

SOCIOLOGY 2009 SENIOR THESIS WRITERS

HOLDING THEIR TONGUES: ARE LOW-INCOME AND MINORITY STUDENTS QUIET IN HARVARD CLASSROOMS?



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ABSTRACT

Ideally, the college classroom provides a space for students from various backgrounds to openly discuss their viewpoints, challenge and learn from one another, and engage with their instructors. However, past research suggests that at times students—students from disadvantaged backgrounds more so than others—feel less-qualified than their peers to contribute to classroom discourse and consequently decide to remain silent. Furthermore, as social reproduction perspectives suggest, minority students and students from low socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to engage in classroom discussions because they may have less pre-college exposure to the material discussed, have less access to cultural and social capital connecting them to the college classroom, and have linguistic preferences that differ from the expected Standard English. In this study, I employ three methods in order to understand how students' experiences in the college classroom, particularly those of minority and low-income students, vary and converge with that of their peers. I survey 273 undergraduates to understand how often they choose to participate in classroom discussions and which factors influence their decisions. In addition, I observe students in classrooms that vary in the percentage of Black and Latino students in the course and whether or not the students read and discussed race-based material. Lastly, I conduct interviews with 16 students from various racial/ethnic and social class backgrounds to more fully understand their experiences in college classrooms. The findings strongly suggest that students from different racial and social class backgrounds have experiences in college classrooms that are unique and substantially affect their classroom participation. In section and lecture discussions, low-SES students participated less than their higher-SES peers. While, in section minority students participate less than their White peers in section discussions, in lecture discussions Black students participate more than their White peers in lecture discussions and Multi-Ethnic students participate less than their White peers.

BROACHING THE SUBJECT OF BIRTH: AN EXAMINATION OF UNDERGRADUATE WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF "ALTERNATIVE" BIRTHING METHODS



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ABSTRACT

The following thesis examines scientific literature on alternative childbirth methods including homebirth, waterbirth, birthing centers, and midwifery and establishes that these methods have been proven to be equally safe (and in several cases safer) than a modern medicalized hospital birth for a low-risk pregnancy. The focus of this thesis is women's perceptions about the safety and comfort of these methods as compared to the science. Specifically, I constructed an online survey and distributed it to 101 Harvard undergraduate college women asking them to rank and rate the comfort and safety of 7 different birthing methods for a typical low-risk pregnancy. Respondents also answered questions about their attitudes and beliefs and were asked to identify any factual information that they had received on the alternative methods. The data collected showed that respondents viewed the normative medicalized birth methods positively and alternative methods more negatively with their perception becoming increasingly more negative based upon the degree of change from the normative model. All respondents, with the exception of five individuals, identified that they had not received any factual scientific information about the alternative methods and located the source of their perceptions in popular culture and anecdotes/personal experience. Simply, this thesis illustrates that alternative birthing methods offer an equally safe and comfortable alternative for a low-risk pregnancy but women perceive these methods to be more dangerous and uncomfortable. This thesis also establishes that the sources of women's perceptions about birthing methods for a low-risk pregnancy are located in broader American culture and not in scientific research.

CROSSOVER LEGITIMACY: GRAPPLING WITH THE CHALLENGES OF GOING MAINSTREAM



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ABSTRACT

This research study explores the costs niche organizations face as they attempt to widen their appeal by entering into the broader, mainstream market. Previous research has underscored the illegitimacy penalties of adopting a generalist, category-spanning strategy, and this study extends such contentions by identifying the additional hazards that exist when the different product categories feature audiences with distinct and contrasting tastes. This assertion is tested via an assessment of the challenges ultimate fighting organizations are experiencing in their attempts to crossover into the world of mainstream sports. Using the media as a proxy for legitimacy, given the findings of a strong, positive relationship between media attention and ultimate fighting's performance on pay-per-view, this study demonstrates ultimate fighting's significant failure to acquire acceptance from the mainstream sports market. A product of its statistically demonstrated divergence from mainstream sports on the issues of competitive uncertainty and organizational influence on matchmaking, this failure to gain legitimacy, which is costing ultimate fighting increased exposure and increased revenue, is traced to the organizations' category spanning and resulting inability to effectively engage with the audiences of each individual market. These findings reveal the hurdles associated with an organization's expansion into the mainstream market and thus provide a means for evaluating how a niche entrepreneurial organization can evolve to expand its audience.

