

# Poverty, Wealth, and Inequality in the U.S.

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Drawing on an interdisciplinary selection of theoretical frameworks and disciplines ranging from critical studies to education, we will explore the social, cultural, political, and spiritual implications of poverty, wealth, and inequality in the United States. In a fully experiential manner we will examine, for example, the ways in which class identity informs one's views of the world and its politics; how socioeconomic status affects one's access to education and other social goods; and how dominant discourses and stereotypes related to poverty influence mass perception regarding a range of social issues, from educational policy to welfare.

## Student Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- Develop deeper understandings of historical and contemporary class conditions in the U.S. (NCC Competency: Global Understanding);
- Strengthen abilities to identify various class-related ideologies as reflected in social, cultural, and political organizations, policies, and discourses (NCC Competency: Critical Thinking); and
- Learn strategies for civic engagement and social change related to class inequities and economic justice (NCC Competency: Civic Engagement).

## Required Texts

Eitzen, D. S., and Smith, K. (2009). *Experiencing poverty: Voices from the bottom*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). Boston, MA: Pearson.

Kivel, P. (2006). *You call this a democracy? Who benefits, who pays, and who really decides*. Lanham, MD: The Apex Press.

Van Gelder, S. (2011). *This changes everything: Occupy Wall Street and the 99% movement*. San Francisco: BK Currents.

## Learning Activities (Assignments)

### Learning Activity 1: Class Participation (100 points)

Participation is not measured by the amount of airtime you consumes. Rather, it is measured by the extent to which you come to class prepared and contribute constructively to the discussion. The question is, within the context of your participation style, were you prepared and engaged? I will use this rubric as a general guideline:

- (80-100) Excellent Participation. Community Member attends class each week. Community Member consistently asks questions or makes observations that demonstrate deep reflection and analysis. Community Member engages actively and civilly in small group discussions and other in-class activities.

- (60-79) Decent Participation. Community Member attends class each week. Community Member sometimes asks questions or makes observations that demonstrate deep reflection and analysis. Community Member generally engages actively and civilly in small group discussions and other in-class activities.
- (40-59) Lackluster Participation. Community Member misses two or more classes. Community Member rarely asks questions or makes observations that demonstrate deep reflection and analysis. Community Member fails to engage actively and civilly in small group discussions and other in-class activities.
- (39 or below) Poor. Community Member misses three or more classes. Community Member clearly arrives to class unprepared and remains disengaged during discussions. Community Member does not engage civilly.

Learning Activity 2: Your Socioeconomic Status Story (100 points)

***Due in class January 29***

In a format of your choosing, you will tell the story of your own socioeconomic status. This is not a research assignment, so you do not need to cite sources, unless it makes sense to do so based on your approach. Rather, this is your opportunity to reflect on the ideologies, assumptions, experiences, and identities you carry with you into this class. The types of questions you might consider—and please don't try to answer all of them—include:

- How do you identify economically? Are you poor, working class, middle class, wealthy, something else? How do you know?
- What, if anything, do you know about how your family ended up in its present economic condition? Were previous generations poorer or wealthier than your family?
- What messages did you receive growing up about what it meant to be the class identity you and your family had? What were the cues that let you know you belonged to a certain social class? Did you grow up in a neighborhood or area in which families were economically diverse or economically similar?
- What biases, prejudices, or other beliefs did you have growing up, or do you have now, about people who are poorer than you? What about people who are wealthier than you?
- Do you aspire to be financially wealthy?
- Would you say most of your friends are in the same socioeconomic bracket as you are?

Again, do not try to answer all of these questions. Choose a couple and dig as deeply as possible. Be creative. Express yourself however you best express yourself. I am giving you the opportunity to choose your own format because I want you to choose whatever format will help you think as deeply and complexly as possible about this, even if you never have thought about it before. Dig, dig, dig.

Possible formats include a brief reflective essay (not more than 1,000 words), one or more poems or song lyrics, a painting or drawing, a graph or chart, a video or photostory, a collage, or just about anything else. (If you have an idea that you want to pass by me, feel free to do so.)

