Spring 2014

Comprehensive Examination

***Theory***

***Select a major topic of contemporary theoretical concern (e.g., religion, stratification, power, etc.) and outline the key contributions made by Marx, Durkheim, and Weber to our current understanding of this domain. Clearly identify the topical area you select and the insights provided by each of these authors to contemporary analysis. Note areas of disagreement and agreement among the three authors in the perspectives on this topic. Do Marx, Durkheim, and Weber provide sufficient theoretical guidance in understanding this topical area or are their key gaps which remain to be filled?***

I have chosen to review stratification as the major theoretical concern for contemporary sociologists. Each of these contemporary sociologists viewed stratification in very unique ways. To begin, Karl Marx’s central idea for his theory of stratification was the ‘mode of production’. The mode of production was a system that produced two distinct classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. To simplify these terms, the bourgeoisie were the members of society that controlled the means of production and essentially were the class that held the power. The proletariats were the members of society that worked for the bourgeoisie. Marx cites that the relationship is formed between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat because the proletariat class is subsequently exploited by the bourgeoisie (Breen & Rottman 1995). “According to Marx, class does not refer to the beliefs that people hold about their position but to objective conditions. But Marx also saw class relations as existing at the political or ideological level. Hence the distinction between a class in itself-by which he means a group of people who share the same objective class position-and a class for itself, which is that group of people who recognize that they share the same class position and have the same class interests, which they may then try to further through, for instance, political action. In such a case we can speak of class consciousness” (Breen & Rottman 1995:27). Max Weber took a slightly different approach when defining a social ‘class’. In contrast to Marx, classes were separated by the potential one had to accessing a better quality of life, better referred to as ‘life-chance’. “This probability of procuring goods and so forth then depends upon what people can bring to the markets of capitalism- hence Weber is concerned to define class in terms of individuals’ resources rather than by reference to their place in relations of production” (Breen & Rottman 1995:28). Both Weber and Marx differ in their theories because while Marx is more concerned with the current class position, Weber offers a more mobile approach suggesting that there is a chance for the lower classes to transfer into higher positions (Breen & Rottman 1995). Emile Durkheim differed with Marx and Weber in that his idea of stratification has less to do with the division of class and more so to do with the function of society. The views of Durkheim support an individualist interpretation where the focus of is primarily on the members of society rather than society as an entity. The differences between these three sociologists are that of where the power lays. For Marx, the power lies with the capitalists, but Weber’s theory suggests that power can be shifted. For Durkheim, the role of equality and the members functioning within society was prominent to his idea I do not believe that these sociologists provided sufficient theoretical guidance for social stratification. While power is a major component of social stratification, it fails to address the power that is within each of the subclasses. Ownership is a prominent factor in the structure of power, however, that does not result in complete control over other classes. Weber does differentiate among classes in his theory of social stratification. There is a hierarchy built into the stratification process for Marx and Weber (Crompton 1998), but not as far as Durkheim is concerned. There needs to be a consensus of what a “class” is in order to properly evaluate the level of power within a society. For Marx, it needs to be noted that the mode of production is not the sole means to power. There are gaps that have to be filled for the stratification theory, such as how power can be shared throughout classes. I do believe that these sociologists provided an explanation that did assist to framing the stratification theory, but their theories are not inclusive to other possible notions of power.

***In social theory, there has been a long-standing divide between “macro” and micro” theories as to which approach best captures the way the world works. On the one hand, macro approaches place greater emphasis on social structures and institutions, and understand humans as having limited agency. On the other hand, micro approaches focus on the agency of individuals, interactions, and the construction of meaning. Write an essay that: (1) compares macro and micro approaches, noting the strengths and weaknesses of each approach, and (2) develops an argument as to which approach (or both) is most appropriate for theorizing social reality.***

