

Teaching Critical Sociology:
The Consequences of Pursuing a Critical Pedagogy

by

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Abstract

While there has been a great deal of literature dealing with critical sociology and also a separate literature dealing with students' perceptions of bias in the classroom, there has been little that looked at the relationship between the two. Professor Prew's course used a critical sociological approach and used a variety of perspectives, but it was still perceived by some students as a single "liberal" perspective or his own opinion. In casual observation, we noticed that evaluations that tended to contain negative comments about Dr. Prew's perspective tended to be lower than the class average. In this paper, we reviewed and coded the written comments on Dr. Paul Prew's Sociology 101 course evaluations in the 2008-2009 academic year to assess whether there is a correlation between the quantitative feedback on evaluations and the qualitative comments. Using correlations and means, we specifically tested to see if the qualitative comments that contain overtly negative assessments of Dr. Prew's perspective in the course were significantly more negative than those that are neutral or complimentary regarding his perspective. The findings tended to support this hypothesis.

This is Not Sociology!

The Consequences of Teaching Critical Sociology on Course Evaluations

“I caution you to think about your actions because they will not go unchecked forever. ... If I was you I would fear this day very much because the punishment you will receive will be one you can’t even fathom and will last forever. I can’t even fathom how bad that would be. Imagine burning for a minute, let alone for eternity. ... Think about it, you’re going to be dead a lot longer than you will be alive. It would be wise to figure out where you’re going.”

Professor Prew received the above email from a “friend” of someone in his Introduction to Sociology course. What is particularly disturbing about this email is that professor Prew’s brother and sister died in a home fire before he was born. It is not clear how much this student knew about his family history, but its effect is chilling. Every term, professor Prew has come to expect a few of these responses to his critical sociology, whether it be verbally after class, via email, or placed in his course evaluations. While teaching in Oregon, someone offered professor Prew this advice in an anonymous email, “You Sally Ass wieners should be the first we toss out of the b-2’s at Iraq.” In addition to the threatening notes, professors are targeted for their statements that do not conform to status quo perspectives. Notable examples of politically motivated witchhunts include Ward Churchill (Frosch 2009; Johnson 2005) and William Robinson (Preston 2009). Emails like the above that border on death threats, witchhunts, and wild invectives found in the popular media (Bérubé 2006) are possibly the more extreme experiences of professors attempting to teach critically, but what effect does teaching critical

sociology have on the more mundane aspects of our professional assessment, specifically course evaluations?

In this paper we will outline critical sociology and tie it to the approach professor Prew takes in the classroom. We then critically evaluate the literature on students' perception of bias and balance in the classroom. While there tends to be some support for the idea that the perspective of the professor does have an effect on professors' evaluations (Dixon and McCabe 2006; Kelly-Woessner and Woessner 2006; Tollini 2009), we focus more specifically on critical sociology. For this paper, we analyze qualitative responses on evaluation forms for perceived bias of the professor. After coding these qualitative responses, we test to see if there are significant correlations between students who perceive bias and how they evaluate professor Prew's Introduction to Sociology course.

CRITICAL SOCIOLOGY

To understand the specific issue in this paper, it is necessary to first outline critical sociology and how it is integrated into professor Prew's Introduction to Sociology class. Critical sociology is distinguished from critical thinking in that critical thinking is a "decontextualized, generic skill applicable to virtually any issue" (Buechler 2008:318) while critical sociology is a deeper critical analysis specifically addressing issues of inequality and power. Steven Buechler (2008) outlines the critical sociological perspective which closely mirrors professor Prew's pedagogical approach in the classroom. In general, sociology is critical in that it "is critical to our ability to define, analyze and respond to pressing social issues," scrutinizes "familiar truths and established facts," and "is explicitly based on the values of freedom, equality, and justice"

(Buechler 2008:319). While mainstream sociology may contain an inherent “debunking” quality that incessantly questions the status quo, critical sociology goes beyond this cynicism to focus specifically on issues of inequality and power. For critical sociology, the notion of objectivity in the physical sciences is not necessarily transferable to social sciences. When applied to the social sciences, objectivity is inherently tied to the acceptance of the status quo relationships of inequality in society. Acknowledging that dispassionate objectivity is problematic, the critical sociological perspective demands that commonly accepted social practices supporting inequality be critically analyzed and understood. “Critical sociologists deliberately focus on relations of domination, oppression, or exploitation because they so obviously violate personal freedom and social equality” (Buechler 2008:324).

In fact, the focus of the critical sociologist is incorporated explicitly in the general education goals (see Appendix 1). Based on the general education goals, professor Prew’s course must challenge students to, “develop and communicate alternative explanations or solutions for contemporary social issues,” “analyze specific international problems illustrating cultural, economic, ... social, and political differences which affect their solution,” and “acquire a substantive knowledge base to identify the impact of oppression for individuals from diverse populations” (Minnesota State University - Mankato 2009). The issues of equality and justice in critical sociology are explicitly outlined in the general education requirements, “Purple courses allow students to explore basic concepts such as oppression, prejudice, discrimination, racism and ethnocentrism and responses to each” (Minnesota State University - Mankato 2009).

In the course, professor Prew intentionally focuses on issues of inequality and demystifying the students’ contemporary social world. The section on socialization focuses on the media as an agent of socialization. The students do not merely survey the research and

findings with respect to the media. We begin by discussing a homework assignment asking them to summarize a news article from CNN (Wallace 2003). After discussing the content, we watched the actual events unfold as documented in the film, *Death in Gaza* (Miller 2004). After discussing the egregious difference between the CNN account and the actual events, professor Prew then turned to the theory of the “filters of propaganda” by Herman and Chomsky (Herman and Chomsky 1988) to explain how the two accounts could differ so widely.

