

SAMPLE ESSAY:

The Power of Sociological Knowledge

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The Power of Sociological Knowledge

Sociology offers valuable tools for deconstructing and analyzing the social constructs and ideologies embedded in our societal framework. The sociological perspective is useful in a variety of real-world contexts, as it seeks to interpret and understand human behaviour. It also has the potential to help restructure inequalities faced within society. Yet sociologists, particularly in their roles as makers and disseminators of sociological knowledge, must be careful to avoid losing their objectivity. This goal is crucial in the classroom, where students depend on instructors to put aside personal biases and create an environment that promotes critical engagement and independent thought. Sociological knowledge is most powerful when it is constructed and shared in open-minded, forward-thinking, socially aware manners.

People inevitably view the world through personal lenses. Often, these lenses are influenced by individual biases that can inhibit inclusive, solutions-oriented thinking. Such biases—whether they are overt or implicit—are particularly dangerous when they are revealed by educators within the classroom. Weber (1919/1946) argues that, while teachers will never entirely eliminate their personal opinions regarding a subject, imposing personal judgments on students is certainly not part of an educator's job (p. 146). Moreover, Weber continues, the potential for students to fully understand facts no longer exists when the teacher reveals bias while teaching. Indeed, the teacher's primary role should be to encourage students to be aware of facts that oppose their opinions (Weber, p. 147). Teachers should stimulate open discussion in the

classroom rather than obstructing such discussion with their personal judgments. Therefore, the teacher is not a leader (Weber, p. 150) but an enthusiast within a conversation about society.

Weber also examines religion as a force that fosters moral judgment regarding matters of society (p. 149). He argues that Christian moral fervor has blinded society for thousands of years and led to compromises and relative judgments. In a recent article on the debate over sharia law, Razack (2007) explores how academics might unknowingly reinforce the colour line and the secular–religious divide (p. 4). She discusses a presentation on honour killings that she attended in Europe (pp. 3–4). She notes that the keynote speaker began by presenting photographs taken at the funeral of a Kurdish woman who was killed by her father because he did not approve of her going to live with a non-Kurdish man. Razack was puzzled by the exploitation involved in showing the woman’s dead body to an audience of over three hundred, mostly white, Western academics. Overall, the presentation misrepresented Muslims as barbaric and Westerners as civilized. As a result of the presenter’s implicit bias, the audience became morally outraged instead of motivated to deconstruct the embedded social inequalities that had led to the woman’s death in the first place.

Unfortunately, the prejudice that Razack experienced is not uncommon, and similar projections of bias can be found even in the field of sociology. Becker (2007) writes that sociologists frequently seek to understand the social structure by looking for problematic situations (p. 129). In doing so, they may take on the role of the storyteller,

which traditionally involves taking sides by introducing a hero and a villain. Users of this knowledge become captivated by the maker's report; they imagine that what they are hearing or reading is based on systematically gathered materials from the "real world" and, as a result, they fail to tackle the underlying issues (Becker, 2007, p. 144).

Moral judgments are sometimes apparent in the words researchers choose when they describe social phenomenon. Becker (2007) discusses the "labeling theory" of deviance, noting that many critics oppose the relativism associated with the term "deviant" (p. 145). He uses the example of murder and questions whether or not such an act would be classified as "very deviant." Significantly, labels such as "deviant" are applied not only in relation to community standards, but also in connection with scientific standards (Becker, p. 145). Thus, it is important to deconstruct the terms used within the field of sociology, as they can signify underlying biases.

Researchers, as makers of knowledge, must also avoid biasing their reports through the misrepresentation or fictionalization of facts. As Becker (2007) observes, "makers incorporate reasons for users to accept what they present as true" (p. 111). Thus, users must rely on makers to be accurate in the presentation of information. Becker uses journalists as an example of knowledge-makers who at times provide the public with accounts that are distorted through the subtraction or addition of factual information (p. 130). In such instances, the individual bias of the makers becomes insidious, and readers are unknowingly affected through this process (Becker, p. 133). Such misrepresentation may also happen implicitly within scholarly sources. Thus, academics must retain

the responsibility of providing the users of their knowledge with factual and accurate reports of the human condition.

