In this paper, we argue that novels, mysteries and nonfiction books can provide undergraduate students with an accessible and exciting place to explore sociological concepts. Using storytelling as a pedagogical tool, we teach students key theoretical ideas by analyzing the books in their specific sociocultural contexts. First, we put forward three different strategies for using nontraditional readings in the classroom. We then present standardized assessment data to measure how well these strategies helped to meet our student learning goals: increasing engagement, enhancing conceptual understanding and improving analytic ability. We also discuss what we consider to be the pedagogical costs and benefits of using these approaches in the classroom.

**Ursula Castellano**
*Ohio University*

**Joseph DeAngelis**
*Ohio University*

**Marisol Clark-Ibáñez**
*California State University-San Marcos*

Sociology instructors commonly face the fundamental problem of motivating students in large introductory courses (Sullivan 1982). Part of this problem stems from the fact that the majority of students are not sociology majors and they are usually taking the course to fulfill a curriculum requirement. Additionally, because few of the students in these courses have experience with sociological theory and ideas, they may be intimidated by the high level of abstraction found in standard sociological texts (Coser 1963). As a result, instructors are confronted with the difficult, and sometimes frustrating, task of finding ways to get their students to read about and deeply engage with sociological concepts and theories (Howard 2004). While many different teaching tools exist for increasing student participation in the classroom, we argue in this paper that non-traditional readings, specifically popular fiction, mystery novels, and journalistic accounts, can provide undergraduate students with an accessible and exciting place to explore sociological ideas.

We were inspired to adopt nontraditional readings into our respective classrooms to help address the challenges of teaching students how to think about the world sociologically. Like most sociologists who teach introductory-level classes, we wanted to find a way to excite and engage our introductory students, while still providing them with a rigorous introduction to sociological ideas and modes of reasoning. We have found that using nontraditional readings can be one strategy for introducing students to sociological ideas in ways that encourage critical thinking and problem solving skills.

In adopting the use of nontraditional texts, our ultimate objective has been to help students cultivate a sociological perspective, which means the ability to analyze human behavior in a sociological way. We strive to achieve this in the following ways. Students must first be engaged (i.e., “on board” and

*Ursula Castellano wishes to acknowledge the generosity and inspiration of Professor William Edwards in helping to develop her use of mystery books in the classroom. Please address all correspondence to Ursula Castellano, 115 Bentley Annex, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Ohio University, Athens, OH 45701; e-mail: castella@ohio.edu.

Editors’s note: The reviewers were, in alphabetical order, Jeffrey Chin and Chris Wilkes."

Teaching Sociology, Vol. 36, 2008 (July:240-253)
interested in the material). Then, if students are interested in the reading assignments, we believe that they are better able to understand the concepts and theories presented in class. Finally, once the students better understand the material, they can begin to conduct sociological analysis and use critical thinking skills.

Nontraditional readings serve an important role in each step of the process toward the goal of teaching students how to see and understand the world sociologically. Each of us uses nontraditional readings in our classes and we do so in somewhat different ways. Our approaches vary according to the material we use (e.g., popular fiction versus journalistic accounts), as well as the intensity with which we rely on the nontraditional readings.

Though the concept of using nontraditional texts in the classroom is not a new idea, we borrow from and build upon this pedagogical strategy in unique ways. In the first section of the paper we offer a comparative study of three different strategies for using nontraditional readings in the classroom. These strategies have broad application; they are appropriate and adaptable to any sociology course. In the second section of this paper, we offer standardized assessment data to measure how well each of our three approaches helps to meet our student learning goals. With the limited exceptions of Sullivan (1982) and Jones (1975), there are no studies that examine how the use of nontraditional readings impacts the attitudes of students. More importantly, there have been no attempts to compare different approaches to using literature in introductory-level sociology classes. In the final section of the paper, we provide some general principles and guidelines for instructors interested in adopting nontraditional readings into their course curriculum.

CULTIVATING A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE USING NONFICTION, POPULAR FICTION AND MYSTERIES

There is a wealth of research on the use of literature in the classroom (Adams 1990; Cosbey 1997; Coser 1963; Hall 1979; Hegtvedt 1991; Hendershott and Wright 1993; Hill 1987; Jenkins 1994; Jones 1975; Laurenson and Swingewood 1972; Lewis 2004; Moran 1999; Porterfield 1957; Sullivan 1982). Historically, two distinct pedagogical approaches have been used to adopt literature into the sociological curriculum (Coser 1963). The first approach emerged from The Sociology of Literature and seeks to scientifically explore the connection between literature and society (Escarrit 1971). This approach explores the social forces that influence the production and consumption of literature in a society (see Burns and Burns 1973; Escarrit 1971; Hegtvedt 1991; Routh and Wolff 1977). Comparatively, the objective of the second approach is to use literature as a medium through which students can discover sociological concepts and theories (Coser 1963; Hegtvedt 1991; Sullivan 1982).