“Macro” and “micro” level theories have made great contributions to research in the sociological field. Though both approaches focus on the structures and functions of society, they do so by dissecting them from two very dissimilar angles. Macrosociology is defined as “sociological study of large-scale social systems and long-term patterns and processes (Dictionary.com, 2014). Microsociology is described as, “the sociological study of small groups and social units within a larger social system” (Dictionary.com, 2014). To further explain the difference between these concepts, macrosociology takes a more collective approach, focusing on the groups that have been created within the society, whereas microsociology has a more narrow approach and is directive at the individuals that are within a society. Macro and microsociology theories are important approaches taken in sociology in regards to sociological research. Each concept is encompassed of different ways of analyzing sociology and what one concept fails to cover, the other makes up for it. There are obvious advantages and disadvantages of both theories, particularly when conducting social research. When utilizing a macro approach, the researcher is able to analyze different aspects of society from a broader range, which is beneficial when making decisions that will affect society as a whole. Also, the macro approach is useful when trying to determine patterns of certain subcultures. In contrast, the micro approach allows researchers to examine the behaviors of individuals in a closer proximity. To apply an example of my own, macro sociology can be referred to as the pages in a book, but micro sociology are the words that are written on the pages. Although, society as a whole is a primary focus, there would be no society without the individuals. Both approaches are able to stand alone, however I believe that it is appropriate to include both approaches for theorizing social reality. “The way the division between ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ approaches has been construed in post-war sociology has led to a separation of the observable situation from large –scale impact. Early micro-sociology was interested specifically in so-called every day or of small scale consequences. As Nicos Mouzelis has pointed out, an interaction can have large-scale effects (Mouzelis, 1992, 1198)”, (Krause, 2013: 145). Macro and micro level theories do have the advantage of interlocking at some point. I have emphasized how important it is to utilize both methods, but there are some occasions where one might work better than the other. When conducting research, the research design will determine which approach is more suitable. There are some studies where it is expensive and difficult for researchers to examine many individuals from a smaller scope, making the macro approach the preferred level for that particular research, and vice versa. Both approaches exist to allow theresearcher to choose which method is best applicable for the type of research they are conducting. I believe that the social world is made up of so many different mechanisms that make it vital to include both approaches. Not only will studying at both levels of analysis possibly improve findings, but it will expand the capabilities of various types of sociological research.

References

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Spring 2014

Comprehensive Examination

***Research Methods***

* ***A. State (a) research purpose(s), (a) specific research question(s), and (a) research hypothesi(e)s of the project.***The purpose of this research will be to examine the quality of life among students who attend Sam Houston State University to find out if there are any correlations. Because quality of life is such a broad concept, for the purpose of this study I will narrow quality of life down to the amount of time the student spends socially interacting (i.e. social organizations, extra-curricular activities, & time spent with spent with friends.) The research question will be stated as: Does income, parents SES, gender, classification, and GPA constitute a better quality of life for students at Sam Houston State University? My hypotheses are that each of these social indicators will be correlated with the quality of life variables. I hypothesize that respondents who have a higher income & parents who have a higher SES, but a lower GPA will likely have a higher quality of life. In reference to the GPAs, students who have a lower GPA typically spend less time studying, allowing space for more leisure time. In contrast, those students who have higher GPAs are more likely to spend more time studying not leaving any room for any leisure time. I expect for race, gender, and classification to have a smaller significance on quality of life for Sam Houston Students.

***B. Discuss your Research Design. a. Specify your choice of time-dimension research design (cross-sectional; trend; cohort; or, panel study) to conduct this specific research project and provide justifications of your choice***Because quality of life is such a broad concept, for the purpose of this study I will narrow quality of life down to the amount of time the student spends socially interacting (i.e., social organizations, extra-curricular activities, time spent with spent socializing). I chose these particular categories because they are the most typical ways the people interact in college campus community. Survey research will be the most effective since there will be a large sample size and the questions on the survey will be straight forward. This will be a longitudinal study because research will be conducted over a 5 year span. I have selected to make a trend study because I would like to study different groups of students over the next five years, in order to compare and contrast my findings. I decided to opt of the idea of using a panel study because I felt that it would be more operative to open the study to different students rather than to focus on the same students for several years. Also, because this research is being conducted at a college, it is not likely that all of the participants will still be attending Sam Houston over the five years that the study is being conducted, which would lead to possible complications for the study. If there is a pattern between the independent and dependent variables, then it is likely that it will be found if there are a larger number of different participants. The variables that I have selected for this research typically change over time and that is where I expect to find if any correlations exist.

