Developing a “Sociological Eye” in Human Services Students

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the importance of including a thorough sociological component in college human services program curricula. The author illustrates the relevance of the sociological perspective as a complement to the psychologically-oriented coursework that forms the core of many human services programs. Various techniques for incorporating sociological concepts and theory into non-sociology human services courses are shared.
DEVELOPING A “SOCIOLOGICAL EYE”
IN HUMAN SERVICES STUDENTS

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIOLOGY IN HUMAN SERVICES

It is challenging to get students to develop a sociological view of relationships and structures they confront every day. A sociological view means that you must examine the world as an impartial observer, taking steps to attempt to remove yourself from your social context in order to critique it without bias. This, of course, is an impossible task. What we can hope for is to continually strive toward a higher level of objectivity by continually asking why things are the way they are, and considering the consequences of how things are. Developing a sociological view of the world has relevance in disciplines beyond sociology.

Human services and social work are fields that people more often align with psychology than sociology. In fact, a review of human services curricula at four Midwestern colleges and universities has demonstrated a strong focus on the psychological aspects of the discipline. These curricula have mandatory coursework in interviewing and assessment, counseling skills, crisis intervention, abnormal psychology, and the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual). All of this coursework is appropriate and necessary for those training to become human services professionals, and should not be removed. However, an awareness of social context is crucial to understanding clients in an increasingly diverse world. It is vitally important as we assist clients to change the social patterns that contribute to their problems. Further, thinking critically about their own personal
prejudices and assumptions will make our students better practitioners. Therefore, developing an objective, sociological view of human interaction is very relevant to our students, and should be one of our goals in training the next generation of human services professionals. Yet the reviewed curricula had very little coursework presented from a social-structural perspective. One answer to this challenge could be to require additional sociological coursework within the human services program. Another option is to teach these lessons, and make their relevance very obvious to our students, by incorporating social-structural theory into our existing human services curriculum.

HOW TO DEVELOP THE SOCIOLOGICAL “EYE”

The pursuit of this sociological view requires students to question their taken-for-granted realities, which are developed intuitively throughout their histories of personal experience. Students are generally uncomfortable and defensive when coming to the realization that they are largely the product of their social environments. The way they negotiate their places in the world; form their interpretations of the people and things around them; and even their very hopes and desires are all largely influenced by when and where they were born.

Most non-sociologists aren’t aware of the tremendous influence our social context has on us. The technique I use throughout the first portion of the semester to develop the sociological view in my students is to gradually remove them from their social cocoons by questioning and gently challenging their assumptions, and encouraging them to consider the sources and consequences of those assumptions. Since we all form our assumptions based upon our very personal experiences, I make class very personal. I
believe that the experiences, talents and perspectives each student brings to the classroom can be leveraged to assist in nudging them outside of their cultural “comfort zones,” which is the crucial first step toward a sociological worldview. As a teacher I use a range of techniques to develop this critical “eye,” including lectures, small- and large-group discussions, personal anecdotes, analysis of current events, and community engagement.

**Creating the Proper Environment**

My classes are highly interactive. Nurturing appropriate interaction in the classroom requires an environment where students feel safe and respected—by me as well as their classmates. This is particularly true in the subjects I regularly teach: Marriage & Family; Love, Romance & Relationships; Juvenile Delinquency; Behavior Modification; Group Process & Skills, among others. To many, these subjects can be emotionally charged and deal with issues that seem to have very clear right-or-wrong answers. We all bring personal biases and a sense of morality into play when we consider the topics discussed in these courses, and I use students’ willingness to share their opinions as a teaching tool to help them evaluate the sources and consequences of their own belief systems.

On the first day of class I impress upon students that our classroom is a “safe” place, where all may share any relevant thought or personal experience, and where we will receive their input and respond with respect and appreciation, even when we disagree with what has been shared—a skill that will be very valuable in their future careers. An exercise I have my students complete on the first day of class in Marriage & Family is an example of how this dialogue can be started. I pass out crayons to students and ask them to draw their families. I refuse to answer any questions about my expectations, except to
tell them there is no wrong way to complete the exercise. After the drawings are complete, I introduce myself and my family from the drawing I have made. Each student takes their turn, likewise introducing themselves and their families. What we find is that all families are different—some large, some small; some include pets, some do not. Some drawings are elaborate and include activities that the families like to engage in together, while others are simple stick figures; some include “adopted” family members such as friends who are like family but don’t fit a census definition of family. Some even include an angel or tombstone to represent family members who have died.

