

Race, Class, and Gender Short Reflective Essay

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Abstract

Making connections between personal experiences and sociological learning in Race, Class, and Gender is of paramount importance. This assignment challenges students to critically reflect on what they have learned, to relate a chosen past experience to what they have learned from class, and to apply their learning to this past experience to reveal how larger institutional forces have shaped an experience in their daily lives. This assignment challenges students to use skills in critical thinking, theoretical analysis, and self-reflection. Students come away from the assignment with stronger self-awareness, better appreciation for how sociology can illuminate their daily lives, and with a clearer understanding of how social forces shape their personal experiences, often in ways they never imagined.

Details

Subject Areas: Race, Class and Gender, Racial and Ethnic Relations, Sex and Gender, Sexualities

Resource Types: Assignment

Class Levels: College 100, College 200, College 300, College 400

Class Sizes: Medium, Small

Usage Notes

This activity is best to be assigned as being due around the middle to end of the semester. It is good to give the assignment prompt to students at the beginning of the semester to get them thinking about their experiences, to ask questions, etc.

Learning Goals and Assessments

LEARNING GOALS

Students will learn to critically reflect on on their learning

Students will learn how to apply sociological material to making sense of a personal experience from their daily lives

Students will learn how larger institutional forces have shaped an experience in their daily lives

Students will learn how to critically analyze events

Students will learn how to use sociological terms, theories, and concepts

ASSESSMENTS

Instructors assess student performance using a grading rubric that is included.

Resource Files

PDF

Race, Class, and Gender
Short Reflective Essay
Assignment Instructions

In this assignment you are challenged to write a short, 550-to-600-word essay in which you will critically and reflectively analyze how larger institutional forces we have studied play into and shape a personal experience of your choosing. Please note that this short essay should not take more than two or three hours to complete.

As part of this assignment, you will reflect on what you have learned in this course, relate your chosen past experience to what you've learned from class, and apply your learning to this past experience to reveal how larger institutional forces have shaped an experience in your daily life. This calls on you to draw upon your skills in critical thinking, theoretical analysis, and self-reflection.

Please pick an experience that is personally meaningful to you that clearly connects to course content. Note that this is a course on race, class, and gender (and sexuality), and so your chosen experience and how it has been shaped should be focused on one of these aspects of our social world, as discussed throughout our course. Please note that your experiences will NOT be shared with others and will be kept in confidence.

Please choose a concrete, discrete event, that began and ended on the same day. Do not choose a series of experiences (e.g. over several days, weeks, months, years) or a broad experience (e.g., your overall experience with racism, sexism, etc.). Choose only something that happened and was completed on a single day. It doesn't have to be something horrible, life-altering, or Earth-shattering. Much can be done with even subtle experiences and positive experiences. If you have trouble choosing, please see me for help. If you can't pick an experience you have personally had, you may choose an experience that happened to a friend, relative, or coworker (so long as you have enough information about the experience to understand it and discuss it critically).

To help ensure that you can critically evaluate this experience meaningfully, please do not choose experiences outside this close circle of people around you. Do not, for example, talk about people you don't personally know and about whose experiences you are not strongly and intimately aware of so as to be able to discuss the chosen experience with strong insight. Examples include but are not limited to: something nice a friend said or did that contradicted your expectations or experiences with racism, sexism, or homophobia; a personal conversation with you in which a friend or relative or boss said something racist/sexist/homophobic; something someone did to you that was racist/sexist/homophobic; a protest you attended in which you stood up against racism, sexism, or homophobia; etc. You are welcome to make the people involved anonymous through the use of fictitious first names or by calling those involved some variant of "Person A" and "Person B," etc., but in writing up your work, please clearly indicate and show that the person or people involved are clearly within the circle of people approved for this assignment to ensure it meets the inclusion criteria outlined above.

Please start your essay showing just enough of the specifics of your chosen experience to "show" what happened, what people did, what people said. This showing of what was said and be limited to be about the first 100 words of your essay. Focus the rest on your critical analysis and making meaningful and explicit connections between the experience you describe and class content.