***b. Then, discuss your choice of research design (you may want to choose one from survey, field research, experiment, and secondary data) and explain why this specific research design is appropriate.***Survey research will be the best research method for this study. Using the selected variables, it is impossible to observe or create an actual experiment that would produce accurate answers. Survey research will provide discrete responses and, in this specific case, the response is more reliable when coming directly from the respondent. However, because this is a longitudinal study and I am using survey research, there will be several limitations for the study.

***C. Discuss your measurements and variables.******Indicate your independent and dependent variables.*** The independent variables are the social indicators: race, income, parents SES, gender, classification (including graduate), and GPA. The dependent variable is quality of life, which has been broken down into three different categories: (i.e. social organizations, extra-curricular activities, & time spent with spent with friends.)

***b. Provide conceptual definitions and operational definitions of key concepts (independent and dependent variables) in your project.***Race is defined as “a group of persons elated by common descent or heredity” (Dictionary.com, 2014). For this study there will be several categories of race such as: African American, White, Hispanic, and Asian. Income is defined as “the monetary payment received for goods or services, or from other sources, as rents or investments” Income will be referred to as the amount of currency the student receives from their monthly pay (Dictionary.com, 2014). Classification is defined as “one of the groups or classes into which things may be or have been classified” (Dictionary.com, 2014). There will be five different classifications: freshman (<29 hrs.), sophomore (30-59 hrs.), junior (60-89 hrs.), senior (> 90 hrs.), and Graduate (have already obtained a Bachelor’s degree). SES, also socioeconomic status is defined as “an individual’s or groups position within a hierarchical social structure. Socioeconomic status depends on a combination of variables, including occupation, education, income, wealth, and place of residence” (Dictionary.com, 2014). Socioeconomic status will be divided into three categories: working class (< 29,999/yr.), middle class (30,000- 49,999/yr.) and upper class 50,000/yr. +). GPA, grade point average, “a measure of scholastic attainment computed by dividing the total number of grade points received by the total number of credits or hours of course work taken” (Dictionary.com, 2014). GPAs will be calculated on a 4.0 scale, meaning the respondent should have a grade point average ranging from 0.01- 4.0. Quality of life is a broad concept and can be interpreted in many different ways. For the study, I have broken the quality down into three different components: (i.e. social organizations, extra-curricular activities, & time spent with spent with friends.). Social organizations are defined as “the structure of social relations within a group, usually the relations between its subgroups and institutions” (Dictionary.com, 2014). Social organizations will be referred to as sororities/fraternities, activist groups, or campus groups that serve to promote change on campus. Extra-curricular is defined as “outside one’s regular work, responsibilities, or routine” (Dictionary.com, 2014). Extra-curricular activities will be referred to as sports or teams that the respondent participates in. The amount of time spent with friends will be referred to as the amount of time (measured in hours) spent in social atmospheres such as, parties, movies, mall, etc.

***c. Based on your operational definitions, provide the measurements of “quality of life” variable (elaborate possible dimensions and indicators), and other relevant variables (provide actual examples). In this step, you need to outline the indicators that you use in order to develop the quality of life measures. Be specific. Explain why you selected these indicators. Based on those indicators, you should create the composite measure of the quality of life.*** Previous research has indicated that there are other possible indicators for ‘quality of life’. In a study by De Piccoli, Fassio, & Rollero (2013), quality of life was accessed by the individuals’ health, social relationships, and environmental factors. Whereas in a different study accessing quality of life in college students and social phobias, quality of life was also measured by health aspects (Bakhtiaria et al, 2010). I was well aware that quality of life was a broad concept and that there were different perceptions of what it could refer to. Also, it is not possible to measure quality of life as a single concept; therefore, it has to have layers that can be measured. That is why I chose to construct components of quality of life that I would be able to measure and that would directly apply to college students. The three indicators of quality of life for this study are social organizations, extra-curricular activities, and time spent with spent with friends. These are behaviors that most likely occur during college, so I found them to be very significant when dissecting the quality of life concept. The environment of college is very social, meaning that there will be a significant amount of social interaction between the students. The three indicators that I chose are ones that will able to be measured on a scale. Socially interacting with others is known to be a pleasant experience. Knowing this, if I can access the amount of time the student spends socially interacting, I can predict how satisfying their social life is. In another aspect, I am relating quality of life with the amount of satisfaction the respondent has in his/her social life. The purpose of measuring the quality of life of the students is to see if there are any correlations between the social indicators and the satisfaction of one’s social life.

