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One-Shot (Public) Sociology: A Teaching Note on Developing Sociologically-Informed Student Workshops on College Campuses

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Cover Page Footnote

We would like to thank Sherryl Kleinman at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for suggesting the title and for being an inspiring teacher and Maxine Atkinson at North Carolina State University for generously mentoring us into the scholarship of teaching and learning.

One-Shot (Public) Sociology: A Teaching Note on Developing Sociologically-Informed Student Workshops on College Campuses

Introduction

What if teaching sociology was like speed-dating? You get one chance to make a good impression, shape minds, and promote sociological mindfulness. For serious academics, this probably sounds like a nightmare. We are not used to working in this manner. We get fifteen weeks in a regular semester – and at least a couple of weeks in a mini-mester or summer school – to teach students to think sociologically. Often, that does not feel like enough time! What if we only have one hour to make a difference? What do we do?

The possibility of helping build a better society is what drew many of us to sociology. Indeed, in his 2000 Presidential Address to the American Sociological Association, Joe Feagin reminded us that sociology was born out of a collective desire on the part of early scholars to not only understand how society works, but to also devise empirically-grounded solutions to some of its most pressing social problems. As Michael Burawoy (2005:281) similarly pointed out in his own address a few years later, “In its origin, therefore, sociology was inherently public.” Now, more than ever, we need a renewed commitment to using our disciplinary training to make sense of the complex challenges we all face in an increasingly interconnected and persistently unequal world. Burke and Banks (2012) illustrate how campus programming can be a way to take advantage of any opportunity, no matter how small, to share the lessons of sociology widely, with as many students as we can.

In what follows, we outline some of the scenarios we have encountered on campus that offered us one shot to get it right, to “help our students think critically about their social lives and about building a better society” (Feagin 2001:14). We discuss our responses when we have been invited to develop short, sociologically-informed workshops and curricula for students we might not normally encounter in our regular classes. We share some of the strategies we developed for making the most of those opportunities and urge other scholars to do the same. By virtue of our disciplinary training and commitments to social justice, we believe sociologists are especially well-equipped to heed Gans’ (1989) call to make our work more accessible to a wider audience by transforming ourselves, as Feagin (2001:14) more recently put it, into “public intellectuals who will speak critically, and from data, about major societal issues.”

Involvement in Student-Organized Workshops

I (Emily) teach at a comprehensive public university with a student body of approximately 20,000. My foray into public sociology began in my first semester as an assistant professor, when I approached a student who looked lost and was wandering around the department's suite of offices. I asked if she needed help finding someone. She wanted to know if there were any "gender experts" in the department. I laughed at the coincidence and told her, "I guess that would be me!" My new job responsibilities included teaching the department's gender courses. I invited her to my office where she explained that she was trying to organize an educational event for her sorority. She wanted the focus to be on something related to gender. Would I be interested in talking to her group? "About what?" I wanted to know. "Anything, really, whatever you want to talk about." Wow, *carte blanc*! I was flattered by the invitation, but I also felt a flash of panic. She wasn't inviting me to do something familiar like teach a class or present my research. She was asking me to chart much scarier waters. Even in the context of a semester-long, structured course, sociological discussions about gender can be challenging. What could I possibly do with a relatively large group (up to seventy was her estimate) of sorority members – most of whom had little to no background (or interest) in sociology – in an hour-and-a-half? My instinct was run away fast, to thank her for the invitation but to suggest that she ask someone else, anybody else. Instead, I told her, "Sure, I'd love to." I didn't know what I was signing up for or what kinds of resources I would be able to find, but I had four weeks to figure it out. I soon discovered that this was just the beginning. Almost every semester since, a new student has dropped by with a similar request.

