

SOCIOLOGY 151, SPRING 2009
EXAM #1 GRADING RUBRIC

1. Analyze the social world depicted in the documentary “Hoop Dreams” from one of the three major theoretical perspectives in sociology. Be sure to clearly explain the theoretical perspective, apply it to the case, and indicate the strengths and weaknesses of the perspective in understanding the case.

[21 students answered this question]

KEY ELEMENTS (10 points total)

- (+2) For making a reasonable attempt to answer the question as posed
- (+2) Clear and accurate explanation of theoretical perspective
- (+2) Appropriate and specific application of theoretical perspective to case of “Hoop Dreams”
- (+2) Appropriate, accurate, and specific indication of strengths and weaknesses
- (+2) For saying something intelligent beyond the first four elements

COMMON PROBLEMS:

- Explanations of theoretical perspectives generally too vague and brief.
- Big question/Vision? – one brief way to introduce the theory is to start here.
- Relevance? Making statements that aren’t clearly tied into the analysis
- Not specific (enough) – discussion of strengths and weaknesses not applied to “understanding the case”
- Existence of “struggle” in their lives does not mean that the conflict theory applies, at least not without further explanation. Struggle could be part of the structural-functional view of society.
- Role conflict does not follow from the conflict perspective. In fact, it might be more akin to a structural-functionalist perspective.

2. Read the news story from *cnn.com* on the back side of this exam. Explain the event described in the news story from a sociological perspective.

[38 people answered this question]

KEY ELEMENTS (10 points total)

(+2) For making a reasonable attempt to answer the question as posed

(+1) Clear statement of what a sociological perspective is at a basic level. What is the sociological perspective at a basic level? Seeing personal problems as social issues, understanding the complex interplay between individuals and society/social structure, etc.

(+2) Clear and accurate identification of sociological perspective on suicide. The social conditions/structure within which one lives affect the likelihood of committing suicide. Three different conditions = three types of suicide.

(+3) Correct application of sociological perspective on suicide to this case

(+2) For saying something intelligent beyond the first three elements. E.g., compare altruistic to other types of suicide and give other examples of altruistic suicide to extend the analysis.

NILAND

Few decisions are more intimate and personal than the decision to end one's own life. Society (especially Western society) tends to view suicide as the product of an individual's moral, emotional, and intellectual weakness. Yet sociologists understand that much more comes into play in suicide than simply the innate characteristics of the person who attempts it. Rather, larger social factors must be considered to truly understand why some individuals choose to end their lives and others do not.

The news article provides a classic example of what Emile Durkheim classified as altruistic suicide. Altruistic suicide is committed by an individual who feels so strongly connected to a group that the group's well-being becomes more important than his or her own. [COMPARE TO OTHER TYPES HERE.] The individual does not want to die, but feels that it is necessary to protect the group. In this case, a young girl felt the need to kill herself in an attempt to save her father's life and their family economic situation. Chinese women are not valued as highly as men in their culture, and since the family has no legitimate source of income apart from whatever work the father can do, it is of extreme importance to the family that the patriarchy be healthy. Valuing the well-being of the group above her own life, the girl elects to sacrifice herself for the sake of the group.

The sociological imagination is paramount in understanding this case. In order to understand how this girl came to view the situation as she did, we must first understand the importance of family and prevailing gender roles in Chinese culture. Furthermore, we cannot fully see the context of the girl's attempt without understanding the economic situation that caused, at least in part, the family's dire circumstances. By taking these other factors into account, we can see that this girl's suicide attempt was not merely the result of her personal mental state. Rather, her act was part of a larger cultural pattern that influence how she, and everyone else for that matter, behaves.

3. Read the brief excerpt below, which is from a 30 November 2008 New York Times review of Malcolm Gladwell's book, *Outliers: The Story of Success*. According to the author of the review, "These two stories about Gladwell are both true, and yet they are also very different." How does the sociological imagination help us to reconcile the two true but different stories of Malcolm Gladwell's success?

[21 people answered this question]

KEY ELEMENTS (10 points total)

(+2) For making a reasonable attempt to answer the question as posed

(+2) Clear and accurate description of what the sociological imagination is. Cannot understand the individual or society without understanding both. Symbiotic view, rather than either or. Humans make their own history, but not under conditions of their own choosing. Intersection of biography and history within society.

(+4) Appropriate and specific application of the sociological imagination to story of Gladwell. Focus not on two different stories, or how the second story supplements the first, but on reconciling the two. Can't just say that the second story is the sociological story. Can say that the first is more individualistic and the second is more social, but bottom line must be how a true sociological imagination tries to capture both. Could bring in idea of ascribed and achieved status here, but need to focus on how a single status (e.g., "journalist") can be BOTH achieved and ascribed according to the sociological perspective.

(+2) For saying something intelligent beyond the first three elements. For example, drawing similar/different example(s) into comparison with Gladwell's case.

COMMON PROBLEM:

Too much space spent just repeating the facts of the case, which are known already to the reader.

DEFINITION:

Newman: Herein lies the fundamental theme of sociology: Everyday social life—our thoughts, actions, feelings, decisions, interactions, and so on—is the product of a complex interplay between societal forces and personal characteristics. To explain why people are the way they are or do the things they do, we must understand the interpersonal, historical, cultural, organizational, and global environments they inhabit. To understand either individuals or society, we must understand both.

Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852): "[Humans] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past."