In a more active and participatory exercise using the technique of “role taking” mentioned by Buechler (2008:328), professor Prew begins the issues of race/ethnicity by conducting a small group in-class exercise. In the exercise, the students are asked to contemplate how they would feel and what they would do if their grandparents were subject to a zoning law that devalued their property dramatically while increasing the property values of neighboring residents (see Appendix 2). Figures were given for property values as well as wages based on the inequitable education systems in the two communities. After a small group and a class discussion, professor Prew collects responses using a “clicker” personal response system. The questions ask what they feel would be necessary to remedy the problem (see Appendix 3). After collecting their responses, we watch the third part of the film, *Race the Power of an Illusion* (Smith 2003), dealing with redlining and block busting after World War II. We then discuss the implications of how we define race over time, and the effects of structural inequality like segregation.

Using the clicker devices again, professor Prew then asks students a new set of questions dealing specifically with housing inequality in the United States (see Appendix 3). The results are interesting and are used to demonstrate both how students learn from the exercise and how some students will view the same issue differently when it involves race/ethnicity. In the results,

there is a tendency for more people to agree that people should be compensated for lost property values *and* they should make the school districts equal. From the perspective of critical sociology, students have become more sensitive to the institutional constraints placed on people of color as a result of the history of structural inequality. Consistent with the goals of critical sociology, some students have changed their attitudes to be more consistent with the sociological research findings, and many are better equipped to understand the inequality in the world around them. Unfortunately, there are also slightly more people who tend to say that only removing redlining and block busting is enough to solve the problem of inequality.

To place the increase in responses favoring less intervention in context, professor Prew expresses to the students that this is part of the issue facing people of color. While most students are in favor of addressing housing inequality in general in the first exercise, there are a few people in this group who change their minds when it becomes intertwined with race/ethnicity and now feel that simply banning overtly discriminatory practices is enough. This shift in thinking is characteristic of racial/ethnic discrimination. Some of the students' attitudes are less favorable of equality when the issue is specifically linked to race/ethnicity. Professor Prew links this issue to a later discussion of inequitable treatment of people of color in the health care profession to demonstrate the continued influence of discrimination. Health professionals tend to treat patients differently based on racial/ethnic markers, and the health outcomes are worse for people of color as a result (Smedley, Stith, and Nelson 2003). In both situations - desegregation and discrimination in health care, differential treatment continues to occur solely based on racial/ethnic markers.

As outlined by Buechler (2008), professor Prew's classroom exercises go beyond mere critical thinking. For comparison, Mollborn and Hoekstra (2010) outlined a critical thinking

exercise dealing with gender roles in an article¹ in *Teaching Sociology*. Their exercise revolves around students' ideas about who does more housework in their family and contrasting their ideas with a critical examination of the human capital explanation. The students are asked to "identify shortcomings in the human capital explanation" (Mollborn and Hoekstra 2010). As Buechler (2008) argues, this technique tends to fall into the category of critical thinking because it fails to contextualize the broader power relationships and historical development of gender inequality over time. Their example is reduced to an intellectual exercise of evaluating a perspective, which may increase the perception among students that the professor is providing more than their own views to the class, but it does not fundamentally address the issues of inequality and power. It does not demystify the contemporary arrangements to allow the student to challenge the contemporary inequitable gender arrangements. On the other hand, the example from professor Prew's course forces the students to contemplate their own feelings about racial/ethnic inequality by placing them in the shoes of the exploited, and then demonstrates how the same process happened to others based on their racial/ethnic background. The institutional forces that gave rise to contemporary racial/ethnic inequality are described both historically and theoretically through the discussion of institutional racism. In order for the students to dismiss institutional discrimination, they must dismiss their own feelings of injustice that they felt in the first exercise. While a few do not accept the evidence regarding institutional discrimination, others are able to grow from the exercise and develop a new understanding of racial/ethnic inequality as well as a better appreciation for the experiences of others.

¹ It must be acknowledged that Mollborn and Hoekstra (2010) were not attempting to surpass critical thinking, but were focused on the difficult task of getting students to think critically in large lecture formats.

Describing in detail how professor Prew's course follows a critical sociological perspective is important to understanding why professors following a critical sociological perspective may be more likely to receive negative comments. Students may perceive critical thinking exercises favorably by creating the impression that professors are providing balance in perspectives and views other than their own. Notions of providing alternative views are central to some research studies of bias (Dixon and McCabe 2006; Tollini 2009) (described below). Comparing and contrasting a variety of theoretical perspectives while not challenging the "social arrangements that create conflicting interests between people" (Buechler 2008:324) is less likely to provoke students to charges of bias than a critical sociological perspective that clearly identifies the source of these inequalities.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Most prior research (Dixon and McCabe 2006; Tollini 2009) tends to focus on bias related to balance and providing alternative viewpoints, but at least one study (Kelly-Woessner and Woessner 2006) investigates how both professor and students' perspectives affects evaluation outcomes. Tollini (2009) attempts to differentiate what behaviors students would classify as political bias. Most of the behaviors that the majority of students considered bias were related to presenting, criticizing, or allowing viewpoints other than the professor's. In contrast, behaviors that few students found biased included discussing political or controversial topics in class. This study is of particular note to our study because there are a variety of sociological viewpoints presented in professor Prew's class, but some students still leave comments such as, "he has a lot of knowledge but seems to be pretty biased to one side of each

argument and discussion.” Additionally, despite the fact that fewer students felt discussing political or controversial issues was an example of bias, between 13 and 27 percent did. Tollini’s (2009) study tends to suggest that even though some behaviors are not considered bias, some students feel that the mere mention of political or controversial issues are.

