

Sociology of Autism

Fall 2026
Locy Hall 301
M / W 9:30am-10:50am

Instructor

David Schieber

Email

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Office Hours

I will be in my office (2001 Sheridan Rd., Rm. 5176, on the 5th floor) on **Tuesdays from 10:00am-12:00pm** to meet in person. Feel free to reach out to set up meetings outside this time as well. I am also happy to schedule a time to meet virtually over Zoom.

Course Description

Over the past century there have been enormous changes in how academic researchers understand autism. Since autism is a neurological difference with social difficulties as a major attribute, it is important for sociologists (in addition to psychologists) to be able to speak clearly about what autism is and what the embodied experience of living with autism is like. What is autism? Why are conversations surrounding autism so contentious? If autism has always existed, who had it and in what communities can we find it? How do sensory and emotional differences translate into social difficulties through social interaction? Sociology can help us find answers to these questions.

More so, as the diagnostic boundaries for autism have changed over time, so has our understanding that anyone can be autistic. Throughout this class we will spend time thinking about autism at its intersections. Why was autism blamed for decades on "refrigerator moms?" What does it mean to be labeled "socially awkward?" Why are so many gender non-conforming people autistic? Which groups have historically been ignored in conversations about autism? Once we look at autism through an intersectional lens, we can get closer to answering questions like these in a meaningful way.

Broadly speaking, this course serves as an starting point to use the strengths of sociological theory and analysis to think through and better understand current academic debates and theories surrounding autism.

Course Objectives

1. Students will learn about the history of the autism diagnosis and will learn about the social construction of illness and knowledge using the history of autism as a case. Students will read historical texts about autism that stand in opposition to each other in order to develop critical thinking skills and refine students' ability to engage with arguments that have murky and contested answers. Students will learn to situate conversations about autism, psychological diagnosis, and illness more generally into the time and place the conversations emerged out of.
2. Students will read sociological work on interaction, identity, stigma, knowledge production, small-group culture formation, etc. Students will also read studies examining the lived experience of autistic people. Students will then use these sociological theories to think about what it means to be autistic and what it means for autistic people to navigate life and to find community.
3. Students will consider autism at its intersections and the social groups to whom autism diagnoses have historically been made available and unavailable. In doing so, students will learn the social / political nature of access to diagnosis. Students will read research and studies that demonstrate that autism, as a human attribute, has always existed across human populations regardless of sex, race, socioeconomic status, or any other demographic variable.

Course Materials

There are no required textbooks for this course. Readings for this class will be available on Canvas through the course reserves or as PDF links. If you run into an issue with a PDF or reading link on Canvas, please feel free to email me.

Class Procedures

I will lecture in-person in our assigned classroom. I expect students to attend lecture, and in-person lecture attendance is part of your final grade (as outlined in the "Grading" section below). There will be material in the short answer questions you have to answer that pull from lecture material (i.e. I will write the short answer questions assuming you have attended lecture.) The easiest way to get this lecture material information is to attend lecture.

However, if you are unable to attend lecture, you will need to get this information a different way (panopto recordings, office hours, notes from friends, piece it together from the readings / posted slides, etc.) I will post my lecture slides to Canvas after lecture, feel free to email me if I forget to do so.

I expect all of the work you turn in to be written by you. I expect all examples in the work you turn in to be thought of by you. I consider any work not written or thought of by you to be a violation of academic integrity.

In a world of Chat GPT tools existing, my standard for grading is work with nonsensical content (i.e. content that the person grading the work does not understand where it came from, it just seems random) receives a zero, and the student can email me (Professor Schieber, this isn't meant to be anxiety inducing) if they want to talk about where the content in their work came from. There are also often opportunities in class to turn in extra work to make up for low grades, and students can turn in extra work to make up for lower grades (within the deadline policy outlined below in the "Grading" section.)

This standard is not meant to stifle creativity or your ability to get information down on the page. Pull from other classes! Critique the readings! Use personal anecdotes that resonate with lecture topics! Write your messy ideas down and see where it goes! I would just rather the writing you turn in reads like it was written by a Northwestern undergrad taking my hodge hodge of a class than by a robot.

