

The Senior Exercise in Sociology



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Goals of the Sociology Program

As you begin to think about your project for the senior exercise, we thought it a good idea to remind you of the goals we had in mind as we have developed the sociology curriculum over the years. These program goals are meant to complement the particular goals of individual faculty in specific courses and of each student studying sociology.

Some of our goals relate specifically to the approach and subject matter of the discipline. Sociology students learn:

To engage the sociological imagination. In all our courses we want students to appreciate the distinctive character, intellectual power, and practical applications of a sociological perspective and our excitement for work in the discipline. Students learn to make connections between broad social-historical patterns and unique biographical events.

To develop a substantive understanding of the dynamics of social institutions, social change, culture and identity. A central benefit of studying sociology is to gain the discipline's accumulated wisdom about the character of social life. Through lectures, readings, and other course activities, students acquire a deeper understanding of the complex relationships among the organization and changes in society, our collective understandings about reality, and the way we think, feel, and act as individuals.

To understand social theory and methods of social research and the connections between them. Whatever the specific topic of investigation, sound sociological inquiry is always guided by systematically developed theoretical ideas and grounded in careful observation of real societies. Acquiring a deep appreciation for sociology's rich theoretical traditions and variety of empirical techniques, and knowing how to evaluate and use

these in sociological inquiry, is central to students' work in the discipline.

To consider social dynamics in relation to time and place. Any one society can be understood on multiple levels, from the local to the national to the global, just as it can be understood in relation to its place in history. Similarly, every society is influenced by its interactions with other societies. Sociology students engage in focused, in-depth study of the United States as well as comparative international study. Students investigate connections between the local and the global, the near and the far, the past and the present.

Please remember that these goals are central to the program in sociology and that the Sociology faculty will expect to see them exemplified as you engage the research process, writing, and presentation of your senior exercises projects in Sociology.

What Is the Senior Exercise in Sociology?

The senior exercise in sociology is an original sociological research paper of about 25-30 pages on a topic of your choice, and a formal presentation of your research to members of the sociology faculty and other senior sociology majors. We view this as your chance to apply many of the skills and talents you have developed during your almost four years at Kenyon College and several years as a Sociology major. Your paper may take many forms:

- It may answer a specific sociological question using existing research that you find in the library. This kind of paper is an intellectual position paper that challenges you to answer an important sociological question which can be clarified by examining already existing data, theories, and speculations. See Jessica Bellama's 2002 paper on women, religion, and

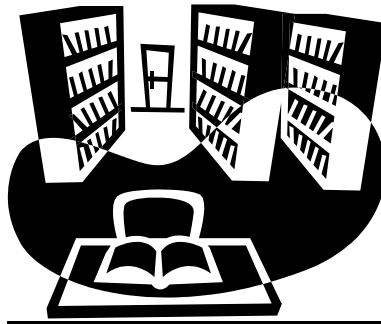
nationalism in South Africa as an example of this kind of project.

- It may answer a specific question in sociological theory through reference to existing sociological theory. This kind of paper is a creative, analytical work that contributes to the discipline by refining, formalizing, reorganizing, critiquing, or synthesizing existing theoretical approaches to a particular topic, deducing new hypotheses from existing theories, or creating entirely new theoretical models of your own. See Aaron Hagamon's 2002 paper on reason, religion, and disenchantment as an example of this kind of project.
- It may answer a specific empirical question by using existing theoretical perspectives to understand original qualitative or quantitative data. Your research might take the form of direct observation or interviews, analysis of existing documents, or analysis of survey data. Most comps papers in recent years have followed this model. See, for example, Annie Crosby's 2000 paper on the socialization of women in sports, Hannah Hill's 2005 paper on female Olympian athletes' depictions in popular magazines, or Stephen DeSanto's 2007 paper on the desexualization of overweight women.
- It may explore theory as a hermeneutical or exegetical project, a detailed textual analysis. Your project may be a comparison of different theorists or schools of thought, hermeneutical research into the meaning or history of ideas within theories, or even a discussion of the metatheory that underlies a theory -- its epistemology, method, normative assumptions, ethics, etc. See, for example, John West's 2003 paper on Weberian methodology.
- It may test a specific hypothesis, either by gathering original data or by analyzing data already collected by other sociologists. Your project may replicate another sociologist's

research by studying an unstudied population, or it may test another sociologist's hypothesis or theory that hasn't yet been subject to empirical testing, or it may test a theory or hypothesis of your own that has been informed by the sociological literature in that area. See Akilah Amapindi's 2004 paper using Jamaican data to test Durkheim's model of crime.