Another study focused on the issue of viewpoints provided by the professor. According to Dixon and McCabe’s (2006) study of student evaluations, the classes tended to perceive their instructors as balanced, especially in terms of discussing points of view other than their own and inviting criticism of their ideas. When professors discussed viewpoints other than their own, their classes tended to give them higher evaluations. Dixon and McCabe (2006) also found some correlations between students’ expected grades and how well the students evaluated the course and instructor effectiveness. Dixon and McCabe (2006) concluded that balance is not the most important element in the classroom, but indicated that it is a significant aspect of the classroom experience.

Another research study in political science by Kelly-Woessner and Woessner (2006) targets the political perspective of the student and the perspective of the professor. Students are asked to provide an assessment of the political orientation of the professor and also their own political ideology. These assessments were then used to see if they had an impact on evaluation criteria. The authors concluded that the more disparate the perceived difference between the professor’s views and those of the student, the lower the evaluation scores. This suggests that students’ estimations of balance or bias are also influenced by their own biases and ideological views.

Our research deviates from previous research in that it specifically targets critical sociology. Prior research tends to address issues central to the critical thinking model:

discussing contrasting viewpoints. For example, previous studies focused on the students' perceptions of whether the professor "discusses points of view other than his/her own" (Dixon and McCabe 2006:116), provides an "objective presentation" (Kelly-Woessner and Woessner 2006:497), or presents a "position," "view," or "side" of a political or social issue (Tollini 2009:383). Again, a critical thinking approach may increase the student's perceptions that the class is balanced by creating the impression that they are exposed to a variety of viewpoints regardless of how "critical" these views may be. The prior research does not distinguish between professors who specifically take a critical sociological (or other disciplinary) perspective from those that encourage critical thinking or do not take a critical approach at all. The research also does not assess whether the professors are actually foisting un-scientific, political views on the students or whether the professors are introducing students to legitimate research theory and findings. In fact, the research of Kelly-Woessner and Woessner (2006) appears to suggest that bias is in the eye of the beholder. Whether the professor is viewed as objective is directly correlated with how similar the student is ideologically to the professor.

Similar to Kelly-Woessner and Woessner (2006), some studies do address the issue of students' reactions to course material. Research in disciplines other than sociology documents some of the reactions faced by professors attempting to teach critically (Bérubé 2006; Seibel Trainor 2002). Students react negatively to the course content despite the efforts of the professor to provide an inclusive environment and a variety of views. When these views clash with the students', they lash out, sometimes in highly inappropriate and disruptive ways. Some students may react negatively to material that clashes with their worldview and then refuse to meet the course material on its own terms. The students may bring their own perspectives into the

academic discussion of the material, derailing what is an intellectual exercise and transforming it into a polemical debate.

Michael Bérubé (2006:2) begins his discussion of the purported liberal bias in higher education by outlining a particularly troublesome student that reacted negatively and antagonistically to the content of his postmodernism and American fiction course. The student staunchly took an assimilationist stance regarding African-Americans and unilaterally defended the Japanese internment camps in the United States during World War II (Bérubé 2006:2,15). The student consistently dominated the course in an effort to be the “only countervailing conservative voice in a classroom full of liberal-left think-alikes,” as Bérubé (2006:5) perceived it. Another author, Seibel Trainor (2002), outlines her own experiences with a difficult student. When professor Seibel Trainor showed pictures of police officers beating migrant workers during a strike, a student “thought the photos were ‘biased’ and” argued “that if ‘you want to learn about history, you have to have objective sources’” (Seibel Trainor 2002:642). This kind of attitude is difficult to address within the classroom because it is extremely challenging to make the act of police brutality or other social ills “objective.” There are certain historical truths that are difficult for some students to accept, but does their very inclusion in a course mean that the professor and the course are hopelessly biased? Some students who disagree with these facts would argue in the affirmative. However, general education goals are aimed directly at introducing these issues into the classroom and exposing students to issues of oppression, discrimination and civil liberties. As the quantitative research above (Dixon and McCabe 2006; Kelly-Woessner and Woessner 2006) tends to suggest, some students will react negatively to the mere mention of issues that differ from their own views. If professors are to honestly

incorporate general education goals, or by extension critical sociology, into their classroom, they will inevitably offend these students.

While there seems to be some connection to perceived imbalance or bias in the classroom and course evaluations, do critical sociological pedagogical practices lead students to these conclusions? Is it possible that professors who provide a variety of perspectives in the classroom are still perceived as biased? The list of perspectives covered in professor Prew's classroom is long, and he does not agree, nor identify, with all of them. Professor Prew has guest speakers as well as covers a variety of topics outside of his area of core interest. Experience tells us that some students feel professor Prew presents only one side, and his class is strongly biased. What is problematic is that from a critical sociological perspective, other classes that parrot a variety of status quo perspectives are equally, if not more, "biased" but are not identified by the students as such. Part of what impelled professor Prew to do this project was comparing students' comments regarding his course and an economist's course on ratemyprofessor.com. While professor Prew received pretty biting comments regarding his perspective, the economist only received occasional references to his perspective, mostly extolling the virtues of his neoliberal approach.