Further, Becker (2007) notes that “representations are made in a world of cooperating users and makers” (p. 30). He writes that makers do most of the work, leaving users to interpret and theorize on the data. This relationship may be problematic: the freedom of interpretation allotted to users is somewhat of an illusion, as the makers have not left much room for interpretation (Becker, p. 30). Statistics, for example, have little value on their own; their significance must be *interpreted*. The researcher’s method of coding data, finding variables, creating labels, and so on effectively tells users how to interpret the data. Thus, in order to give the user a full picture, researchers should provide users with accurate explanations of how they chose their variables, why they felt that the variables are important, and why they chose to leave out other possible variables.

Similarly, teachers of sociological research have the responsibility of forcing students to develop their critical-thinking skills. Vaughn (2005) explains that teaching critical thinking helps transform students from passive learners into active learners (p. xvii). The focus of critical thinking is the basis of a belief, not the question of whether something is worth believing. It is the systematic evaluation of statements, by means of rational standards (Vaughn, 2005, pp. 3–4). Critical thinking leads to understanding, knowledge, self-improvement, and, ultimately, empowerment. For students and researchers, empowerment comes from the ability to actively participate in the sociological examination of societal inequalities and ideologies.

As Lemert (2004) notes, reflecting on Michel Foucault's theory of knowledge as power, knowledge is empowering in that it breaks down the binary opposition between the ruler and the ruled (p. 466). In terms of the classroom experience, knowledge breaks down the barrier between the teacher and the student. Ideally, students can attain power by deliberating openly, from an informed perspective, amongst themselves and with the teacher.

In a recent interview, Stuart Hall has described the learning process as a journey (de Peuter, 2007, p. 117). In the beginning, the teacher is in an elevated position because he or she has been to a place that the learner has not yet experienced; over time, as the learner searches for and eventually finds the source of knowledge that the teacher possesses, the relationship becomes more equal (de Peuter, 2007, p. 117). Yet the burden of achieving this goal does not rest solely on the student. Educators must not only disseminate the knowledge they possess, but also recognize the cultural framework of the student and work to overcome the existence of social hierarchies embedded in the learning process; ultimately, they can do this by progressively equalizing the dialogue throughout the relationship with the learner (de Peuter, 2007, p. 118).

Neave (2000) explains that universities, in particular, have always been required to preserve, develop, and provide individuals with knowledge (p. xiii). The more society expects from the institutions of higher learning, the more complex the responsibility of academics becomes. Neave suggests that academics should analyze whether or not their research has improved the understanding of social inequalities (p. 67). Furthermore, educators should assess whether the students

have been able to grasp the message that was initially sent out regarding the importance of societal matters at hand (Neave, 2000, p. 67). Thus, just as academics must focus on the needs of their students, they must also focus on the needs of society as a whole and aim to devise real-world solutions to social impediments.

A fairly recent development, service learning within post-secondary institutions has helped broaden experiences of students by means of hands-on work within the community. In their report on a service-learning initiative that took place in Queensland, Australia, Carrington and Siggers (2008) argue that community-based service learning promotes inclusive, socially aware education. Such courses, which foster work within the academic setting as well as in the real world, provide students with the ability to address the civic responsibility all sociologists face. With teachers, students, and community workers working together, students gain practical knowledge and experience; as a result, they are able to critically analyze their environment by working within it.

As researchers and educators, academics must use their interpretations and analyses to equip the world with sociological knowledge. Teachers have a duty to disseminate sociological knowledge both within and beyond their classrooms, and they must prepare their students to likewise disseminate this knowledge. In the absence of bias, sociology offers a way of looking at life as it is rather than as we wish it to be. It offers inquiring minds a deep, meaningful understanding of social structures, and it allows researchers to critically and productively engage with real-world social issues.

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