Note that you will be asked to share your story, or as much of it as you are comfortable sharing, with classmates.

Your story will be assessed on the extent to which you:

1. demonstrate deep and complex reflection; and
2. describe, in some fashion, how you ended up in the socioeconomic status you now occupy.

Learning Activity 3: An Essay on Power and Wealth (300 points)

***Due electronically by midnight on March 7 (Thursday)***

Choose one theme related to power and wealth from class discussions or readings or films—something that is interesting enough to you that you wish to dig into it more deeply and rigorously. You will become the expert on that theme by researching it thoroughly and writing an essay, 2,000-or-so words long, about it.

Themes might include, for example:

- the relationship between race (or gender or disability or ...) and wealth inequality;
- the history of the corporation and corporate power in the U.S., or some aspect of that history;
- economic connections between a particular industry (e.g., dairy farming or firearm manufacturing or ...) and elected government officials—we call this the “follow the money” theme;
- trends in wealth and income inequality and their relationships with corporate profits; or
- anything else you can come up with that you’d like to pursue.

This is an *analysis* essay, not an *exploratory* essay, so the idea is not just to report *what is happening* or *what the trends are*, but instead to analyze their significance in society, their relationship to ideas like equity and justice and fairness, and their consistency or inconsistency with ideals like meritocracy and equal opportunity. This also is not an *opinion* essay or vehicle for purely ideological arguments. Use and cite evidence to make informed arguments.

In order to prepare to make informed arguments, you should plan to read as much about your topic as possible, both from scholarly sources (peer-reviewed, scholarly journals) and from reports published by nonpartisan organizations. The following *are not* scholarly sources: magazine articles, newspaper articles, Web sites, encyclopedia entries, and blog posts. Please cite at least 5 such sources in your essay.

Essays will be assessed based on the extent to which you:

1. incorporate ideas and experiences from class in your analysis;
2. dig beneath the obvious surface in order to analyze (not just describe) how some aspect of wealth or power relates to questions of equity, justice, fairness, meritocracy, and equal opportunity;
3. cite at least 5 scholarly, nonpartisan sources that are relevant to your topic; and
4. produce a well-written, well-organized, argument that offers unique insights about your theme.

Learning Activity 4: Poverty Media Analysis (200 points)***Due Electronically, March 26***

Throughout the semester we will be experiencing a wide variety of media sources, from TV shows to radio shows to music videos to photographs, which depict people in poverty in a variety of ways. For this assignment you will identify and analyze two such sources that we did not examine in class. The two sources, which *must be from two different media*, should project different portrayals of poor people and poverty—one roughly a “deficit” view and one roughly a “resilience” view. Also, the sources do not have to be explicitly about poverty; in fact, I much prefer for you to find sources that might not be so obvious to people who are not paying attention to images of class and poverty in the media. Note that *you will need to be able to bring copies of your two media sources to share in small groups during class*. That means that, if you choose something that is in electronic form, you need to be able to put it on a computer or on a phone or you need to be able to send me a link to it.

You have *500 words* for each analysis, so be concise. In what ways does each media source reflect either a more or less deficit ideology or a more or less resilience ideology? Who do you imagine to be the primary audiences for the media sources and what are the implications of their depictions of poverty and poor people for that audience? Remember to note the people or organizations behind the media sources. If you choose a radio program, what do you know about the host and sponsor? If you choose an advertisement, what do you know about the product and the company marketing it?

This assignment will be assessed on the extent to which you:

1. describe, using course concepts, how the sources you chose portray deficit and resiliency views of poor people and poverty;
2. describe with depth, beyond the obvious surface-level stuff, the implications of the sources and their messages for the assumed audience; and
3. produce cogent, well-written, mini-essays.