Lewis Coser (1963) was one of the earliest proponents of the use of literature in the classroom. In his anthology titled Sociology through Literature, he argues that literature can be a useful pedagogical tool for making sociological concepts accessible to introductory-level students. While Coser’s book provided literary excerpts that can be used to highlight important sociological concepts, he offered little concrete guidance as to how these excerpts can be deployed effectively in the classroom. A second generation of sociologists has elaborated more systematically on the themes developed by Coser (1963). Teresa Sullivan (1982) designed her course around the assignment of several different novels as a medium through which students could “discover” sociological ideas. Jones (1975) reports that he used 16 different literary excerpts in one large introductory class to explore a wide range of fundamental sociological topics, such as bureaucracy, socialization, stratification, race, crime, and deviance. Hegvedt (1991) integrated five novels into her sociology of literature course to both highlight sociological ideas and to study literature as a form of
social action. Cheryl Laz (1996) adopted a similar approach by using science fiction to concretize sociological concepts and to push students to engage in critical thinking.

Other sociologists have assigned novels in order to promote cultural understanding by exposing students to different perspectives and worldviews. For example, Charlotte Fitzgerald (1992) integrated three novels into her introductory-level courses to provide students from a university with an overwhelmingly white student body some insight into the life experiences of racial and ethnic minorities. Hendershott and Wright (1993) adopted a similar approach and used three novels in an interdisciplinary course on technology and society both to increase comprehension and promote cultural awareness. They reported that the use of literature seemed to enhance the students’ understanding of sociological theory and concepts, but was also useful for exposing students to different forms of technological culture.

Lastly, Lewis (2004) incorporated nontraditional readings into his Sociology of Mental Health class with the goal of empowering students to draw upon their own experiences.

Even though we have known for a while that using nontraditional texts in the classroom might be good way to promote student engagement and cultural understanding, the challenge for the instructor is how to develop concrete, actionable strategies to achieve those pedagogical aspirations within the classroom. To address that issue, we present three different strategies for using nontraditional texts to help students to develop critical thinking and analytical skills (see Table 1 for a summary of the different approaches).

**Strategy 1: Using Nonfiction to Inspire the Sociological Imagination**

Clark-Ibáñez integrated a journalistic account of two families into the introductory course curriculum to help develop students’ appreciation for the conceptual powers of Mill’s sociological imagination. She found that the central tenets of sociological thought challenge the way most students view the social world. Students readily subscribed to an individualized ideology when analyzing factors that contribute to social inequality. In American culture, students are often conditioned to believe in a meritocratic system in which a person’s social standing in society is a reflection of their personal achievements. Using this approach, the instructor asked students to move beyond an individualistic framework to consider how larger social forces can shape a person’s life chances.

To teach students to develop a critical analysis of the interconnections between individuals and society, the instructor assigned a book, *Random Family: Love, Drugs, Trouble and Coming of Age in the*...
Throughout the semester, students read portions of Random Family and participated in group book clubs to discuss developments in the plot (Lewis 2004). For their final paper, students analyzed a person or group of people in Random Family specifically using Mills’ concept of the sociological imagination. An important element of this assignment was that the student had to choose to write about an individual problem that could be analyzed as a public issue. Students were not to discuss the people in Random Family as simply individuals making bad choices. Instead, they had to use their sociological imagination to understand and explain peoples’ predicaments in the book.

The paper assignment also required that the students reference outside sources to support their analysis (see Appendix 1). For example, Cesar and Jessica are two of the central persons portrayed in the book Random Family. Both Cesar and Jessica spend significant time in prison on drug-related charges. If the student decided to focus on Jessica’s or Cesar’s status as a federal prisoner then they would gather data that showed the current rates of incarceration for poor Latino males and females. By doing so, students gained a better understanding of how an individual’s social location impacts their life chances in broader society. In the case of Jessica and Cesar, as poor Latinos living in the Bronx, they were more likely to resort to crime as means of survival or as an opportunity to achieve financial success. Another component of the paper required students to propose a possible solution to the public issue they identified. In other words, students had to be able to distinguish a personal solution to the problem versus a structural solution.

