Social Problems Research Project/Presentation

This assignment involves identifying a particular social issue that you believe constitutes a social problem. Sociologists are trained to identify the nature and causes of social problems, along with possible solutions to these problems. Sociologists conduct scientific research on social problems and disseminate this information at academic conferences through paper presentations, through publishing articles in peer-reviewed scholarly journals, and writing books. Prominent sociologists will occasionally appear on nationally televised programs to discuss their research on a particular problem, or they may be asked to present their research to a governmental committee that has been charged with a fact-gathering mission on a social issue. In these cases, a sociologist would be expected to present their evidence of the problem, discuss the nature and the causes of this problem, and present some possible solutions to politicians in the hope that government representatives can develop social policy that helps to alleviate the problem.

The purpose of this assignment is to give you some experience in analytically studying a social problem, making reasoned arguments to support the acknowledgment of the issue as a social problem by policy makers, and how to present this information to a larger audience. This purpose is consistent with the goals of public sociology, which emphasizes educating the larger general public about the contributions that sociology can make to the larger society. The benefits of this assignment for students are two-fold. First, if you plan on attending graduate school in the future, it will help prepare you for future assignments that involve critical analysis and presentations. However, a second benefit is of a more personal nature, that of empowering students to challenge what they see as a social problem and taking steps to rectify it.

What You Need to Do:

I. Identify the Social Problem (Objectivist Aspect):

You will select a social issue that to you constitutes a social problem. This problem can be a local, state, or national problem. Here you need to provide recent statistics on the problem itself, along with citing sociological research on its causes. A good place to look for statistics on a social issue is the Statistical Abstract of the United States. This resource contains recent and historical information on a variety of issues, including unemployment, wages, divorce, crime, and drug use. If you are having a difficult time trying to identify a problem, it is best to think of something that you are passionate about, maybe something that appears to be affecting your own neighborhood/community. The textbook for this course is also a good resource for topics, but an introductory sociology textbook can be helpful as well.

Keep in mind that this assignment transcends political ideology in the sense that the issue or problem you select does not have to be a “liberal” or a “conservative” issue, simply an issue you believe constitutes a problem. However, whatever issue you do select, part of your grade will be based on the quality of the empirical evidence you provide to support your argument.

II. How to Raise Public Awareness About the Social Problem (Constructionist Aspect):

In this section of the assignment, you will discuss different claimsmaking activities that might help raise awareness of the issue to a broader audience. If it is a local issue, then focus on activities appropriate for that level. If it is a larger issue, then focus on activities appropriate for that level. In addition to several claimsmaking activities, you are required to typify the problem for others. In other words, how do you feel the problem should be characterized - is it a problem caused by individuals, the larger social structure, or both (or something else)? Keep in mind how important this part of social problems awareness is. You need to convince a broader audience that first of all the issue is a social problem, but you also want to influence how others see it. If this sounds biased in some way, keep in mind that there is bias associated with every viewpoint. This is the subjective nature of human inquiry and cannot be avoided. The objectivity that social scientists are expected to seek comes from recognizing all research findings on an issue, not just the ones that support your viewpoint.
III. Identifying Solutions:

In this section you will be presenting some solutions to the problem to your audience. These solutions must be grounded in sociological research and viable (possible to achieve and potentially effective). There is not a specific number of solutions that I am looking for, but I will assess your solutions in terms of their potential effectiveness, expense, and creativity. Keep in mind that you want to succeed in your mission to bring attention to the social problem, not turn people off because of exceedingly controversial or outrageous suggestions.

Please Note: I wanted to give you some guidance on sources of information for the paper. There are acceptable sources, such as governmental agencies, scholarly journals like the American Sociological Review and Social Problems, etc. However, there are some unacceptable sources that are not permitted in this paper, such as Wikipedia, magazines, blogs, etc. that are not peer-reviewed. If you are uncertain about a particular source you have found, simply ask and I will let you know. Keep in mind that your paper needs to be based on facts and not simply somebody’s opinion or belief. The best approach to finding sources is to start with the Cameron Library and search through the database of published scholarly articles.

Putting It All Together:

There will be two components to your paper. The first will contain a written paper addressing the three sections above. This will be in essay form with one-inch margins, double-spacing, and page numbers. The second component will be a PowerPoint presentation. Your presentation will consist of: (1) one or two slides briefly identifying the social problem and its causes, (2) one or two slides on the typification of the issue (in what way is it a social problem, who is impacted by it, etc.), and (3) one or two slides presenting solutions to the problem. The essay component should be between 4-5 pages in length, in addition to a cover page and a reference page at the end of the paper. Be sure to write your paper in Microsoft Word. The PowerPoint presentation should include at least six slides and no more than ten. You should include citations in your slides, but you DO NOT need to include a references slide since these references should already be at the end of your paper. Your citations in the slides should include author last name and date of publication. Here is an example of proper citing in sociology: (Bausch 2007).

You are required to compile these two files together in WORD. Simply copy your PowerPoint slides to the end of your WORD document and they should remain intact. Then, save the entire document in WORD and upload it to the Digital Drop Box in Blackboard as ONE file.

A Brief Note on PowerPoint: While this task might strike some of you as daunting, it shouldn’t be too difficult. If you are not very familiar with PowerPoint, please experiment a little with the program first and make up some quick slides with which to practice. You can also go to the Help pull-down menu and click on Microsoft Office Online and watch some demos, etc. on how to set up slides. I understand if you do not feel confident with using PowerPoint, however, the ability to communicate effectively in both the public and private sectors often requires knowledge of these kinds of software programs.

Assignment Due Date: Friday, April 17th, 2009.