

Research Projects with Guide for Writing Papers

Part 1: Subject Matter of Sociology: Society and Culture

1. The general in the particular

Mills maintains that sociology studies *patterns of behavior* in order to draw conclusions about a social issue that transcends the effect of the problem or issue on any particular individual. See Mills and Wright et al in course reader to guide this project.

- 1) A behavior or event is “patterned” when it is *recurrent*. Find patterns in your everyday life for example, in mass media use, dietary choices, musical preferences, and clothing styles (e.g., an identification with *heavy metal* music).
- 2) Connect your *particular*, or personal, pattern to a more *general* pattern for a “group” or “category” of people who occupy a place in the social structure: (e.g., the core audience for *heavy metal* music is young white males). Is this a named pattern (e.g., Metalheads)?
- 3) Use Risman to interpret this general pattern as a social “institution” (e.g., *youth culture*).
- 4) What can explain these patterns *sociologically* (e.g., *heavy metal* reflects and channels the symbolic rebellion of certain young males against adult authority).

2. The group and the individual

The French sociologist Emile Durkheim defined “the social” as a reality that is “external” to the individual and that “constrains” individual behavior – what Risman understands as a social *institution*.

- 1) How is your involvement in a relationship (e.g., marriage), or membership in a group (e.g., a family), a reality that is *outside* of you as an individual – Risman’s concept of social *institution*.
- 2) Describe situations in which this social institution “constrains” your behavior? Consider *expectations* to conform to social norms in regard to matters like dress (e.g., fashion), speech (e.g., jargon), beliefs, taste preferences, etc.
- 3) Why do you submit to these social constraints? Consider institutional power and benefits received.
- 4) Does constraint and conformity leave room for your *individuality*? Are there situations when you are at odds with the culture of the group/institution *as an individual*?

Part 2: Culture and Socialization

1 Agents of Socialization

- What is socialization? When does it matter most in the life-course? Why is it important for the individual and society?
- What is an agent of socialization? Consider the “agents of socialization” that shaped your “self”. Assess their relative importance distinguishing between “primary” and “secondary” influences.
- How were they *complimentary* and how did they *conflict*?
- Were there occasions when you rebelled against any of these influences?
- To what extent was individual rebellion can be a function of socialization conflict?

2 Age Norms

“Now he’s too old to rock and roll, too young to die.”
[Jethro Tull]

- What are *age norms*? In general, how does age place individuals in society?
- In what social situations do you *act your age*? When are you not acting your age? Explain by referencing the concept of *age norms* - social rules governing age-appropriate behavior.
- *What do you want to be when you grow up?* Are certain achievements, responsibilities, or performances necessary to validate *adulthood*? What does this signify for the adult role?
- In your culture, are there any events that *publicly* signify change in age status, in particular the attainment of adulthood?
- To what extent does “becoming an adult” vary for *gender*? Is one sex more “adult” than the other?
- Insofar as rock and roll is historically an expression of youthful rebellion, can you be “too old to rock and roll”? [You may answer this question literally and/or as a metaphor for age-appropriate behavior.] How does Jethro Tull’s lament illustrate the blurring of age categories as with the emergence of the “childlike adult”?

3 The Social Self

- Sociology maintains that the “self” is a *social product*. Evaluate this position by considering how you have learned to “see yourself” by *internalizing* what Becker refers to as a “shared culture” and G.H. Mead as the “point of view” of “significant others” (e.g., family, teachers, age peers, media others).
- Use actual experiences to evaluate Goffman’s point that the individual can shape what others “see” via the “management of impressions” and “expressions”.
- What self do you “present” to others? How does this vary from one situation to another?

- How is the “self” constructed in relation to the “personal fronts” which we “wear like masks”?

Part 3: Family

1 Patterns of Mate Selection

Interview someone in your parents’ or grandparents’ generations about their experience with *mate selection*, or marriage. Specify the time frame and locate the experience in the social structure to the best of your ability (e.g., class, ethnicity, gender, religion). Take into account the following factors:

- How is the couple relationship initiated? Consider the extent of individual choice and family and peer influences. Note relevant distinctions for *gender*.
- When does dating or courtship begin? Are relationships placed “on a clock” leading to marriage?
- What are the social constraints on who dates whom? Are they the same for eligible marriage partners (i.e., endogamy)?
- Discuss the major courtship rituals which provide a scripted route to marriage?
- Where does your case fall on the continuum between arranged marriage and romantic marriage?
- Ask if you can make “generalizations” from their “particular” experiences. Contrast with patterns for your generation.
- Locate your particular case on the *continuum* between the two extremes of arranged marriage at one pole and romantic-companionate marriage at the other.

Arranged Marriage 0+++++++0 Romantic-Companionate Marriage

2 Rules for Forming Family

- Why is marriage historically privileged as a route to family formation?
- To what extent is marriage the socially accepted route to family formation in your community? Cite statistics where available.
- Would you characterize the typical family form as nuclear or extended? Explain.
- What is family’s relationship to the kinship group? Consider rules for naming children and residence patterns (who is included in the household and the proximity of kin households).
- Is the conjugal or *spouse-centered* family becoming more prevalent at the expense of kinship solidarity?
- How is *conjugal* related to the independence of the young and the erosion of parental control of mate selection?

- Have any alternatives (e.g., out-of-wedlock births, cohabitation) become institutionalized in lieu of marriage? Does the “pair bond” alternative have a name (e.g., “baby daddy/mama”)?

Part 4: Social Stratification

1) What are *status hierarchies*? Interview someone to ascertain their *subjective* sense of status position.

- How do they conceive of their social status or position in the social hierarchy (i.e., where they believe their status to be)? Do they measure their status in terms of wealth and income, occupation, and education? Do they describe their status in terms of *social class*? Take the opportunity to ask them about their sense of the *class system* including the extent of *inequality* and its causes.
- Does their sense of social positioning refer to *ethnic stratification*? Elaborate.
- How “objective” is their “subjectively” experienced sense of status?
- To what extent is their status *relative* in the sense that is measure against specific individual and group others?

2) Interview someone about the types of *capital* (economic, social, cultural) available to them as they *position themselves in society*.

- What is the role of “capital” in social status and mobility?
- Assess *relative amounts* of each type and “consistency”.
- Differentiate for capital that is *inherited* versus capital that is *achieved* by the individual.
- Where do they believe their capital *places them in society*? Why? In particular, is their status *relative* to specific individuals and groups?
- Where do you believe their capital places them? Why?

3) Interview someone who is consciously *styling* their lives for *prestige* or “distinction” on the basis of consumption.

- What is the basis of *prestige claims* (e.g., fashion, cars, jewelry, cuisine, travel and vacations, house)?
- Describe the status group or social hierarchy that ranks people by prestige (e.g., the Hamptons, “players and haters”, “in crowd” and “losers”, “popular kids” and “wannabes”). Locate this status group in the society-wide class system.
- Is there media representation and validation for the style and the group, e.g., the MTV shows *Jersey Shore* and *Cribs*? Elaborate.

Guide for Writing Papers:

- A first draft will be presented in class and becomes the basis for a paper that incorporates revisions.
- Submissions are due within one week of class presentations.
- Papers should be a minimum of 2 typed pages in length for *writing-intensive courses* that require a minimum of 10 pages for the term.
- Papers are graded for critical sociological thinking as well as descriptive detail.
- Class notes and texts (i.e., required readings and Internet resources) must be incorporated for a maximum grade.