The instructor provided two days of class time in the last week of classes for students to work on their papers and present their ideas for feedback. The first day, students worked in a computer lab to conduct some research on their paper topic, including collecting data, statistics, and charts and exploring other informative Web sites. The second day, students came to class and diagramed their paper’s argument and evidence on the dry-erase board.

**Strategy 2: Using Bestsellers to Study the Construction of Social Problems**

DeAngelis integrated bestsellers into a Contemporary Social Problems course to help students understand how to apply social constructionist theory to the study of social problems. Most students are aware that the public’s knowledge about social problems is informed by a wide variety of sources. They are also generally able to recognize that the public images of social problems may be influenced by the claims making activity of politicians, activists, and the news media. However, students typically have more difficulty seeing that the public construction of social problems can be influenced by a wide variety of less obvious sources, such as movies, television, magazines, and popular fiction. The goal for this assignment is to have students use social constructionist theory to examine the potentially powerful role that “innocent” and “mindless” forms of entertainment, such as bestsellers, may play in the ideological construction of social problems.

In previous research on the use of nontraditional texts in the classroom, authors reported that they carefully selected texts in order to highlight specific sociological concepts that they would like to discuss in class (Fitzgerald 1992). In DeAngelis’s social problems class, however, students were asked to use choose their own books to analyze sociologically. One of the explicit goals of the assignment was for students to collect their own “data,” and then use social constructionist theory to write a paper analyzing the role that fiction writers may play in the construction of social problems (see Appendix 2). There were, however, a number of guidelines that students had to follow. For example, they were given two weeks to choose a bestseller published within the last five years that related to a clearly identifiable social problem. In order to help students, DeAngelis provided a rec-
ommended list of bestsellers and reported that one third of the class chose from his list. At the end of the two weeks, students then had to compose a memo defending their choice and describing how it related to a social problem covered in the class.

After choosing their book, students then had four weeks to compose a five-page paper. In the assignment sheet, the instructor gave students a research question and a set of recommendations for how they could use constructionist theoretical ideas. Specifically, students had to answer the following question: To what extent can fiction writers be considered social problems claim makers? Students analyzed how the author: (1) typified a social problem, (2) made claims concerning the villains, victims, and heroes of that problem, (3) identified a solution to the problem, and (4) left out or minimized competing claims and images. In order to help the students tame the complexity of writing a paper of this sort, the instructor required that students structure the paper in a relatively specific way. For example, the paper had to have an introduction that summarized the main argument, a review section that outlined the social constructionist perspective, an analytical section where they analyzed the claims made in the book, and a conclusion where they reflected on the role that fiction writers may play in constructing social problems.

**Strategy 3: Linking Sociological Concepts to Mystery Book Characters**

Castellano incorporated mystery novels into her class to provide students with a variety of different social settings for exploring, testing, and applying sociological ideas. Prior to adopting this approach, she found that students tended to excel at memorization but experienced difficulties applying concepts and theories more generally. Castellano asked her students to play “sociological detectives” and read the novels analytically to look for the sociological relevance. She used the mysteries throughout the class and provided a highly structured curriculum to help students make linkages between the storylines and the core concepts presented in lecture.

Following the recommendations of Professor William Edwards (USF News 2004), the instructor assigned two mysteries: *Harvest* by Tess Gerritsen (1996) and *The Ax* by Donald Westlake (1997). *Harvest* explores the underworld of illegal organ donations. *The Ax* is about an unemployed paper mill manager who becomes increasingly distressed in the face of fierce competition for jobs and begins to murder his competition. The strategy of linking concepts to characters can be operationalized in the classroom in various ways (see Appendix 3). For example, Castellano used lecture, large group discussion, and the mystery book *The Ax* to help her students explore the connection between an unemployed individual and the structural problem of corporate downsizing. During the first few weeks of class, students read *The Ax* and Castellano lectures on Marx’s alienation, Durkheim’s division of labor and Merton’s version of anomie as well as constructions of deviance. This means that students must read the books for sociological ideas and relevance. The instructor explains to students that the people in the book are not just fictional characters but ideally they will come to understand how their actions are shaped by how the social world is structured.

At the macro level, the class examined how downsizing has collateral effects on the structure of the labor market and the welfare state. At the meso level, students examined how downsizing affects the core elements of civil society, specifically family, economy, and work. Lastly, at the micro level, the class examined how downsizing negatively affects individual potential, their sense of self as well as social relationships.

