into 'effective practice guidelines' and explore a range of issues - analytic, political and ethical - that this raised.

4: Researching Disorders of Consciousness: The personal and the political Celia Kitzinger Wk 5 - Feb 4th
This session draws on my own recent research programme on chronic disorders of consciousness (i.e. coma, the vegetative state and the minimally conscious state following severe brain injury). We'll explore how personal experience can generate research questions which in turn lead to the development of a research programme with broad policy and practice implication. We discuss the use of semi-structured interviewing in sensitive areas, the relationship between researcher and researched (and the use of 'insider' research), the integration of theory and practice, and the ways in which researchers can encourage uptake and implementation of research findings in real-world settings.

Recommended reading in advance of this session: Kitzinger, J. & Kitzinger, C. 2012. The 'window of opportunity' for death after severe brain injury, Sociology of Health & Illness click here
You may also find it useful to watch a Youtube video of the authors discussing their broader research programme on Coma, Consciousness and Culture. Click here.

5: Difficult Heritage (Sharon Macdonald) Wk 6 11 February
Usually, 'heritage' acts as a cultural form that helps to affirm positive senses of collective self-identity - for example, helping to substantiate national identity. Much of the social and cultural analysis of heritage has explored how it performs this role. Some history and heritage, however, is much more awkward to accommodate to positive self-identity narratives. This session will explore the phenomenon of 'difficult heritage' and consider possible social and cultural explanations for its rise in recent years. In doing so, Sharon Macdonald will draw especially but not only upon her research on Nazi heritage in Germany.

Class preparation
Before the class, complete the reading as explained under the reading tab. Come to the class with at least two questions ready to ask on the basis of your reading of Difficult Heritage. In addition, using sources that you find independently, prepare a summary of another example of 'difficult heritage' of your own choice.

6: Norms and inference in description: the case of paranormal experiences (Robin Wooffitt) Wk 7 - 18th Feb
In the past thirty years, there has been a turn to language in the social sciences. As a consequence, instead of viewing language and communication as a vehicle or the transmission of ideas between people, it is now seen as a form of social action: people do things to each other through their talk. In this session we will consider a basic feature of communication - description - and show why something as mundane as this is sociologically interesting. We will then develop these observations by looking at reports of personal experiences with paranormal phenomena, such as poltergeists and apparitions. We will see how descriptions of these experiences are tacitly designed to do a range of interpersonal tasks.

7: Critically analysing the ‘gender-specific’ movement within medicine (Ellen Annandale) Wk 8 - 25 February
In this session I will reflect upon my ongoing research (with colleagues) on what advocates represent as the new science of ‘gender-specific medicine’ (GSM). Specifically we will consider the professional discourse of GSM as a configuration of present day social and political power structures within what Steven Epstein
characterises more broadly as the ‘inclusion-and-difference paradigm’ within medical research, policy and practice. In my joint research I have employed the method of critical discourse analysis (CDA) to explore how the ‘gender-specific body’ is fabricated. As part of the seminar discussion we will reflect on the pros and cons of the methodology of CDA as formulated by Faircloth and as used by others, including myself in this project. More generally we will reflect on changing conceptualisations of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ and the relationship between them within medical research and the social sciences.

Please prepare by reading the materials accessible via the

8: Wrap-up and assessment (Sharon Macdonald) Wk 9 - 4 March
This session will be dedicated to discussing the overall course content and issues arising, and the assessment. In preparation for the session you should bring a proposed essay title or two and an essay outline.

Assessment
An Open essay assessment of no more than 5000 words in response to one of the questions set on Yorkshare VLE