

Doing what Sociologists do: A student-engineered exercise for understanding workplace inequality

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Abstract: This exercise is designed to help instructors, even those with moderate to relatively large enrollments, lead students through interviews and data analysis. Instructors in a number of fields including sociology, economics, political science, public policy, anthropology, business, or human services may find this exercise useful. Students devise their own research questions and interview questions from course readings on workplace and labor market inequality. They are responsible for conducting four short interviews; two with service-sector employees and two with managers or owners of similar establishments. Students are then responsible for assessing the extent to which the two sides converge and diverge. Along with a description of the exercise, I present a suggested format for students' final papers, as well as sample research questions, interview questions, and sample establishment-types that students may use to create their own independent research project. My students are often surprised by the richness of their data and the consistency of their conclusions with existing theory and empirical research findings.

Keywords: inequality, work, interview, service sector, experiential learning

I. Introduction.

This paper describes a student-designed project for understanding workplace and labor market inequality. The impetus for the project came from numerous discussions with upper-level students at a large, public U.S. university, through which I learned that many students received their degrees without collecting and analyzing their own data. Instead, most “research” takes place in the library and culminates solely in literature reviews. In the words of one student, she had gained little experience “doing what sociologists do” (or anthropologists, political scientists, etc.). In response, I crafted a project that involves interviewing both service-sector employees and managers or owners at similar establishments in order to glean different perspectives on workplace and labor market inequalities. Students select their own focus (for example, minimum wage policies, healthcare benefits, gender and race in the workplace, or scheduling issues), and test their own hypotheses. Before outlining the exercise, I provide learning goals as well as variations on how this exercise might fit into a course framework.

II. Objectives.

The goals of the exercise are fourfold. Primarily, I designed it hoping that students would develop an understanding and appreciation of the demanding nature of low-wage and/or service

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sector work. I suspected that they would discover not only that every worker's situation qualitatively differed, but that even "low-skill" jobs actually require substantial hard skills (reading, writing, mathematics) and soft skills (linguistic ease, diction, work ethic, deference). Secondly, the exercise's strength comes from its ability to compare and contrast the views and experiences of employees with those of management. Students will likely find at least some diverging opinions regarding public policy or the work environment. Thirdly, it seeks to foster an understanding of the ways that mobility is limited in many of these jobs. Finally, and most importantly, the project requires independent, student-driven research involving data collection and qualitative data analysis. This is final goal is undoubtedly an ambitious one, however, as the "Student Findings" and "Student Reactions" sections reveal, the students embraced and appreciated the chance to engage in original data collection and analysis.

III. Framework and Possible Uses.

Although students at large, research universities often encounter fewer opportunities for "experiential learning" than their small-college counterparts, research reveals that this sort of learning can be quite effective at developing the critical thinking and analysis skills (e.g., Grant et al., 1981; Misra, 1997). Most experiential activities aimed at elucidating social inequality rely on service-learning (Mikolchak, 2006; Giles and Eyler, 1994; Everett, 1998; Mooney and Edwards, 2001), classroom activities (McCammon, 1999; Straus, 1986; Groves et al., 1986) or participant-observation/field-trip approaches (Grant et al., 1981; Scarce, 1997; Nichols et al., 2004; Abelev, Vincent and Haney, 2008). Very few experiential inequality exercises place students in the field and require them to engage in project-design and independent data collection. Moreover, the exercise accommodates differential learning styles (Friedman and Alley, 1984; Dunn, 1984) by benefiting students who may learn better from interaction than strictly from reading and lecture. Often, students learn concepts and theories better if they are required to use them (Certo, 1976; Wright, 2000), as students see that their utility extends beyond the classroom.

This exercise fits best in an upper-level course, one in which all students have completed a prior Research Methods course. This prerequisite will ensure that the students are grounded in the ethical and epistemological considerations involved in interviewing and data analysis. The exercise would fit well in courses such as "Work Inequalities," "Poverty," "Social Inequality," "Work and Occupations," "Urban Economics" or "Urban Politics" course. Possibilities exist for incorporating the exercise into an array of economics, anthropology, political science, business administration, or human services courses. In my "Work Inequalities" course, I accompany the exercise with David Shipler's (2005) *The Working Poor*. Although more journalistic than empirical, this book sensitizes students to the many issues affecting the working poor in America, including the Earned Income Tax Credit, affordability of childcare, issues affecting undocumented workers, social capital, "deskilling," and a number of unfair or illegal employer practices.

