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## **On the Sociology of Games: Revisiting a Syllabus for “Playing Games: A Mini Social Science Course for Freshmen” at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (1982)**

Michael R. Hill

The syllabus attached below was prepared (on a manual typewriter!) at the invitation of the Chair of the Department of Sociology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, for a proposed four-week mini-course to be taught during January 1982. Whereas I was then a sociology teaching assistant and as such was invited to submit a proposal, it subsequently developed that tenured faculty members exerted their right (under departmental by-laws) for priority consideration for all teaching appointments (and subsequent payment) and, thus, my proposed course was not only “bumped” but also languished unfunded and untaught.

Having recently encountered the syllabus among my papers, I still think — forty years later — that the course was a good idea. If updating the proposed syllabus for students today, I would focus more strongly on games as socially-constructed, institutionalized patterns and make the following additions to the assigned readings:

(1) Erving Goffman on “play” and “playfulness”, pp. 40-52 in *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974.

(2) George Herbert Mead on “play” and “games”, pp. 150-64, 364-65 in *Mind, Self and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934.

(3) Mary Jo Deegan on “play” and “football”, pp. 25-28, 77-88 in *American Ritual Dramas: Social Rules and Cultural Meanings*. New York: Greenwood Press.

(4) George Elliott Howard, “Social Psychology of the Spectator”, *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (July 1912): 33-50.

(5) Ludwig Wittgenstein on “games”, sections 66-71 in *Philosophical Investigations*. Revised 4th edition, edited by P.M.S Hacker and Joachim Schulte. Chichester, West Sussex (UK): Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

This syllabus is offered for the record as an exemplar of an immersive approach for quickly introducing students new to the social sciences to relatively sophisticated concepts with which they can be expected to have at least a modicum of personal experience in the everyday world.

13 March 2021  
St. Joseph, Michigan

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## PLAYING GAMES

### A Mini Social Science Course for Freshmen

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Objective: The objective of this mini-course is to introduce the student to the many-faceted concept of "game" and its application in the social sciences. This objective will be met through lectures, discussions, required readings, exercises, and a take-home final examination.

Who Should Consider Taking This Course: This course should be of interest and use to students who are seriously considering a major in any of the social sciences, including: sociology, economics, social psychology, political science, anthropology, linguistics, human development, and human geography.

Assumptions by the Instructor: It is assumed that students taking this course can add, subtract, multiply, and divide, use a dictionary, and write an intelligent paragraph using complete English sentences. It is also assumed that students will read and study the assignments carefully, do the assignments on time, be prepared to participate in discussions, and be able to think abstractly at a level about equal to that required to pass a freshman algebra course or an introductory philosophy course.

Course Grade: Participation in discussions (10%), Typed, one-paragraph summary of main points for each assigned reading (30%), Exercise reports (10%), Final examination, take-home, typed (50%).

Late Work/Unexcused Absences: University policy requires attendance at all class meetings. Each unexcused absence will result in reducing your final grade by 5%. The typed summaries of readings are due on the day that the indicated unit is covered in class. Late summaries (as well as late exercise reports) will result in a 10% grade reduction for that assignment for each day that it is late. These policies will be rigidly enforced in order to help the student keep on top of the assignments. This course is very compact, cumulative, and must move very rapidly. The course is so short that if a student gets behind, he/she will most likely never catch up enough to write a passing final examination.

Academic Dishonesty: This potential problem can be avoided if each student does his/her own work independently. The instructor will follow the most severe course permitted under the procedures outlined in the UNL Student Handbook if a case of academic dishonesty is discovered.

Final Examination: Questions for the final examination will be distributed at the start of the mini-course. They will be due no later than 5:00 p.m. on the day scheduled in the Class Schedule for the Sociology 153 final exam. All answers must be typed. Each student is on his/her honor to do his/her own work independently. Students who require clarification or guidance on a particular question must contact the course instructor rather than a fellow student. There will be no make-ups or incompletes except in cases of well-documented personal hardship or severe illness or personal injury.

Availability of Assigned Readings: At least one copy of all assigned readings will be on reserve at Love Library. Arrangements will be made at the first class meeting to obtain Xerox copies (at minimal cost) of all readings except Goffman's Interaction Ritual which will be available at the bookstores.