If you do not understand the grades you are receiving please reach out to me. I am always happy to talk about comments on your work and where the grades you receive came from.

Grading

Lecture Attendance and Participation- 10%

Regular in-person lecture attendance is required in this course. Your lecture attendance and participation will be gauged through your responses to poll questions I ask in class using the software Poll Everywhere.

At the end of the quarter, I will add up your total responses / participation across all lectures. All students who responded to at least 90% of the total polls throughout the quarter will be awarded a full 10% for this portion of your grade.

Students with below 90% poll participation will receive 0% for this portion of their grade.

If you do miss a lecture, that is not a problem. You can complete a **"Missed Lecture Write-Up"** to make up your missed participation for the day. The "Missed Lecture Write-Up" consists of watching the recorded lecture you missed, then writing a response outlining the key points you learned from the missed lecture. The response isn't meant to be formal, but is meant to be evidence that you watched and engaged with the

lecture content. You can find submission portals for the "Missed Lecture Write-Up" posted to canvas under the weekly modules.

All missed lecture write-ups are due by **Sunday, December 6th at 11:59pm.**

Reading Quizzes- 10%

At the start of each lecture, I will ask two to four questions about that days' readings. Each question will be worth half a point (.5%) and at the end of the quarter I will add up the points you receive, maxing out at 10 points / 10 percent. There are 17 lectures this quarter, meaning I will ask ~40-50 questions throughout the quarter, and you will need to answer 20 questions correctly in order to receive full credit.

These questions are not meant to be exceptionally difficult, but are meant for you to demonstrate that you are regularly completing the readings throughout the quarter. Answering these question will count towards your lecture attendance, whether or not you answer correctly.

Reading Response Papers- 40% (8 x 5%)

Throughout this course, you are required to complete eight reading response papers. These response papers should be divided into two parts: 1.) A brief summary of the main takeaways from each of that day's readings showing me that you attempted the readings, and 2.) A brief response to the reading. See Canvas for a more detailed explanation of what the summary and response should look like.

You may choose which eight days readings' you respond to, and **your paper must be submitted to Canvas before the start of class that day.** Each paper is worth 5% of the total writing assignment category. The paper will be graded on a Check Plus / Check / Check Minus system (Check Plus = 5%; Check = 2.5%; Check Minus = 0%).

All writing assignments should be double-spaced, with 12-point font, and 1-inch margins. See the "Reading Response Rubric" posted on Canvas for more details. You are welcome to bring drafts of reading response papers to my or TA office hours to make sure your work is on the right track.

Short Answer Questions- 40% (10 x 4%):

After every lecture, I will post 1 short answer question to canvas. These short answer questions are dues on Canvas **By Sunday, December 6th at 11:59pm.** If you would like to save these until the last week and complete them like a typical exam you are welcome to do so. If you want to complete the questions as quickly as possible in the first few weeks of class, you are welcome to do that as well.

These will be the same type of questions I typically ask on my exams, but de-bundled from the traditional exam format. Each answer should be 200-250 words, but more importantly, should answer each part of the question. Please see the "Short Answer Question" rubric on canvas for more information.

If you or a group of students attend office hours (either mine or a TAs) to discuss a short answer question, it will count as full credit for one of your 10 short answer questions. You may do this multiple times per quarter for multiple responses. I see this as a way to encourage the use office hours, which is an important resource to learn how to use.

Letter Grading Scale

93%+	A	90-92%	A-
87-89%	B+	83-86%	B
80-82%	B-	77-79%	C+
73-76%	C	70-72%	C-
67-69%	D+	60-66%	D
0-59%	F		

Emails

Email is the best way to get a hold of me, and I try to respond to emails as quickly as possible. If you have questions about course materials or readings, don't hesitate to email. **Please include SOC 376 / Autism in the subject line of any email sent to me.**

Students With Disabilities

Any student requesting accommodations related to a disability or other condition is required to register with AccessibleNU (accessiblenu@northwestern.edu; 847-467-5530) and provide professors with an accommodation notification from AccessibleNU, preferably within the first two weeks of class. All information will remain confidential.

