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Abstract

This article offers strategies for teaching about rationality, bureaucracy, and social change using George Ritzer's *The McDonaldization of Society* and its ideas about efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control. Student learning is facilitated using a series of strategies: making the familiar strange, explaining McDonaldization, self-investigation and discovery, and exploring and implementing alternatives. Through assignments, class exercises, and films, students contextualize modernity and its unintended negative consequences by viewing McDonaldization through the lenses of work and jobs. These strategies provide a framework to help students understand key concepts, critique McDonaldization, and formulate positive ways to cope with Weber's iron cage.

Keywords

classroom-based exercises, introduction to sociology, social theory, work and occupations

Sociology professors expect students to grasp Max Weber's ideas about rationality, bureaucracy, and social change but often struggle to make the material relevant. George Ritzer's (1996) *The McDonaldization of Society* links Weber's ideas to the proliferation of the fast food model. As it approaches its 20th year, the text has continued to evolve, spawning both critiques and adaptations (Smart 1999; Ritzer 2013). Yet, with the notable exception of Lippmann and Aldrich (2003), relatively few teaching-focused publications on the topic exist. To help fill this gap, I offer methods to teach the McDonaldization thesis to undergraduates.

For Max Weber, the bureaucracy epitomized formal rationality whereby rules, regulations, and hierarchies help secure efficient processes. Ritzer (2013) termed the trend toward rationality *McDonaldization*, whereby an increasing proportion of society is dominated by the fast food model of efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control through automation or routine. As Smart (1999:2) noted, Ritzer characterized McDonaldization as the

most important manifestation of rationalization processes in the modern world.

Accordingly, many jobs are McDonaldized in a fashion similar to industrial deskilling, whereby skilled work is broken down into its constituent parts, with a resultant loss of creative capacity. According to Ritzer (2002), through scripted interactions, workers are not only controlled in what they do but also in what they say. Professionals such as physicians and college professors, however, are not immune. Although McDonaldization has a long reach, it disproportionately affects those at the bottom of the socioeconomic scale. Members of the working class are more likely to interact with McDonaldized school systems, live

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in mass-produced homes, and ultimately “work in McDonaldized jobs” (Ritzer 2002:147).

CHALLENGES OF TEACHING McDONALDIZATION

Although some have questioned the originality of Ritzer’s (1996, 2013) contributions to social theory, most agree that his rendering of Weber is both timely and “appetizing for students” (Smart 1999:2). Although Weber is the source of these ideas, Ritzer (1996, 2013) crystallized them and brought them into focus, making them memorable for students and professors alike. Nevertheless, although these examples are more current than Weber’s, students still have a hard time appreciating their impact, in part because they have always lived in a McDonaldized world (Lippmann and Aldrich 2003). To complicate matters, students often have an emotional attachment to the McDonald’s brand. They value McDonald’s “for its own sake,” as a part of family tradition, rather than the threat Ritzer (2013:44) described.

In the course of class discussion, it becomes clear that many students view McDonaldization as an unmitigated good and are thus hesitant to critique it. However, although students recognize the advantages of being McDonaldized consumers, they do not like the idea of working in fast food-style “McJobs.” Thus, it is through links to the social organization of work that students make the connections to concepts such as alienation, deskilling, and the McDonaldization of professionals. Yet focusing on social problems without solutions can be depressing (Crone 2011); hence the need to help students identify practical solutions to rationalization and its discontents.

I teach at a large, undergraduate-focused, public university of about 25,000 students, of whom 35 percent are nonwhite. On average, the students are 24 years old, female (58 percent), and from middle- to working-class backgrounds, with 75 percent of students attending full-time. The usual sociology class size is 35 to 40 students. I have taught the McDonaldization thesis in principles of sociology courses, as well as upper level courses on work and organizations. Depending on course goals, instructors might want to spend more or less time on McDonaldization than I do. The basic

framework offered here can be easily adjusted to meet individual needs. The McDonaldization thesis can be revisited over the course of the term as applicable to core topics such as globalization, family, and religion.

In an introductory sociology class, my overall objective is to enable students to understand various sociological theories and research methodologies and, in so doing, to evaluate the social world. Thus, when teaching about Weber through McDonaldization, I have four interrelated goals. These are to help students: (1) understand the changes from traditional ways of organizing the social world to more rational efficient forms of social organization, (2) analyze rational efficient elements found in their daily lives, (3) evaluate how these changes can be both beneficial and problematic using jobs and work as a focus, and (4) create positive ways to deal with increasing rationality and McDonaldization.