The following is an example of one of the analytical class sessions. The instructor drew on the plotline of corporate downsizing to talk about how the rise of capitalism affects how labor relations are organized. To situate Hubert’s murderous actions in larger social contexts, students learn to de-
fine and apply macro-social theories, including alienation, rationalization, and anomie. For example, during class a student provided an example of Marx’s idea that capitalism results in workers’ alienation from the labor process as well as alienation from their inherent creativity. She cited a quote in the book when Hubert talks about assembly line labor as “the kind of dull deadening repetitive labor that everybody agreed was bad for the human brain and paralyzing to the human spirit” (p. 81). Students cite Hubert’s wife having an affair as an example of how the stress of unemployment breeds alienation in marital relationships. An example of anomie is represented in the following excerpt about mass layoffs at the paper mill company: “When the air traffic controllers were all given the chop suicide ran briskly through that group probably because they felt more alone than we do now” (p. 47). This excerpt links Hubert’s words to Durkheim’s study on suicide. It is a clear example of Durkheim’s theoretical insight that an individual’s sense of connection to social groups and to society plays a functional role in their overall well-being. Social groups that lack meaningful relationships will suffer negative consequences, such as suicide.

**EVALUATION OF THE THREE APPROACHES**

How well do these approaches work? Each of our approaches to using nontraditional texts in the classroom was designed to achieve the same three student-learning goals. The first goal was to promote student engagement. Following the work of Coser (1963) and Sullivan (1982), we assigned literature in the hopes of motivating lower-division students to engage more fully with core sociological concepts. Our second goal was to use literature to increase student understanding of sociological ideas. That is, we thought that assigning literature rather than a textbook chapter might improve students’ basic comprehension of sociological concepts and theories. Finally, we assigned literature as a means to improve the students’ analytical abilities. In order to compare student attitudes toward our teaching strategies across courses, we distributed a questionnaire during the last week of class alongside our regular course evaluations. Students in Castellano’s Introduction to Sociology and DeAngelis’s Contemporary Social Problems courses were surveyed in spring 2006, while students in Clark-Ibáñez’s Introduction to Sociology class were surveyed in fall 2006. The level of student participation in the survey was acceptable, with response rates of 54 percent for Castellano, 64 percent for DeAngelis, and 90 percent for Clark-Ibáñez. Survey nonresponse was due entirely to class absence rather than a refusal to participate in the survey. In order to ensure anonymity, demographic data was not collected on the survey. As a result, we were not able to compare the characteristics of the respondent pool to the overall course populations.

The questionnaire for each of the classes included a mix of closed and open questions that were designed to measure student attitudes in relation to our three goals (i.e., engagement, conceptual understanding, analysis), as well as students’ attitudes toward how well the books were integrated into the class. Because the approaches to integrating nontraditional texts varied between classes, both the wording and the inclusion of specific questions varied slightly between classes. The questionnaire included closed questions measuring:

- **Clarity of the instructions:** “The instructions for completing this assignment were clear” (Castellano and DeAngelis).
- **Engagement:** “The use of fiction helped stimulate my interest in the subject” (Castellano and DeAngelis).
- **Conceptual Understanding:** “In general the books [paper assignment] helped me understand sociological ideas better” (Castellano, DeAngelis, and Clark-Ibáñez).
- **Application of Concepts:** “The assignment helped me understand how to apply sociological ideas” (Castellano and DeAngelis).
- **Overall Satisfaction:** “I would recommend this approach for future classes” (Castellano,
DeAngelis, and Clark-Ibáñez).

Integration: “The professor spent enough time talking about the books” (Castellano and Clark-Ibáñez).

The closed questions used a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.” To simplify the reporting of the results, the scale was collapsed from five points to three points during the analysis.

The survey instruments for all three classes included the following open-ended questions that were designed to measure more emergent ideas about the assignment’s strengths (“Overall, what were the strengths of using nontraditional books in this class?”), weaknesses (“Overall, what were the weaknesses of using nontraditional books in this class?”), and areas for improvement (“Do you have any specific recommendations for how to improve the assignment?”).

NONTRADITIONAL READINGS HELP STUDENTS LEARN

Engagement

In our view, student engagement refers to the student’s level of interest in the course material. Positive engagement may manifest itself in several ways, including asking and answering questions during class, reading the assignments, and active note taking.