Additional Notes

It is the responsibility of every student enrolled at Northwestern University to support the principles of academic integrity and refrain from all forms of academic dishonesty: <https://www.northwestern.edu/provost/policies/academic-integrity/>. Always do your own work, and reference any words that did not originally come from you. I will report any suspected academic dishonesty cases to the dean.

Calendar of Lectures and Readings

Week 1:

Course Expectations and Syllabus Overview

Wednesday, September 23rd

- No Readings

Week 2:

We Need to Talk About Autism

Monday, September 28th

- Cedar Turner. 2023. "We Need to Talk About Autism." *The Daily Northwestern*.
- Steve Silberman. 2015. "Introduction: Beyond the Geek Syndrome" from *Neurotribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity*.
- Simon Baron-Cohen. 2019. "The Concept of Neurodiversity is Dividing the Autism Community." *Scientific American*.

Wednesday, September 30th

- Donna Henderson, Sarah Wayland, and Jamell White. 2023. "Introduction + Chapter 1: Our Framework- The Current Diagnostic Criteria" from *Is This Autism: A Guide for Clinicians and Everyone Else*. Pg. 1-31.
- Allison Parshall and Amanda Montañez. 2026. "Here's What the Autism Spectrum Really Looks Like: The Autism Spectrum is Big, Vibrant, and Complicated a New Graphic of 39 Traits Shows." *Scientific American*.
- Beth Arky. 2026. "Why Many Autistic Girls Are Overlooked: They Often Go Undiagnosed Because They Don't Fit Autism Stereotypes and They Mask Symptoms Better Than Boys Do." *The Child Mind Institute*.

Week 3:

Feral Children, Refrigerator Mothers, and the Historical Construction of Autistic Blame

Monday, October 5th

- Edith Sheffer. 2018. "Chapter 3: Nazi Psychiatry and Social Spirit" from *Asperger's Children: The Origins of Autism in Nazi Vienna*.
- Leo Kanner. 1943. "Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact" *Nervous Child* 2(3): 217-250.
- Bruno Bettelheim. 1959. "Feral Children and Autistic Children." *American Journal of Sociology* 64(5): 455-467.

Wednesday, October 7th

- Kenneth L. Lichstein and Laura Schreibman. 1976. "Employing Electric Shock with Autistic Children: A Review of Side Effects." *Journal of Autism and Childhood Schizophrenia* 6(2): 163-173.
- D.V.M. Bishop. 1989. "Autism, Asperger's Syndrome and Semantic-Pragmatic Disorder: Where are the Boundaries?" *British Journal of Disorders of Communication* 24(2): 107-121.
- Amy C. Sousa. 2011. "From Refrigerator Mothers to Warrior-Heroes: The Cultural Identity Transformation of Mothers Raising Children with Intellectual Disabilities." *Symbolic Interaction* 34(2): 220-243.

Week 4:

The Social Construction of Illness, of Knowledge, and the Contentious Politics of Autistic Authority

Monday, October 12th

- Peter Conrad and Kristin K. Barker. 2010. "The Social Construction of Illness: Key Insights and Policy Implications." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 51(1): S67-S79.
- Steven Epstein and Stefan Timmermans. 2021. "From Medicine to Health: The Proliferation and Diversification of Cultural Authority." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 62(3): 240-254.
- Chloe Silverman. 2012. "Chapter 5: Desperate and Rational- Parents and Professionals in Autism Research" from *Understanding Autism: Parents, Doctors, and the History of a Disorder*.

Wednesday, October 14th

- Lidia V. Gabis, Odelia Leon Attia, Mia Goldman, et al. 2022. "The Myth of Vaccination and Autism Spectrum." *European Journal of Paediatric Neurology* 36: 151-158.
- Catherine D. Tan. 2021. "Defending 'Snake Oil': The Preservation of Contentious Knowledge and Practices." *Social Studies of Science* 51(4): 538-563.
- Claire Laurier Decoteau and Paige L. Sweet. 2024. "Vaccine Hesitancy and the Accumulation of Distrust." *Social Problems* 71(4): 1231-1246.

