

**SOCIOLOGY  
THROUGH  
ACTIVE LEARNING  
Student Exercises**

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# **SOCIOLOGY THROUGH ACTIVE LEARNING**

## **Student Exercises**

**Kathleen McKinney**

Illinois State University

**Frank D . Beck**

Illinois State University

**Barbara S. Heyl**

Illinois State University



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# CONTENTS

*About the Editors* xiii

*Note from the Editors to the Students* xv

## 1 THEORY AND METHODS

### **Puzzling Over Theoretical Perspectives** 3

*Kathe Lowney, Valdosta State University*

Are you nervous about theory? 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. This task can help reduce any anxiety that you might have about working with theories.

### **Observation of the Social World: Marketing** 7

*Steve Derné, State University of New York (SUNY) at Geneseo, and Lisa Jadwin, St. John Fisher College*

Groups of you and your classmates will analyze the social world around you—specifically, the world of shopping. In the spirit of grounded theory, the groups will generate some propositions or broad theories that explain the patterns that they observe.

### **Faculty Doors as Symbolic Statements** 9

*John W. Eby, Messiah College*

This active exercise uses naturally occurring symbolic statements—postings on faculty office doors—to help you develop skills of observation, understand the sociological imagination, develop group cohesion, and understand one aspect of campus culture. What do your faculty post on their doors?

### **Helping Experiment** 11

*Paul Higgins, University of South Carolina at Columbia*

You will experience and explore the challenge of creating knowledge about social life through an important research method used by sociologists: experiments. You will also work with the scientific process, the steps through which sociologists and other scientists conduct their investigations. This experiment explores whether attachment between people affects whether help is offered.

### **A Very Short Survey** 13

*Sue R. Crull and Susan M. Collins, Iowa State University*

Here is your chance to choose a research topic with your classmates, to operationalize that concept, to write survey questions that get at the issue, to collect the data, and to interpret that information. Welcome to sociology.

## 2 CULTURE

### **Understanding Social Location** 21

*Andrea Malkin Brenner, American University*

By reading and discussing some shocking fictional accounts, we hope you will come to see that as humans, we have a habit of looking at other people's worlds as we look into our own, and we make assumptions based on what we know is the norm or the truth. Yet, others in a different social location might see things differently.

### **Decoding Norms 23**

*Corinne Lally Benedetto, DePaul University*

Every social situation functions through the recognition and maintenance of norms. These prescriptions for appearance and behavior are both formal (written) and informal (expected), yet we typically pay little conscious attention to them. This assignment (group and individual) offers systematic practice in the recognition and analysis of norms in everyday life situations.

### **The Symbolic Basis of Culture: The Cultural Cocktail Party 31**

*Andrea Malkin Brenner, American University*

Welcome to the cultural cocktail party—a fun group exercise involving role playing that will enable you to understand the importance of non-material or symbolic culture (and specifically, the use of gestures and personal space to convey meanings in different cultures).

### **Investigating Students' Rooms 35**

*Jeff Lashbrook, State University of New York (SUNY) at Brockport*

This group assignment has you studying the familiar. Through an investigation of the contents of students' rooms, you will learn about material culture and research methodology, develop oral presentation skills, learn teamwork (in other words, planning and executing a project), and create a more student-centered classroom.

### **Application Exercise on Ethnocentrism and Cultural Relativism 41**

*Virginia Teas Gill, Illinois State University*

In this group writing assignment, you will learn to view the world with different lenses by analyzing specific cases or situations. The focus is on the concepts of ethnocentrism and cultural relativism. How do people from different cultures view an event, and why?

## **3 SOCIALIZATION AND INTERACTION**

### **Gender Socialization 47**

*Betsy Lucal, Indiana University at South Bend*

The purpose of this individual and group exercise is to give you a chance to analyze how children learn about gender. You will begin with a visit to a children's clothing or toy store so that you can observe the items that are offered for sale. By analyzing the gender makeup of children's toys and/or clothes, you will have a chance to see how gender and socialization work in the real world.

### **Leadership, Gender, and the Invisible Ceiling 53**

*Keith A. Roberts, Hanover College*

This activity is a survey exercise in which you gather some data from about 25 students—male and female—that enable us to reflect on social conceptions of masculinity and femininity and our society's definitions of leadership. Understanding that our definitions of leadership characteristics tend to correspond very highly to our society's definitions of masculinity can help us understand forces that contribute to the invisible ceiling.

