Final Essay Topics

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Sociology 3954: Race, Class, Gender

This examination requires you to write a 6-8 page essay (somewhere between 1200 and 2000 words) based upon one of the three topics listed below. This essay will be graded on how thoroughly you deal with the issues posed in the question, how effectively you use materials from the course (especially assigned readings) to illustrate and elaborate your points, and how clearly and creatively you express your argument on the whole.

1. Although Jennifer Pierce focuses primarily on issues of sex segregation and gender stratification in Gender Trials, class and status inequalities also play an important role in the social organization of the law firms she analyzes. Explain how gender and class interact, intersect or contradict in Pierce’s study. Then, compare Pierce’s understanding of the relationships between gender and class with the one Lillian Rubin uses in her study of working class families. Which of these analyses, in your view, provides a better model for understanding the relationships between class and gender in the U.S., and why? After you have addressed these issues fully, draw upon Bonnie Thornton Dill’s discussion of the varied experiences of African American women to incorporate race into your analysis. What are the advantages of such multidimensional approaches to social stratification?

2. Elijah Anderson ("The Police and the Black Male") and Gwendolyn Mink ("The Lady and the Tramp") deal with the way in which certain groups of poor men and women — especially poor men and women of color — have been seen by the dominant culture as somehow dangerous, menacing or threatening. Compare these articles, focusing on: (1) who or what is being threatened in each case; (2) how the threat is realized and dealt with; (3) the costs and consequences of these strategies; and (4) how all of this varies by gender. Then, consider Robin Kelley’s description of the different ways in which some of these supposedly threatening individuals — young, urban African Americans — have responded to their predicaments. Use Kelley’s article as a springboard for discussing the possibilities and/or limitations of challenging and changing the complex, interlocking system of social stratification that results when race, class and gender are combined in the ways Anderson and Mink describe. What broader conclusions about social stratification in the U.S. can you draw based upon these readings?

3. Both Lillian Rubin and Jay MacLeod offer essentially class-based critiques of American society, focusing especially upon the problematic (that is, un-sociological) ideals of individualism and meritocracy that MacLeod calls the "achievement ideology." At the same time, both present a data that seem to suggest that race and gender are important dimensions of the American stratificatory system as well. But how important do MacLeod and Rubin think race and gender really are? In what ways do they matter? Using concrete examples and/or quotes from each book, explain how race and gender fit
into Rubin and MacLeod’s respective visions of social stratification. Then address the following questions: Which of these books do you think offers the more useful or important model for understanding the American stratificatory system and challenging the injustices associated with it? Does this book offer a full and satisfactory model of the intersections and interactions of race, class and gender? If so, defend your position. If not, use other readings or ideas from the course to explain its weaknesses and suggest alternatives to it or ways in which it may be improved.