Learning Activity 5: Acting for Economic Justice Poster Presentation (300 points)***Due in class April 30.***

This learning activity is designed to be a group project. However, you can choose to do it individually if you prefer to do so. Each group will explore an economic justice or class inequity concern of her or his choosing. Options are broad: access to education, homelessness, environmental degradation, lack of living wage work, or something else. You will present an issue analysis on that concern in the form of a poster presentation, in which you will describe, as deeply and concretely as possible:

- (1) *Who is most affected by the issue.* For example, in addition to socioeconomic status, are race, gender identity, (dis)ability, sexual orientation, or other identities noticeably related to the issue?
- (2) *How, exactly, the issue impacts those who are most affected by it.* Think both immediate-term and long-term. For instance, what are the long-term implications, even across generations, for a community that is denied access to healthcare?
- (3) *Who is responding, and how.* Who is responding to the issue? What strategies are they using to respond? Explore community organizations, non-profit organizations, religious organizations, activist organizations, and others. Look to see how national organizations (United Way, Catholic Charities, Urban League, for instance) might be involved. How would you characterize the ways individuals and organizations in your community are responding?

- (4) **Most Importantly**, *How you would respond, given adequate resources*. What do you think needs to happen in order to redress the inequity or injustice you're exploring? Remember to consider the necessity for immediate, practical, responses as well as long-term social change.

Try to imagine that #1-3 are preparing you to address #4. That's what this poster presentation is really about. *How would you respond? What is your answer? How do we create equality out of inequality, if that's what you think we ought to do?* Be specific. Have a proposal and be ready to justify it.

Your group will be expected to inform itself about the issues you're discussing by consuming (and citing) at least five *scholarly* sources, not including course readings, relevant to your topic.

Your group will create a poster presentation to share your research, findings, and recommendations to your classmates on the last day of class. In a visually stimulating format, your poster should include a synthesis of the elements described above. In addition, you will turn in a brief synopsis of your presentation, not more than two double-spaced pages long, which also should include your list of references.

Your poster presentations will be graded based on the extent to which your group:

1. incorporates into its analysis major concepts, ideas, and experiences from class;
2. produces a visually appealing, information-rich, poster summarizing its findings;
3. offers a deep, complex analysis of organizations' and others' responses to the problem on the poster and orally; and
4. provides a thoughtful, informed, set of strategies for both immediate and long-term change for economic justice and class equity as related to the problem being analyzed.

### Grading

A = 940-1000	A- = 900-939	
B+ = 870-899	B = 830-869	B- = 800-829
C+ = 770-799	C = 730-769	C- = 700-729
D = 600-699	F = >599	

### Tentative Schedule

January 22: Introductions

- Introduction to course and each other
- Review of syllabus
- Class & poverty awareness quiz
- Exploration of major course themes: poverty, wealth, inequality

Read for January 29: Eitzen pp. viii-8

January 29: What We Know and Our Class Identities

- Why poor people are poor and wealthy people are wealthy: our views (free write)
- Our stories about class—our attitudes about people poorer and wealthier than us

*Due: Your Socioeconomic Status Story*

Read: for February 5: Kivel pp. xv-8; Norton & Ariely essay

February 5: Wealth Distribution and Class Socialization

- Graphs: How is wealth distributed in the U.S.?
- The stories of our class identities
- Relationship between wealth and income
- Wealth pyramid
- Ten Chairs activity: wealth distribution

Read for February 12: Kivel pp. 9-47; essay TBD

February 12: Wealth and the U.S. Power Structure

- U.S. Economic Structure
- Corporate influence
- *The Corporation*

Read for February 26: Kivel pp. 48-124; essay TBD

February 19: No Class (no pun intended)

February 26: The U.S. Ruling Class and Power

- Passing on wealth
- Corporate welfare
- Redistribution of wealth
- *The 1 Percent*

Read for March 5: Kivel pp. 125-143; essay TBD

March 5: Popular Ideologies on Wealth and Poverty in the U.S.