The purpose of this paper is to focus on the critical sociological approach and document its effect on course evaluations. While there are limitations to including only professor Prew's class, the perspective of the class is known and can serve as a starting point for future comparative research. We hope to promote research that begins to address pedagogical differences as the source of student perceptions of bias. This paper is an attempt to begin research into the pedagogical influences on students' perceptions of bias.

METHODS

The data for our research is taken from evaluation forms collected in professor Prew's Introduction to Sociology courses from Fall 2008 to Spring 2009. Of the 662 students enrolled in the classes, 473 completed evaluations for a response rate of over seventy percent. The evaluations included both quantitative and qualitative sections (see Appendix 4). The quantitative portion of the evaluations included questions that addressed the course in general and other questions that were more specific to the professor. The students could choose a number between one and five, one being low and five being high. On the back of the evaluations students were asked to comment in writing on the professor and the course.

We coded the written comments for inclusion of comments regarding the professor's perspective. In the process of coding the evaluations, we developed codes for positive comments, negative comments, mixed comments and critical thinking. An example of a negative comment would be, "He didn't teach sociology! He taught what he thought was soc! He also only showed one side of the stories!" This comment includes two components that we looked for in negative comments on the perspective. First, we looked for comments that argued the class was biased or "showed one side." Second, we looked for comments that argued that the class was another discipline or not sociology. Positive comments regarding the perspective would resemble the following: "Receiving the clear cut, unbiased truth [sic]. ... I loved this course. Presentation of current events & social issues [sic]." A critical thinking comment would include statements like the following, "Helps critical thinking, [sic] the different Sociological

perspectives helped with that greatly.” They tend to focus on seeing things from different perspectives and often use the term, critical thinking. Mixed comments blurred positive and negative comments regarding the perspective in the classroom. They tended to identify bias, but still saw the approach in the class as beneficial. For instance, the “instructor is bias [sic] to what he teaches, but everyone likes to show their views on topics. I think that understanding these social problems and learning from a different perspective [other] than my own was extremely beneficial.” We will refer to this variable as Comments Regarding Perspective.

Our main hypothesis is that students who provide negative comments regarding the professor’s perspective will tend to more negatively evaluate the course as a whole. Our dependent variable is a measure on the evaluation form that asked the students to rank “the course as a whole” (Course as a Whole). We looked at other independent variables that may influence Course as a Whole, such as grade expected in the class, the student’s class standing (freshman, sophomore, etc.), and if the class was in their major. We included the grade expected in the class because previous research (Dixon and McCabe 2006:116) found a link between grades and course evaluations. The year in school may influence evaluations if students who are further along in their education take it more seriously than new students. Students in the major may evaluate the course more favorably because they are more familiar with the material and interested in the subject.

To assess the relationship between the Comments Regarding Perspective and Course as a Whole, we ran means for Course as a Whole based on the various categories in Comments Regarding Perspective. To test the strength of the relationships, we also ran correlations for the Comments Regarding Perspective and the items included in the evaluation form. Lastly, the variable Comments Regarding Perspective was ordered in a way to allow regression analysis.

Negative comments regarding the professors' perspective was coded as "1," no comments were coded as "2," comments provided that did not include negative or positive comments regarding the perspective were coded "3," mixed positive and negative comments were coded "4," positive comments were coded "5," and critical thinking comments were coded "6." Two regression models were run. The first was a basic model including only Comments Regarding Perspective, the grade expected in the class, and the class of the student (freshman, sophomore, etc.). The second model included a number of variables in the quantitative portion of the evaluations that were less likely to be dependent on how the student viewed the perspective in the course. In addition to the above variables, the second model included course organization, sequential presentation of concepts, evaluative and grading techniques, use of class time, instructor's enthusiasm, clarity of student responsibilities and requirements, answers to student questions, clarity of instructor's voice, and instructor's interest in whether students learned.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