Overall, we found that students were highly engaged with the nontraditional readings we used in our classes. While there was some variation between classes (the potential causes of which we will discuss), it was clear that use of fiction and nonfiction helped to capture the interest of students. As seen in Table 2, approximately 65 percent of the students involved in Castellano’s class and more than 85 percent of the students involved in DeAngelis’s class agreed that reading literature helped stimulate their interest in the subject. In addition, similar percentages across the three classes reported that they would recommend that the instructor use this approach in future classes.

In examining the patterns in qualitative comments, we found three different themes that were common to each of our classes. Not surprisingly, the first theme we encountered was that students found the use of fiction and journalistic accounts to be “interesting” and “exciting.” Sullivan (1982) reported similar results that the intensive use of fiction was an effective means of increasing student satisfaction, with 83 percent of her students reporting that they preferred the use of literature to the traditional lecture/textbook course format. For example, it was very common for students to remark about the use of nontraditional texts:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mysteries</th>
<th>Popular Fiction</th>
<th>Journalist Accounts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The use of fiction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>helped stimulate my</td>
<td>61.1%</td>
<td>84.8%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interest in the subject.</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would recommend this</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>approach for future</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>classes.</td>
<td>63.0%</td>
<td>87.0%</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>20.4%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It was interesting and contemporary.

It made it more interesting to read something that wasn’t just facts and definitions.

It made the readings and learning fun and exciting.

The second theme that we discovered was that a large number of students indicated that they were interested in the use of non-traditional texts because the approach was “different” from “normal” sociology classes:

The paper required thought for a book used typically as mind numbing entertainment. The entertainment made me more interested in the assignment, and provided a break from the mundane readings of other classes.

Interesting, good strong examples. Different from other classes.

More importantly, quite a number of students reported that one of the main reasons they enjoyed this approach was that it allowed them to avoid reading “regular” textbooks:

It was a way of understanding the material in a new way—no textbook.

It really helped keep my interest. It was also a nice break from textbooks.

Traditional text can be very boring. By using nontraditional text, I believe it made the class discussions more interesting.

In all, we have found that assigning fiction and nonfiction books in our introductory classes was highly effective for increasing students’ interest and participation in the course material.

Understanding

In our experience, students in lower-division courses tend to memorize the definitions of concepts and theories, without fully understanding them. As a consequence, students are less able to articulate core sociological ideas more generally. We believe that literature can help students move beyond rote memorization of concept definitions and can be an effective teaching tool for building conceptual understanding of the material.

In looking at student responses to the survey, it was clear that a majority of students felt that the use of nontraditional readings helped them to understand sociological ideas better. For example, we found that between 63 and 69 percent of our students believed that these texts helped them understand concepts (see Table 3).

Based on student comments, two common themes emerged across our classes with regard to how nontraditional texts assisted in conceptual understanding. First, students reported that the use of the books allowed them to see how some sociological ideas related to “real life” and “real people”:

[Random Family] helped me understand myself and . . . the concepts. It helps to put faces and actual events with the concepts.

It helped us understand the material in a real life sense.

It gives a better understanding of the concepts and now each concept can be applied to real

Table 3. Student Perceptions of the Effect of Nontraditional Texts on Conceptual Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mysteries</th>
<th>Popular Fiction</th>
<th>Journalist Accounts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In general, the books</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>63.0%</td>
<td>65.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>helped me to understand</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
<td>28.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sociological concepts</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>better.</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
life events. We interpreted these comments to mean that the use of literature in the classroom provides an accessible context for students to see sociological ideas in action.

A second important theme among the student comments was that nontraditional texts were helpful because they provided an enjoyable forum that reinforced the points discussed in class:

- It gave us another way of looking at the sociological concepts. It also helped us to apply the concepts, so we are more likely to recognize them in everyday life.
- It made the readings and learning fun and exciting. Also the books were good ways of understanding social concepts.

**Analysis**

For all sociology instructors, teaching students how to analyze social problems is a challenging task. Reading literature in the classroom is a valuable way to get students to identify as well as apply theoretical concepts. The approach requires that students read the novels analytically and look for sociological relevance. We found that between 64 and 74 percent of our students thought that the nontraditional readings helped them learn how to conduct sociological analysis (see Table 4).