- It may evaluate a policy initiative by comparing data before and after the enactment of a policy change. See Tara Tucci's 2004 paper on the influence of tribally-controlled education at Pine Ridge Indian Reservation.

*Please note that all of the papers described above can be found in binders on the shelves in the Ralston House Lounge.



Choosing Your Topic & Formulating Your Research Question

Whatever type of project you choose, your first task is to articulate a research topic and formulate a research question. We urge you to formulate a question which does not have a pat answer—one that will require you to evaluate a theoretical perspective, organize evidence in support of a position, perhaps collect your own evidence, and make an informed judgment among competing interpretations. In addition, your project needs to be *situated* within the discipline—that is, you must become familiar with existing research on your topic, and your paper must explain how your research contributes to the sociological “conversation” in that area.

Here are several ways you might begin the process of finding a topic and formulating a sociological question for your project:

- Think back to the courses you've taken in the department--- is there a question, a topic, an article, an idea that didn't get enough attention as part of the formal course to satisfy you? Did you write a research paper in one of your classes that left you with further questions you'd like pursue?
- Or, think about a book or article you've read that struck a chord with you. What about it did you find intriguing? Investigate the book or article's bibliography—what kind of “debate” is going on in this body of work?
- Or, think about something in your life that you're passionate about, or some social issue that either bothers or fascinates you. How would a sociologist approach such a topic? Are there institutional dynamics to analyze? Are there issues of inequality or domination to be studied? Is there a race/class/gender analysis to be made? How would different theoretical approaches look at this topic? What is the social context that makes this an issue or problem in the

first place? Are there social movement organizations that deserve study?

- Or, look around at the social world. Go to group meetings or public lectures or events you might not ordinarily go to. Look at newspapers or magazines you might not ordinarily look at. Visit settings you might not ordinarily go to. Consider if you see anything that would be interesting to look at sociologically. If you studied abroad recently, you might consider if there is anything that you saw abroad that would be interesting to look at sociologically.

An additional consideration: You will need to select a topic to which you bring some expertise. Usually, you should have taken at least one course that introduced you to the available literature as well as the relevant theoretical and methodological perspectives on this topic. Your topic is ultimately up to you, but we want to caution you that students who undertake a project for which they have little or no background often find themselves in a serious time crunch in their efforts to “catch up” with the topic, and end up writing less sophisticated papers.

A next step is to do a thorough literature review. Begin by using Consort and SocIndex to find sociological work on your topic. If you find books or articles you like, look up some of the sources they cite in their bibliographies. Find out: What perspectives have others taken? What arguments have others made? What do you think about these other perspectives and arguments? This process will help you identify a research question, and it will help you situate your project within the discipline, and it will allow you to write a more sophisticated paper, one which considers all relevant positions, even those you may ultimately reject. Better papers exhibit a depth of analysis that adequately considers more than one position.

The sociology faculty strongly encourage you to keep track of page references and citations as you review the relevant literature.

Reproducing the literature search process after the fact is insanity. Be very careful to keep track of citations as you read and write. This will slow you down initially, but will save you hours and hours of work later on.

Your Proposal

In September of your senior year, you will submit a written proposal for your project. The proposal, approximately 3-5 pages in length, will include:

- A tentative title indicative of your topic
- A statement of your research question
- A statement of your specific qualifications to successfully pursue the proposed study
- A justification for conducting this research that explains its relevance to relevant sociological literature or to fundamental issues in the discipline or in society
- A description of how you intend to explore the issue, identifying relevant theories as well as methods and strategies for any empirical research you plan to conduct
- A tentative bibliography of at least ten sources

The sociology faculty will read your proposal and either approve it or ask that you revise it according to their suggestions.



Your Paper's Format

The model for your senior exercise is a sociological journal article. You should use the source citation style of the American Sociological Association (a brief summary of the ASA style guide is available in the student section of www.asanet.org). Your paper will include:

- A title page
- An abstract. An abstract is a brief (200-500 word) summary of the paper's argument, including your research question, your methodological approach, and your major findings.
- A list of references that adheres to ASA formatting guidelines

In addition, your paper should be meticulously reviewed for correct spelling, punctuation, grammar, and diction. After you have been notified of your results, your paper will be stored in an online database.



