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Theory and Methods

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Puzzling Over Theoretical Perspectives

Kathleen Lowney, Valdosta State University

Rationale

This exercise is a fun way to begin to think about the role of theory in the discipline of sociology. You will be asked to get into a group and then collectively work a puzzle, under timed conditions.

Instructions

1. Your instructor will guide you into forming groups. Most likely, your group will want to get on the floor, so create some floor space for yourselves.
2. Your group will receive a sealed envelope. In it will be puzzle pieces. Do not open the envelope until your professor says to begin. Your group's goal is to work as much of the puzzle as possible in the amount of time given.
3. You will need to both participate in working the puzzle **and**, at the same time, take mental notes on the processes your group uses to solve the puzzle. Eventually, you will need to write down these mental notes, so watch carefully.
4. After time is called, you will be given additional information about your group's puzzle. Then you will be given more time to complete the puzzle. Again, both participate and also observe the group processes. Then you will be given still more information with which to work the puzzle. Can your group get it completely put together this time?
5. Have some fun!
6. Class discussion will require you to think about how certain kinds of puzzle pieces function in ways similar to theories in sociology. Pay close attention to this; you will be asked to explain this in a short essay on the worksheet!

Grading

1. Students must thoroughly answer all questions on the worksheet. Your answers must show a good-faith effort to complete each section of the worksheet.
2. The worksheet must be turned in by the beginning of the next class session.
3. Grading will be explained by your professor in class.

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Puzzling Over Theoretical Perspectives

Worksheet

Name: _____

PART I: Write down your observations about how your group worked the puzzles. Think about what kinds of strategies were suggested by group members, which strategies were actually followed, how successful the strategies were, what you learned about the functions of various kind of pieces, etc.

A. When the group was given only the first envelope with puzzle pieces:

Strategies that group members suggested?

Strategies you actually followed?

Success of the strategies followed?

What you learned about the functions of the various kinds of the various kinds of pieces (and so on)?

B. When the group received the first kind of additional information:

Strategies that group members suggested?

Strategies you actually followed?

Success of the strategies followed?

What you learned about the functions of the various kinds of the various kinds of pieces (and so on)?

C. When the group had received all the information needed to work the puzzle:

Strategies that group members suggested?

Strategies you actually followed?

Success of the strategies followed?

What you learned about the functions of the various kinds of the various kinds of pieces (and so on)?

PART II: Please write in the space below what you learned about the role of theory in sociology from doing this exercise. Think about the role of border pieces, the interior pieces, how information such as the picture helped you to understand what the puzzle was about. What are the comparable analogies in sociological theory? Explain. Discuss how this analogy between sociological theory and the border pieces of puzzles can help you as you study a particular set of data.

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The Speed Discussion

Peter Kaufman, State University of
New York at New Paltz

Rationale

It has been noted that we can learn more if we discuss things with others. Listening to just one voice in class (usually the instructor's) does not maximize our learning potential. Instead, we should strive to hear as many viewpoints as possible. Even if some people do not fully comprehend the material, hearing them articulate their confusion may help us (as well as them). This is particularly true in trying to decipher sociological theory. Many students are confused and turned off by the writings of classical sociological theorists. Not only do these older theorists often use an antiquated linguistic style but their arguments are complex, wordy, and rely on historical references which most students know little about. And yet, we still read classical theory in sociology because it helps us understand the social world we live in today. The challenge for teachers and learners is to decode these sociological theories and figure out how they are relevant to our everyday lives. The Speed Discussion was created to do just that. By fostering dialogue with an array of people, and by having students share with each other the various ways in which sociological theory relates to their everyday lives, the Speed Discussion will help the class develop a collective understanding of some key sociological theorists.

Instructions

Each member of the class will write a few sentences about some questions and then we will discuss our answers with each other in groups of two. Each group will only discuss their answers for three minutes, and then we will change partners and discuss the same question again with another partner. Once we have discussed each question with three people, we will move to the next question. We will continue in this fashion until we have discussed all of the questions with three different people. *Please make sure that you introduce yourself to the other person.*

Grading

See your instructor for details concerning how this assignment will be graded.

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The Speed Discussion

Worksheet

Name: _____

Take a few minutes to write down some thoughts to the following questions:

1. Karl Marx: In one of his famous quotes Marx said, "The ideas of the ruling class are the ruling ideas." Think about whether you agree or disagree with Marx and come up with an example or two to support your argument.
2. Max Weber: Think of some situations where you obey authority. In these instances, do you obey this authority because of rational authority (formal rules), traditional authority (established beliefs), or charismatic authority (personal qualities of the leader)? Are there any instances where you obey authority for some other reason?