Social Evening: We will collectively schedule a social get together for one evening during the course. We will actively play a variety of games and discuss the social values/skills involved in each game. Food and beverages will be arranged. This activity is not required for the course, but participation is strongly encouraged.

The Instructor: Michael Hill is an M.A. student in sociology and a Ph.D. student in geography. He is currently writing his doctoral dissertation in geography on pedestrian route-selection as a spatial game. He has lived in Nebraska since the 5th grade, graduated from Benson High in Omaha, earned his B.A. at the University of Omaha (now UNO), and completed his M.A. in geography at UNL.

PART I            Introduction and Philosophical Issues

- Unit (1)        Lecture: Why Study Games?--Introduction  
                 Reading: Elliot M. Avedon and Brian Sutton-Smith,  
                                 "Introduction," The Study of Games (New  
                                 York: John Wiley, 1971), pp. 1-8.  
                                 (Note: a one-paragraph, typed summary of  
                                 this reading is due at the first class  
                                 meeting).
- Unit (2)        Lecture: What Are the Characteristics of Games?  
                 Reading: Bernard Suits, "What Is a Game?"  
                                 Philosophy of Science, Vol. 34(2), June  
                                 1967, pp. 148-156.
- Unit (3)        Lecture/Discussion: Is Life Just a Game?  
                 Readings: (1) John Huizinga, "The Play Element  
                                 in Contemporary Civilization," Homo  
                                 Ludens (London: Paladin, 1949), pp. 221-240.  
                                 (2) Roger Callois, "Toward a Sociology  
                                 Derived from Games," Man, Play and Games  
                                 (New York, Free Press, 1961), pp. 57-67.

PART II            Games, Society and Culture

- Unit (4)        Lecture: Social Interaction as a Game  
                 Reading: Erving Goffman, "Where the Action Is,"  
                                 Interaction Ritual (Garden City: Anchor  
                                 Books, 1967), pp. 149-270. (Note: This  
                                 is a lengthy, but fun and easy to read  
                                 assignment. It is scheduled so you can  
                                 read it over a weekend.)
- Unit (5)        Lecture: Game Rules As Norms  
                 Reading: Rivka Eifermann, "Rules in Games," in  
                                 Alick Elithorn and David Jones (eds.),  
                                 Artificial and Human Thinking (San  
                                 Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1973), pp. 147-161.
- Unit (6)        Lecture: Developmental and Cross-Cultural Aspects  
                                 of Games  
                 Reading: Elliot M. Avedon and Brian Sutton-Smith,  
                                 "The Function of Games," The Study of  
                                 Games (New York: John Wiley, 1971),  
                                 pp. 429-439.

PART III      The Empirical Study of Games

- Unit (7)      Lecture: Why Study Games?--Revisited  
              Reading: James S. Coleman, "Games As Vehicles  
                              for Social Theory," American  
                              Behavioral Scientist, Vol. 12(6),  
                              July-August 1969, pp. 2-6.
- Unit (8)      Lecture: Observing Games  
              Reading: Fritz Redl, et al., "The Dimensions  
                              of Games," in Elliot M. Avedon and  
                              Brian Sutton-Smith (eds.), The Study  
                              of Games (New York: John Wiley, 1971),  
                              pp. 408-418.
- Unit (9)      Exercise: Observing, Characterizing, and Comparing  
                              Games Using the Redl Checklist. Students  
                              will observe three 10 minute video-tapes  
                              of childrens' games and characterize  
                              them using Redl's dimensions. Students  
                              will write a summary report on each  
                              game and comment on the social values/  
                              skills implicit in each game observed.  
                              Typed report is due at next class meeting.

PART IV      Formal Game Theory: An Introduction

- Unit (10)      Lecture: The Concept of Strategy  
              Reading: Oskar Morgenstern, "The Theory of Games,"  
                              Scientific American, Vol. 180(5), May  
                              1949, pp. 22-25.
- Unit (11)      Lecture/Discussion: The Limits of Game Theory  
              Reading: Anatol Rapoport, "The Use and Misuse of  
                              Game Theory," Scientific American, Vol.  
                              207(6), December 1962, pp. 108-14, 117-18.
- Unit (12)      T. V. Lecture: Anatol Rapoport, recorded at UNL,  
                              fall 1976.