### **A Play Based on Goffman's Theory of Dramaturgy 59**

*Victoria Rosenholtz, Albright College*

This assignment is designed to help convey the nature of social interactions at the micro level in everyday life. Goffman's Theory of Dramaturgy was chosen because it gets at the details of behavior in a way that is compatible with our mass media-oriented society, where we encounter acting and actors perhaps

even more often than intimate relationships. You and your peers will create a glossary of definitions for concepts from Goffman's theory and then write a three-act play.

## 4 GROUPS AND SOCIAL INFLUENCE

### **The Year Is 2292 A.D. 65**

*Kim M. King, Hiram College*

You are all members of the president's council on the planet Thorion. Thorion has been nominated for the title of Best Model Society. You will be involved in this application/selection process. Diversity and multiculturalism are complex concepts, and this exercise will help you sort through some of the possible minority/majority group relationships.

### **Stereotyping and Labeling 67**

*Andrea Malkin Brenner, American University*

Stereotypes are specific assumptions about what people are like based on previous associations with them or with people who have similar characteristics, whether true or false. People's stereotypes influence their expectations and actions. This individual and group exercise focuses on the origin of stereotypes in the United States and the power of racial and ethnic labels.

### **Group Decision-Making 69**

*Judy Singleton, University of Cincinnati*

Building on previous group assignments, this exercise enables you to analyze what factors about your group influenced *how* the process worked. What might explain the particular dynamics of your group? Did leaders or other roles emerge? Can you track how decisions were made? Learning to analyze group dynamics can be a valuable skill to take into your future workplace.

### **The Seed Jar: Social Construction of Reality 73**

*Keith A. Roberts, Hanover College*

This exercise asks you or your classmates to solve a problem with unclear guidelines for how to do it. Analyzing just how individuals came up with answers can help increase your awareness of various influences on the ways in which people make sense of other ambiguous situations.

## 5 STRATIFICATION

### **Guided Fantasy: The Titanic Game 77**

*John R. Bowman, University of North Carolina at Pembroke*

This time, *your* ship is going down; survivors will be few; and your group will have to make life-and-death decisions. This exercise will bring issues of social status and social inequality into focus, as was the case with the real *Titanic* and the list of who actually survived its sinking. Do you think that social class position still affects life-and-death decisions?

### **Social Inequality: Budgeting for a Low Income 81**

*Brenda L. Beagan, University of British Columbia*

Doing this exercise will enable you to determine, first of all, what it actually costs to live in the community where you are, and second, what it would be like to budget out a low income so that you could live reasonably in the community within your means. No sooner do you have the budget all worked out when along comes some new expense that you have to consider.

## **Occupation and Income Exercise 93**

*Keith A. Roberts, Hanover College*

In this exercise, you are asked to consider why we pay more for some jobs than others. Your group will have to divide a specific sum among workers who are doing different kinds of work. On what basis do you decide who gets what amount of income? Sociologists try to explain patterns in society. Do their theories help you analyze and explain the different levels of income associated with different jobs?

## **Divorce and Income 95**

*Judy Aulette, University of North Carolina at Charlotte*

By using tables that report real earnings for men and women of specific educational levels in this country, you will have the chance to talk about what you feel the statistics tell us about people's lives. Do they help you consider the impact of these income differentials for divorced men and women? You will have the chance to consider how you feel about this information and the group discussion about it.

# **6 ORGANIZATIONS AND BUREAUCRACY**

## **Structural Change at Your College or University 99**

*Charles S. Green, III, University of Wisconsin at Whitewater*

By comparing a much older organizational chart of your school with one from today, you will be able to see how your college or university has changed structurally as an organization. What kinds of changes have occurred, and what might explain these changes? See whether you can relate these organizational changes to other changes that have occurred both inside and outside your college or university during this time period.

## **Critique of Student Government 101**

*Alton M. Okinaka, University of Hawaii at Hilo*

Here is an opportunity to consider what you would like your student government to do for you and then to investigate systematically what it is currently doing. This government operates right on your doorstep, which makes it accessible to you. Or is it accessible? You will have the chance to work with a group over a number of weeks to find out how closely this government in operation meets your vision.

# **7 RACE, GENDER, SEXUAL ORIENTATION**

## **A Group Exercise in Affirmative Action 109**

*Jacqueline C. Simpson, McMurry University*

To do this exercise, you will need to apply the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and its executive order to specific situations, such as admitting certain students (and not others) to medical school (or, in the case of a private firm, promoting some workers to supervisory positions). You will need to devise a plan to guide and justify your decisions while upholding the law, but you will have your group to help you.