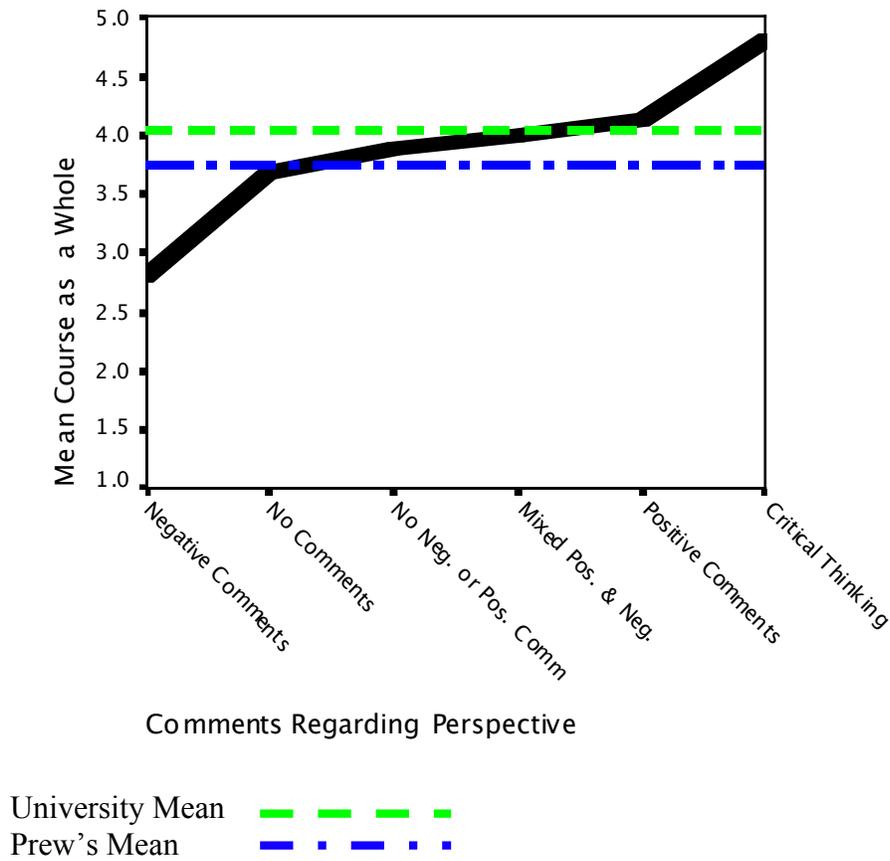
The results tend to support our hypothesis that students who comment negatively on the perspective in professor Prew's classroom have a negative effect on the course evaluations. To begin, the means of the Comments Regarding Perspective contrasted with the variable, Course as a Whole, show a pattern consistent with lower evaluations scores associated with negative comments. While the total mean for Course as a Whole is 3.74, the mean for students who leave negative comments regarding professor Prew's perspective is 2.82.

Table 1. Means: Course as a Whole by Comments Regarding Perspective

Course as a Whole

Comments Regarding Perspective	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Negative Comments	2.8214	56	1.09722
No Comments	3.6897	87	.81141
No Pos. or Neg.	3.8846	312	.91054
Mixed Comments	4.0000	6	.89443
Positive Comments	4.1429	7	1.06904
Critical Thinking	4.8000	5	.44721
Total	3.7378	473	.98020

Figure 1. Means: Course as a Whole by Comments Regarding Perspective



Out of a 5-point scale, this is nearly a full point lower. On the other hand, students who comment that they appreciate the critical thinking in the class have a mean of 4.8 (although the N is very low at 5 cases). For a graphic representation of the difference in means, see Figure 1. Students who leave negative comments regarding the professor’s perspective dip sharply below the overall mean for the class and the university as the graph progresses toward positive comments and critical thinking, the graph line moves above the class and university mean.

The correlations tend to demonstrate a significant relationship between the students’ ranking of Course as a Whole and the comments regarding professor Prew’s perspective in the classroom. Of all of the factors listed on the evaluation form (See Appendix 4), Comments Regarding Perspective was most closely correlated with “The instructor’s contribution to the course” (.362) followed by “Student confidence in instructor’s knowledge” (.340). Next, both “The course as a whole” and “Would you recommend the course?” (not shown in table) have a significant correlation of .334 with Comments Regarding Perspective. Other correlations of note (not shown in table) include “Explanations by instructor” (.322), “Amount you learned in the course” (.311) and “Answers to student questions” (.300).

Table 2. Correlations

	Comment	Course	Contrib	Know	Grade	Class	Major
Comments re: Persp.		.334**	.362**	.340**	.027	.021	-.023
Course as a Whole	.334**		.680**	.548**	.222**	-.009	.074
Instructor’s Contribution	.362**	.680**		.669**	.065	.034	.079
Instructor’s Knowledge	.340**	.548**	.669**		.067	-.010	.083
Grade Expected	.027	.222**	.065	.067		.020	-.059
Class/Year in School	.021	-.009	.034	-.010	.020		.035
In Major, Elective, etc.	-.023	.074	.079	.083	-.059	.035	

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The close tie of these survey items to Comments Regarding Perspective can be related to how students view the course. First, there is a close tie to how the student evaluates the content provided by the professor in the form of confidence in the instructor's knowledge, contribution to the course, explanations, and answers to questions. If a student were reacting negatively to the critical sociological perspective, it would be expected that the student would not agree with the theories and research findings presented in the class. The student may also find the explanations and answers to students' questions unsatisfactory because they do not agree with the student's biased and uniformed worldview. Consistent with the correlations found here, evidence in prior research tends to suggest that students who hold dogmatic ideological viewpoints are not only less likely to accept factual information, they are more likely to believe more strongly their own incorrect misperceptions (Nyhan and Reifler Forthcoming).

Second, the Comments Regarding Perspective are closely tied to evaluations of the course in terms of what the student learned, how they feel about the course as a whole and whether they would recommend the course. Students who attack the course for a perceived bias would be likely to reject the class as a whole and feel that they did not learn in the class. Because it differs from their own preconceived worldview, the students will reject the course material, leading them to the impression that they did not learn and the course was not worthwhile. For example one student who self-identified as being in the major stated, "The strengths were [sic] that he was confident in what he was saying but his weakness was that the only opinion that he ever portrayed throughout the course was his own & he was not open to others. He let his liberal views run the course rather than teaching true curriculum. I felt as if I learned nothing & that I learned more in sociology in high school by a teacher assistant[,] who was 18, then [sic] him. [K]eep the professor's bias, [sic] liberal agenda out of the curriculum."