In evaluating your experience, you are to use only TWO terms/concepts from class

explicitly in your work (shown in the list below) to demonstrate how there were larger structural or institutional forces at play that shaped the outcome of the experience you describe. For your essay, use only two terms in your essay. This will help me better identify the terms you are using and elaborating upon and give your work greater focus and space for critical thinking and elaboration in using your chosen terms. Try to present a more sustained use and engagement with your chosen terms and be sure they are integrated throughout your essay/argument rather than using them only once and rather than using them only briefly, tangentially, or in passing as more sustained use focuses and deepens your analysis and makes the connections you draw more meaningful. Using three or more terms should be avoided because this detracts from the greater depth and sustained focus that is easier to accomplish with using only two terms. Please put the terms you use in **bold print** the first time you use them so that I can more readily identify them and to ensure I know which terms you intend to use to avoid any confusion or misinterpretation.

After you briefly introduce what happened in the event itself, discussing and showing “why” and “how” your chosen experience was shaped by larger institutionalized forces should be the main focus of your response. Really try to critically and theoretically explore “how” and “why” the event was shaped by larger forces we have discussed and to show the linkage(s) between your chosen experience and those larger forces shaping that experience. These linkages are critical as they help to support your larger argument and better enable the reader to “see” and follow your argument and line of reasoning. In other words, please do not just use your experience as an entry point to discuss larger issues, but discuss your experience and show “how” and “why” it was shaped by institutional forces we have discussed and be sure to make the linkages between your experience and those institutional forces very clear. Also, be mindful that this short essay is not intended to be an opinion-editorial (op-ed) and so please stay clear of veering into opinion and editorializing.

In using your two chosen terms, be sure to use and discuss them as they are used and explored in class content. Also, please do more than using the chosen terms in a superficial way. Using one of the terms in passing, for example, is not enough as it must be unpacked and the dynamics explored in relation to explaining how your chosen event was shaped. Your use of your two chosen terms should be more sustained and meaningful and show deeper engagement rather than incidental and unexplored uses of the terms, which would be too superficial for this assignment.

As this is not a “paper” in the traditional sense and as space is intentionally limited, please do NOT include a title page, title, introduction paragraph, conclusion paragraph, or list of references. Your work should fall into three or more paragraphs. Also, do NOT define the terms you use in your work. The terms are defined elsewhere and your understanding of them should be evident from your writing. Terms should not be defined here because your ability to use them correctly better demonstrates to me your understanding of the terms and ability to use them correctly and meaningfully. Not defining your terms is also intended to give you more space in which to better discuss and develop your points/argument in the short amount of space available.

Also, use quotes sparingly, if at all. The only time a quote is really called for is if the wording of something is meaningful, illustrative of something profound, to support an argument with concrete evidence, and cannot be captured any other way. It is generally better to put things in your own words, otherwise it can appear as an attempt to pad your word count.

Please be mindful of the upper- and lower-word limits as points will be deducted if your work falls below the 550 minimum or goes over the 600 maximum. This word limit range is intended to help make the essays more comparable and to facilitate fairness. So be concise and

dive right in. Give just enough for me to understand what happened in the experience you describe (no more than 100 words). Spend the rest of your space on evaluating how the experience was shaped by larger forces (about 450 to 500 words). You should go beyond summary, description, or opinion. Draw connections, question assumptions, show critical thinking that draws connections to class content.

Generally speaking, essays start with a short paragraph briefly describing the experience to be analyzed and are then followed with two or three additional paragraphs critically examining the chosen experience while making use of the chosen terms. Also note that your chosen terms must be clearly related to and be strongly and explicitly visible in the experience you choose to analyze, or you will receive points deductions. Please do not expect me to necessarily understand how things connect or are evident. I have to “see” the terms/concepts you choose in your work. Show and support your arguments and points clearly. Failure to support your points with illustration will receive points deductions. These illustrations need not be lengthy. Often a sentence or two will suffice. It is better to make fewer points and illustrate and support them well than to attempt many points that are not well supported or illustrated.

