

Sociology 2008

Senior Thesis Writers

HARVARD UNIVERSITY
Department of Sociology

GLOBALIZING ACTIONABLE RIGHTS:
The Role Of Policy Elites In Health Care Reform in Chile and Bolivia, 1982-2007



Stephen Amrock
Advisor: Jason Beckfield
First Reader: Mary Ruggie

Abstract

How globalization causes policy and institutional isomorphism is poorly understood. Research up to this point has largely focused on macro-level quantitative indicators of developed countries' welfare states. Insufficient attention has been given to analyzing the mechanisms by which globalization and policy diffusion proceed. To understand those mechanisms, I construct a comparative historical analysis of two recent Latin American health care reforms. Health care reform is an important international policy script but is also particularly contentious on the national political stage, bringing to the fore debates around social citizenship rights. Through archival research and in-depth interviews with almost forty policy-making elites, I propose a historical institutionalist model with which to understand policy-makers. In an era of globalization, policy-makers' decision space is both constrained and enabled by the political institutional history of their nation-state, and international discourse and policy preferences. The codification of actionable rights in both countries examined here aims to institutionalize social citizenship rights in response to neoliberalism and create a path dependency to safeguard those rights from the actions of future policy-makers.

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LAUGHTER AS LEISURE:
Motivations for Participation in Improvisational Comedy Communities



Sachiko Amy Ezura
Advisor: Jason Kaufman
First Reader: Timothy Nelson

Abstract

This paper describes motivations and reasons for participation in improvisational comedy communities as a form of serious leisure. According to Robert A. Stebbins, serious leisure refers to those leisure pursuits that fall between an occupation and a casual leisure activity. Using Stebbins' model, I examined participation in improvisational communities in four theatre-schools in New York City and Boston. I conducted open qualitative interviews and participant observation with students, teachers, theatre staff, and performers. According to these interviews, initial participation often stemmed from a desire to work in the comedy industry based on the belief that study of improvisational comedy led to work in television and film. However, many improvisers described a sense of hopelessness after not seeing a career come to fruition and began to describe their reasons for participation in other terms. The uncertainty in terms of how to parlay this activity into a career separates improvisational comedy from other art forms. Other motivations described by interviewees include a strong community with a shared culture, fun and enjoyment, improved self-confidence, and the desire to contribute to a relatively new art form.

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"HOMEGIRLS" AND "HOOD GIRLS":
Unveiling Important Differences Among Violent Female Youth in Boston



Caroline Hostetter
Advisor: Christopher Winship
First Reader: Anthony Braga

Abstract

Since the 1980s, arrest rates have indicated a narrowing gender margin in rates of juvenile violent crime in the United States. This trend has generated concern and confusion. Due to the lack of historical research on female delinquency and violence, academics are still trying to determine the best way to approach and conceive of female delinquency. Two general frameworks have emerged and formed the bases of contemporary research. The first framework, known as the gender similarity framework, suggests that female delinquency can be attributed to the same etiological factors as male delinquency – negating the importance of gender in explanations of female offending. In contrast, the gender dissimilarity theory suggests that persistent, gendered, structural inequalities shape differential patterns of male and female offending – making gender the key to understanding female delinquency. In this study I have sought to understand the situational and contextual circumstances in which females are violent. My research, conducted through in-depth interviews with youth practitioners, has focused upon violent adolescent (age 13-17) girls in inner-city Boston neighborhoods. My key finding is that there seem to be two different sets of violent female offenders. The differences between these two sets shed light on the gender similarity/gender dissimilarity debate and support the need for integrative approaches.

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DOES NOT COMPUTE:
The Introduction of New Technologies to South African and Namibian Classrooms



Eric Kouskalis
Advisor: Mary Brinton
First Reader: Michael Kramer

Abstract

Efforts to provide computers and internet access to schools in developing countries are receiving increased attention from policymakers. I study three large-scale computer deployment projects in South Africa and Namibia. Quantitative evidence is used to estimate the causal effect of computer availability on student achievement, and qualitative evidence is used to understand how computer use can be most successfully and effectively adopted in developing country schools. In stark contrast with the existing literature from developing countries, I find no evidence that computer use significantly impacts test scores. I identify sets of technical, human and organizational factors which substantially impact program take-up as well as a set of mechanisms through which computer availability may affect student learning. The findings suggest that the use of computers as an educational tool by teachers is far less effective than that of independent student computer use and that results of computer-assisted learning projects in developing countries are very sensitive to particular implementation issues. Based on these findings, I propose that policymakers considering such projects would be most successful by pursuing computer-assisted learning as a supplement to traditional classroom teaching, ensuring that schools have particular types of long-run technical and financial support, and minimizing interference with existing school-day routines.