TEACHING McDONALDIZATION MODULES

Experienced teachers have long used *The McDonaldization of Society* (Ritzer 1996, 2013) in their courses and offered advice as to how to effectively do so. For example, Lippmann and Aldrich (2003) recommended a variety of learning assignments, including personal observation, quizzes, and writing exercises. Over the past 10 years, I have used these and other strategies to make rationalization visible. I do this by integrating a sequence of related modules I call “making the familiar strange,” “explaining McDonaldization,” “self-investigation and discovery,” and “exploring and implementing alternatives.”

Module 1: Making the Familiar Strange

A time-tested sociological technique is asking students to question the normal or natural world, that is, to make the familiar seem strange (see Conley 2011). As noted by Kleinman, Copp and Sandstrom (2006), this tactic works well with Horace Miner’s (1956) piece “Body Ritual among the Nacirema.” In Miner’s description of the American (i.e., “Nacirema”) medicine cabinet through the lens of an outsider, our health rituals seem strange.

Kleinman et al. (2006) subsequently used this technique to help students see the sexism in the custom of opening doors for women. They recommend a classroom performance in which the instructor pretends to be a visitor from Mars who cannot understand why this is done. Making the familiar strange also illustrates the unintended aspects of rationality. Following the insider-as-outsider theme, I ask students to consider the unintended consequences of several technologies from a nonnative perspective. These include clocks, assembly lines, cell phones, disposable diapers, and suburbs. For example, the invention of clocks changed the way we think about time (Berger, Berger, and Kellner 1973). “Time is money” is something students take for granted, yet making this feel strange helps them understand that clocks made labor calculable. A more surprising issue is the irrationality of disposable diapers. A Martian might question the timesaving benefits of disposables when these items take up so much space in landfills. Thus, starting with a general example such as Miner’s (1956) *Nacirema* and then funneling the discussion toward the hidden indicators and mechanisms of rationalization in everyday life, I generate a lively class discussion. As a result, making the familiar strange provides a foundation for understanding McDonaldization and its unintended consequences.

Next, many students stay up late but have not considered the sociological implications of doing so. “Night as Frontier” by Murray Melbin (1978) offers a novel approach by comparing the colonization of night to the settling of the old West. Ritzer’s (2013:6) discussion of how more McDonald’s restaurants stay open for 24 hours further emphasizes this point. In other words, McDonaldization has spread not only through geographical space but also through time (Ritzer 2013).

The documentary series *The Day the Universe Changed* (Burke and Reisz [1985] 2009) also helps explain the historical impact of technology. Although some students have a hard time getting past the film’s 1980s production techniques, such devaluation exemplifies modernity’s emphases on progress. A current film resource is the History Channel’s *Modern Marvels* series, which features the historical and social significance of a variety of simple and complex technologies, including wood,

supersized food, and extreme gadgets (History Channel n.d.).

Module 2: Explaining McDonaldization

How exactly should teachers explain McDonaldization? I start by defining McDonaldization as “the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world” (Ritzer 2013:1). I display the definition on an overhead slide, illustrated with a picture of a smiling Ronald McDonald. I then introduce the principles of efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control.

I first explain that efficiency is the search for optimal means to a given end: in other words, going from point A to point B with minimum cost, effort, and/or time. Following Ritzer (2013), we discuss the use of assembly-line processes in making hamburgers and how limiting choices through specialization makes things more efficient. Examples offered by students include a variety of fast food restaurants that specialize in chicken, tacos, and seafood. I then explain how streamlining and simplification of products is linked to deskilling.

Students can, however, be intimidated by the concept of calculability, which, simply put, is an emphasis on using numerical values to measure things. I link this to jobs through a discussion of scientific management techniques of time and motion studies and in fast food portion control. During the discussion it becomes clear that counting things makes it easier to determine efficiency. Students often remark that work performance evaluations are often numerically based. In discussing predictability (the assurance that the products and service will be the same time after time), students note the exceptions to the rule, commenting on how fast food tasted different in other parts of the country or the world. Their comments underscore how widespread the expectation of predictability has become.

Finally, the discussion of control, whereby humans are increasingly replaced and controlled by nonhuman technologies, connects these principles. At McDonald’s, products, workers, and customers are strictly controlled. For example, ingredients are pre-prepared, needing only to be

combined, while machines manage the cooking process. Customers likewise know that they must wait in line, order when their turn comes (often using a combination meal number), and clear their own trash (Ritzer 2013).

Module 3: Self-Investigation and Discovery

After helping students situate rationalizing processes in context, I seek to facilitate this recognition in their lives. As an introduction to this section, I distribute three-by-five index cards and ask students to answer the following questions, “What was your worst job? What made it bad?” Generally, an assortment of “McJobs” emerges, featuring repetitive tasks, scripts, overbearing, unrealistic bosses, and unpleasant working conditions.