I (Andrea) teach at a regional, four-year, public university with nearly 7,000 students. My involvement in public sociology initially started through engagement with student groups on campus. I was invited by another faculty member to co-moderate a discussion on healthy relationships and safe sex co-sponsored by two historically black Greek-letter organizations. She had moderated the discussion the previous year and had some talking points prepared. I mainly went to observe. Little did I know that the event would be standing-room-only with over one hundred students in attendance. This event was student-organized and was not in a classroom setting. The discussion was lively and engaging and, at times, had to be settled down and redirected. While students were discussing their thoughts on relationships today, we contextualized the discussion using a sociological perspective and gave them a framework to make sense of their own experiences. After several hours, the event ended with students staying behind to ask questions. While I felt underprepared and nervous about the event, it was rewarding to see so many students exposed to the discipline and learning outside of the formal

classroom. This led to eight other accepted invitations to moderate discussions or lead workshops with students on campus.

As we both came to understand, by coming to us, students were giving us a chance – one chance, in many cases – to show them and their peers how the tools in our discipline can enrich their understanding of the social world and be used to craft novel solutions to the challenges we all face. In what follows, we outline two programs that we developed for different student groups and share the lessons we learned through trial-and-error about what seems to work well and what does not. By doing so, our hope is that other scholars will feel more comfortable accepting these kinds of student invitations and begin to imagine concrete ways of turning them into opportunities to do public sociology.

Examples of Sociologically-Informed Curricula

Example One: Body Image Workshop

I (Emily) was asked to facilitate a workshop on body image for three different campus sororities. The first time I was asked, I agreed, but quickly realized I did not know how to organize a workshop. Instead, I treated it more like a class. I showed Jean Kilbourne's documentary film "Killing Us Softly IV: Advertising's Image of Women" and led a discussion afterwards on cultural constructions of beauty, the pervasive objectification of women, and the power of the media to shape beauty ideals.¹ This went over pretty well with the students, but I did most of the talking.

The next time I was asked to do a workshop on body image, I decided to make some big changes. First, I insisted that the young Latina who made the request serve as a co-facilitator. This created an opportunity to mentor a student who had already shown initiative. It also gave me a way of managing my own racial privilege. The first time I led this kind of discussion, I was keenly aware of the contradictions that arose as I, a white woman, attempted to initiate discussions with almost exclusively Latina and African American young women on racialized constructions of beauty. The student co-facilitator, in effect, served as a bridge between me and the group, and she took an active role in developing the curriculum for the workshop. In what follows, I sketch out the latest version of the workshop and discuss the videos and websites that we compiled together and organized with the goal of creating an interactive, student-led discussion.

¹ Since 1979, media expert Jean Kilbourne has been critically examining the sexualized and objectifying representations of women – and increasingly men – in advertisements for the documentary film series "Killing Us Softly: Advertising's Image of Women." The documentary has been updated four times, most recently in 2010 (<http://www.mediaed.org/killingussoftly4/>).

We started by showing “Perceptions of Perfection,” a short video my student co-facilitator had seen previously and thought would be effective at getting students to think critically about cultural differences in beauty ideals.² After giving participants a chance to share their reactions to the video, we asked them, “What’s considered attractive in your culture?” Rather than listing their responses ourselves, we handed out colorful markers and asked each participant to go to the board and write something (even if it duplicated something someone else had already written). After everyone had listed something (some went up more than once!), we asked them to stand back and note what stood out. In some cases, they noticed the repeated themes: nice eyebrows, smooth skin. Other times, it was the contradictions that caught their attention: thin/curvy; tall with long legs/petite frame. In one case, it was the single reference to “light skin” that elicited the most discussion. In another, it was the mention of “colored eyes” – which meant, as a student explained, having irises that were light enough that the pupil was distinct (not, in other words, having dark brown eyes like most of the Latina and African American women in the room). We then asked students to identify women of color who seemed to embody these ideals. They immediately began naming celebrities. We listed these on the board, too. There weren’t many – less than ten. We talked about how some of the people they named seemed to violate the cultural “rules” for attractiveness that they had already listed – for instance, by being too tall or having dark eyes. Others seemed to conform – especially to the ideal of having light skin. Was it a problem, we asked, that we could think of so few women of color who were considered “beautiful”? How might that scarcity of images shape our ideas about what’s attractive?