Format and length: 550-600 words, single-spaced, 12-point Times New Roman font, 0 spacing after each line, and one-inch margins. As an example, these instructions are written using the correct formatting.

Points will be awarded using the rubric below and relative to overall class performance. Additional points may be deducted for not following the instructions and criteria above, as appropriate, on a case by case basis.

Component	Excellent	Good	Poor	Score
1. “Brief Overview of Experience”	Provides a concise summary of the chosen experience that describes it with sufficient detail needed for others to understand but does not exceed 100 words. 7-10 pts	Meets expectations, but with some mistakes or omissions, such as neglecting some detail needed to make sense of the experience or greatly exceeding or falling short of the 100 word limit. 5-6 pts	Does not meet expectations or rules and/or contains many errors or omissions, such as neglecting to include most of the information or details needed to understand the experience and/or greatly exceeding or falling short of the 100 word limit. 0-4pts	10 Points Possible
2. “Personal Impact”	Demonstrates critical thinking and appraisal of how larger forces have affected the	Meets expectations, but with some mistakes or omissions, such	Does not meet expectations or rules and/or contains many errors or omissions, such as giving too few	20 Points Possible

	<p>student personally or others, drawing on the student’s personal experiences to illustrate and support points. Adequately and concisely describes the student’s own experiences to make them understandable in context.</p> <p>14-20 pts</p>	<p>as giving some mention of how a social force has impacted the student but failing to adequately support and illustrate points with examples drawing on personal experiences. Shows some attempt at critical thinking but this thinking is superficial.</p> <p>7-13 pts</p>	<p>or no examples to illustrate how the student and others have been personally affected by experience in question. Does not demonstrate critical thinking and instead relies on entirely superficial reasoning.</p> <p>0-6 pts</p>	
3. “Use of Terms”	<p>Uses two terms/concepts to make and illustrate points and to make and develop the central analysis. Terms are meaningfully connect and are integrated into the chosen experience and unpacked throughout the analysis from beginning to end. Use of terms is adequately illustrated and supported. Shows clear logic and understanding of both chosen terms. Terms are used explicitly and unambiguously.</p>	<p>Uses two terms/concepts to make and illustrate points, but terms lack more meaningful integration into the analysis or analysis is somewhat superficial. One term is meaningfully integrated as described, but the other is not. Integration of terms could use more sustained use and development. Use of one of the terms may show lack of clear understanding of</p>	<p>Uses two terms/concepts to make and illustrate points, but illustration is unclear, vague, or not well supported. Use of terms is superficial. May have flawed logic or over-reliance on the reader to “know” what the author means or intends. Terms may be mentioned only briefly or in passing without sustained and meaningful integration that develops the essay. One or both terms may be used in a way that shows lack of understanding of the terms. One or both terms are not used</p>	20 Points Possible

	14-20 pts	the term. One term may not be used explicitly or there may be ambiguity in its deployment in the essay. 7-13 pts	explicitly and/or with ambiguity. 0-6 pts	
			Total	50 Points Possible

TERMS FROM WHICH TO CHOOSE FOR ESSAY

NOTE: Terms should be discussed and used in the way they are discussed in class and in the assigned readings. NOTE: Page numbers given for terms below are not comprehensive in definition as terms are often discussed in multiple places. Page numbers below are merely an initial step to help you get started. You should use your chosen terms as they are discussed throughout the assigned reading in the chapter(s) in which they appear, not solely on the pages shown below. This essay covers content from pages 7-197.

Remember: Only use TWO terms from this list. Using three or more will result in deductions.