3. W.E.B. DuBois: In one of the first sociological analyses on race, DuBois made the following statement: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line,—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea." Do you think this statement is still accurate today? In other words, is the problem of the twenty-first century still the problem of the color line?

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Faculty Doors As Symbolic Statements

John W. Eby, Messiah College

Rationale

This active exercise uses naturally occurring symbolic statements—postings on office doors—to help you develop skills of observation, understand the sociological imagination, develop group cohesion, and understand one aspect of campus culture. Postings on faculty doors are symbolic statements of individuals and symbolic representations of the subcultures in the area in which the doors are located.

Instructions

Your class will be formed into groups and assigned to visit various campus buildings or sections of buildings in order to “read” the subculture of the area by observing what is posted on office doors. Record your observations on the worksheet and on other pages as necessary.

You should be prepared to explain what you are doing to anyone who asks. You should also talk with those people who are in the offices that you examine. If time allows, your instructor might ask you to interview the person in the office. Remember that what persons post on their doors is affected by many things. Many of these are personal. Others are structural, such as rules that limit what persons may post.

Grading

See your instructor for details regarding how this exercise will be graded.

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Faculty Doors As Symbolic Statements

Worksheet

Names of group members:

Area observed:

Postings on office doors are symbolic statements that tell a lot about a person (or persons) in the offices, about the subculture of the area where the office is located, and about institutional rules about postings. Examine the doors in the area assigned by your instructor. Carefully observe and record below what is posted on the doors and the areas surrounding the doors. Note both style and content. Look for the “what,” and deduce the “why.” Think comparatively. How is your area different from other areas on campus?

Use the space below, and extra sheets if needed, to do the following things:

1. List what is on the doors. Develop general categories (for example, cartoons, course-related announcements, profound sayings, things related to family and so on).
2. Comment on the style of the postings (are they neat, messy, and so on).

3. Make deductions from what you observe about what the faculty member does and what personal characteristics the faculty member might have. Also make deductions about the subculture of the area in which the office is located.

4. Identify variables that might explain what you observe, and suggest hypotheses based on these variables.

5. Evaluate this methodology. What other methodologies could be used to gather data and to test your hypotheses?

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A Very Short Survey

Susan M. Collins, University of Northern Colorado,
and Sue R. Crull, Iowa State University

Rationale

The goal for the “very short survey” is for you to join with other students to develop three survey questions during one class period. Through this brief process you will learn some basics about writing survey questions. Also, with your individual report following the analysis of the data, you will learn some basics about interpretation of data analysis that will help you to better understand the topic you chose to study.

Instructions

1. During the first five minutes of class, you and other students will choose a survey topic.
2. Then for about 10–15 minutes you will break into small discussion groups to operationalize the topic by developing three closed-ended questions, including response categories. One student from your group then writes the questions on the chalk board.
3. Finally, the whole class comes back together to evaluate and edit the questions, and choose the three they want on the survey. You can combine or eliminate similar questions, refine the wording of several, and adjust response categories. Then you will vote by a show of hands for the final three questions.
4. Your instructor will explain how the data will be collected and analyzed.
5. Following the analysis of the data, you will review a cross tabulation of two variables from the survey and write a brief summary interpreting the results of the survey analysis.

Grading

Your interpretative summary will likely be evaluated on content accuracy, organization, and presentation. Please see your instructor for details on grading.

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A Very Short Survey

Worksheet: Interpretative Summary

Name: _____

Please provide your cross-tabulation table below:

Write a brief summary interpreting the cross-tabulation results.

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Helping Experiment

Paul Higgins, University of South Carolina
at Columbia, and Mitchell B. Mackinem,
Claflin University

Rationale

You will experience and explore the challenge of creating knowledge about social life through an important research method used by sociologists: experiments. You can also work with the scientific process, the steps through which sociologists and other scientists conduct their investigations. This experiment explores whether attachments between people affect whether help is offered. Two people are attached when they like each other or when they have affection for each other. Sociologists consider attachments crucial for social life and have explored their importance in many areas of social behavior, such as conversion to religious groups and deviant behavior.

Instructions

Your instructor may modify these instructions. Check with your instructor.