Next, we asked participants where they learned about these beauty standards. Some recalled watching their mothers, sisters, and older cousins putting on make-up and fixing their hair for a date or special event. Others said their peers had a strong influence, especially in middle and high school. Ultimately, though, students agreed that the media had the most influence over their understandings of what was considered beautiful. We expected this and were prepared with another short video. We used Dove’s “Evolution of Beauty” video to talk about how many of the images that are lifted up as ideal are completely fabricated or photoshopped

² In the video “Perceptions of Beauty,” 18 female graphic artists from different countries were asked to airbrush the same photo of a female model using the beauty standards of their own culture (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jOwimNEm41Q>). This video was inspired by an earlier initiative by journalist Esther Honig to demonstrate the socially constructed and culturally-specific nature of what is considered attractive. To make the point, Honig sent an unedited photo of herself to graphic designers around the world with the request that they make her “beautiful.” This resulted in a diverse array of “before” and “after” photos that varied tremendously from one culture to the next (<https://www.designboom.com/art/25-countries-photoshop-esther-honig-make-her-beautiful-06-26-2014/>).

to death, such that the people they are supposed to represent literally do not exist in the world.³

Some participants were familiar with the video and grumbled their frustrations with the made-up images. But most participants had not seen it before and were shocked by the extent of the photoshopping. They wanted us to go back and show them the original image so that they could compare “before” and “after.” Many of them said the woman looked fine in the original picture; others said the before/after images looked like entirely different people. Still others said that when the photos were put side-by-side, the “after” image didn’t even look like a person, but more like a “creepy doll.” Mostly, the young women were angry that advertisers used trickery to create beauty ideals that are so out of reach that no “real” woman actually embodies them.

To channel students’ frustrations and encourage them to think more sociologically about how to challenge harmful beauty standards, we asked them to do a “body mapping” activity.⁴ The goal was to show them that they could resist cultural pressures to conform to narrow beauty standards. They could do so in part by creating new images of beauty – on their own and with others. To that end, we asked participants to work in small groups to create full-sized self-portraits on butcher paper that they then decorated and transformed into whatever they considered to be “beautiful.” One person made herself into a lion! A couple of groups merged their self-portraits to create an enormous mermaid in one case, and a fiesta scene with turtles and dinosaurs in another. We ended this activity by asking participants to stand in front of their self-portraits and list five things they liked most about their own bodies. While most pointed to individual things, like their eyes or feet, a handful proclaimed that they liked “everything.” This ended up being the most animated part of the workshop, with participants enthusiastically supporting each other’s declarations of personal beauty.

To get students thinking more *collectively* about how to encourage more women to push back at narrow beauty norms, we ended with a social action activity in which they created a set of affirming messages on sticky notes that they would take with them and put up in women’s bathrooms around campus.⁵ Participants took this part of the workshop the most seriously. Nearly everyone pulled their phones out to look for quotes and positive messages they could create for other women. Many of them worked together. While we expected participants to spend

³ In 2006, Unilever launched “Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty” and developed a short video entitled “Evolution of Beauty” that showed how editors use airbrushing techniques to dramatically alter print images (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=emQUHRlpeaE>).

⁴ Body mapping is an activity developed by visual artist Laura Hollick that involves tracing a person’s full silhouette onto a piece of butcher paper and then decorating or transforming the image into something else entirely (<http://www.soulartstudio.com/gallery-bodymapping.php>).

⁵ “Operation Beautiful” is an initiative started by blogger Caitlin Boyle to uplift and affirm others by posting encouraging messages in public places (<http://www.operationbeautiful.com/>).

five minutes or so on this activity, they were so engaged that they ended up taking much longer. As they were finishing up, we asked if anyone wanted to share any of the messages they found with the group. It turned out that everyone wanted to read at least one of their notes before leaving. They were excited to help their fellow students fight back against harmful beauty standards.

