

Sociology 750 – Freese – Spring 2005

Exercise #8: Research Project Description

Weight: 10 points

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

Overview: This exercise is intended to provide you with both (1) a mandatory opportunity to describe a research project that you are conducting or might conduct and (2) a compulsory occasion to engage in a vigorous self-interrogation of the details of this project.

Task: Sociology is an astonishingly diverse enterprise in many respects, including the kinds of data that nourish sociological research and the ways that sociologists scrutinize these data. One of the purposes of this course is to urge you to give more detailed consideration of methodological issues in research that you, yourself, plan to do. Toward this end, this exercise asks you to describe a *particular* research project and consider what *particular* issues might provoke the most deliberative attention in terms of the design, data collection, or analysis of this research.

Specifically, your mission here is to provide an essay in which you articulate the general goal(s) of your project, describe the research (to be) conducted in this project in detail, and then discuss what you regard as prospectively being the most important issues for the extent to which the project will be successful in meeting its goals (e.g., *what are the challenges of the project? what methodological objections might one raise to the project as you have described it? what can be done to answer these challenges and objections?*)

The project that you describe should be one on which you are currently working, beginning to work, or thinking about potentially sometime in the future beginning to work. I do not want you to use for this some project that you have already completed to the extent that you have a finished manuscript out the door and either in print or under review somewhere (or, say, a master's thesis that you've already completed but have no intention of trying to revise for publication). You can certainly use it for a project on which you have completed the data collection and analyses but have not yet completed the manuscript, as I could see where this exercise would be helpful to someone at that stage of the endeavor. On the other side of things, it would seem a waste of this mandatory opportunity to discuss some project that you are only making up for the

purposes of getting these exercises done and that you don't have even an imagined intention of ever actually following up on. *But if you think that you have some good reason for violating these strictures despite my reasoning, then go ahead and violate. It's your mandatory opportunity, after all.*

You should write an essay that is, as best you can, descriptive of and reflective upon the methodology of the project. Be mindful that, as an essay for a methods class, telling me about the theoretical rationale of your project is nowhere close to as important as explaining to me what you are planning to do (or have done, etc.), and what kinds of questions you are hoping to better understand as a result of this doing. I should finish the essay with a good understanding of your thinking about how you might marshal some information about the empirical world in the service of being able to say something meaningful about the world. What is the data gathering, processing, or analyzing work, and what is it that you are hoping to learn from this work?

To elaborate, what I mean when I ask you to be "reflective" in your essay is that I want you to consider the practical issues, constraints, resistances in collecting or analyzing the data for your research purposes and what you might do in response to these (*What obstacles stand in your way? What might you do about them?*). You may also wish to consider the resistances you might confront in compellingly answering the questions that you want to answer given the data and methods of your project, and your response to those resistances (*When you write this up, what kinds of methodological criticisms might you anticipate being launched by someone who doesn't want to believe you?*) Be honest: it is all right for your essay to have either the tone of describing a project that has real, insurmountable limitations to fulfilling its aspirations or the tone of a project whose potential limitations are only apparent and will be successfully overcome (or any tone in-between).

Keep in mind also that your essay needs to include, preferably at or near the beginning, some very clear articulation of what the epistemic goal(s) are of your project; that is, what it is you are hoping to learn or understand better as a result of systematic engagement with the empirical world. Much muddled methods meditation can ensue and continue unrelieved when the research never had any conception of what it was after in the first place. This is not at all to speak against induction or the idea that the purposes of research are often clarified in and through the doing of research, but, even here, there is plenty of room for strategic thinking about maximizing the possibilities for productive induction and iteration at the outset.

In terms of grading, I want to be clear that my evaluation of the essay will be based on the exposition of the essay, not on my evaluation of the research project itself. In other words, please do not try to obscure what-you-recognize-as-being-recognizable vaguenesses, deficiencies, or flaws in the design of your project because you think this is the route to a good grade, as that would thoroughly trounce the intent of the exercise. Instead, the difficulties you face in doing the research or building a convincing argument based on the research (and what you can and can't do about them) are precisely what should be the object of this initial reflection.

Length: Your project description should be somewhere between 10 and 15 pages.

Turning it in: Before the due date/time, you should e-mail your essay to me at *jfreese@ssc.wisc.edu* with the subject line "Completed Exercise 8." The document should be submitted as an attached *.pdf* file that includes your surname in the filename. While you do not need to have a "title page," your name should be on the first page of the document, along with a proposed title for your project.