NEIGHBORHOOD EFFECTS OF IMMIGRANT POPULATION SIZE: A CASE STUDY AMONG THREE BOSTON NEIGHBORHOODS ON ATTITUDES TOWARDS IMMIGRANTS AND FEAR OF IMMIGRANT CRIMINALITY



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ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to answer two primary questions, and how they interact: (1) how does variation in immigrant populations across neighborhoods affect the attitudes of native-born residents' towards immigrants? (2) How does variation in immigrant populations across neighborhoods affect native-born residents' fear of immigrant criminality? I designed a survey instrument to capture the effects of both phenomena, along with ancillary factors that comprise these phenomena, such as the effect of race, ethnic differences, legal versus illegal immigration, media, and more. Subsequently, I administered the survey to only native-born residents in three Boston neighborhoods according to immigrant group size—South Boston (12% immigrant population), Jamaica Plain (23% immigrant population) and East Boston (43% immigrant population). I collected a random sample of 100 respondents in each of the three neighborhoods, providing a sample size of 300 respondents. The findings indicate that respondents in South Boston, the neighborhood with the lowest immigrant concentration, indicated the most negative attitudes towards immigrants and the highest fear of immigrant criminality. Respondents from Jamaica Plain, the neighborhood with the mid-range immigrant population, indicated the most positive attitudes and least fear of immigrant criminality. Lastly, the attitudes and fears of respondents from East Boston, the neighborhood with the highest immigrant population, fell between both other neighborhoods. The results indicated statistical significance for neighborhoods as predictors of attitudes and fears, which posits some evidence for causation towards the effects of immigrant group size in neighborhoods. Additionally, the findings indicate a potential neighborhood immigrant population apex after which attitudes and fear turn negative. A theoretical explanation for this "tipping point" is that when a minority-sized immigrant population grows, there will be some point when the majority-sized population recognizes more competition for resources—and responds by receding inward.

BLACK FACES IN WHITE PLACES: ANALYZING WHITE AND BLACK VOTER RESPONSE TO BLACK SENATORIAL CANDIDATES



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ABSTRACT

This research analyzes white and black voter support for black senatorial candidates. I statistically analyze a dataset I created combining exit-polling data from nearly every senatorial election between 1990 and 2006 (n=334,756 from over 272 total senatorial elections, including fifteen biracial elections). I compare voter choice in biracial elections to a baseline of voter choice in elections with two white candidates. I hypothesize that after controlling for a variety of individual and electoral-level variables generally white and black voters will prefer the in-group candidate in biracial elections. However, this preference will not be uniform—when the elections are analyzed separately I predict there to be substantial variation in white and black voter response to black senatorial candidates. The results presented in Chapter IV confirm these hypotheses. These in-group preferences can be critical—the model predicts that in five of the biracial elections analyzed the black candidate lost while a white candidate would have won. In Chapters V and VI I attempt to explain when and why white and black voters discriminate against (or prefer) black candidates in biracial elections. In Chapter V I analyze the impact of statewide and individual-level variables on white and black voter support for black candidates. White voters in less educated states are more likely to prefer the in-group candidate in biracial elections. Interestingly the analysis indicated that white voters in the South are more likely than non-Southern voters to support black candidates. The demographic balance of the state had negligible effects on white voter response, contrasting the existing literature. Finally the results indicated that income serves as a mediating factor on the individual level but not statewide level. In Chapter VI I analyze the impact of electoral-level variables on white and black voter support for black candidates. White and black voters were both more likely to support high-quality black candidates. Additionally, white and black voters were more likely to support the black candidate in competitive biracial elections. The results indicated that white voters did not react more negatively to black candidates in racially polarizing elections. This finding is inconsistent with previous research and tentative because of the limited sample size, potential measurement error and possibility of confounding factors. This research contributed substantially to the field by employing a more robust statistical approach and approaching the issue of voter response to black candidates more comprehensively than ever before. The dataset analyzed is the largest of its kind—this allows for analysis of new election types (notably black Republicans) and ability to understand general trends. By analyzing both white and black voter support for black candidates in the same analysis I get a holistic understanding of the electoral prospects of black candidates. Finally by measuring the impact of individual, state and electoral-level variables I analyze white and black voter response more comprehensively than previous researchers.