Week 5:

Autistic Identity, Autistic Masking, and the Presentation of an Autistic Self

Monday, October 19th

- Meryl Alper. 2023. "Chapter 2: Identity" from *Kids Across The Spectrums: Growing Up Autistic in the Digital Age*. 35-63.
- Catherine D. Tan. 2018. "'I'm a Normal Autistic Person, Not an Abnormal Neurotypical': Autism Spectrum Disorder Diagnosis as Biographical Illumination." *Social Science & Medicine* 197: 161-167.
- Allison Stanich. 2024. "All the World's a (Neurotypical) Stage: Neurodivergent Folklore, Autistic Masking, and Virtual Spaces for Discussing Autistic Identity." *Journal of American Folklore* 137(545): 293-307.

Wednesday, October 21st

- Aven Peters. 2026. "(Dis) orderly Bodies: Gender Identification and Disability in Social Context." *American Journal of Sociology* 131(4): 773-828.
- Ghilhem Bonazzi et al. 2026. "Gender on the Spectrum: Prevalence of Gender Diversity in Autism Spectrum Disorder- A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *Autism in Adulthood* 8(5): 848-861.

- Robin Michiels, Marie Groffi, Jeroen Dewinter, Ilse Noens, and Paul Enzlin. 2026. "Gender Identity Development in Autistic Individuals: An Interview Study." *Autism* 30(4): 1000-1013.

Week 6:

Special Interests, Social Interaction, and Autistic Involvement in Small-Group Cultures

Monday, October 26th

- Donna Henderson, Sarah Wayland, and Jamell White. 2023. "Chapter 7: Intense or Atypical Interests" from *Is This Autism: A Guide for Clinicians and Everyone Else*.
- Kerri P. Nowell, Courtney J. Bernardin, Cynthia Brown, and Stephen Kanne. 2021. "Characterization of Special Interests in Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Brief Review and Pilot Study Using the Special Interests Survey." *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 51(8): 2711-2724.
- Rebecca-Eli M Long. 2025. "Access Points: Understanding Special Interests Through Autistic Narratives." *Autism in Adulthood* 7(1): 100-111.

Wednesday, October 28th

- Donna Henderson, Sarah Wayland, and Jamell White. 2023. "Chapter 4: Relationships" from *Is This Autism: A Guide for Clinicians and Everyone Else*.
- Brett Ranon Nachman, Karly B. Isaacson, Bradley E. Cox & Catherine Tobin McDermott. 2026. "'I Always Ended Up Getting Close to Other People Who Are Autistic': Autistic College Students' Friendship Development." *The Journal of Higher Education* 97:4: 734-759.
- Ben Belek. 2018. "Autism and the Proficiency of Social Ineptitude: Probing the Rules of 'Appropriate' Behavior." *Ethos* 46: 161-179.
- Gray Atherton, Rhys Hathaway, Ingela Visuri, and Liam Cross. 2025. "A Critical Hit: Dungeons and Dragons as a Buff for Autistic People." *Autism* 29(2): 382-394.

Week 7:

Stigma, Boundary Work, and the Othering of Autistic Difference

Monday, November 2nd

- Richard Roy Grinker. 2020. "Autism, 'Stigma,' Disability: A Shifting Historical Terrain. *Current Anthropology* 61(S21): S55-S67.
- David E Gray. 2002. "'Everybody Just Freezes. Everybody is Just Embarrassed': Felt and Enacted Stigma Among Parents of Children With High Functioning Autism." *Sociology of Health & Illness* 24(6): 734-749.
- Monique Botha, Bridget Dibb, and David M. Frost. 2022. "'Autism is Me': An Investigation of How Autistic Individuals Make Sense of Autism and Stigma." *Disability & Society* 37(3): 427-453.