This attitude about the class may be explained by the difference between critical sociology and uncritical approaches. Another student recently came to my office to express gratitude for the critical sociological approach because his high school course taught what happens when “someone farts in an elevator.” Certain types of sociology, especially taught in the restrictive environments of secondary education, focus on issues like the elevator example above. The reliance on breaching experiments and humorous insights is termed “whoopee cushion” sociology by Professor Prew. Students may get a distorted impression of the wide range of sociological topics if instructors do not stray too far from safe topics that make students giggle. When they do take a class that teaches critical sociology, they may embrace or reject the change in approach depending on their own preexisting biases.

The correlations also reveal some interesting non-findings. First, a major charge of “liberal” higher education is that left-leaning professors will make it more difficult for non-liberal students to earn higher grades, or even that the professor will lower grades for students who disagree with their perspective [cite]. Comments Regarding Perspective was not significantly correlated with “What grade do you expect to receive?” indicating that even though some students felt professor Prew’s class was “liberal” or “not sociology,” they did not feel that it affected their grades. There is also no correlation between Comments Regarding Perspective and whether the class was in their major, or an elective, etc. While it would be assumed that sociology majors would tend to be more liberal and less likely to view the class as overtly liberal, crosstabs revealed that two students who identified as majors, did express negative comments about the perspective in the class and two others expressed mixed comments. “He seems to have done a lot of research on the subject matters[,] and he seems to really care about said subject as well, but he is far too biased and opinionated to fully trust as an informational source. I almost

expected the instructor to burst out into a rant about the man. Ironically, I agree with most of what he says, but he seems to [sic] close-minded. [B]e more open-minded to others' view points. The world is not black and white." Another student in the major stated, "Some [sic] of the major strengths of the professor is his knowledge[,] but one of his weaknesses is that he isn't [sic] bias [sic] about certain issues." In many cases, like these comments, it is difficult to understand where the student is coming from since the course emphasizes the complexity of social life and eschews simplistic, often ethnocentric, explanations.

To get a relative sense of the explanatory power of some of the variables included in the evaluations, the regression equations tended to continue to support the idea that students' negative comments regarding the perspective in the classroom are related to the overall evaluation of the course. In the first model including only Comments Regarding Perspective, the grade expected in the class, and class standing, Comments Regarding Perspective had the greatest explanatory power. Overall, the explained variance is small (.159) but significant. In the second expanded model, Comments Regarding Perspective was still significant and had a standardized coefficient near the middle of the variables included. While Comments Regarding Perspective would not be expected to be the most predictive of the evaluations, it is still one of the stronger variables included in the equation. Overall, the r-square is .536 and demonstrates that students' attitudes about the perspective of the class and their expected grade do play a significant role in determining the outcomes of evaluations. Some of the difference between professor Prew's average evaluation scores and the university in general may be explained by the fact that his course is arguably more difficult than other large lecture courses. For example, the number of students expecting A's in professor Prew's class is 23 percent of those filling out

evaluations compared to 42 percent in the university large lecture courses and 55 percent in other large lecture Sociology courses for the 2008-2009 academic year.

Table 3. Standardized Regression Coefficients for Course as a Whole:
Fall 2008 to Spring 2009

	Model 1	Model 2
R square	.159	.536
N	470	467
Comments Regarding Perspective	.329***	.142***
What grade do you expect to receive?	.217***	.133***
Class (freshman, sophomore, etc.)	-.019	-.023
Course organization		.197***
Sequential presentation of concepts		.194***
Evaluative and grading techniques		.165***
Use of class time		.156***
Instructor's enthusiasm		.134**
Clarity of student responsibilities and requirements		-.103*
Answers to student questions		.072
Clarity of instructor's voice		.028
Instructor's interest in whether students learned		-.041
* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$		

What is disturbing about these results is that many of the comments by the students criticizing the perspective are inaccurate characterizations of the course, and sometimes, outright fabrications. Some of the more extreme comments paint a very disturbing portrait of the course. One student claimed I was “biased and racist towards white males[.] [What aspects of the course were most beneficial to you?] Honestly nothing, the course was unbelievably biased. Don’t promote communism, don’t be so biased, stop playing out America as the bad guys, don’t accuse white males as being the evil in this world, use logical arguments [sic]. (saying race wasn’t real

made you lose quite a bit of credibility) Don't be so biased (accusing the right side of being retarded)." Professor Prew obviously did not refer to the "right side" as "retarded" and the student missed the entire point of the discussion regarding race. The class discussed how genetic differences between different perceived races are so small as to be inconsequential while the effects of racism are real. The student's own perspective is so jaded and biased that the information in the class becomes distorted and exaggerated, consistent with the findings of Nyhan and Reifler (Forthcoming). What is also interesting about these types of comments is that professor Prew actively focuses on theoretical, historical and empirical data to create the foundation for course exercises and lectures. While the choice of topics and issues covered is influenced by professor Prew's theoretical and research interests, very little of professor Prew's personal attitudes regarding social issues leak into the classroom since his attitudes are actually much more progressive than those discussed in the class.

