Interview and Essay Assignment

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Sociology 3954: Race, Class, Gender

Interview someone (a friend or acquaintance, but preferably not a family member) about his or her personal class background and her or his general understanding of class and social reproduction in American life. Then, compose a 2-3 page, typewritten paper describing and analyzing what this person told you based upon the ideas, concepts and facts we have covered in the class so far.

Objective:

The primary goal of this exercise is to test your understanding of class and social reproduction by having you analyze how someone who is not an expert on these topics understands them. You might want to think of Jay MacLeod’s extended interactions with the Brothers and the Hallway Hangers as presented in Ain’t No Makin’ It as a model for what you are trying to do on a much, much smaller scale.

Directions and Suggestions:

Choosing a Subject. First, your will need to find someone who will agree to talk with you about his or her attitudes about and experiences with class. It doesn’t matter whether this person’s views and experiences are typical or exceptional, only that they are willing to talk with you about them. Tell them the conversation will last no more than an hour and that you will not disclose their identity in your project.

Preparing for the Interview. Second, you will need to prepare for the interview by figuring out what topics you want to cover and how you will get your interviewee to start talking about them. Some of the themes you might want to cover include: how they characterize their own class background; how typical they think their experience is (and in relation to whom); how they think a person’s class position is determined or decided; how important they consider class to be in the United States. There will probably be other topics you want to raise as well. Some of these topics may be best posed as direct questions (avoid questions that allow one word, yes-or-no type answer). Others, however, might require you to be more creative: for example, you might want to give concrete examples for your interviewee to discuss or even assume a devil’s advocate stance on a controversial issue that you think provoke a response.

Conducting the Interview. As you conduct your interview (the next step), keep two points in mind. The first is to let the exchange develop or flow as naturally as possible, as a kind of focused-conversation. Don’t worry if topics come up in a different order than you planned or if your respondent is unable or unwilling to answer some of your questions. Just try to make sure
that all the points you want to cover are touched on in one way or the other. The second point is to take careful notes during the interview. If your interviewee is willing, in fact, you might even consider tape-recording it. You will need to refer back to these records during the course of writing up your analysis (especially if you use direct quotes, which is highly recommended) and have them available in case there are any later questions about your project.

Writing the Analysis. The final step in the process is writing up a brief description and analysis of your findings. The most important thing here is that the paper should not be just a report of what your respondent said, but rather an analysis of how your respondent understood class and social reproduction. Your goal, in other words, is to make some kind of an argument about your respondent’s views, comparing and contrasting them with what you have learned in this course so far. Relevant concerns here might include: statistics about income inequality and social mobility; different definitions of class; and concepts such as social reproduction and the achievement ideology. Also keep in mind that what your respondent didn’t discuss might be as revealing as what she or he did discuss. We will grade your essay based upon (1) the clarity of your presentation of your respondent’s views; (2) the insightfulness of your general analysis of these views, and (3) your usage of ideas and examples from the class to frame and develop your argument.

Final points:

—Use a pseudonym (a made-up name) to protect the privacy of your interviewee.

—Please do not hesitate to consult with the Professor or the Teaching Assistant if you have any problems or questions with this assignment.