Students’ qualitative comments supported this finding:

- It helped develop the students’ understanding of social problems and applying the constructionist theory.
- [I was able to] learn to analyze books and where the author’s beliefs are coming from.
- Students also commented that they had to read the books in a more critical fashion:
  - The ideas were harder to find. We had to use more analysis.
  - Many times we had to apply [theory] and it was mandatory. . . .
  - I liked it. It made me read more in depth into something and analyze it.
  - Moreover, students commonly noted that this approach could be more difficult because the sociological relevance of fiction and nonfiction books was more ambiguous than traditional textbooks:
    - You really have to understand [because] it does not define [concepts] like textbooks do.
    - The text is not straightforward; it is up to your own interpretation.
    - No straight definition—have to try hard to better understand ideas.

On the whole, in our collective experiences, the use of literature in the classroom provided a textual setting within which students could apply their sociological knowledge and demonstrate their analytical ability.

**DISCUSSION**

In this paper, our central focus is how literature can be used as a medium for increasing student interest in and comprehension of core sociological concepts and theo-

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**Table 4. Student Perceptions Regarding the Effect of Nontraditional Texts on Analytical Application**

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mysteries</th>
<th>Popular Fiction</th>
<th>Journalistic Account</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>65.4%</td>
<td>73.9%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>4.34%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ries. What can we learn more generally from adopting fiction and nonfiction into the classroom?

First, one of our initial concerns regarding the use of nontraditional readings was that students might casually read the “fun books” for entertainment purposes only and miss out on the larger analytical purpose. Moran (1999) and Sullivan (1982) assigned poetry and literature, respectively, with the goal of teaching students to engage in inductive forms of analytical reasoning. However, they reported that while literature provides students with a new context in which to discern sociological concepts and ideas, they were less able to analyze the texts sociologically. We, however, found that our strategies for using nontraditional readings can foster students’ analytical and critical thinking skills. Each of our approaches was structured in ways that required students to find the theoretical relevance in the assigned books. Of course, for this approach to be successful, an instructor must provide students with some concrete guidance on how they can go about searching for the social significance of the work. For example, in order to help students make a connection between abstract constructionist theory and their “data” (i.e., the bestseller they chose), DeAngelis outlined in the assignment handout some of the social constructionist ideas students should look for in the nontraditional reading. To teach students how to conduct sociological analysis, Castellano provided copies of her raw field notes and instructed them on how to code the data for particular concepts and theories. After teaching students this basic skill set, Castellano found that students have a better sense of what it means to analyze the mystery books. The lesson here is that instructors need to make sure that they provide a good, detailed set of guidelines about how to conduct sociological analysis using the books. Otherwise, students may be not sure about how to proceed or why the books are important to the course goals.

Second, we believe that the assignment of nontraditional readings can minimize or discourage incidents of plagiarism. The paper assignments developed by DeAngelis and Clark-Ibáñez require students to apply a specific set of sociological ideas to a work of nonfiction. The uniqueness of these assignments makes it difficult for students to copy ideas or texts from other sources. Indeed, we found that assigning papers that draw upon nontraditional readings empowers students to develop their own ideas because they are given a creative license to write about problems and issues that interest them the most. Yet, even though the uniqueness of the assignment makes plagiarism more difficult, we still take many of the same steps employed by other instructors to discourage plagiarism, such as keyword searches in Google and the use of proprietary plagiarism software. In addition, some of us take further steps to prevent plagiarism. In order to prevent students from reusing papers composed by other students in earlier classes, DeAngelis requires students to submit both an electronic and a paper version of their paper. The electronic versions of the papers are archived in a database and key phrases from new papers are randomly checked against that archive.

There are some costs or limitations associated with these teaching strategies. One potential drawback of assigning literature is that it may require the displacement of more traditional sociological readings. This can be a scary proposition for some instructors who might worry that using nontraditional texts may cause students to be exposed to fewer concepts and theories. Yet, if the instructor does not reduce some of the traditional readings and simply adds nontraditional texts on top of the regular reading list, then students may feel overloaded.

While this is a valid concern, there are a number of ways that we have dealt with this issue. First, we each use nontraditional material to supplement, rather than replace, a standard slate of sociological readings. For example, DeAngelis bestsellers assignment is used in a very focused way and is only one of four writing assignments given dur-
ing the term. In addition to reading a best-seller, students still read an average of 60 pages a week from a course packet composed of more traditional sociological fare. Second, it is important to note that assigning less traditional readings does not necessarily mean that students are learning less sociology. Do students have to read all of Marx and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto* to understand their critique of capitalist society? Can an instructor cover the same material in lecture and then have students explore the concepts within nontraditional excerpts? We think so, but it requires that instructors pay careful attention to the preparation of their lectures. Moreover, instructors have to strike a balance between assigning readings from traditional and non-traditional readings. One way that Castellano “strikes a balance” is she now assigns much shorter excerpts (2 pages) of the classic social theorists (Marx, Durkheim and Weber) and discusses them in conjunction with lecture and excerpts from the mystery books.

