Friendship Diversity and the Sociological Imagination

Suggested Citation:

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Abstract:

The purpose of this class activity is to acquaint students with the idea of the sociological imagination and demonstrate its relevance for their own personal lives by exploring their friendship patterns. Students discuss the friendship diversity scores they’ve calculated and the overall pattern of such scores in the class, drawing comparisons between race, class, gender, and sexual orientation and connecting these patterns to the opportunity structures they experienced.

Details:

Resource Types: Class Activity, PowerPoint
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Date Published: 7/2/2012
Subject Area: Race, Class and Gender
Class Level: Any
Class Size: Medium
Language: English

Usage Notes:

TIME: 45-60 minutes STEPS: I typically conduct this exercise and discussion on the first day of class. When the class is divided into small groups, it can also be used as an ice-breaker for introductions. Provide an overview of the sociological imagination (first slide), including how sociologists draw connections between private troubles and public issues and how this reflects the relationship between biography and history/social context, the tension between agency and constraint, and the fact that
sociologists engage in multiple levels of analysis. Introduce the exercise by telling students that we will see how their biographies are intimately tied to their social contexts by exploring their own friendship patterns (this idea is discussed in depth in my book Unlikely Friends: Bridging Ties and Diverse Friendships (2011, Lexington Books). Display the next slide and ask students to write down the names of their three closest friends (intimate partners should be left out). Then, students should identify whether each friend is the same (by placing a 0 in the appropriate column) or different (by placing a 1 in the appropriate column) than themselves. They should add up each row, total the last column, and then divide by three. I then allow them to round their scores up to the nearest whole number. Explain the possible range of scores (next slide) and what they mean. On the board, list the numbers from 0 to 4 and then ask for a show of hands for how many students had a friendship diversity score corresponding to each. Discussion begins by asking for their observations and reactions from seeing the pattern of scores for the class and in calculating their own scores. Break the students into small groups (4-5 students) and have them discuss the questions on the last slide. After students have had time to discuss the questions in the groups, facilitate a class discussion using the same questions and calling on different groups.

**Learning Goals and Assessments:**

**Goal** Students will be able to draw comparisons between race, class, gender, and sexual orientation in terms of their impact on close friendships.

**Assessment** The first learning goal is assessed through discussion of the first two discussion questions on the slide.

**Goal** Students will learn how their close friendships reflect opportunity structures within society.

**Assessment** The second learning goal is assessed through discussion of questions three and four on the slide.

**Goal** Students will gain a basic level of understanding of the sociological imagination and be able to apply it to the topic of friendship diversity.

**Assessment** The third learning goal is assessed through discussion of the final question on the slide. Attention is paid to encouraging students to use the following terms: private troubles, public issues, biography, history/social context, agency, and constraint.

**Resource Files:**

- Friendship Diversity Slides.pdf
- Instructions.pdf