Another tactic is to claim that the information in class is constructed to fit professor Prew's narrative. For example, a student had this to say, "Paul gives the appearance that he knows about what he's talking, and if I hadn't known better about some of the subjects, I would have believed him. However, upon talking with him, he pretty much admitted that he skews facts and figures to make his point – which gave me no faith in the remainder of the class." A different student made a similar accusation, "His strengths are that you can tell he is very knowledgeable and enthusiastic, but a weakness is that he tends to screw the information to fit his personal opinion." Again, students construct conversations and interpretations of what happens in the classroom. The notion that the course material is "skewed" or "screwed" to fit an opinion is a fabrication to justify dismissing the course content. No conversation in which professor Prew "admitted that he skews facts" ever took place. The inaccurate comments of students tend to belie a more

fundamental social problem than the bias of the professor. Students are so terribly misinformed that accurate information appears to be propaganda. These comments also tend to resonate with the research of Nyhan and Reifler (Forthcoming). People with strong political convictions, largely conservative, are not only resistant to new, more accurate information, but cling more tightly to their misperceptions.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study are both disturbing and illuminating. While only a small portion (about 12 percent) of students actively voiced negative attitudes toward the perspective in the class, they do constitute a group of students who sleepwalk their way through the course and actively reject the general education goals of identifying oppression and examining the concepts of ethnocentrism, discrimination, and racism. The general education goals at Minnesota State University - Mankato are well suited to a critical sociological perspective, but some students reject the attempt to seriously engage those goals. Based on their prior experiences, others, even sociology majors, have distorted impressions of what constitutes sociology. In this sense, sociology professors who do not seriously engage the general education goals or tend to limit themselves to a whoopee cushion approach are in a more advantageous position when it comes to evaluations. Given the laundry list of social problems facing the world today, it is necessary to challenge current students to understand their world more deeply. Without the ability to “develop alternative explanations or solutions for contemporary social issues” (Minnesota State University - Mankato 2009), students will be ill-equipped to address the problems they face.

The presence of students in our classrooms that reject general education goals generally, or critical sociology specifically, presents unique challenges. In the classroom, students cannot avoid or opt out of their professors' critical approach. Accepting course content that addresses inequality, oppression, and civil liberties may be hard for some students because it contradicts their own beliefs. As a result, students might experience cognitive dissonance (Kelly-Woessner and Woessner 2006). One solution is to withdraw from controversial issues in the classroom and hide the fact that, as a scientist, the professor has an obligation to present the most accurate and contemporaneous research possible. By refusing to differentiate between supported and unsupported research conclusions, the professor is perpetuating the assumption that one piece of information or perspective is just as good as another. Just as the reality of climate change has remained in a limbo of "debate" over its existence, students may leave the classroom assuming that the research regarding wealth inequality as a result of segregation is also debatable. Simply because some students emphatically deny scientific evidence, professors should not be goaded into watering down their courses to make everyone feel comfortable.

As a result of viewing a critical sociology or other disciplines as politically charged, professors may argue that they are not trying to "effect a change in the political opinions of its students" (Jay and Graff 1995:206). To me, this is an odd stance to take in that critical sociology is no more (or less) an expressly political project than other disciplines like political science, anthropology or economics. In opposition to Kelly-Woessner and Woessner's (2006:500) admonitions to "strive for political balance," I suggest that focus should move away from the issue of the political orientation of the professor to a broader understanding of the social climate that creates intolerant students. More specificity of what students are actually reacting to needs to be observed in the research in this area. Administrators and supervisors should be aware of

the effects of the students' prejudices on the evaluations of professors who take a critical sociological approach. While Bérubé (2006) looks at the influence of the radical right to influence what is taught on college campuses, research could also focus more specifically on how this media assault on academic freedom has created intolerance among students, especially those required to take general education courses.

Unfortunately, the research in this paper is limited to one professor's course, but it does provide guidance for future research. A more ambitious project could be developed to analyze the content of Introduction to Sociology courses to determine the level of critical sociology in the course. Differences in the application of critical sociology could be contrasted with the degree to which students criticize the perspective in the classroom and the evaluation scores for the professor. Further studies could be expanded to other disciplines. While previous studies tended to focus on a balance of views in the classroom, new research could be reoriented toward attempting to understand how much the student's own bias influences the evaluation outcomes. Despite its limitations, our study does demonstrate a direct connection between students' negative evaluations of the professor's perspective and lower evaluations of the course as a whole.

Appendix 1
Introduction to Sociology General Education Goals
(Minnesota State University - Mankato 2009)

Goal Area 5: History and the Social and Behavioral Sciences

Goal: To increase students' knowledge of how historians and social and behavioral scientists discover, describe, and explain the behaviors and interactions among individuals, groups, institutions, events and ideas. To challenge students to examine the implications of this knowledge and its interconnection with action and living an informed life.

Students will be able to:

- a) employ the methods and data that historians and social and behavioral scientists use to investigate the human condition;
- b) examine social institutions and processes across a range of historical periods and cultures;
- c) use and critique alternative explanatory systems or theories;
- d) develop and communicate alternative explanations or solutions for contemporary social issues.

Goal Area 8: Global Perspective

Goal: To increase students' understanding of the growing interdependence of nations, traditions and peoples and develop their ability to apply a comparative perspective to cross-cultural social, economic, and political experiences.

Students will be able to:

- a) describe, analyze, and evaluate political, economic, humanistic, artistic, social and cultural elements which influence relations of nations and peoples in their historical and contemporary dimensions;
- b) demonstrate knowledge of cultural, social, religious and linguistic differences;
- c) analyze specific international problems illustrating cultural, economic, artistic, humanistic, social, and political differences which affect their solution;
- d) understand the role of a world citizen and the responsibility world citizens share for their common global future.

Diverse Cultures - Purple (Content-Based)

To prepare students with course content and the analytical and reflective skills to better understand diversity in the United States and in other societies across the world.