**CONCLUSION**

Our teaching strategies can be adopted to serve the curriculum goals in other sociology courses. How and what nontraditional readings to assign depends in large part on the substantive goals of the instructor and, perhaps, the number of students in the class. In general, we recommend that instructors choose readings that students will find familiar or fascinating (Sullivan 1982). We found that nontraditional books in the classroom can be highly appealing if they involved scenarios that interested students on a personal level (Lewis 2004). In Castellano’s class, corporate downsizing was a relatable social problem for the students in Southern Ohio, who have experienced the effects of mass layoffs on a personal level. When students discussed the plot of *The Ax* in class, they frequently referred to friends and family members who had lost their jobs because the company shut down or moved operations overseas. Similarly, few students have experienced the abject poverty and crime depicted in *Random Family*, yet students’ engagement with the book was very high. Many students reported sharing the book with their roommates and family members who were not in the class. Also, several students revealed that they had not read an entire book before *Random Family*. It is possible that because the lives depicted in *Random Family* were so unlike their own, students appreciated the reporter’s intimate account.

We suggest that instructors be sensitive to the reading workload, as well as class size, if they want to fully engage students. Castellano’s students reported lower rates of satisfaction than the other two classes. We attribute the lower rates of engagement in the class to students’ perception of a large reading load. Castellano assigned the three mystery novels in conjunction to two other standard texts. Consequently, some students reported that they felt overwhelmed by the heavy reading requirements. One student report, “There was a lot to read. Just having so much to read in so little time is a weakness.” To address these concerns, Castellano now assigns two mystery books, reduced the required readings in the anthology text, and spends more time in class helping students find examples of core concepts in the mystery books.

In summary, we have experienced success using popular fiction, mysteries, and journalistic accounts in our classrooms. Similar to Fitzgerald (1992), the excitement of the books motivated students to read and utilize them to develop their basic comprehension of sociological ideas. However, as with any new teaching technique, the use of literature in the classroom required forethought and planning. In our experience, while students typically enjoyed reading the books, the instructor must provide structured guide-
Using sociological imagination. The lines to ensure they appreciate the books’ sociological relevance and learn to apply theoretical ideas.

Appendix 1. Random Family and The Sociological Imagination.

The Assignment
This paper asks you to analyze a portion of Random Family using sociological imagination. The sociological imagination asks us to take a step beyond our own individual spheres of life to think about the larger structural forces that influence our lives. You need to be able to discuss the people and/or events using sociological imagination, specifically the difference between private troubles and public issues. We already discussed social institutions and systems in class—it would be helpful for you to analyze the individual lives and choices of the people in Random Family by placing them in a larger context of their placement in a social system or social institution. In other words, I don’t want you to look at these people as individuals just going along making bad choices. Instead, use your sociological imagination to understand their predicaments. You will have to do some extra research to illustrate your point. For example, if you choose to look at Cesar and Jessica’s incarceration by understanding their role in the social justice system then you should gather data that shows what the current rates of incarceration are for poor Latino males and females. After you work to understand people’s situations with a sociological imagination, you must brainstorm an appropriate solution. You must be able to distinguish a private/personal solution versus a structural/institutional one.

The paper will include the following sections:
I. Introduction: introduce your topic and the people you are focusing on.
II. Public Issue: This is where you discuss the individual(s)’s private trouble in terms of part of a larger public issue. You must clearly distinguish them. Also, you must prove that their private trouble is indeed a public issue (this is where your research comes into play). You should also bring in relevant course material (videos, Windows, Forest, lecture, etc.).
III. Solutions: This is where you come up with a solution for the public issue. You will need to address structure, systems, institutions, etc. to answer this question. Be creative. Your answer need not be based on could or could not realistically happen.
IV. Conclusion: What did you learn about the sociological imagination and thinking sociologically? How does this perspective help us understand people better? How realistic are the solutions you proposed? What might limit achieving this solution?

An “A” paper will address all these issues thoroughly, be well written (no typos or word-choice problems), and well organized. You must cite the sources from which you obtained your data. If you use the Internet, please use correct citations. I recommend you use Web sites with .org or .gov at the end so as to ensure their reliability.