Supervision and Evaluation

The Fall semester Senior Seminar in Sociology is designed to give structure to the process of conducting your senior exercise. After your proposal has been approved, you will be assigned a committee consisting of two or three of the sociology faculty members. Early in the Spring semester, your project (including paper and presentation) will be evaluated by the professors on your committee. If the members of your committee decide that your paper is a possible fail or a possible distinction, then the rest of the faculty will also read your paper and meet to make a final collective decision. The department will notify you of the results of the evaluation (pass, fail, or pass with distinction) by late March.

The department expects that you will not rely only on the professor leading the senior seminar for feedback during this process. Below is a list of the sociology department faculty and their areas of specialization. Consult early and often with faculty members who are specialists in your area and those who are on your committee. Ask if they have ideas for background reading. Ask if they have advice for theoretical or methodological approaches you might want to consider. Ask if they will read a draft of your paper. It is in your best interests to get advanced feedback from these professors. In the past, students who have not consulted with their committee members or professors knowledgeable about their topic have found themselves unpleasantly surprised by their final evaluation.

When asking for feedback, respect the professors' busy schedules. Email them to ask for a meeting or carefully observe the times posted on their doors for office hours. During your first meeting with them, ask what kinds of feedback they are willing to give. Will they meet with you and talk with you about your project? Will they read a draft or drafts of your paper? How do they prefer to be contacted? How do they prefer to provide feedback? How much "lead time" do they typically need for providing feedback on written work?

The Sociology Faculty

You are free to choose your own comps topic, but we encourage you to choose a topic that corresponds with the expertise and interests of one or more members of the sociology faculty. This will enable the faculty to be of more help to you, and will make the comps experience more gratifying and rewarding to you as well as to the faculty.

Nikole Hotchkiss specializes in political, cultural, and comparative-historical sociology and the sociology of law. Her current research is an extension of her dissertation and examines the role of ethno-religious bias on the implementation of counter-terrorism law in France and the U.S. She is also working on a project focusing on the legal constructions of hate crime and terrorism in the U.S.

Jennifer Johnson specializes in political sociology, social movements and theories of social change and globalization. Her dissertation is entitled *Appropriating Citizenship: Resources, Discourses and Political Mobilization in Contemporary Rural Mexico*. She is currently researching policing and vigilantism in southern Mexico and on the U.S.-Mexico border.

Marla Kohlman specializes in the areas of gender, theory, law, quantitative methods, and stratification. Her most recent research focuses on sexual harassment in the military, sexual assault on college campuses, and the work/family balance in the legal profession.

John Macionis specializes in social stratification, social change, social problems and policy, urban sociology, deviance and criminology, and research methodology. The author of the most widely used introductory sociology textbook, Professor Macionis has a broad knowledge of the discipline and the connections among its different areas.

George “Mac” McCarthy specializes in ethics and social justice, political and social theory, philosophy and sociology of science, German social thought and Greek philosophy/literature, and American political economy. His major area of concentration is nineteenth- and twentieth-century German social theory: Marx, Weber, Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, Gadamer, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Habermas.

Howard Sacks specializes in social psychology, contemporary social theory, rural society, community, and field research. He has particular interests in traditional art and culture including folklore, ethnomusicology, and cultural politics, as well as the sociology of food. Professor Sacks was a founder of Kenyon's American Studies program, and directs Kenyon's Rural Life Center and the Food for Thought program. He has great knowledge of the local community, and has won awards for projects on food, music, family farming, and black experience in Knox County.

Anna Sun specializes in sociology of religion, sociology of knowledge, classical and contemporary social theory, and sociology of East Asia. Her dissertation is entitled *Confusions over Confucianism: The Making of Confucianism as a World Religion and the Emergence of Comparative Religion as a Discipline, 1870-1915*. She was recently a co-principal investigator on the Baylor University research project “The Empirical Study of Religions in China.” **Please note that Professor Sun will be on leave during the 2010-2011 academic year.**

Jan Thomas specializes in health and gender issues. Her research focuses on women's health care, and she has experience working in public and private health care settings. Professor Thomas teaches courses on social movements, health and illness, women in the discipline of sociology, gender, and research methods. She spent the 2005-6 school year in Stockholm, Sweden conducting research on maternity care and learning about the Swedish welfare state. **Please note that**

Professor Thomas will be on leave during the fall semester of 2010.