GAUGING THE GAY GAZE: GAYDAR AS A SOCIOLOGICAL DRAMATURGY OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION



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ABSTRACT

For this project, I examined the concept of gaydar, or the identification of sexual orientation, as sociological dramaturgy. Through respondent-driven sampling, I identified 18 Boston-area gay men and conducted in-depth interviews on the subject of how they were able to identify other gay men based on a limited amount of information. My findings show that all of the men interviewed based their ability to find other gay men on largely effeminate gender expression and other stereotypes. It can be concluded that gaydar identifies feminine performance on the male body and conflates sexual orientation with gender expression.

THE GENDERED EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN PHYSICIAN IMMIGRANTS TO THE U.S.



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ABSTRACT

This senior thesis addresses the gendered experiences of African physician immigrants to the U.S. It asks whether there are differences between female and male African physician migrants in: (1) their motivations for, and processes of, migration; (2) their experiences integrating into and dealing with potential prejudice in the U.S. medical profession; and (3) their possible plans for contributing to their home countries. To answer this question, I conducted in-depth interviews with fifteen female and fifteen male African doctors in the U.S. Analysis of interview transcripts showed that both women and men migrated due to advanced training opportunities abroad, encouragement of loved ones, and desire to gain the resources necessary for them to save the lives of patients. Women were more likely to migrate in response to the prior migration plans of their spouses, and this tendency brought about somewhat gendered migration and integration experiences. Once in the U.S. medical profession, women faced greater challenges balancing work and family. Interviewees of both genders dealt with people doubting their medical credentials based on racial, immigrant, and/or gender bias. Despite these issues, they generally viewed the U.S. medical profession as fairly meritocratic. Overall, the common professional status and values of interviewees tended to diminish gendered differences in their experiences migrating, working in the U.S., and contributing to their home countries. These findings have policy implications for the treatment of female, minority, and immigrant physicians in the U.S. medical profession, and for the "brain drain" of doctors from African countries.

CULTURAL CONCERNS: THE DELETERIOUS IMPACT OF COOL POSE



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ABSTRACT

Social scientists must focus on the interaction of environmental and cultural influences to explain the negative social outcomes of black men, such as low educational attainment and criminal involvement. To set aside the impact of cultural influences on black men results in an incomplete analysis of these outcomes. This thesis reviews existing structural and cultural scholarship to demonstrate the importance of examining cultural frames and narratives to explain social outcomes. Through in-depth interviews with twenty-nine black men, ages 19-25, in Boston, Massachusetts, I document the existence of a weak or strong cool pose culture in approximately two-thirds of the men interviewed. The cool pose cultural frame serves as a coping mechanism for men who feel restricted by society. It is exhibited through excessive pride, narcissism, toughness, callousness, "street cool" and contemporary coolness. Compounding existing educational inequities, cool pose culture influences young black men to be less focused on academic attainment. To maintain a powerful image and the "respect" associated with a strong cool pose culture, black men also are more likely to embrace drug dealing and stealing. Cool pose culture is integral to help explain why two men from similar backgrounds may make different life decisions. Consequently, the cool pose cultural frame not only emerges out of marginalization from structural inequities, but it also negatively inhibits the life chances of black men. Given the staggering incarceration and homicide rates affecting black men, the influence of the cool pose cultural frame on decision-making is both undeniable and essential to the study of black male social outcomes.