Example Two: Healthy Relationships

I (Andrea) was asked by three different student organizations to co-facilitate several events on topics related to healthy relationships after moderating the initial event described above. It is worth noting that the student organizations that I have worked with primarily serve marginalized populations and these organizations were not used to faculty readily accepting their invitations. Word spread quickly across campus about my willingness and passion to work with students outside of the classroom, which created a synergy on campus around social issues. The next event I co-facilitated after the event discussed above was sponsored by another black Greek-letter organization and addressed domestic violence. My co-facilitator and I met with several of the sorority members beforehand and listened to what they hoped to accomplish through the event. They wanted to create some dialogue around the warning signs of abuse and how to set boundaries in relationships. This event was less of a workshop and more of an open discussion. We introduced students to the “Power and Control Wheel” developed by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project and distributed by the National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence.⁶ We guided the discussion while students did most of the talking. This was an eye-opening experience for students in attendance because they were able to talk freely about a topic that is often taboo in minority communities and see how power and control were used in a variety of different relationships in their own lives. While it was beneficial, it was mostly discussion-based without any hands-on activities to help students apply what they learned.

The next event I was asked to co-facilitate was another discussion on healthy relationships and safe sex which was sponsored by a student organization for LGBTQ students and allies. I partnered with a local non-profit organization that focuses on the prevention of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). I was mostly a moderator for the event and began by asking students to define a “healthy” mental, emotional, and physical relationship. Students discussed their expectations in relationships and how to set boundaries. The representative from the non-profit discussed risk factors for HIV and STIs and specifically related this to the LGBTQ population, dispelled myths, and provided condom demonstrations.

⁶ The “Power and Control Wheel” provides examples of common behaviors that an abusive partner may use to maintain and enforce power and control within a relationship (<http://www.ncdsv.org/images/powercontrolwheelnoshading.pdf>).

By partnering with a local organization, we were able to build on their expertise; and students were able to learn about resources in the community.

The third event that I co-facilitated was sponsored by two black Greek-letter organizations and focused on relationship goals. After seeing the hashtag #relationshipgoals on social media, both organizations wanted students to think about real relationship goals rather than looking at shared posts and pictures online as their only source of information on healthy relationships. For this workshop, my co-facilitator and I used part of a curriculum called “Within My Reach.”⁷ The curriculum focuses on relationship skills and decision-making. Numerous experts consulted on the development of this curriculum including sociologist Kathryn Edin, domestic violence prevention advocate Anne Menard, and domestic violence researcher Michael Johnson. We focused primarily on the principles of “smart” love, how to set personal boundaries in relationships, and how to communicate your expectations. Students completed an inventory where they identified their personal expectations in relationships. We then discussed in an open forum various elements of healthy and satisfying relationships.

My department is a joint department with family studies. We offer a Certificate in Family Life Education accredited by the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR). As family life educators, students will likely deliver community workshops. Assisting with those on campus gives them needed experience for their future careers. One of my students assisted me with several other workshops and decided to facilitate a workshop as part of her Honor’s project. I served as her faculty sponsor. She was particularly interested in body image and how that affects expectations in relationships. This workshop was open to all students and it was titled “Be-You-tiful.” In this workshop, we started with a small group activity where participants used 25 x 30 inch Post-It self-stick paper and markers to record phrases that describe normative expectations around gender, specifically how women should act and what dominant beauty ideals are. The groups analyzed patterns and discussed how they came up with these phrases. Next, they talked about whether or not they had felt pressure to adhere to stereotypes of how women should act and look. We shared research on the cultural standards of beauty and discussed how what we see in the media is often distorted by the use of airbrushing and other techniques to modify photographs. Research and data were provided to demonstrate how self-esteem shapes our expectations in interpersonal relationships. While I oversaw and assisted with the development of the workshop,

⁷ “Within My Research” is a skills-based relationship education program developed by Marline Pearson, M.A.; Scott Stanley, Ph.D.; Galena Rhoades, Ph.D.; and PREP, Inc. Numerous other scholars and experts consulted on the curriculum. The curriculum includes hands-on activities that engage participants in self-reflection and is evidence-based, with a great deal of research on the curriculum conducted at University of Denver and sponsored by the National Institutes of Health (<https://www.prepinc.com/content/curricula/within-my-reach.htm>).

my student independently led it. The attendance was much lower for this event compared to the workshops sponsored by student organizations. However, it was still successful because it had a good balance between hands-on activities and research.

