SOCI 211: Sociological Inquiry
Assignment 1: Preliminary Research Proposal
Grading Rubric

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Dimension 1: Research question

Written comments:

For "problem solving" questions: Does the author's question highlight a genuine problem, i.e. a logical contradiction between what we think we know and what the data/history show? At a basic level, does it seem to warrant further investigation, or does it strike you as having an obvious answer?

For "problem creating" questions: If the author's research actually showed that the problem it thinks exists really did exist, would it create a real sociological problem? Would it challenge some existing theory or set of theories about how the world works? Note that this is different from a *social* problem, i.e. something we think is bad about the world.

Does the author provide adequate motivation for the problem, i.e. show why the problem is interesting and worth investigating?

How might the author sharpen or clarify the question?

(3-5 comments)

Quantitative evaluation (rated from 1-7):

1. Research question quality: Does the author’s research question highlight a real sociological problem?
2. Thought-provoking: At a basic level, does the problem the author proposes to solve or hopes to identify lend itself to further discussion, or does it seem to have an obvious answer?
3. Motivation: Does the author motivate the research question adequately, i.e. show why it is a real problem worth exploring?
4. Relevance: Is the author's research question relevant to the course? Does it fall within the realm of sociological questions, or is it too far afield, i.e. more in the realm of medical science, psychology, biological sciences, etc.?

Dimension 2: Competing Explanations

Written comments:
This is where the author sets up the terms of the debate in which they are intervening. While you are not necessarily expected to comment on how accurate the author's assessment of the terms of the existing debate is, you should be able to assess the extent to which the author has successfully set up a real debate, or set up a concise list of possible and plausible explanations to evaluate.

(1-3 comments)

Quantitative evaluation (rated from 1-7):

1. Set-up: Does the author construct a set of plausible possible explanations? In reading through them, do you find yourself almost automatically starting to think through which explanation makes the most sense? Are there other possible explanations you can think of that might be missing?

2. Research quality: Has the author consulted an array of reliable sources of academic research? Note that this is just a preliminary proposal at this point, so there won't be a lot of sources. But you should be able to assess the quality of the existing references, i.e. does the author reference peer-reviewed journals and books from academic publishers (good)? Primary research from reliable agencies (e.g. government statistics, etc.) (also good)? OR does the author reference Wikipedia articles (not good), popular magazines (probably not good), random websites (not good).

Dimension 3: Hypotheses

Written comments:

This is where the author is expected to articulate as clearly as concisely as possible what they expect to find based on their current understanding of the issues surrounding their research question. They can either 1) “take sides” in an existing debate, i.e. say that they agree with one school of thought over another; or 2) articulate their own hypotheses.

For "problem solving" research proposals, this section involves stating what you currently think the explanation of your problem might be, given your limited knowledge. For "problem creating" research proposals, where you are trying to figure out if a problem exists or not, you need to provide a justification for why you think the problem might exist.

You should NOT evaluate the authors' hypotheses based on how "right" you think they are. The main thing is that they be 1) coherent; and 2) plausible, based on the author's assessment of debates surrounding the question (as elaborated in the previous "competing explanations" section).

Note that the author can propose a single working hypothesis, or multiple hypotheses (no more than three, though).
Quantitative evaluation (rated from 1-7):

1. Clarity: Is the stated hypothesis clear? At a basic level, do you understand what the author's proposed explanation is? For problem-creating research, does the author provide a clear rationale for expecting to find their proposed causal relationship?
2. Falsifiability: Do you think it would be possible to show that the proposed hypothesis is wrong, given the right evidence? Do you see a clear way of evaluating whether it's more or less wrong than other competing explanations?