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Introduction to Sociology

Deborah Van Cura

CUNY La Guardia Community College

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Designing Information Assignments for Literacy

1. Professor's Name: Deborah Van Cura
2. Course Name/Section: Introduction to Sociology SSS100
3. Activity Duration: 50 minutes
4. Activity Learning Objectives:
 - Objective 1-To understand human behavior in the context of society (the social matters and the sociological imagination)
 - Objective 2 - Learn how to form a sociological research question

5. Activity Description: Describe what the students do.

Using the topic of suicide, students will explore the difference between sociological and non-sociological explanations of human behavior. Students will then form a research question and then gather and analyze evidence to test their question.

6. Vocabulary/Keyword(s)

Descriptive questions

Explanatory questions

Sociological imagination

7. Materials and Resources: Provide your instructions, handouts, and links to any other materials students use to do the activity.

1. Written instructions of the assignment (either hand out or posted to Blackboard)
2. Links to sites for suicide statistics, (government sites, states sites, suicide associations)

8. Activity: (Insert activity here)

To start the lecture/discussion students are asked to write down six reasons why a person might seriously consider suicide. Then I tell them that we will come back to these reasons in a few minutes.

A brief lecture is presented on two basic questions that sociologists ask about human behavior:

(1) the descriptive question (i.e., What do people do?/ actions)

(2) the explanatory question (i.e., Why do people do what they do?/explain human behavior)

I tell them that we will use suicide and the explanatory question to examine the difference between non-sociological and sociological explanations for human behavior. The idea of the sociological imagination and the social matters are introduced.

Using items from the students' lists of reasons why a person might seriously consider suicide, I list six or eight of these on the board. As students offer their suggestions, I rephrase them into statements about feelings. For example, a frequent suggestion from students is that a person might consider suicide if his or her spouse died. "What feelings would such a person experience that would lead him or her to consider suicide?" I ask. "Feelings of loneliness" is often the response. Typically, these feelings emerge: depression, unhappiness, guilt, hopelessness, rejection, worthlessness. Sometimes students bring up religious martyrs or Japanese kamikaze pilots so I include religious beliefs and patriotism to the list..

When I have a representative sample of feelings on the board I ask the students to think about them as a group or how they are alike. They are all represented by feelings of unhappiness - except for the altruistic suicide example. I explain that we can examine suicide through internal issues. People commit suicide because they are seriously unhappy. This is an example of an individualistic (or non-sociological) explanation.

Then I ask "Why is the rate of suicide higher in Alaska than it is in New York?" I cite the most recent suicide rates of these states and/ or the list of the states with the highest rates of suicide. Students are asked to write down three possible reasons as to why suicide might be higher in some states. From their ideas I list on the board their ideas.

From the responses (which are usually external explanations) a comparison is done between the previous speculations of feelings (internal) to the recent speculations (external). With the comparison the concept of the difference between sociological and non-sociological thinking about human behavior is examined and reinforced.

A written assignment is then given to the students:

Select two states and compare the suicide rate. Then select an issue of social concern or the economy of those states. Find the statistics on both these issues. Based on your findings, test

the relationship between the suicide rates and the social factors of those states. Discuss your findings. Were you surprised by the results?

At the next class meeting we have a discussion regarding their research.