During the following discussion, students often relate their jobs to *Office Space* (Judge 1999), a comedy film that exemplifies bureaucratic dysfunction. If time permits, I show the film or, alternatively, selected clips in class. *Office Space* is replete with red tape, impersonality, and workers treated as interchangeable parts. Bureaucratic dysfunction, ritualistic behavior, and the irrationality of rationality are exemplified by the “TPS reports” the main character, Peter Gibbons (played by Ron Livingston), must complete. Visiting efficiency experts also note how little some workers actually do, yet they promote Gibbons, who achieves next to nothing.

In a secondary plot, the phrase “pieces of flair” describes the dress code at a chain restaurant where Joanna (played by Jennifer Aniston) works. Here, employees must wear decorative pins, identified as “pieces of flair,” on their uniforms. Although Joanna correctly wears the minimum number allowed (15) per the employee handbook, her manager berates her for “doing the minimum,” unfavorably comparing her with an obnoxious coworker. Instructors should keep in mind that the film contains profanity, brief nudity, and sexual situations. Nevertheless, reactions from students have been overwhelmingly positive. One called it “a genius form of comic relief.”

After discussing problems and pitfalls of McDonaldized work, I ask “Where do you go,

what do you do, when you want to escape the routines of everyday life and work? How do you relax?” True to Weber’s prediction of an iron cage of rationality, the very activities that are supposed to help us get away from rationality have also become McDonaldized. Thus, students vacation at theme parks, sporting events, concerts, guided tours, and cruises, all of which are prepackaged.

Students often resist the notion that increased specialization in professional work can be bad. They have, for instance, told me, “I’d want a specialist to operate on me! You want somebody who has done the same surgery hundreds of times.” Although it must be acknowledged that research on surgical error supports this (Gawande 2009), unintended consequences of McDonaldized medicine do exist. To demonstrate this, I ask students to read and discuss a scenario about the McDonaldization of medicine from a physician’s point of view (Appendix A). This helps them understand that their own frustration with health care is linked to rationalization. Instructors might ask advanced students to read Ritzer and Walczak’s (1988) “Rationalization and the Deprofessionalization of Physicians” and comment on its currency.

Of course, not all students wish to eschew McDonaldization. As Ritzer (2013) noted, it makes money, reflects consumer preferences, and fits well with the dual-career family. To provide students a chance to apply McDonaldization to a frustrating problem, I use an activity adapted from Teresa A. Sullivan’s (2002) *The Social Organization of Work*. Small groups identify an area on campus (or elsewhere) that suffers from poor customer service and develop a rationalized remedy. Places typically reengineered are financial aid, parking, advising, and registration.

Term paper: interviewing about McJobs. Term papers can be run of the mill. This project offers students the opportunity to develop real-world research and theoretical application skills. Simply put, the assignment is to interview two people who have different jobs and then compare and contrast the key elements of McDonaldization in each (Appendix B).

I use a rationalized point system for grading the term paper. When students comment that the assignment has McDonaldized elements, I know

that I am getting through to them. Term papers have included comparisons of an aeronautics engineer with a clothing retail chain worker, a long-distance truck driver with a schoolteacher, and a registered nurse with a Chick-fil-A worker.

Module 4: Exploring and Implementing Alternatives

After several weeks on McDonaldization, students are able to see both its positive and negative aspects, but they usually remain ambivalent about change. In chapter 6, “Dealing with McDonaldization: A Practical Guide,” Ritzer (2013) explained Weber’s notion of the iron cage and offered ways to make life less McDonaldized. Acknowledging that people appreciate both its pros and cons, he described increased rationality as a “velvet” or “rubber” cage (Ritzer 2013:142–43). Thus, the goal is to help students discover realistic coping strategies. The conversation starter in this section is “How can I de-McDonaldize my life?” Proposed solutions include opting for local mom-and-pop restaurants instead of chains, staying at locally owned hotels, buying from thrift stores, and avoiding theme parks.

Interested students might enjoy *Simple Living: One Couple’s Search for a Better Life* (Levering and Urbanska 1992) or the more recent *The Heart of Simple Living: 7 Paths to a Better Life* (Urbanska 2010). Levering and Urbanska’s (1992) story of letting go of techno-commercialism provides lessons in the quality-versus-quantity conundrum. In *The Heart of Simple Living*, (Urbanska 2010) a couple moves from fast-paced Los Angeles to the rural Blue Ridge Mountains, where they take over the family orchards. Urbanska (2010) continued the theme by offering seven lessons in how to avoid a prepackaged lifestyle. These include forgoing indebtedness for unnecessary items such as oversized “McMansion” homes (p. 89). The documentary film *Escape from Affluenza: Living Better on Less* (de Graaf 1998) also emphasizes these points.

