WRITING PAPERS THAT APPLY SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES OR PERSPECTIVES

This document is intended as an additional resource for undergraduate students taking sociology courses at UW. It is not intended to replace instructions from your professors and TAs. In all cases follow course-specific assignment instructions, and consult your TA or professor if you have questions.

ABOUT THESE ASSIGNMENTS

Theory application assignments are a common type of analytical writing assigned in sociology classes. Many instructors expect you to apply sociological theories (sometimes called “perspectives” or “arguments”) to empirical phenomena. [1] There are different ways to do this, depending upon your objectives, and of course, the specifics of each assignment. You can choose cases that confirm (support), disconfirm (contradict), [2] or partially confirm any theory.

HOW TO APPLY THEORY TO EMPIRICAL PHENOMENA

Theory application assignments generally require you to look at empirical phenomena through the lens of theory. Ask yourself, what would the theory predict (“have to say”) about a particular situation. According to the theory, if particular conditions are present or you see a change in a particular variable, what outcome should you expect?

Generally, a first step in a theory application assignment is to make certain you understand the theory! You should be able to state the theory (the author's main argument) in a sentence or two. Usually, this means specifying the causal relationship (X—>Y) or the causal model (which might involve multiple variables and relationships).

For those taking sociological theory classes, in particular, you need to be aware that theories are constituted by more than causal relationships. Depending upon the assignment, you may be asked to specify the following:

- Causal Mechanism: This is a detailed explanation about how X—>Y, often made at a lower level of analysis (i.e., using smaller units) than the causal relationship.
- Level of Analysis: Macro-level theories refer to society- or group-level causes and processes; micro-level theories address individual-level causes and processes.
- Scope Conditions: These are parameters or boundaries specified by the theorist that identify the types of empirical phenomena to which the theory applies.
- Assumptions: Most theories begin by assuming certain “facts.” These often concern the bases of human behavior: for example, people are inherently aggressive or inherently kind, people act out of self-interest or based upon values, etc.

Theories vary in terms of whether they specify assumptions, scope conditions and causal mechanisms. Sometimes they can only be inferred: when this is the case, be clear about that in your paper.

Clearly understanding all the parts of a theory helps you ensure that you are applying the theory correctly to your case. For example, you can ask whether your case fits the theory's assumptions and scope conditions. Most importantly, however, you should single out the main argument or point (usually the causal relationship and mechanism) of the theory. Does the theorist's key argument apply to your case? Students often go astray here by latching onto an inconsequential or less important part of the theory reading, showing the relationship to their case, and then assuming they have fully applied the theory.
Theory application papers involve making a claim or argument based on theory, supported by empirical evidence. There are a few common problems that students encounter while writing these types of assignments: unsubstantiated claims/generalizations; “voice” issues or lack of attribution; excessive summarization/insufficient analysis. Each class of problem is addressed below, followed by some pointers for choosing “cases,” or deciding upon the empirical phenomenon to which you will apply the theoretical perspective or argument (including where to find data).

A common problem seen in theory application assignments is failing to substantiate claims, or making a statement that is not backed up with evidence or details (“proof”). When you make a statement or a claim, ask yourself, “How do I know this?” What evidence can you marshal to support your claim? Put this evidence in your paper (and remember to cite your sources). Similarly, be careful about making overly strong or broad claims based on insufficient evidence. For example, you probably don’t want to make a claim about how Americans feel about having a black president based on a poll of UW undergraduates. You may also want to be careful about making authoritative (conclusive) claims about broad social phenomena based on a single case study.

In addition to un- or under-substantiated claims, another problem that students often encounter when writing these types of papers is lack of clarity regarding “voice,” or whose ideas they are presenting. The reader is left wondering whether a given statement represents the view of the theorist, the student, or an author who wrote about the case. Be careful to identify whose views and ideas you are presenting. For example, you could write, “Marx views class conflict as the engine of history;” or, “I argue that American politics can best be understood through the lens of class conflict;” or, “According to Ehrenreich, Walmart employees cannot afford to purchase Walmart goods.”

