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Evaluation of Evidence (V1205)

MW 2:40-3:55, 301 Fayerweather

Americans, and especially educated Americans, are voracious consumers of information produced by others. Survey results appear in the media almost daily, and journalistic reports “from the scene” are just as common. All information, however, is not created equal: surveys and first-hand accounts can be biased in various ways, as can other sorts of evidence, and the relationship between evidence and substantive conclusions is often tenuous. This class is about the relationship between evidence and the sometimes-sweeping claims it is often purported to support. Because this class serves as an introductory sociology course for prospective Sociology majors, particular attention is paid to the way that evidence is generated in the course of sociological research, and to the relationship between this evidence and sociological (and more generally, social-scientific) explanations of such things as suicide, inequality, and obedience to authority.

Required texts

Emile Durkheim, *Suicide* (Labyrinth and on reserve).

John Allen Paulos, *A Mathematician Reads the Newspaper* (Labyrinth and on reserve).

Claude S. Fischer et al., *Inequality by Design: Cracking the Bell Curve Myth*. Appendix 1 and ch. 4 (Labyrinth and on reserve).

Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (Labyrinth and on reserve).

William Brustein, *The Logic of Evil: The Social Origins of the Nazi Party, 1925-1933*. (Labyrinth and on-reserve.)

Elliot G. Mishler, *Research Interviewing: Context and Narrative* (Labyrinth and on reserve).



Requirements

Attendance: Students are expected to attend all classes. If you miss a class you are responsible for obtaining lecture notes from one of your classmates.

Reading: Students are expected to complete assigned readings in a timely fashion, and to particulate in discussions to the extent possible given the size of the class.

Exams: There is a midterm and a cumulative final examination.

Paper: Students are to write a 15-20 page (double-spaced) paper on some topic of interest with respect to which evidence (e.g., survey, interview, and anecdotal) is readily available in the media. Examples include the deterrence value of capital punishment; the effects of abortion availability on such things as crime and poverty; the effects of “social promotion” in schools; the effects of school voucher systems; the viability of permitting homosexuals to serve in the military; explanations for the recent nation-wide (and especially NYC) drop in crime; and the effects of internet use on psychological well-being. You are to evaluate the evidence in light of the concepts introduced in the lectures and readings, and formulate your opinion on this basis – keeping in mind that in some cases the evidence is truly ambiguous, in which case a strong opinion one way or another may not be warranted. (Translation: if the evidence leaves you uncertain, even after you’ve evaluated it critically, say so.) Be on the look-out for opinion pieces in newspapers and magazines that wield evidence in support of some position. Critically analyze such articles for logic and their (possibly selective) use of evidence.

Here are three pointers based on errors made by students in the past:

1. Pick a topic that has generated a substantial amount of literature; if you pick a topic that proves too obscure to have generated much interest in the media, change topics.
2. Make sure to use concepts introduced in class; your success in doing so competently is an important determinant of your grade.
3. Resist unfounded conjecture. If you don’t have evidence to make some assumption or draw some conclusion, don’t.

While the paper is not due until late April, by the end of February you will have most of the concepts you need to start working on it. Contact me if you are uncertain about a particular topic. While more than one student may write on a particular topic, I will read all papers on a particular topic at once, and will be sensitive to excessive similarity, and appreciative of differences. (Translation: you can ask other people writing on the topic for references, but don’t collaborate otherwise.) The paper will be graded both for form (50%) and content (50%). Make sure to cite your sources, and exceed the 20 page limit at your own peril.

Grading

		90-100% = A
Midterm:	30%	80-89% = B
Final:	35%	70-79% = C
Paper:	35%	60-69% = D

Note that aside from errors of calculation, all final grades are final. Under no conditions will make-up work be assigned or considered over the summer, unless you have successfully petitioned the dean for an official extension.

Date	Reading	Topics	Due/tests
Jan. 17		Introduction	
Jan. 22	<i>Suicide</i> , Preface, Introduction, chs. 1-3 of Book 1	Evidence and argumentation in sociology, principles of sociological explanation	
Jan. 24			
Jan. 29	<i>Suicide</i> , chapter 4 of Book 1, chs. 1-3 of Book 2		
Jan. 31	<i>Suicide</i> , chs. 4-6 of Book 2		
Feb. 5			
Feb. 7	<i>Mathematician Reads</i> , pp. 1-100		
Feb. 12			
Feb. 14			
Feb. 19	<i>Mathematician Reads</i> , pp. 101-203	Statistics in the media, sampling, inferential statistics	
Feb. 21			
Feb. 26	Fischer et al., Appendix 1, Chapter 4	The <i>Bell Curve</i> controversy	
Feb. 28			
March 5		TBA, midterm review	
March 7			Midterm
March 12	Spring break		
March 14			
March 19	<i>Obedience to Authority</i> , chs. 1-9	Experimental research	
March 21			
March 26	<i>Obedience to Authority</i> , chs. 10-15		
March 28			
April 2	<i>Logic of Evil</i> , chs. 1-3	Archival research and historical reconstruction	
April 4			
April 9			
April 11	<i>Logic of Evil</i> , chs. 4-5 and Conclusion		
April 16	<i>Res. Interviewing</i> , chs. 1-3	Interviewing, ethnographic research	
April 18			
April 23	<i>Res. Interviewing</i> , chs. 4-5		
April 25			
April 30		Wrap up	Paper due in class
May 4-11			Finals