

Name	Kenneth Branco
Department	Sociology
Has your chair sent a letter to the Director of the CTL indicating his or her willingness to find coverage for your course reduction?	No
In which semester would you prefer to participate in the seminar?	Fall
Project Title	The Sociology of Autism

Project Proposal (500–750 words, including a rationale, project description, a discussion of the benefit to the Stonehill community, and your "community outreach plan") -- see full requirements on the CTL website.

Rationale: The purpose of this project is to develop a course on the sociology of autism. The growth in the prevalence of this condition has created a need for a broader and deeper understanding of autism, particularly among students who are going on to careers such as teaching, psychology and human services. For a number of years I have been conducting research on cognitive impairment, social engagement, socially inappropriate behavior, religiousness, depression and optimism among nursing home residents. I am shifting the focus my research to the study of children with autism, and expect to find many of the issues that I addressed among the elderly to be relevant. I believe that the reading and preparation involved in the development of a class on the sociology of autism will help me gain a broad understanding of the literature in this area, and to also begin to delineate future research topics. This work may also lead to development of a text or a reader on the sociology of autism.

Project Description: Much of my work will involve reading articles and books on autism and sociology that might facilitate the construction of meaningful linkages between the two fields, and placing these within an organized structure for an undergraduate class. I will include readings on...

- I. The prevalence of autism, and problems encountered by individuals on the autistic spectrum. Autism involves a developmental delay in the ability to engage in social interaction. People with autism are "socially blind" and unable to see situations from the point of view of others, which often leads to inappropriate behavior and social rejection.
- II. Classical sociological theory that address related issues. This includes George Herbert Mead's work on development of the self, W.I. Thomas's concept of "definition of the situation" which involves the deliberation that precedes social action, Cooley's conceptualization of "The Looking Glass Self", and Goffman's work on the presentation of self and on stigma.
- III. Social policy on autism. The federal government has established national centers to promote research, screening, treatment and education. Many states require insurance coverage of services, and individual education plans for students with autism.
- IV. "The business of autism". As with many other health problems for which there is no known cure, numerous enterprises have developed to assist with problems associated with autism. Some of these are helpful, while others are limited to well-developed marketing campaigns. Sociological work that takes a critical view of some business practices may be useful here.
- V. Social movement theory, the disability movement and the recognition of autism as a social problem.

VI. Social and cultural contexts of neuroscience.

VII. Treatment approaches such as applied behavior analysis, social stories, and social skills training, as well as research on the effectiveness of different approaches.

VIII. The sociology of education that are relevant to special needs teaching and autism. Many sociology majors are double majoring in education, they are an important audience for the class.

Another part of the project involves development of relationships with community based learning sites at public schools in Brockton, Easton, Sharon and others, at private schools and treatment facilities such as the New England Center for Children, the May Institute, and the Boston Higashi School, and at programs such as the Bridge Center, which focuses on therapeutic horseback riding, or the HOPE center, that provides respite care and day programs.

I also need to give thought to creating effective ways to help student learn this material. My experience in teaching Human Services leads me to believe in-class exercises can have a lasting influence on understanding and retaining knowledge in an area that is both analytical as well as practice components.

I will develop relationships with faculty at Stonehill who have interests in the study of autism and who include aspects of autism in their classes.

Community Outreach: I have given presentations on students' views of community based learning and on connections they make between class concepts and their experiences. These have been presented both on campus and at meetings of the Massachusetts Sociological Association and the Association of Humanist Sociologists. I will develop a similar presentation on autism for interested faculty at Stonehill, to respond to my work and to share their own teaching in this area. I would also like to present and discuss the class with my colleagues in the sociology department and gather their insights before teaching the class.