## **Critically Thinking About Race through Visual Media 113**

*Marcia Marx and Mary Thierry Texeira, California State University at San Bernardino*

In a major group project over a number of weeks, you will tape from the television examples of subtle messages about non-white groups. Presenting your edited selections to your whole class will enable you to show and tell how the media can make certain images of different racial groups seem to be a natural part of the way things are in society (when in fact, they are manipulating that picture).



## **Drawing Pictures: Race and Gender Stereotypes 119**

*Jacqueline C. Simpson, McMurry University*

We all have stereotypes in our minds, and this exercise helps get some of them out on the table—literally. Doing this activity early in a course will help you see the ways in which we organize an image of people in our minds and even adapt the names that we give to people to our image.

## **A Coming-Out Role Play 123**

*Travis W. Anderson, University of Washington*

During class time, you will be asked first to consider the societal attitudes towards gays and lesbians. Then, some class members will act out a coming-out scene (that they create) between a young person and his or her parents. The goal here is not to judge homosexuality as positive or negative; rather, the objective is to consider the various ways that attitudes in society might influence the different family members. Role playing enables you to imagine what a gay or lesbian young person and his or her parents might be thinking and feeling.

# **8 DEVIANCE AND CRIME**

## **Images of Crime 131**

*Paul Higgins, University of South Carolina at Columbia*

You and your classmates will conduct a small interview survey in order to identify the common images that people have about crime and criminals. Pooling the findings from all class members, you can consider what patterns emerge from at least *these* respondents. Often, the images that we carry with us oversimplify reality and leave out important categories and characteristics.

## **Debating Deviance 135**

*Brenda L. Beagan, University of British Columbia*

This exercise will enable you to explore in depth the key concept of deviance. Answering the worksheet questions requires consulting your book chapter on deviance or deviant behavior and then working with your classmates to develop a group answer. Groups will then debate each other as to whether or not date rape can be considered deviant, according to the definitions that you developed. This practice in how to build a coherent, logical argument will help develop an essential skill for your academic work and beyond.

## **Drug Testing in the Workplace: What Would You Do? 139**

*Robert B. Pettit, Manchester College*

In a hypothetical case study, the owner of an accounting firm begins conducting mandatory drug testing of employees, and one male employee (single, age 28) tests positive. He denies illegal drug use. You and your group need to decide what should happen next. The exercise enables you to debate the real-life issue of mandatory drug testing in the workplace as well as analyze what sociological theories say about how people get identified as deviant and with what consequences.

## **The Hand Game 143**

*Paul Higgins, University of South Carolina at Columbia*

This activity is an in-class exercise that asks you to work in pairs—each tapping on the back of your partner's hand according to a rhythm and intensity led by the instructor. After the tapping part is over, you will reflect on what occurred and consider a sociological explanation for what happened. You will also be asked to reflect on implications for other similar social situations in which young people are guided by others (such as peers and people in authority).

## **9 COLLECTIVE BEHAVIOR, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, SOCIAL CHANGE**

### **Studying a Collective Behavior Episode 147**

*Charles S. Green, III, University of Wisconsin at Whitewater*

Over several weeks, your team will conduct field research about your choice of a fad, a crowd, or a disaster. You will gain research skills as you gather your data, and you will learn how to analyze those data by using conceptual tools relating to collective behavior. Finally, you will likely gain empathy for other people whose experiences are different from yours, because field research can take you close to their world.

### **Family History Project 151**

*Mark R. Warren, Fordham University*

With this exercise, you have the opportunity to explore in depth your own family history. You will conduct interviews with six family members, going back as many generations as possible. As you and your classmates share stories, you will see the impact of common social and historical factors as well as individual differences. Your final essay will consider both the extent of societal influences on your family and the extent of that family history on who you are.

### **Studying a Social Movement Organization 155**

*Charles S. Green, III, University of Wisconsin at Whitewater*

You will gather information about the goals of an organization, the kinds of activities that it engages in to reach those goals, who its opponents are, and how it competes for resources. What are the purpose and tactics of this social movement? Teams of students are called upon for an in-depth analysis of a social movement organization.

## **10 SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS**

### **Families Across Cultures in the Media 161**

*Nancy Wisely, Stephen F. Austin State University*

Using the sociological approach to study the family, you will ignore the individual people involved and look instead at the institution of the family and how it operates. The family as an institution operates according to a set of norms, roles, statuses, and values. In this assignment, you will observe and analyze two fictional families (on video). You will have the opportunity to develop your sociological imagination, apply core course concepts, and collaborate with peers for a quality analysis of the family.