As these examples show, students are seeking answers to their questions and problems, and they are looking for those answers in research rather than settling for lay explanations. This provides a unique opportunity for sociologists to share our discipline with a much larger audience. What we see in the above scenarios is that students want a deeper understanding of culture and how norms and values shape behaviors. They are also aware of power differences and inequalities in the broader society, and they have personal experience trying to navigate these dynamics in their daily lives. They're not satisfied with individualistic explanations for these problems. They want a sociological imagination and the ability to see how larger social forces affect their lives, but they are not able to clearly articulate that yet. That's where we – academic sociologists – have a role to play.

Lessons Learned

In this paper, we have outlined ways in which sociologists can expand their reach beyond the formal classroom by accepting students' invitations to develop short, sociologically-informed curricula for campus groups. In addition to sharing concrete strategies we developed for responding to these requests, we also wanted to share some of the things we have learned in the process of doing public sociology on our campuses.

Student ownership is vital. Without that, it is just another lecture by another professor. This means that a student group or organization should take the lead on the event or workshop, and students should assume an active role in developing and facilitating the workshop. For many students, this will be a new experience; and they will need help coming up with ideas and thinking through the flow of activities. But, as we've found in working with students on these kinds of workshops, treating them like partners in the process has several benefits: (1) it spreads the work around so we're not doing it all; (2) it gives us a chance to mentor students into leadership roles; and (3) it lets us learn from them what they care about and what they already know. All of this, in turn, enables us to develop a more engaging, relevant workshop. In our experience, when students are invited to participate in the planning and implementation stages of a workshop, they will step up, identify thought-provoking materials, and share valuable insights that we – despite our professional training and expertise – may not have.

You need a good balance of activities and research. Students are seeking us out because we are experts, but they don't want to be lectured at the whole time.

Look up existing curricula or class activities on your topic – you do not have to reinvent the wheel. Many of the activities published in TRAILS and in *Teaching Sociology* can be integrated into workshops.

Include some kind of action item or social change activity. Show students that the tools of sociology are not just useful for understanding how social problems come about, but that they can also be used to develop solutions. Admittedly, sociologists are not always good at this, but students who are attending our workshops want to be able to *do something* with what they've just learned. Helping them think about next steps means that the brief glimpse they got into sociological ways of thinking doesn't end when the lights are turned off and the door is closed. It shows them that the lessons of sociology have practical applications in their daily lives and that they have a role to play in solving the problems that affect us all.

Student attendance can vary greatly. Ask the student organizers what to expect, but be prepared for an audience of five or fifty, an all-woman, all-man, or mixed gender group, and a racially/ethnically homogeneous or diverse crowd. When you are selecting materials, activities, and discussion prompts, keep these “unknowns” in mind and discuss them with student organizers so that they are ready to shift gears if necessary. Ask them to help you devise a few extra questions or activities that you could use if your audience turns out to be different from what you were expecting (ex. one or two men show up to a body image workshop attended by thirty women). On a similar note, students should advertise the event through their social media accounts or through university social media accounts. Their peers are more likely to see something on social media than a flyer on campus.

Once students know that you are an expert in an area, be prepared for more requests to help with workshops or events. You need to know when to say yes and when to say no – and when to challenge a colleague to take the plunge into public sociology. We are not experts on everything! At the same time, we all have expertise that can be used to develop engaging workshops that introduce students to sociological ways of thinking. If you don't have the time or knowledge to help with a particular event, encourage a peer to give it a try. On a similar note, once one student group sponsors an event on a topic, it is likely that other student groups will want to do the same thing. There will be a point where students do not want to hear about a topic over and over again and will no longer attend events.

Conclusion (and a Challenge)

Our hope, in sharing our experiences, is that more academic sociologists will embrace the opportunities our students give us to do public sociology. We all feel a bit anxious when we're asked to do something outside of our wheelhouse. However, sociologists are well-equipped to moderate and deliver programming on

college campuses because many of the issues that students are dealing with are directly connected to our course content. Through our engagement with campus programming, we can foster a sociological imagination, promote social change, and bring students into the discipline of sociology (Burke and Banks 2012). As Burawoy (2007) reminds us, students should be considered our first public – that includes students outside of our formal classrooms.

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