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DEFENDING AND DEFINING DIFFERENCE:
The American Self and the Arab Other, How the Experiences of American Soldiers in North Africa During WWII Shaped Their Perceptions of Arabs and Muslims



Elizabeth Kurtz
Advisor: Mary Waters
First Reader: Susan Miller

Abstract

I examined how the experiences of American soldiers who served in North Africa during World War II shaped their perceptions of Arabs and Muslims. I approached this topic by asking three questions: 1) What might Americans who served in North Africa during World War II have known about North Africa, Arabs, and Muslims before joining the Army? 2) What were American troops who were deployed to North Africa told about North Africa, Arabs, and Muslims by the Army, and how might their perceptions of Arabs and Muslims been affected by what they were told? 3) How do troops themselves talk about North Africa, Arabs, and Muslims?

My research consisted of three parts: 1) An analysis of films that were produced between 1935 and 1945 and were set in the Near East, through which I attempted to make conclusions about how Arabs and Muslims were popularly seen in the United States during the 1930's and '40s. 2) An analysis of materials about North Africa that the U.S. Army distributed to American troops there, through which I attempted to make conclusions about how Army rhetoric may have influenced soldiers' opinions of North Africa, Arabs, and Muslims. 3) An analysis of fifteen interviews that I conducted with veterans, twenty-three memoirs and three collections of letters that were written by veterans, and articles that were written by soldiers in North Africa and published in the U.S. Army newspaper Stars and Stripes during the war, through which I attempted to make conclusions about how troops themselves perceived their experiences in North Africa and the Arabs and Muslims they encountered there.

My research suggested that soldiers' experiences in North Africa tended to confirm their perceptions of Arabs and Muslims. In interviews and memoirs, as well as in articles published in the U.S. Army newspaper Stars and Stripes, soldiers reiterated stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims that were prevalent in American society during the 1930's and '40s. Most notably, they observed that Arabs and Muslims were unlike Americans because they were unprogressive and undemocratic. This observation, which troops and veterans articulated in a variety of ways, reinforced the notion that being American means being progressive and democratic. In short, othering was a way of engaging in a nationalistic discourse about national identity. At the same time, it was a way of implicitly justifying American participation in the war. Troops saw themselves as fighting to defend a progressive way of life and to pursue a progressive agenda of advancing democracy abroad. By othering Arabs and reinforcing the idea that Americans are democratic and progressive, troops affirmed the truth of the assumptions that underlay their main justifications for fighting. My research generally suggests that in times of war, othering may manifest itself as a nationalistic discourse that justifies fighting as the defense of a national character.

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THE EFFECT OF MINORITY STATUS ON EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT:
An Evaluation with Propensity Score Matching



Olivia Levine
Advisor: Stephanie A. Howling
First Reader: Donald Rubin

Abstract

This paper focuses on the effect of minority status on students' educational attainment, specifically whether they attend college. Using propensity score matching, I offer a reevaluation of the hypothesis that minority status is associated with educational attainment. I employ propensity score matching to determine whether there is a difference between White and minority students' ability to reach college when all potentially confounding socioeconomic and demographic traits are controlled for between the two groups. Findings indicate that there is no difference between White and minority students' college attendance rates. This suggests that past findings of an achievement gaps in educational attainment between these students may result from other socioeconomic and demographic factors that may proxy minority status. I conclude by offering insight for future policy attempts to reduce achievement gaps in education and offer equal opportunity for all students to attend college.

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FROM MUSCLE CARS TO MINIVANS:
Changes in Car Advertising Towards Women from 1950 to 1995



Saloni Pareek Malik
Advisor: Jason Kaufman
First Reader: Amanda Teo

Abstract

This thesis in sociology explores the differences in the social meaning of cars for men and for women between 1950 and 1995. I explore how changing social norms about the role of women in society interact with the image of the automobile as a masculine object. Specifically, I examine this relationship in the context of advertising. I posed the question: To what extent do the changes in car advertising between 1950 and 1995 reflect key changes in social discourse regarding women over this time period?