### **Parenthood: Defining Family 165**

*Judy Aulette, University of North Carolina at Charlotte*

In order to confront changing definitions of what constitutes a family, you will be asked to decide who the child of a surrogate mother (Baby M) should be raised by. What are the sociological issues relevant to this decision?

### **Housework: Division of Labor 167**

*Judy Aulette, University of North Carolina at Charlotte*

This assignment gets you thinking personally about what a household should do (if anything) to change how household labor is divided between two working parents. You will also place your thoughts in the context of a theoretical approach within sociology.

### **Proposed Grading System 169**

*John W. Eby, Messiah College*

You will be asked to rewrite the grading system for the sociology course in which you are enrolled. What should count, and for how much? In doing so, you will be asked to think about stratification and the allocation of rewards.

### **Tommy's Story 171**

*Marjorie Altergott, DePaul University*

Define health. This exercise will have you look at this issue and other tough issues related to why some people die and others do not. Good luck—this activity is a little stressful.

### **Mapping Census Data for Your Town 173**

*Frank D. Beck, Illinois State University, and Julie A. Pelton, Pennsylvania State University*

You are asked to look at the poverty rates, racial diversity, and housing characteristics for your hometown or neighborhood. Given what you know of the place, you are asked to describe why these structural characteristics are distributed the way they are. Where do the wealthy live, and why? How segregated are different neighborhoods, and why? Answer these questions and more with Internet mapping technologies.

## **11 MULTI-TOPIC ASSIGNMENTS/MAJOR CLASS PROJECTS/GENERAL**

### **Critical Reports on Contemporary Social Problems 183**

*John J. Shalanski, Luzerne County Community College*

You will choose a social problem in your local community, in the nation, or a more global issue that affects everyone. Writing critically about the problem that you select and attempting to come up with solutions will help you clarify your own perspective and values. You will be able to look at how the problem originated, what has been written about it, and what can be done about it.

### **Meal for the Homeless 185**

*Sue R. Crull, Iowa State University*

Who are the homeless? Why are there homeless people? Gain answers to these questions through a service-learning exercise constructed with the goal of you doing something that you have never done before and confronting your own beliefs head on.

### **Social Class Stratification Project 187**

*Angela J. Hattery, Wake Forest University*

Here is a chance for you to intelligently confront the issues of resource distribution and stratification in our society. You and a group of other students will work up a highly detailed budget for a family. Other groups will do the same for families who have different socioeconomic characteristics. The discussion that follows should be quite interesting.

### **Song Analysis Project 195**

*Mellisa Holtzman, University of Iowa*

Music is sociology? It can be, and this assignment enables you to use different songs as examples of sociological concepts. You might even get a chance to bring compact discs of your own into class and demonstrate their sociological relevance.

## **Creating a Society 199**

*Lynn H. Ritchey, University of Cincinnati*

Here is your chance to start over. This exercise asks group of students to create their own society. All aspects from family, education, and religion to politics, economics, and culture are on the table for discussion. Have fun, and be creative.

## **12 COURSE STRUCTURE AND PROCESS**

### **Student Empowerment: Student-Designed Syllabus 215**

*Ada Haynes, Tennessee Technological University*

In this group exercise, you will have the opportunity to help design the syllabus for your introduction to sociology course. According to research, such input can increase your motivation and empowerment in the course.

### **Initial Group Assessment 221**

*John R. Bowman, University of North Carolina at Pembroke*

Working in groups, you will engage in an analysis of how a class work group (for a class project or assignment) is functioning. You will look at group norms and periodically assess the effectiveness of your group.

### **Group Quiz 227**

*Sue R. Crull, Iowa State University*

Have you ever had the chance to answer a quiz question with a group of other students? Now is your chance. Your instructor will pose a question that is relevant to a section of the course, and each group will write a response.

### **Facilitating Discussion 229**

*Sandy Welsh, University of Toronto*

You and a group of other students will take responsibility for leading a discussion on the readings for a section of the course. Your instructor will help you, but this opportunity is your chance to be the teacher.

### **Group Presentations 233**

*Kathleen R. Johnson, Keene State College*

Given that there are some sociological topics that your class will not have time to address fully, this exercise enables groups to work together on a presentation of one such topic. You will work with the instructor closely as you educate the rest of your class about the new knowledge.