Reversing McDonaldization? As teachers, we can help students recognize areas of social life in which alternatives to rationality and McDonaldization might be welcome. However, taking the steps to reverse these processes and introduce substitutes is asking for a different sort of applied learning.

Although intensive mentoring of students can be difficult at a large university, I work toward enabling students to consider the ways they can effect widespread social change, not only at the individual level but also on a wider scale. Their ideas range from promoting vegetarianism to banning fast food on campus and beyond. Depending on the academic resources available, instructors might wish to assign a project or response paper that enhances the “real-world” applicability of what is learned in this process.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

With institutional review board approval, I asked students to take short before-and-after quizzes (available on request) and to comment on class materials as to their helpfulness in learning. On average, students correctly answered four of the seven items (roughly 56 percent) before beginning module 1. After the modules are completed, the students answer the same multiple-choice questions as part of an in-class exam. Average scores improve to 90 percent.

CONCLUSIONS

Ritzer’s (1996, 2013) *The McDonaldization of Society* has long been a mainstay in my sociology courses. Over the years, I have adapted a series of modules and projects that help students achieve an understanding of changes in the modern world through the principles of McDonaldization. Taken together or used separately, these help students to think sociologically, grasp key concepts, apply these to a variety of settings, and formulate strategies of their own.

APPENDIX A

McDocs Scenario

Jim has been a physician at Smallville General Hospital since 1999. Becoming a doctor was Jim’s dream job; he has always wanted to help others. But lately, Jim likes practicing medicine less and less. His small practice has been taken over by Metropolis HMO Corporation, a giant company that has been buying medical practices all across

the country. Since then there have been many changes. Jim used to order any medicine or lab test he wanted but now is limited by cost. In fact, he must follow a standardized list of tests and treatments for various illnesses. Each diagnosis has a code number. Every doctor's office in the Metropolis HMO group must choose from this list. Nor is Jim able to decide how long to spend with each patient. The manager, who is not a doctor, tells him to limit his time to 15 minutes per patient. At the end of every month, Jim receives a statistics sheet with numbers of patients seen, diagnoses, and the average cost per patient. If Jim's costs are too high, the HMO's manager reminds him that this is against policy. Even the décor of Jim's office has been changed to match the other Metropolis offices. All are decorated in red, black, and white with the Metropolis HMO logo. Moreover, all staff must answer the phone the same way: "Thank you so much for choosing Metropolis HMO. We really care about your needs. How can we help?" To top it off, Jim's patients don't seem to respect his judgment any longer. Just yesterday, a patient challenged his advice, saying that she looked up her diagnosis on the Internet. Now, instead of enjoying medicine, Jim is thinking about retirement!

APPENDIX B

Term Paper Assignment: McDonaldization and Work

NOTE: Please identify your institution's policy concerning the protection of human subjects prior to assigning the paper.

For this assignment, using questions you design, interview 2 people about their work and compare and contrast the amount of McDonaldization in each. Please choose people whose jobs differ in power and prestige. You will need to develop an interview guide, with questions that incorporate concepts including predictability, efficiency, calculability, and control. During the interviews, jot down notes. Afterwards, immediately write these in more detail so that you can remember what was said. Please do this right away, as you will likely forget important points. These are called field notes. Please do not use actual names in your

paper. Assign pseudonyms (e.g., "Person A," "Person B") instead. The paper should be 7-9 pages, double spaced, and will be graded on the quality of both content and form. It should contain all the following sections:

Title: 5 points. This should be both descriptive and inviting. A good title tells the reader what the paper is about.

Abstract: 10 points. A 100-word summary of what you did, why and how you did it, and what you found.

Introduction: 15 points. First, define and discuss key issues related to work, based on what you have learned from readings and discussions. Second, discuss what you expect to find in terms of similarities or differences between the workers.

Methods: 15 points. Describe the methods used to collect your data, including where and when you conducted the interviews. Provide the basic list of questions asked during the interview.

Results: 20 points. Report the facts from each interview. Be specific about each worker's job. Use actual examples, where appropriate.

Conclusions: 15 points. Draw conclusions based on your results. How did the jobs differ? How were they alike? How did the jobs differ from the standard McDonaldized model? Did you find anything unexpected? What do your findings suggest about the McDonaldization of work?

References: 5 points. Please use American Sociological Association Style.

Field Notes: 15 points. Attach copies of your interview notes. You do not need to type these.

NOTE

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