Learning Outcomes

Students will be able to:

1. Master an understanding of diversity as defined by Minnesota State Mankato.
2. Acquire a substantive knowledge base to identify the impact of oppression for individuals from diverse populations.
3. Obtain the analytical skills necessary to make links between historical practices and contemporary U.S. societal issues of diversity.
4. Apply the same method for interpreting diversity issues in the United States to understanding issues of diversity in other societies across the world.

5. Develop an understanding of historical and contemporary social relations in specific societies across the world.

Satisfying Purple Courses for Goal 1

1. Purple courses meet the outcomes associated with Goal 1 and are primarily aimed at helping students learn content.
2. Purple courses allow students to explore basic concepts such as oppression, prejudice, discrimination, racism and ethnocentrism and responses to each; civil liberties in the context of economic, political, social, religious and educational issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, class and disabilities in a pluralistic society.
3. Although Purple courses may focus primarily on one diverse group of people, the course content should relate the basic concepts and issues discussed to a variety of groups.
4. Purple courses must meet at least 3 of the learning outcomes identified for Goal 1, including Learning Outcome 1.
5. Purple courses may have experiential and reflective components, but the primary focus is on content.

Appendix 2 Housing Inequality Interactive Assignment

For this exercise, read the scenario and answer the questions below. Once you have answered the questions, find 2 or 3 other people and compare your answers. *Come to a consensus about Questions 4 and 5 on what you would like to be done.* We will discuss what conclusions you agree upon.

Imagine that your grandfather lived in a town divided into two different neighborhoods. Your grandfather lived in the East neighborhood. At a certain point, the people living in the West neighborhood gained control of the city council. They then enacted a zoning regulation that devalued the properties in the East neighborhood. The residents of the West neighborhood saw the values of their properties increase as a result of the new zoning regulation. The West residents on the city council worked with their friends in the local real estate and banking businesses to discourage or refuse people from the East moving into the West neighborhood.

As a result of the new zoning ordinance, property values of the East residents fell from \$100,000 to \$25,000 over the course of 15 years, and have remained low ever since. The West residents saw their property values rise from \$100,000 to \$400,000 in the same time period. West residents enjoy a better tax base and primary schools. Using the value of their homes, some can afford to send their children to private high schools. East residents do not have the tax revenue to provide a quality education to their youth. With the better schools and private education, West residents attend better colleges and average \$52,000 salaries. East residents, on the other hand, make only about \$32,000.

The grandchildren of the East residents have discovered the zoning law and are now filing a lawsuit against the city. They are suing for damages in relation to their property values and lost wages. Because **your grandfather was a resident of the East**, you can participate in the lawsuit. What do you do?

Place your answers on the back of this sheet.

1. Having discovered this zoning law, how do you feel about what happened?
2. What would you say if someone from the West told you that it was all in the past and you should “just get over it”?
3. Would you support trying to remove the zoning law? The law is perfectly “legal,” so what would be your argument to get rid of it?
4. Some of the grandchildren are asking for compensation. What would be your argument to support or oppose their actions?
5. Who do you think should be held responsible: no one, the city council, the residents, the bankers, real estate agents, etc.? Explain the reasons for your decision.
6. **What is the consensus of your group about what to do about Questions 4 and 5?**

Appendix 3
Interwrite PRS “Clicker” Questions

- 1) Having discovered this zoning law has a great impact on your income and education, how do you feel about what happened?
 - a) I am angry.
 - b) It does not matter.

- 2) Would you support removing the zoning law?
 - a) Yes
 - b) No

- 3) In terms of fixing the problem, what solution would you most support?
 - a) I think removing the zoning law would be enough
 - b) I think the school districts should use funds from both communities to make the schools equal
 - c) I think the West community should have to pay the difference in property values to the owners and their offspring
 - d) I think the West community should pay for lost property values and make the school districts equal.

- 4) In terms of fixing the problem discussed in the film regarding housing inequality, what solution would you most support?
 - a) I think ending redlining and block-busting is enough.
 - b) I think the school districts should use funds to make the schools equal.
 - c) I think those affected should be paid the difference in property values to the owners and their offspring.
 - d) I think they should be paid for lost property values and make the school districts equal.

Appendix 4
Instructional Evaluation

LARGE LECTURE
MINIMUM CLASS PARTICIPATION

Rate the instructor and course on a 5 to 1 scale
(High) 5 1 (Low)

SECTION 1: To provide a general evaluation, please rate:

1. The course as a whole
2. The instructor's contribution to the course
3. Use of class time
4. Instructor's interest in whether the students learned
5. Amount you learned in the course
6. Evaluative and grading techniques (tests, papers, projects, etc.)
7. Clarity of student responsibilities and requirements

SECTION 2: To provide feedback to the instructor, please rate:

8. Course organization
9. Sequential presentation of concepts
10. Instructor's use of examples and illustrations
11. Clarity of instructor's voice
12. Student confidence in instructor's knowledge
13. Instructor's enthusiasm
14. Explanations by instructor
15. Answers to student questions

BACKGROUND INFORMATION.

16. Would you recommend the course? no, majors only, anyone interested
17. Is this course: in your major, not in major but required for program, an elective, other
18. Class: Fr, So, Jr, Sr, Grad, Other
19. What grade do you expect to receive? A, B, C, D, P, F/NC

PLEASE COMMENT ON THE FOLLOWING ITEMS:

- A. What are the major strengths and weaknesses of the instructor?
- B. What aspects of this course were most beneficial to you?
- C. What do you suggest to improve this course?
- D. Comment on the grading procedures and exams.

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