- Deficit ideology (individual)
- Systems ideology (systemic/institutional)
- Resilience ideology (community)
- Analysis of texts related to each

*Due electronically by midnight, Thursday, March 7: Essay on Power and Wealth*

Read for March 19: Eitzen Part II; essay TBD

March 12: Spring Break

March 19: Images of Poverty and the Working Class

- Media depictions of poor and working class people
- View and analyze clips from *All in the Family*, *Good Times*, *Cops*, *The Wire*, *Justified*, etc.
- Depictions of working class and poor people in school textbooks

Read for March 26: Eitzen Parts III and IV; essay TBD

March 26: Voices of Poor and Working Poor People

- Visit to National Coalition for the Homeless
- Grassroots activism in poor communities
  - Highlight education activism in Appalachia

*Due electronically: Poverty Media Analysis*

Read for April 2: Eitzen Part V; essay TBD

April 2: Systems of Economic Injustice

- Access to educational opportunity
- Access to healthcare
- Access to living wage employment

Read for April 16: Eitzen Part VI; Kivel pp. 153-163; essay TBD

April 9: No Class

April 16: Responses to Inequality: The Labor Movement

- History
- Demonization
- Present conditions

Read for April 23: van Gelder; essay TBD

April 23: Responses to Inequality: The 99% Movement

- History
- Goals
- Demonization

Read for April 30: Whatever will help you with your poster presentation

April 30: Poster Presentations and Final Reflections

### **Policies and Information**

Please arrive at class on time. Two tardies will be considered an absence for the purpose of participation grading.

Please attend class. Each member of the Community is allowed one absence, no questions asked. Because the class is built around interaction and dialogue, attendance by each member of the Community is critical. So when you miss more than one class, your grade may be affected.

When you miss class, it is your responsibility to arrange to make up the day's work. You must approach me about the absence and inquire about ways of making it up.

Engaged and respectful dialogue is encouraged. Demeaning, intolerant, and/or disruptive behavior or responses at any time will affect your participation grade.

You are responsible for completing individual and group assignments on time (defined as turning in all assignments by the date and/or time listed on the syllabus). Assignments submitted late will lose one letter grade for each day they are past due, including Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays.

Please check your email account regularly for updates and important announcements; checking your email during University closings is especially important as I will alert you to schedule changes via email.

George Mason University has an Honor Code with clear guidelines regarding academic integrity. Three fundamental principles you must follow at all times are: 1) all work submitted must be your own; 2) when using the work or ideas of others, including fellow students, give full credit through accurate citations; and 3) if you are uncertain about citation rules or assignment guidelines, ask me for clarification. No grade is important enough to justify academic misconduct. If you feel unusual pressure or anxiety about your grade in this or any other course, please let me know and also seek help from University resources. The University provides a range of services to help with test anxiety, writing skills, study skills, personal issues, and related concerns.

All papers must be typed, double spaced on 8.5" x 11" paper using 12 point Times New Roman font with 1" margins. Multiple pages must be stapled before class. Additionally, all papers and other assignments should be documented properly in accordance with an accepted citation manual (e.g. The Chicago Manual of Style, The APA Manual of Style, The MLA Style Manual).

### **GMU Student Resources**

#### **Center for Service and Leadership (Center for Leadership and Community Engagement):**

The Center for Leadership and Community Engagement is a central contact point at George Mason University for information on experiential learning, service learning, and leadership development. The Center's webpage provides exciting and useful material including the Student Service Learning Handbook, information on writing learning objectives, instructions on completing a learning objectives contract, and lists of experiential learning opportunities.

#### **New Century College On-Line Writing Guide—<http://classweb.gmu.edu/nccwg/index.html>**

This on-line guide is tailored specifically to New Century College students.

**GMU Writing Center:** Robinson A116; 993-1200; [writingcenter.gmu.edu](http://writingcenter.gmu.edu)

**Office of Disability Services:** Any student with documented learning disabilities or other conditions that may affect academic performance, should: 1) make sure this documentation is on file with the Office of Disability Services (SUB I, Rm. 222; 993-2474) to determine the accommodations you might need; and 2) talk to me to discuss reasonable accommodations.

<http://www.gmu.edu/student/drc>

**Student Technology Assistance and Resources (STAR) Center:** Johnson Center 229; 993-8990; <http://www.media.gmu.edu>