

How Then Should We Live? Principles of Sociology for Emerging Adults

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Description of the project

Principles of Sociology is generally full of students who registered to fulfill the general core's requirement for social science, rather than a major requirement. As a result, on the first day of class few students even know what sociology is—much less why they should be required to take the course. To help non-majors see the relevance of sociology I made significant revisions to my Principles of Sociology course in the Fall of 2024 by reordering the course in terms of three questions, which also serve as the three primary units in the course. These questions are:

1. Who am I? Sources of Identity in Modern Life
2. What are the stories of my life? Culture and Meaning-Making
3. How should I live? Institutions, Culture, and Human Flourishing?

Traditional undergraduate students are emerging adults, a stage of life characterized by opportunity, change, and uncertainty.¹ Our students are in the process of learning who they are and who they will become. Which major should they choose? What careers interest them? Who should they date or marry? Where will they live? Will they join a church and make Christ the center of their life? The answers to these questions require time and discernment. The problem is that contemporary society offers many pathways through emerging adulthood that are unproductive and lack intentionality. Many of our students are aware of which social and cultural pathways are overtly immoral, but how should they discern which ways of life are most consistent with who God is calling them to be?

Socrates famously said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." This course helps students to live an examined life by foregrounding three questions that will help them navigate

¹ Jeffrey Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

emerging adulthood in a more intentional and Christ-centered manner. The first major unit in this course addresses the question *who am I?* It teaches the principles of sociology related to gender, race, social class, and life stage while grounding these principles in a Biblical anthropology: what does it mean to be made in the image of God how should this shape how we imagine ourselves and others? This unit reminds students of our unity in Christ (Gal. 3:28) without downplaying the very real and important differences related to our various identities.

The second major unit in the course addresses the question *what are the stories of my life?* This unit explores the topic of culture, which relates to how we make sense of our lives, including various narratives. These narratives are embedded within nations, cultures, institutions, and groups. According to the renowned moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre narratives are essential because “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”² The third unit addresses *how should I live my life?* by exploring questions related to economics, health, technology, community and relationships, marriage and family, and the Christian faith. This unit offers concepts that help students to think through questions related to these areas of life without telling them exactly *how* to live, since students must exercise their own discernment and wisdom (within a Biblical framework, of course).

The readings, assignments, and method of instruction were chosen to facilitate discernment and conversation related to the course’s three primary questions. The assigned readings are not dry descriptions, but rich and thought-provoking. Students are required to annotate or take notes on the readings and be ready to discuss during class. Two or three times during each class period we break into small groups to discuss a question related to the reading

² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press 2007 [1984]), 216.

or lecture. Anecdotally, students have told me they love these small group discussions because it gives them a chance to reflect on the course's deep questions without requiring them to be vulnerable in front of the whole class.

We also address the question *how should I live?* through our daily Scripture reflection, which works through the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7) over the course of the semester. Scripture scholar Jonathan Pennington (Southern Seminary) argues in his book *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing* that this passage of Scripture ought to be understood in terms of God's design of human flourishing. When addressing questions related to human flourishing it is helpful to have a daily reminder that the most blessed people are those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Mt. 5:6) and who build their life on the solid foundation of the words of Christ (Mt. 7:24-27).

How the project differs from current teaching ideas and methods in the field

The typical sociology textbook is organized into approximately 15 chapters with one chapter devoted to general topics such as classical social theories, research methods, race, gender, social class, education, economics, politics, family, crime, deviance, social movements / social change, and religion. This format reduces entire sub-disciplines to about 30 pages, meaning these chapters are a "mile wide but an inch deep." This approach often feels formulaic, and in my opinion is generally incapable of cultivating what C. Wright Mills called the "sociological imagination," or the ability to see the relationship between the "general" and the "particular." Sociology generally avoids questions related to human flourishing in an effort to be scientific and distance itself from the discipline of Philosophy. My approach offers a true innovation to teaching Principles of Sociology in the following ways:

1. I introduce an overarching framework that draws on the principles of sociology to address three fundamental questions of human life: *Who am I? What stories do I belong to? How then should I live?*
2. I embrace the value-laden nature of these questions—not only because Union is a Christ-centered institution (though this is reason enough)—but because it is impossible to address these questions in a theological vacuum.
3. I avoid the temptation to cover *every* general topic in the discipline in one semester but instead go deep (the fencepost method) into several key questions and issues. No doubt there are other instructors who use the fencepost method to teach introductory sociology, but my method is innovative because I focus on topics that are most relevant for Christian emerging adults, not just to teach my favorite topics or research interests.

Success of the project and how it can be improved

In general, I find that these innovations resonate with students. It often takes time for students to adjust to this style of course if they are accustomed to a textbook and multiple-choice exam format, but once they learn what to expect I find their response to be positive overall. One student wrote, “This class has made me excited and inspired to connect more with people I don’t know well and to hear their story!” Another said, “This class is my absolute favorite and I’ve enjoyed everything we’ve learned about so far!”

This innovative approach to teaching Principles of Sociology would be improved by creating additional space for genuine student reflection. Currently students engage with the course themes through several writing assignments both inside and outside of class, but students would be better served by more regular and intentional reflection. One assignment asks them to

make connections between the course content and their life's experiences, but I have a sense that students are approaching the assignment with the primary goal of earning a high grade, rather than personal reflection for its own sake. This summer I am planning to develop a semester-long journaling assignment that requires students to regularly process their own responses to the foundational questions raised during the course. This project will be a completion grade, allowing students to genuinely wrestle with these big questions for their own sake—and not solely for the purpose of earning a grade.

Conclusion

In summary, this innovative approach is comprehensive because the overall arc of these three questions affects the course content by selectively choosing where the course goes deep, rather than trying to cover every subdiscipline within Sociology. This approach is also innovative because it raises questions that undergraduate students face during emerging adulthood, while providing concepts and frameworks to help them discern their own answers to the question *how should I live?* This innovation is comprehensive because it affects the content, our daily Scripture reflection, the course's methods (rich readings and many small group discussion), and course assignments. I plan to improve upon this innovation by creating a more regular means of encouraging genuine reflection, rather than the kinds of written reflections students think will yield the highest grade.