Appendix 2. Constructing Social Problems through Popular Fiction

Assignment
For this writing assignment you will evaluate the role that the producers of popular culture, and particularly fiction writers, play in the public construction of social problems. In particular, you will examine how one author constructs a social problem through the medium of fiction. My goal in having you conduct this assignment is to help you think through how the public construction of social problems goes on in many hidden areas outside of what we often consider to be the “normal” realms of public debate. It is my hope that you will come away from this exercise with a newfound respect for the role that seemingly “mindless” forms of entertainment, such as novels, can play in the ideological construction of social problems.

For this assignment you will select and read a contemporary book-length work of fiction that relates to a social problem that we cover during the term. The book you choose is up to you. I will hand out a list of ten recommended works of popular fiction that relate to social problems we are discussing this term. I strongly suggest that you select your book from this list. However, you may also choose a book that is not on the list. If you would like to choose your own book, you must adhere to following guidelines: (1) It must be a work of popular fiction; (2) It must have been published within the last five years; (3) It must be strongly related to a social problem that we will be discussing.

Before you read the book, you should review the social constructionist literature we covered on claims making and typification [i.e., the chapters from Joel Best (1995) and Donileen Loseke (2003)]. Once you have reviewed the chapters, read your book and write a four- to five-page paper that examines how your novel typifies and frames one social problem. Your overall goal for this paper should be to analyze how the novel contributes to the public image of that social problem.
Structure of the Paper

Introduction: You should write a clear introductory paragraph where you introduce the book and give an overview of your argument.

Review of the Social Constructionist Perspective: In this section, you should explore the main ideas from social constructionist theory and setup a framework for analyzing your novel. In particular, you will want to outline how a social constructionist would study the claims making and typification activities of fiction authors.

Critical Review and Discussion: In this section (which should comprise at least half of the paper) you should use your social constructionist framework to analyze the book. While your paper should outline the main plot points of the novel, you should not provide a chapter-by-chapter summary. Instead, I want you to use social constructionist ideas about claims making and the typification process to critically discuss and analyze how the book constructs the social problem. For example, you should examine the following questions: What claim does this book make about the problem? How does the author construct the villains, victims, and heroes of the social problem? If all of your knowledge about that particular problem came from this book, what would you know about it? What are the ideological implications of the author’s representation? What perspectives get left out or are ignored?

Conclusion: In this section you should provide a summary of your argument and a reflection on the implications of your findings.

Due Dates
A one-page memo that describes the novel you have selected and how it relates to a social problem will be due at the end of week three. A hard copy of your final paper must be dropped off at the beginning of the last class. You must also deposit an electronic version of the paper in the Blackboard drop box prior to the due date. You will not receive a grade for the assignment unless I receive both versions of your paper. With the exception of documented emergencies, I will not accept late papers.

Appendix 3. Linking Mystery Characters to Sociological Concepts

In-Class Discussion Questions
(1) Let’s look at Harvest as an example of social structure:

What statuses does Abby hold: ascribed, achieved and situational?

What are the social roles attached to one of those statuses?

Do certain statuses conflict with one another? Which statuses bring her more power?

(2) Are Weber’s ideas still relevant today? Let’s relate the concepts of the Protestant Ethic and the Iron Cage to The Ax:

Turn to your neighbor and identify one example of each in mystery novel.

Sample Exam Questions
(1) The following excerpt from The Ax best illustrates which sociological concept? Write down your answer, then define the concept and explain why it fits.

“[Everett Dynes] was like me, he should be my friend, my ally, we should work together against our common enemies. We shouldn’t claw each other down here in the pit, fight each other for scrapes, while they laugh up above.”

(a) Social institutions
(b) Alienation
(c) Labeling Theory
(d) Functionalism

(2) This excerpt from Harvest best represents which sociological concept? Write down your answer, then define the concept and explain why it fits.

“Nothing ever happened to men like Victor Voss. He could buy lawyers, enough to turn a lowly surgical residents dream into scorched earth.”

(a) Power
(b) Authority
(c) Discrimination
(d) Gender bias

REFERENCES
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Ursula Castellano is an assistant professor at Ohio University. Her primary teaching and research areas are the sociology of the courts, criminal justice processes, and qualitative methodologies. Her current project explores the role of case managers in mental-health courts.

Joseph De Angelis is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Ohio University. His research explores issues relating to police deviance, citizen oversight of police, and the role that criminal-justice institutions play in contested urban neighborhoods.

Marisol Clark-Ibáñez is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at CSU San Marcos. Her research interests are education, childhood, inequality, visual sociology, and globalization.