I examine the relationship between car advertisements and social norms through an extensive content analysis of print advertising in TIME, Newsweek, the Ladies' Home Journal, Cosmopolitan, and Good Housekeeping. I collected data from the March, June, September, and December issues of these magazines for the years 1950, 1955, 1960, 1965, 1970, 1975, 1980, 1985, 1990, and 1995. Overall, I collected data from 445 advertisements.

Based on my research, I found that advertising does not perfectly reflect changing social discourse. There exists a basic foundation of assumptions about the differences between men and women that never completely vanishes. The overarching trend we find is that in automotive advertising, regardless of prevalent social discourses, men were appealed to on emotional and aesthetic grounds, with connotations of adventure and independence, whereas women were appealed to on rational, practical grounds with connotations of the importance of family. There are however, subtle fluctuations and transformations of form that suggest that car advertising is not completely unrelated to changing social norms.

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FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE:
The Influence of Economic and Gender-Based Dependence on Married Women's Knowledge of HIV/AIDS in Ethiopia



Karezhe Mersha
Advisor: Mary Jo D. Good
First Reader: Stephanie A. Howling

Abstract

This thesis examines the role of economic and gender-based dependence on married women's knowledge of AIDS in Ethiopia using a data set from the 2005 Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey. The results of this study show that married women's economic dependence consistently has a greater negative effect on her AIDS knowledge than gender-based dependence. Furthermore, the findings show that control over sexuality and economic dependence have an interactive effect as the specificity of AIDS knowledge increases. The study also indicates that women are less isolated than men, which inhibits their knowledge about amount of HIV/AIDS transmission, and that the limited information they received comes through social networks which often tends to be distorted.

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COMMERCIALIZED INJUSTICE:
Portraits of Agency and Vulnerability in Non-Profit Advertising



Ashley Marie Pletz
Advisor: Nathan Fosse
First Reader: Jocelyn Viterna

Abstract

This thesis seeks to explore contemporary media representations of gender, engaging with the depictions of victims of social problems and of those who work to remedy those problems. Focusing on magazine advertisements published by non-profit and public organizations that either depict "victims" (those experiencing social problems) or "agents of change" (those working to fix social problems), I question the implications and effects of such depictions on the wider cause of working to alleviate suffering and injustice and to better the world. Noncommercial advertisements from all available issues from the year 2005 of Time, Reader's Digest, Ladies' Home Journal, Ebony, Latina, The Progressive, Mother Jones, and Ms.—magazines which cover a range of audiences—are analyzed for patterns of representation, especially for normative or stereotypical depictions of gender. Content analyses of these advertisements reveal that victims of U.S. social problems tend to be depicted as solitary females, whose vulnerability is emphasized by traditionally "feminine", passive demeanors, paired with physical or intellectual weakness. International victims' vulnerability is also purposefully represented, most often embodied by "helpless" children and solitary women enacting traditional gender roles and displaying normative feminine weakness; international victims are also characterized by their morose and even desperate facial expressions. "Agents of change" ads are prone to depict women as the agents, who smile triumphantly yet are rarely shown interacting with victims. These women, too, are shown engaging in traditional "women's work," or are shown as victim-agents, whose historical oppression or unique suffering is a call-to-arms for action. The thesis ends by considering the ethical implications of these depictions, particularly the stereotypical depictions of women and the lack of agent-victim interaction.

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NOT IN MY FRONT YARD:
The Use of Neighborhood Appearance in the Construction of Moral Boundaries



Michelle Anne Steward
Advisor: Michèle Lamont
First Reader: Stacey Bosick

Abstract

Both symbolic boundaries and the spatial boundaries of economic segregation are drawn along class lines. This project brings these two types of boundaries together by asking how people construct moral boundaries from the appearance of homes and neighborhoods. 84 homeowners were interviewed from four neighborhoods: working and upper-middle class census tracts outside Boston, Massachusetts and Eugene, Oregon. Respondents were randomly selected from public directories within selected census tracts, and interviewed for 45 minutes in their homes about the criteria by which they define good neighborhoods and the visual cues they use to assess those criteria. Upper-middle class respondents valued privacy, personal space, and diverse taste as displayed by large homes, open spaces, and various types of yard décor. These respondents derided laziness, negligence, and close-mindedness, which they read from disrepair and clutter. Working-class respondents valued neighborliness and efficiency, which they saw reflected in small homes and unconventional uses of space. They denigrated isolation and wastefulness, displayed primarily by large homes and yards. Respondents in all sub-samples resisted talking explicitly about class, tying their judgments to the moral worth of residents rather than the social status of a neighborhood.