- Social location (Ferguson 8)
- Power (Ferguson 8)
- Internalized oppression (Ferguson 17)
- individualistic fallacy (Ferguson 26-27)
- legalistic fallacy (Ferguson 26-27)
- Tokenistic fallacy (Ferguson 26-27)
- ahistorical fallacy (Ferguson 26-27)
- fixed fallacy (Ferguson 26-27)
- Social construction (Ferguson 32)
- Heteronormativity (Ferguson 36)
- Class (Ferguson 62)*
- Heterosexuality (Ferguson 89-97)
- Class (Ferguson 100)*
- Class locations (Ferguson 103)
- Hegemonic masculinity (Ferguson 114)
- Structural domain of power (Ferguson 136)
- Disciplinary domain of power (Ferguson 136)
- Hegemonic domain of power (Ferguson 136)
- Interpersonal domain of power (Ferguson 136)

Terms above come from our course textbook:

Ferguson, Susan J. 2020. *Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Social Class: Dimensions of Inequality and Identity*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

USAGE NOTES

I find this assignment is very easy to adapt and use it widely in my other courses.

Most of my students share personal experiences that they have been involved with directly, though a significant number choose the non-personal option.

Students infrequently overlook the instructions that require selecting a single event completed on a single day and instead stray into an attempt to discuss a series of events or broad generic experience (e.g., their entire life experience with racism/sexism/homophobia, etc.). I find it helps to remind students that this assignment should focus on a single event that was completed in a single day. A reminder of this a week before and another reminder of this a day before the assignment is due may help to decrease the odds of this happening, though it is not the norm. It also helps to give examples, such as relating something from the instructor's personal experience or that of a colleague, friend, etc. Instructors can also require that student topics and approaches be pre-approved in advance of the due date to ensure appropriateness.

I purposefully do not include "intersectionality" on the list of terms because this inevitably becomes a term, in my experience, that half or more of the class chooses, making the grading potentially monotonous for the reader. I also find that it becomes the easiest term to use throughout the course because it figures centrally into so many of the readings from the assigned textbook (and indeed throughout the course as a whole). This makes it a little more of a challenge to students to use other terms.

I haven't really experienced much pushback from students on the assignment, mostly just students overlooking details of the assignment or ignoring instructions entirely, which is just part of the business of teaching that can't be entirely avoided. Most often I get good analyses, things which I sometimes enjoy and learn from, though they can be difficult to read due to the difficulty of the experiences they may share that have caused them pain.

Some brief discussion of how one illustrates and supports points when writing is always useful for any written assignment, and this proves no exception. Instructors can easily do this drawing on their own training and knowledge. I encourage students to make fewer points and illustrate and support them well. I also encourage students to try to expand on their use of the terms and sustain analysis using the terms critically and multiple times rather than mentioning the terms only once or briefly, tangentially, or in passing as this leads to a more superficial analysis.

Another issue that can sometimes arise is that students sometimes resort to mindreading or overgeneralizing in making their arguments. This is not uncommon for students, of course. Separately from the assignment, such as when introducing it or otherwise discussing it, it is useful to remind students to avoid mindreading and to stick to claims they can support with logic and/or evidence. I also encourage them not to overgeneralize.

I also remind students separately from the instructions here about the importance of being explicit in their writing and not to rely on the reader to interpret or just "know" what they mean. I

also make it clear that it is better to “show” rather than “tell,” and explain with examples what that looks like.

It is important for students to put their terms in bold as sometimes they do not and this makes it difficult to have to search for the terms they are using. It should be stressed, too, that terms must be used explicitly rather than relying on the reader to interpret their intention and meaning and to be fair to the class.

I regularly encourage students to write about their choice of events and stress that what they choose doesn't need to be negative, that much can be done with positive and even very subtle events, but there is an inclination for them to lean towards discussing negative events rather than neutral or positive as well as more obvious and stronger events and dynamics rather than the more nuanced and subtle. This is to be expected for undergrads. The experiences they describe can sometimes be very moving, very challenging, potentially even triggering for those who have had similar experiences or traumas in their lives. These should be treated with respect, care, and compassion.

Note that the “use of terms” component is separated from the “personal impact” component, but the use of terms is intended to be integrated deeply in the personal impact throughout.