Wednesday, November 4th

- Alvin van Asselt, Yvette Roke, Sander M. Begeer, and Anke M. Scheeren. 2025. "'Feeling Constantly Kicked Down': A Qualitative Phenomenological Study Exploring Rejection Sensitivity in Autistic Adults." *Autism* 29(11): 2703-2714.
- Anna N. De Hooge. 2019. "Binary Boys: Autism, Aspie Supremacy and Post/Humanist Normativity." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 39(1)
- Sachindri Wijekoon, John Robison, Christie Welch, et al. 2026. "Neurodivergence and the Rabbit Hole of Extremism: Uncovering Lived Experience." *Autism in Adulthood*: 8(1): 102-111.

Week 8:

Access to Diagnosis, Diffusion of Diagnosis, and the Social Pathways of Who Gets Diagnosed as Autistic and When

Monday, November 9th

- Gil Eyal. 2013. "For a Sociology of Expertise: The Social Origins of the Autism Epidemic." *American Journal of Sociology* 118(4): 863-907.
- Ka-Yuet Liu, Marissa King, and Peter S. Bearman. 2010. "Social Influence and the Autism Epidemic." *American Journal of Sociology* 115(5): 1387-1434.

- Christine Fountain, Marissa D. King, and Peter S. Bearman. 2011. "Age of Diagnosis for Autism: Individual and Community Factors Across 10 Birth Cohorts." *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 65(6): 503-510.

Wednesday, November 11th

- Brandon S. Aylward, Diana E. Gal-Szabo, and Sharief Taraman. 2021. "Racial, Ethnic, and Sociodemographic Disparities in Diagnosis of Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder." *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics* 42(8): 682.
- Laura Hull, Konstantinos V. Petrides, and William Mandy. 2020. "The Female Autism Phenotype and Camouflaging: A Narrative Review." *Review Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 7(4): 306-317.
- Maire Claire Dieter, Emily D. Gerstein, and April Regester. 2022. "Autism Presentation in Female and Black Populations: Examining the Roles of Identity, Theory, and Systemic Inequalities." *Autism* 26(8): 1931-1946.

Week 9:

Profound Autism, Facilitated Communication, and the Search for an Intact Mind

Monday, November 16th

- Amy Lutz. 2023. "Introduction" from *Chasing the Intact Mind: How the Severely Autistic and Intellectually Disabled Were Excluded from the Debates That Affect Them the Most*.
- Elaine B. Clarke, James B. McCauley, Amy Lutz, Marina Gotelli, Stephen J. Sheinkopf, and Catherine Lord. 2024. "Understanding Profound Autism: Implications for Stigma and Supports." *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 15: 1-15.
- Jocelyn Bessette Gorlin, Cynthia Peden McAlpine, Ann Garwick, and Elizabeth Wieling. 2016. "Severe Childhood Autism: The Family Lived Experience." *Journal of Pediatric Nursing* 31(6): 580-597.

Wednesday, November 18th

- Jacobson, John W., James A. Mulick, and Allen A. Schwartz. 1995. "A History of Facilitated Communication: Science, Pseudoscience, and Antiscience Science Working Group on Facilitated Communication." *American Psychologist* 50(9): 750-765.
- Amy Lutz. 2023. "Chapter 6: The Resurgence of Facilitated Communication" from *Chasing the Intact Mind: How the Severely Autistic and Intellectually Disabled Were Excluded from the Debates That Affect Them the Most*.

Week 10:

Eccentric Geniuses, Reclusive Artists, and the Economic Commensuration of Autistic Lives

Monday, November 23rd

- Dean Keith Simonton. 2017. "Creative Geniuses, Polymaths, Child Prodigies, and Autistic Savants: The Ambivalent Function of Interests and Obsessions." from *The Science of Interest*: 175-185.
- Gary Alan Fine. 2003. "Crafting Authenticity: The Validation of Identity in Self-taught Art." *Theory and Society* 32(2): 153-180.
- Sue Steward. 2001. "Inside An Outsider's Mind: The Reclusive Henry Darger Spent His Life Secretly Creating a Bizarre Painted World. In America His Work Now Sells For Huge Sums and He Is Seen as the Quintessential Outsider Artist." *The Telegraph*.

If you made it this far, thanks for reading!