

Sociology 750 – Freese – Spring 2005

Exercise #1: Describe an instance of instructive research

Weight: 2 points

Due date and time: February 10, 5pm (note policy on the syllabus about late exercises)

Purpose: An orienting occasion for you to reflect upon research design and your own epistemic standards and tastes.

Task: Empirical social research is carried out on a vast array of topics using a vast array of methods. Despite this immense diversity, social research carried out under the auspices of the academy generally professes some aim toward generating a product that is instructive in some way for at least some of its consumers.¹ That is to say, a guiding belief is that research investigations have the capacity to teach us things about the phenomena/objects being investigated, with “us” being not just the investigators but those who read accounts (books, articles) provided by the investigators. *The idea is that we can learn things from well-done research.* Here, I take learning to imply about the thing learned that: (1) one did not know it before, and (2) one provisionally regards it as being “true” or “correct” or “credible.”

If all social research did was generate affirmations of what we already knew or strongly suspected to be the case, my guess is that we would not think that embarking on a career of doing such research is something we would regard as being very inviting, exciting, or challenging. If all social research did was generate conclusions that we regarded as foolish and unwarranted, my guess is that we would regard “sociologist” as a profession as being a silly, pointless, or deeply suspicious career choice. Since everyone here is neither new to their field of study nor chained to this pursuit against their will, I presume that everyone here believes that they can and have learned things from particular research projects that have been carried out by others. *Your task for this exercise is to select one such instance of personal edification and discuss it in some detail.*

You are to discuss a specific piece of research *by someone else* that contains some result (or finding or conclusion) that *you personally* have found instructive. Because you have presumably had substantial exposure to social research by this point, hopefully you will be able to recall some single instance without having to do any or much new reading.

Your exercise should contain *four parts, with enumerations separating each of the four parts.*

¹ As well as, often, a product that is somehow useful, but we will set that issue aside for this exercise.

1. Provide the specific reference for the specific research project that contains the research that leads to the conclusion/results/observation that you found personally instructive. The reference you provide *must be a primary reporting of this finding*—that is, a reporting by the investigator(s) that does not make reference to some other published source as being a “more primary” source of a finding. For example, if a book describes and discusses some interesting result and gives a reference to an article where the research giving rise to that result is reported in detail, the article is the reference that you should be providing here and that you should be consulting in doing this exercise.
2. Describe the specific thing that you found instructive. Obviously, it is possible to learn multiple things from a given report of research, but focus on one for this assignment. Contrast what you found instructive with what you had or would have thought to be the case before reading about this research. Generally speaking, findings that are instructive because “I never thought about it before” make less interesting exercises than those that are instructive when the student had thought about it before but had thought about it differently.
3. Describe the specific research that produced this result. How did the specific research lead to the generation of this specific and instructive result? What is it about the research that makes the result compelling or persuasive to you?
4. Imagine that someone without ethical qualms has been hired to discredit the very result that you have said you found personally instructive. That is, they have been hired to raise (or increase) doubts about whether the research provides grounds for believing the result versus some alternative. What sorts of arguments might they make?

Word length: Parts 2, 3, and 4 combined should be no longer than 700 words.

Turning it in: Before the due date/time, you should e-mail your exercise to me at jfreese@ssc.wisc.edu with the subject line *Completed Exercise 1*. Please e-mail it with the text of the assignment in the body of the message (not as an attachment). You should still spell-check, etc., and you may use text formatting features [e.g., *italics*, **boldface**] if you are using an e-mail client that allows this. Especially since you need to check the word count, I would recommend writing the essay first in a text editor or word processor and then pasting it into your e-mail program.