

Sociology: Key concepts, designs and mechanisms

Time & Place: Thursdays, 11:00-13:00, Seminar room 2

Instructors: Arnout van de Rijt, Juho Härkönen & Valentina Di Stasio

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Open to: all researchers, visiting students, MW fellows and other research fellows at EUI. All participants must attend all meetings and do all assignments (no audits).

Course Description and Objectives

This course is part of a 3-course curriculum “SOCIOLOGY.” The other courses are the field seminar “SOCIOLOGY: Main questions and building blocks” and the elective “SOCIOLOGY: Core contemporary debates”. Taking the field seminar first is recommended but not a condition for participation. The present course is a theory course, with a focus on research designs that can be used for theory testing, and the type of data that are necessary. The objective of this course is to gain a deep analytical understanding of core concepts and mechanisms that together provide a toolkit for approaching research problems across the discipline and the social sciences more broadly. Each week focuses on one concept or mechanism. Different types of mechanisms emphasize different kinds of explanations: group-dependent mechanisms (e.g., relative deprivation, assortative mating, cooperation or boundary making) are useful for understanding how groups relate to one another and how these comparisons shape their actions; time-dependent mechanisms (e.g., cohort replacement, path dependency, cumulative advantage) focus on long-term trajectories to explain how past events can impact future outcomes, whether through endogenous processes or through demographic and structural ones; space-dependent mechanisms (e.g., contagion, segregation, chain migration) examine the role of networks and social interactions. The analysis of mechanisms allows us to understand how social phenomena come about, how they persist (path-dependency and isomorphism), when disruption can occur (tipping points) and why actions and behaviors can have unintended effects (Mathew effects, self-fulfilling

prophecies, symbolic compliance). In a typical week we read an article or handbook chapter on the focal concept/mechanism as well as several articles applying it through different designs. The weekly two-hour sessions are hands-on: students discuss interesting conceptual problems, make links with other concepts and mechanisms, and present applications proposed in assignments.

Requirements for credit: Attendance: This course requires regular attendance and active participation. Weekly assignments, done in teams (which are assigned and change in composition from week to week).

Readings

Researchers are expected to do the readings ahead of the meeting and to hand in a one-page assignment that either applies a concept / mechanism to a research problem of interest (e.g. the dissertation) or identifies an overlooked and previously underappreciated theoretical problem with the concept.

Artificial Intelligence

Creative use of Artificial Intelligence in assignments is encouraged. All use of Artificial Intelligence in the course must be disclosed and abide by the EUI's Guidelines for the Responsible Use of AI for Research, in particular section V Pedagogy and Training.