FACEBOOK STALKERS AND THEIR FRIENDS: THE IMPACT OF ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORK SITES ON FACE-TO-FACE INTERACTION



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ABSTRACT

Over the past 10 years, the use of online social network sites has increased significantly. Previous scholars have assessed the importance of online social networks with regard to fields such as social capital, privacy, and the formation of network ties. However, they have failed to study the most basic influence online social network sites have on its members: the role of online social network sites on daily face-to-face interaction. Using Facebook, the second most-trafficked website in the world, this thesis addresses how the online and offline worlds are interrelated. Through an online survey (n=274) and in-depth interviews (n=18) my findings suggest that members gather information online from a process termed "Facebook Stalking." During this process, members learn information from reading their friends' profiles and viewing their friends' pictures. Members selectively use information learned online during offline interaction depending on the strength of the relationship tie in the offline world. My findings indicate that among strong ties, information is used freely and there are few offline ramifications that are unique to online behavior. Next, my findings show that members who are not friends in the online or offline worlds do not actively seek or discuss information about one another. Finally, my key finding is that among weak ties, information learned online is systematically and strategically excluded or included during conversation offline using three tools: ignoring the information, contextualizing the information, and flaunting the information. I conclude that among weak ties, if information is managed and excluded successfully, it allows both the Facebook member and the person with whom the member is speaking to more precisely maintain face.

THE RELIGIOUS UNDERPINNINGS OF VIBRANT CIVIL SOCIETIES



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ABSTRACT

A vibrant civil society — one composed of civically active and cooperative citizens — is essential in lubricating society at large. In theory, religion simultaneously presents an opportunity to foster civil society and at the same time destroy it. Religion can encourage civic engagement through heightened social interactions at church, through opportunities for civic leadership, and through channeling religious engagement and altruistic tendencies into other, secular forms of civic engagement. At the same time, religion poses a threat to civil society by instilling stringent morals and opinions in its followers, potentially creating intolerance and hatred towards religious outgroups and making society-wide cooperation impossible. The tension described is the subject of this study, which asks if religiosity can create both civically engaged and cooperative citizens, two essential elements of healthy civil societies. Using entirely new survey data (the survey was designed by Robert D. Putnam and his team at the Squamotown Seminars), this study empirically explores religion's ability to generate civically active and cooperative citizens in a comparative study of a highly secular Great Britain and a highly religious United States. Examining religion's civic role in two radically different religious contexts measurably strengthens or weakens the claim that there is an inherent connection between religiosity and civic engagement — one that transcends context and culture. Employing a combination of descriptive statistics, factor analysis, ordinal logistic squares regressions, ordinal logistic regressions, and partial correlations, this study finds a strong, significant and virtually identical link between religiosity and civic engagement in both Great Britain and the U.S. In terms of the same mechanisms, religious belonging, not religious believing, is almost entirely responsible for this link. Religion's ability to generate cooperative, tolerant citizens is somewhat more complex. Religiosity is linked to religious homophily and intolerance, though more robustly in the US than in the UK, but overall the more religious nation (the US) shows substantially less religious homophily and more tolerance, probably because of the greater religious pluralism in the US. Thus religion's power rests in its sociability. Partaking in a religious community, not practicing religion in private, creates more civically active citizens. But it is not only interacting with people of one's own faith, but interacting with people of other faiths that fosters the tolerance, social solidarity and cooperation necessary to unleash religion's tremendous capacity to build healthy civil societies.