### **Panel Debates 237**

*Kathleen R. Johnson, Keene State College*

Given that there are some controversial yet sociological issues that your class will not have time to address fully, this exercise enables groups to work together to form an argument on one such topic. Different groups in class will argue the pro and con sides of an issue. In doing so, you will become more skilled at constructing quality arguments for what you believe.

## ABOUT THE EDITORS

**Kathleen McKinney** is Professor of Sociology at Illinois State University (ISU). In addition, she serves as the director of the Center for the Advancement of Teaching and the supervisor of the University Assessment Office at ISU. Most recently, McKinney has taught Introduction to Sociology, Research Methods, and Senior Experience. Her scholarly interests include sexual harassment in academia, teaching and learning in higher education, and faculty development. McKinney served as editor of *Teaching Sociology* for three years and was the 1996 recipient of the American Sociological Association Section on Undergraduate Education Hans O. Mauksch Award for Contributions to Undergraduate Education. McKinney has published numerous articles and books related to her areas of interest. Currently, she is involved in the *Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* (CASTL) Campus Program with a project on student engagement.

**Frank D. Beck** is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Illinois State University. Over the past three years, he has taught Community Sociology, People in Places: Understanding and Developing Community, Social Statistics, Introduction to Sociology, and Foundations of Inquiry (an interdisciplinary, general-education course). This work recently culminated in his winning a University Teaching Initiative Award from ISU. His research focuses on local economic and community development policies, absentee-ownership of local businesses, and empowerment zones. He also writes about rural-urban differences in education and community theory. He serves as Associate Editor of *Sociological Inquiry* and is editing a special section of the journal on “Struggles in Building Community.”

**Barbara Sherman Heyl** is Professor of Sociology at Illinois State University. She is currently Graduate Coordinator of the Sociology Master’s Program and teaches the Sociology of Deviant Behavior and Qualitative Research Methods. She recently served as President of the Midwest Sociological Society. Her past research on prostitution utilized both life history and ethnographic interviewing and appeared as *The Madam as Entrepreneur* (1979); a new paperback edition is in preparation. Her recent research involves a longitudinal, qualitative study of special education in Germany, published both in Spain and in the United Kingdom. She has published articles on the positive effects of using collaborative methods both for teaching in the college classroom and for conducting field work for research purposes.

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# ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

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# NOTE FROM THE EDITORS TO THE STUDENTS

We designed this book with you in mind. Whether you are enrolled in introduction to sociology, an elective course, or you are a sociology major with some courses completed, this opportunity is a chance for you to explore in depth some of the most important ideas in the discipline. Your instructors are giving time in their courses for you to do these hands-on exercises in and out of class. Research shows that any time you actually get to *do* something, you understand it better. In fact, there is an old Chinese proverb that says:

“I hear, and I forget.  
I see, and I remember.  
I *do*, and I understand.”

Because we believe this proverb, we developed this book to help *you go do* it. Another benefit of doing and exploring, as you already know, is that in the process, you uncover new things—and that can be fun. Sociology has a long history of uncovering patterns in the social world of which most people are not aware, because people are embedded in the patterns. These exercises will take you deeper than most people ever go into how social life is organized, and you will be uncovering and analyzing patterns and processes. We fully expect that these activities will not only help you do well in your sociology classes but will also open to you new ways of seeing the social world.

We engaged in a nationwide search for sociology instructors who had developed active-learning exercises for their own classes. These instructors submitted their most effective assignments, and we selected this set to cover the major topics in sociology. As you look over the exercises in the book, you will see that the author of each exercise has written a rationale for the assignment that includes what learning goal he or she had in mind when devising the project. Next come instructions to the student, and last, we present ideas about how your instructor might go about grading your efforts in this exercise. You will hear from your own instructor just how the exercises will be integrated into your course. We have selected a variety of types of assignments—some can be done individually, some in small groups, some will take place over many weeks, and some can be done during class time. Several of them focus on the group process itself, and you will gain practice in working on a team—something that will help you in any occupation that you might have in the future.

We encourage you to read the short descriptions of each exercise that we have included in the full table of contents. These will introduce you to the task and primary question or problem being addressed in each assignment. Given that not all of these exercises will be assigned in your course, some of the others might be useful to pursue on your own or might be helpful to you in carrying out a project in another class. Please feel free to reach us through Pine Forge Press if you have questions or comments. We wish you well on your own explorations of sociology.

*Kathleen McKinney  
Frank Beck  
Barbara Heyl*