***\*\*\*To answer for question C, you need to search some articles on quality of life among college students. The literature will provide ideas about conceptual definitions, operational definitions, and measurements. You should include appropriate citations and references of the literature that you use.***

***D. Discuss your sampling.*** ***Discuss the relevant sampling design that you are going to employ (indicate your choice of specific sampling design) with justification.***Probability sampling will be the most useful for this study. Within probability sampling, stratified random selection will be the most appropriate. The reason I chose to probability sampling is because the student population at Sam Houston is diverse in many ways, which will allow the study to be observe the differences in the students as it relates to the variables. Gender, SES, and classification are exclusive categories, which is the primary reason that the sample has to be stratified. As a benefit of having a large sample size and using stratified random sampling, the sample will be representative of the Sam Houston State University school population.

***b. You must elaborate actual procedure of your sampling. When you discuss your sampling design, you want to define target population, sampling frame, and sample.***The target population will be Sam Houston State University students. The sampling frame will be currently enrolled male and female students at Sam Houston State University. A generated email will be sent out to all currently enrolled Sam Houston Students asking of their participation in a study to help measure the usefulness of social activities. If the students wish to participate in the study, then they will be asked to respond to the email, including their student information such as: Sam ID, name, date of birth, classification, and electronic signature. I will allow one week from the time the email is sent to give the students a chance to notify me of their willingness to participate. Once the invitation has closed, of the notifications of willing participants I will divide the respondents by their classification. I will then randomly choose 20 respondents from each classification with 10 being female and 10 being male. This should produce sample of 100 students.

***E. Discuss your choice of data collection method(s) with justification.*** The sample is relatively large making survey research the best possible data collecting tool. I will be able to structure the questionnaire in the way that I believe will be most effective for the study.  Students selected for the study will be sent a questionnaire consisting of multiple questions surrounding the dependent and independent variables. Once the questionnaire has been completed, it will be requested that the respondent submit the completed questionnaire via email. This process would be repeated twice over the course of five years. The benefit of administering a survey is that there are several possible ways that it can be given. Although, I have chosen to submit the questionnaire online, there are different options that I can take with the survey method. The survey method served the most feasible option for the purpose of this study.

***F. Discuss specific analytical plan considering the levels of your measurements.*** The independent variables race and gender will be measured on a nominal scale. For the nominal measurements the questions will be made exhaustive and mutually exclusive. Parents SES and classification will be measured on an ordinal scale. GPA and income will be measured on an interval scale. The dependent variable, quality of life which has been divided into three different indicators (i.e. social organizations, extra-curricular activities, time spent with spent with friends) will be measured on an interval scale.

***G. Discuss the potential limitations of your research in terms of research design, sample, measurement, etc.*** The first limitation with using a survey is that I will not be able to establish if there is a cause and effect relationship, only a correlation relationship between the dependent and independent variables. Another possible limitation is that there is a chance that some of the questions pertaining to the quality of life variables will not be answered honestly. By this, I mean that some of the respondents might embellish on their social interactions to avoid making it seem as if they are dull or boring. Also, with the way that the quality of life questions are structured, there may be some confusion when asked about organizations. If the question is too ambiguous, then the respondent may list activities that do not correspond with social organizations for the purpose of this study. Furthermore, because I am conducting a longitudinal study with different participants, the findings might not be a strong as if I were measuring the same respondent over the five year span.

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