Afterward I ask for their observations about the exercise and the families they have just “met.” Students often say that using crayons brings back memories of childhood and helps them think about how their view of “family” has changed since they were children. Always, students remark about how many different forms there are to the American family, and that most students spoke very fondly of their own. I then explain that we all judge other families relative to our own because family is the first and most powerful influence on our perceptions of the world. What is wonderful and comforting to one person would be very distressing to another. They have now learned a valuable lesson about how different the world can look through someone else’s eyes, and that no structure of the family is inherently better than another. It is the patterns of behavior within the structure, rather than the structure itself, that is relevant. This lays an important foundation on which to build a greater understanding of the social construction of reality, including family, gender, sex, and many other important topics throughout the semester.
Collaborative Learning

My students play an active role in learning. They are not passive listeners as I simply lecture about definitions and concepts. After presenting social theory to the class, I challenge students to apply the theory to current events, as well as to their own experiences. Critical to this process is an understanding of the difference between personal stories used to *illustrate* a point, and the inappropriate use of anecdotal evidence to “prove” a point. I help them understand the difference by providing feedback about the relevance and generalizability of their stories. In other words, anyone can recall a story that is an exception to the “rule” of any theory, but that does not necessarily disprove the theory. Rather, it simply shows that in the social sciences we can never predict human behavior with absolute certainty. Their attempt to “disprove” a theory through a personal story allows me to explain the difference between illustrating a concept with an example from life to make it accessible versus using one limited encounter to over-generalize our experience to others without appropriate evidence. This is very important to human services professionals, as we need to be able to accurately judge the causes and prevalence of problems, remembering to rely upon proper evidence, keeping anecdotal accounts in perspective.

In addition to lectures and full-class discussions, I incorporate small-group discussions, which allows students who are uncomfortable sharing their opinions on sensitive matters in front of the whole class to participate and build confidence. For instance, in my Marital Relations & Sexuality course, I put on the screen the text of a state law that provides a very ambiguous and far-reaching definition of obscenity. I then divide the class into groups of 4-5 students each and ask the groups to pretend they are on the jury
of an obscenity case. They are to read through the law and apply it to determine if a work, such as a movie, picture, song or other product, is obscene. I instruct them to identify areas of the law that are ambiguous and could be interpreted in different ways by different people. I also ask them to consider whether they have done anything in their own lives that could lead them to be arrested for obscenity under a strict interpretation of the law. After allowing a significant amount of time for discussion within their small groups, I have the class reunite and share with everyone what they discussed within their groups. I have found that this exercise builds trust and confidence within the class and leads to very spirited discussions within the full-class setting, which might not have otherwise happened. The lessons students take from this exercise are that man-made laws are subjective, yet have a tremendous, sometimes stigmatizing, impact on the lives of individuals. Also, that most people have done things that could be judged harshly by others, only few people get “caught” doing them. We, therefore, need to be cautious about judging our clients. Students also learn to talk about sensitive issues, such as sexuality, more comfortably and respectfully.

**Beyond the Classroom**

The first part of the semester focuses on deconstructing and laying bare the students’ assumed realities. Throughout the remainder of the semester I place them back into their own social world—hopefully with a different view of their position in it—and encourage them to extend their newly-critical eye to the rest of the world, and to consider their responsibility, as newly awakened social beings, toward identifying harmful social structures, and working to bring about a positive change. In sociological terms, this is the
exercise of praxis: sociology in action. This is what good human services professionals do every day.

In moving toward engaging students in the world as future practitioners, I assign student responses to current news articles or videos in the media, as well as analyze other items from pop culture, such as conducting a content analysis of television commercials, songs, and movies. I also have students stage debates about current events, with each side of the debate presenting their argument from an assigned theoretical perspective. This requires them to display a thorough understanding of the theory, and to view current events from a different ideological “lens” than they might have otherwise done.

I feel that the ideal culmination of students’ development of the sociological view and a commitment to praxis is embodied in the completion of meaningful community service. One way in which this is done is through our program’s two required internships. I like to prepare students for their internships by giving them an opportunity to work in the community less formally in their lower-level classes, as their option for earning extra credit. My favorite community service project is one that teaches students the impact of extreme poverty on the family. In these classes I have the program director of a local homeless shelter speak to students about the social and economic factors that contribute to homelessness, providing details about who the homeless are compared to stereotypes, and the significant impact of extreme poverty on family stability. They also analyze the ways children raised in this environment are exposed to challenges—psychological, social and material—that children born to the middle-class could not imagine. I then allow students to complete volunteer service at the shelter to earn additional credit.
Students have shared with me how touched they are by this experience, and that the residents of the shelter were quite different than they expected. A number of students have decided to continue volunteering after their class project was complete.

Recognizing the link between the broader social world and the private lives of their clientele is a skill that will pay dividends far beyond the end of our students’ college careers. It will help them to understand and relate with their clients more effectively. It will enable them to continually evolve as human services professionals. And it will make them wiser and more effective advocates for change at the community and national level—and perhaps minimize or prevent some of the social problems we face every day in our careers in the human services.