

# Classic Tensions & Thinking Sociologically

Aside from following instructions, grades on Assignments and Tests depend upon demonstrating sociological thinking in your written work. **Over the semester, changes in your written work REFLECT YOUR LEARNING; use this guide to practice sociological thinking AND develop a sociological imagination. Refer to this guide after you've reviewed comments on grades & submitted work.**

**Aside from BASIC rules for clear written communication (grammar, spelling, sentence structure) using sociological language and EVIDENCE are key in all course work.**

- Follow basic grammar and punctuation rules and check your spelling; correct typos and keep sentences short.
- Stick to the point and the point is **ALWAYS** current course materials and topics.
- Use **appropriate sociological language** not only BECAUSE they are precise, unambiguous, 'value-free' and your classmates can look up the definitions if they need to but importantly because use of them demonstrates sociological thinking.
- Provide **EVIDENCE**. Appropriate use of EVIDENCE is necessary to make sociological issues clear to others.
  - Evidence must be cited (in-text cites)
  - Evidence is specifics and examples; it is details and demonstrates understanding of issues, not simply use of terms.
  - Evidence identifies social roles, social structures, social processes, social norms – AND sources.

**Doing Sociology, with a BIG dose of self-reflexivity, develops your sociological imagination; Course Work GUIDES this process.**

- Learning **starts** with asking questions about the work you are doing and the meaning of new information (notes!)
- Learning **starts** when and where you are able to connect what you know with 'new' information – this is interpretation
- Learning follows your interests; doing sociology/inquiry is SUPPOSED to be driven by YOUR choices and YOUR questions; Course Work and feedback GUIDE YOUR LEARNING. **A little bit of confusion/anomie is GOOD – it means you are THINKing!**

**I use RUBRICS to outline expectations and provide feedback to help you achieve course Learning Goals; in other words, assignment grades reflect your progress in achieving course learning goals all of which are about revealing a sociological perspective and thinking sociologically.**

Evidence based on MANY years of experience shows that students who start assignments late and skip steps/instructions earn poor grades. Give yourself time to complete course work effectively.

**Chances are questions and concerns raised while doing course work are related to at least one of the 4 classic tensions in sociology:** Classic tensions represent 'unresolved issues' in the discipline of Sociology AND appear in one form or another in all 'social problems'. Course work deepens your ability to identify classic tensions and to recognize the details and specifics that constitute evidence. Since 'tension' implies 'stretch', BOTH elements of each tension are identifiable in ALL social contexts.

- **Formal** and **informal** is the 'tension' between patterns of behavior and social organization that is 'codified', as in written into law, policy or procedure, and that which is informal, normative behavior and social patterns that appear as part of human social interaction and are not codified. People establish informal social patterns to manage the formal ones.
- **Agency** and **structure** is the 'tension' between, on the one hand, the ability and capacity of individuals and single social organizations to change the normative structures of daily life (called **agency**), and the **structural constraints** on their abilities or capacities to 'act freely' to achieve change. **Individual agency is ALWAYS impinged upon by social structures.**
- The gap between **real** and **ideal norms** is the **social distance** between what we as individuals (or as a culture) BELIEVE **should** be true and what actually **IS true** and real in society and social life. Individuals experience the tension between their ideal norms and reality as **cognitive dissonance**; society expresses cultural myths that mask uncomfortable realities.
- **Anomie** to 'normative' continuum – **Norms** are always context specific so finding the **social boundaries** of a context helps us identify what is normative and what is 'deviant'. In all social contexts, some individuals experience more anomie than others – often related to their level of **marginalization**. Who (by social roles) experiences contexts as normative and who experiences them as anomic (and to what extent) has to do with **social boundaries** and **marginalization**.

Essentially, the terms above are the 'boundaries' of sociology as a discipline; if you can identify these, you are thinking sociologically. As we move through the semester, I will point out and we will do in-class exercises identifying and applying classic tensions; recognizing them in the social issues that interest you also gives you ways to organize your thinking and stay focused on sociology.

Making explicit use of classic tensions in the organization of Unit Tests and the Final Team Project is a key aspect of demonstrating the sociological thinking and achievement of course learning outcomes that your grade depends on. Classic tensions will therefore appear in a variety of ways over the semester.