THE DOUBLE² STANDARD: HIGH STAKES FOR WOMEN POLITICIANS IN THE MEDIA



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ABSTRACT

Women politicians in the U.S. walk a fine line between gender expectations that are incongruent with characteristics of a successful politician. Generally, the media focuses on gender-specific criticisms of female politicians, and I argue that women in politics additionally encounter what I call the Double² Standard — exponentiated forms of double-binds in gendered conceptions of attractiveness that serve to complicate and stigmatize female candidates. My thesis garners evidence that the national television news media infiltrated these perceptions of Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin in the 2008 Presidential election. Using the transcripts from television news media surrounding the two most-viewed debates for both Clinton and Palin, the most prevalent issues I discover include skepticism of each candidate's political qualifications, gendered depictions of political politics, sex-role orientation, ambivalence between the feminine and the political, and their physical appearances. The results also reveal categorical differences in perception of these candidates by partisan affiliation and culturally defined attractiveness markers including age and sex appeal. Understanding how female candidates are covered by the mainstream media and how this might consequently reflect our limited and gendered political structure is an important question to the validity of our democracy.

THE LEAST OF US: EXPLORING RACE AND FIRST GENERATION STATUS AT AN IVY LEAGUE COLLEGE



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ABSTRACT

One word is at the core of academic discussions on college campuses around the nation—diversity. But the concept of diversity, particularly as it relates to the student body of these campuses, remains vague at best. Although the concept remains elusive, scores of Universities create programs and initiatives in the hope of constructing a more diverse campus. Harvard University, considered among the most selective and elite institutions in the world, is no different in this respect. Some signs point to Harvard's fidelity to its promise of campus diversity, including racial diversity initiatives and the recent Middle Income Initiative and Low Income Initiative. However, black students still face many challenges on elite college campuses. Similarly, socioeconomically disadvantaged students, especially those who are the first in their families to attend college, also face obstacles in both gaining admittance to elite colleges and succeeding therein. The aims of this study are to and persist at Harvard. Second, I will explore how black and white first-generation students at Harvard compare with respect to their family backgrounds, and their social and academic lives at Harvard. Through interviews with white and black first-generation Harvard students, I found that maintaining a positive disposition towards academic achievement was crucial to their success in both high school and in college. In addition, while at Harvard, retaining their home identities and successfully navigating their social and academic lives remained important to the students. The educational background of their parents continued to exert influence on their experiences in social and academic settings at Harvard and caused both groups of students to feel marginalized within their own racial groups. Finally, although they share many common experiences, few first-generation black and white students have relationships with their racial counterparts. In sum, both race and first-generation status are important for understanding these students' experiences.

HOW TO BECOME A TELEVISION WRITER: BUILDING A CAREER IN AN UNSTABLE LABOR MARKET IN HOLLYWOOD



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ABSTRACT

Much research exists on the labor market in the film industry, while little exists about the labor market in the television industry. Exploring the unique characteristics of the labor market for television writers allows for a more in-depth understanding of how players in the labor market respond to instability. Instability and unpredictability have long been the norm for television writers investigating the mechanisms television writers use to deal with such unpredictability can be instructive for understanding the increasing uncertainty of labor markets in general, an especially important concern in light of the economic crisis that began in the fall of 2008. This study examines how television writers build careers in a labor market characterized by instability and uncertainty, difficulties determining professional competency, and boundaryless careers. Based on interviews with 27 aspiring writers, writers, past writers, and those who hire writers, I trace the stages of the television writing career path from entrance in the labor market to exit, exploring how and why aspiring writers and writers focus on developing human, social, and cultural capital at different stages of the career. In addition, I examine in detail how employers make hiring decisions about writers as they assess signals of writing quality, fit, and social and cultural understanding. The findings of this study point to the importance of social capital in labor markets characterized by boundaryless careers. Social capital plays a central role in the hiring process, mediating the effects of human and cultural capital on hiring decisions: those who hire television writers use social capital to screen the pool of job-seekers. My findings extend research on network structure. My data suggest that television writers deliberately form redundant ties, and that the value of ties to those of high status varies depending on the stage of the career.