1. Decide on some objects to be dropped, such as books, notebooks, coins, or whatever. Several or more items should be dropped.
2. Drop the objects in front of a stranger as the stranger passes by. Do so in a way that appears natural.
3. Record whether the stranger helps you pick up the dropped items.
4. Drop the same objects in front of a friend. Do so in a way that appears natural.
5. Record whether your friend helps you pick up the dropped items.
6. Bring your results to class to be combined with the results from your classmates.
7. With the results from your classmates, create a two-by-two table (see worksheet). This activity can be done in class with your professor. The causal dimension, (degree of) attachment (to a passerby), can be classified into two conditions: friend and stranger. The outcome dimension, helping, can be classified as yes or no.

8. Fill in each cell of the table with the appropriate results from your and your classmates' experimental trials.
9. Calculate the percentage of strangers who helped and did not help and the percentage of friends who helped and did not help.
10. Examine and interpret your results.

Grading Criteria

Check with your instructor. Grading criteria can include how clearly you present your conclusions, whether you show how the results support your conclusions, and your careful discussion of how the conduct of the experiment might have affected the results and how the experiment could be conducted more adequately.

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Helping Experiment

Worksheet

Name: _____

	Attachment	
	Friend	Stranger
Yes	_____	_____
Helped	_____	_____
No	_____	_____
	100 percent	100 percent

1. Examine your results. Were friends more or less likely to help than strangers?

2. What conclusions do you draw about the importance of attachments for helping? Discuss how the results support your conclusions.

3. Evaluate how you and your classmates conducted the experiment. Discuss how the conduct of the experiment could be improved.

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An Introduction to an Important Source for Basic Quantitative Data

Edward L. Kain, Southwestern University

Rationale

Sociological analysis involves both theory and research. Sociologists use theory to develop hypotheses about how different variables are empirically related in the social world. An important first step in developing your sociological imagination is learning about key sources of data that can be used to explore sociological questions. This assignment introduces you to one important source of sociological data, the website of the United States Census Bureau.

This assignment has three simple goals—to introduce you to one source of data that you might find useful in sociology and other classes, to have you start to think about variation in several social variables, and to help you think a bit about how we might measure social variables.

Instructions

The instructions are included on the worksheet below. As noted on the worksheet, you need to:

1. Choose two different counties or cities.
2. Print the data for: a) the two cities/counties you have chosen, b) the state or states in which those cities/counties are located, and c) the entire United States.
3. Be prepared to discuss the data in class on the day the assignment is due.
4. Make certain you are prepared to discuss the measurement of the variables, with a particular focus upon the measures of race/ethnicity.
5. Write out your answers to the questions in part VI on the worksheet.
6. Because we will discuss this assignment in class, it is important that you bring it with you to class. To receive full credit you must have it completed and with you at the beginning of class on the day it is due.

Grading

See your instructor for information about grading this exercise in your course.

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An Introduction to an Important Source for Basic Quantitative Data

Worksheet

Name: _____

For this assignment:

1. Go to the following web address at the U.S. Census Bureau website: <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/>
2. Choose two different counties or two different cities. You can choose both of them from your home state, or you can compare a county or city from one state with that in another state. It would be ideal to have a range of states and counties/cities, so in class we'll talk about what states and counties/cities you plan to choose. It would be great if you'd look at your home county/city as well as one that interests you in another state.

For the two counties or two cities you chose for this exercise:

3. Print the data for the state (or states) that you have chosen. (This will list a set of variables for the state as well as the entire U.S.) Also print out the data for the two counties/cities you have chosen. This sheet will list data on a variety of variables for the county/city, as well as for the state in which the county or city is found.
4. Look through the data, and be ready to discuss them in class.
5. Choose one of the race variables (% Asian persons, % African-American persons, etc.) Be sure that you know how this was measured.

Race variable that you chose:

How was it measured?

Choose another variable of your choice and read about how that variable was measured.

Name of the other variable you chose:

How was it measured?

6. Briefly (a couple of sentences for each question is fine) answer each of the questions below.
- A. What percent of your two counties/cities is composed of persons 65 years old and over?

How does this compare to the percentage in the entire state(s) that are the same age?

How does it compare to the percentage in the U.S. as a whole?

- B. What is the average number of persons per household in each of the two counties/cities that you chose?

How does this compare to the state(s) and the whole country?

- C. What is the percentage of people below poverty in the two counties/cities?

In the state(s)?

In the U.S.?

- D. Of all of the variables, which one or two surprised you the most?

Why?

On the day this is due in class, you will hand in both the printed data sheets and your answers to these questions. Please have them stapled together (or at least make certain your name is on all sheets). As noted in the instructions, you need to be prepared to talk about these data in class.