Another common problem that students encounter is the trap of excessive summarization. They spend the majority of their papers simply summarizing (regurgitating the details) of a case—much like a book report. One way to avoid this is to remember that theory indicates which details (or variables) of a case are most relevant, and to focus your discussion on those aspects. A second strategy is to make sure that you relate the details of the case in an analytical fashion. You might do this by stating an assumption of Marxist theory, such as “man’s ideas come from his material conditions,” and then summarizing evidence from your case on that point. You could organize the details of the case into paragraphs and start each paragraph with an analytical sentence about how the theory relates to different aspects of the case.

Some theory application papers require that you choose your own case (an empirical phenomenon, trend, situation, etc.), whereas others specify the case for you (e.g., ask you to apply conflict theory to explain some aspect of globalization described in an article). Many students find choosing their own case rather challenging. Some questions to guide your choice are:

1. Can I obtain sufficient data with relative ease on my case?
2. Is my case specific enough? If your subject matter is too broad or abstract, it becomes both difficult to gather data and challenging to apply the theory.
3. Is the case an interesting one? Professors often prefer that you avoid examples used by the theorist themselves, those used in lectures and sections, and those that are extremely obvious.

WHERE YOU CAN FIND DATA

Data is collected by many organizations (e.g., commercial, governmental, nonprofit, academic) and can frequently be found in books, reports, articles, and online sources. The UW libraries make your job easy: on the front page of the library website (www.lib.washington.edu), in the left hand corner you will see a list of options under the heading "Find It" that allows you to go directly to databases, specific online journals, newspapers, etc. For example, if you are choosing a historical case, you might want to access newspaper articles. This has become increasingly easy to do, as many are now online through the UW library. For example, you can search The New York Times and get full-text online for every single issue from 1851 through today! If you are interested in interview or observational data, you might try to find books or articles that are case-studies on your topic of interest by conducting a simple keyword search of the UW library book holdings, or using an electronic database, such as JSTOR or Sociological Abstracts. Scholarly articles are easy to search through, since they contain abstracts, or paragraphs that summarize the topic, relevant literature, data and methods, and major findings. When using JSTOR, you may want to limit your search to sociology (which includes 70 journals) and perhaps political science; this database retrieves full-text articles.
Sociological Abstracts will cast a wider net searching many more sociology journals, but the article may or may not be available online (find out by clicking "check for UW holdings"). A final word about using academic articles for data: remember that you need to cite your sources, and follow the instructions of your assignment. This includes making your own argument about your case, not using an argument you find in a scholarly article.

In addition, there are many data sources online. For example, you can get data from the US census, including for particular neighborhoods, from a number of cites. You can get some crime data online: the Seattle Police Department publishes several years' worth of crime rates. There are numerous cites on public opinion, including gallup.com. There is an online encyclopedia on Washington state history, including that of individual Seattle neighborhoods (www.historylink.org). These are just a couple options: a simple google search will yield hundreds more. Finally, remember that librarian reference desks are expert on data sources, and that you can call, email, or visit in person to ask about what data is available on your particular topic. You can chat with a librarian 24 hours a day online, as well (see the "Ask Us!" link on the front page of UW libraries website for contact information).

[1] By empirical phenomena, we mean some sort of observed, real-world conditions. These include societal trends, events, or outcomes. They are sometimes referred to as "cases." Return to Reading

[2] A cautionary note about critiquing theories: no social theory explains all cases, so avoid claiming that a single case "disproves" a theory, or that a single case "proves" a theory correct. Moreover, if you choose a case that disconfirms a theory, you should be careful that the case falls within the scope conditions (see above) of the given theory. For example, if a theorist specifies that her argument pertains to economic transactions, it would not be a fair critique to say the theory doesn't explain dynamics within a family. On the other hand, it is useful and interesting to apply theories to cases not foreseen by the original theorist (we see this in sociological theories that incorporate theories from evolutionary biology or economics). Return to Reading

[3] By empirical evidence, we mean data on social phenomena, derived from scientific observation or experiment. Empirical evidence may be quantitative (e.g., statistical data) or qualitative (e.g., descriptions derived from systematic observation or interviewing), or a mixture of both. Empirical evidence must be observable and derived from real-world conditions (present or historical) rather than hypothetical or "imagined". For additional help, see the "Where You Can Find Data" section on the next page. Return to Reading

[4] If your instructor does not want you to use the first-person, you could write, "This paper argues..." Return to Reading

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