I instruct students to generate a research question or hypothesis, as well as a number of potential interview questions, while reading this book. Therefore, like a professional academic, students derive their research questions from pre-existing theory and empirical evidence. This approach allows me to introduce students to deductive reasoning, if they have not already encountered it. Other texts germane to this activity include Ehrenreich's (2001) *Nickel and Dimed*, Hays' (2003) *Flat Broke With Children*, Newman's (1999) *No Shame in my Game* or her (2006) *Chutes and Ladders: Navigating the Low-Wage Labor Market*. Although dated, I

accompany the exercise with the (1990) film “Fast Food Women” (Appalshop Productions), which documents the working conditions of fast food workers in rural Kentucky. Like the exercise, the filmmakers interview workers, managers, and even corporate executives. It reveals many surprising contrasts; for instance, corporate executives contend that most employees are either teenagers or simply adding supplemental income to their families’ budgets, thereby justifying low wages. Workers, by contrast, reveal that they are the sole breadwinners in their families, struggling to make ends meet. Uncovering such contrasts serves as the overarching objective of this exercise. I find that this combination of film and reading encourages appropriate and insightful student research questions. Yet, the PBS film “Waging a Living” also provides fertile territory for students to develop their own research projects (Public Broadcasting Service, 2006).

IV. Exercise Description.

I first inform students that they will be speaking with four people for the assignment, two workers and two managers or owners. I tell them that the people they speak with must be strangers, not friends, and that they must appear to be at least 25 or 30 years of age (this is especially important in a “college town” where one is likely to find many university students in service sector jobs). During the week preceding the interviews, I ask students to develop a research question and a set of interview questions germane to that research question. Table 1 presents a list of research questions devised by my students. Some students are particularly interested in the minimum wage and the perceived effects of an increase (which happened federally in 2007, 2008, and 2009). Other students devise questions related to promotions, health benefits, scheduling, hiring practices, unions, or employee turnover.

Students initially voice trepidation at the prospect of interviewing strangers. In order to help the students become more comfortable approaching people, we practice the above scenario during in-class mock interviews. I ask them to bring along at least 20 sample questions (10 for workers; 10 for managers or owners) for use in the mock interview. Instructors may also ask students to turn in a copy of these questions as a graded assignment and so they may provide feedback and use the questions to guide a discussion about proper, objective interviewing techniques. For example, I find that many of the students initially write questions such as “Why do you feel your employer treats you unfairly?” without first asking *if* the employee feels he or she is treated unfairly and without operationalizing fairness or unfairness. Tables 2 and 3 present a list of many of the better questions developed by my students for use during our in-class mock interviews. Once fieldwork commences, I instruct students to approach workers by saying something like the following:

“Hi, my name is (name) and I’m a student taking a sociology course at (school name). We’re doing a unit on service sector jobs, and one of our projects is to interview people who work in these jobs. I was wondering if you would have some time, maybe at the end of your shift today, to talk with me about your work. Everything you tell me will be kept confidential, except where required by a court of law,² and I won’t be talking with

² Having taken a previous research methods course, students should know that survey and interview data, although perhaps not freely shared with anyone, are not subject to the same legal protections as information provided to lawyers and priests and that researchers have occasionally been subpoenaed and forced to reveal interviewees’ identities (Babbie, 2008, pp. 70-71). Associations such as the American Sociological Association maintain that researchers should assure participants the level of confidentiality with which the researcher is comfortable (American Sociological Association, 1999). Therefore, students should

anyone else at your workplace. The interview should take between 10 and 20 minutes. Is there a time that would be convenient for you?”

Table 1. Sample Research Questions Devised and Utilized by Students.

1. What would be the effect on both employers and employees of a minimum wage raise? How much of an increase would employees need to make ends meet? How much of a raise would employers absorb before raising prices or cutting back workforce?
2. Are workers at these establishments typically unionized? Do workers and managers feel that unions would be helpful in ensuring fair pay and labor practices?
3. How do tips affect employees' earnings and employers' attitudes toward proper employee pay?
4. Do workers at this type of establishment typically receive employer-provided health insurance? How do employers feel about providing health insurance to employees?
5. What methods do service sector employers use to augment low wages (if any)? Do they use the provision of free items, discounts, or other amenities? How do these provisions affect employee satisfaction?
6. Do employers create schedules by considering employee obstacles such as childcare, school schedules, or public transportation availability? Do employees generally feel as if their employers ignore the need for scheduling flexibility?
7. Do employers consider family responsibilities in deciding who to hire, promote, or terminate? How do family responsibilities affect on-the-job performance of employees?
8. Do employers generally live more comfortable material lifestyles than employees? Does either party need to rely on government assistance (including TANF, Food Stamps, Earned Income Tax Credit, WIC, etc)?
9. Do employees and employers generally make ends meet on their wages? If not, what other sources of income do they maintain?
10. Do service sector employees [assuming low wages] see their work situation as a result of personal failure or structural inequalities? Do they cite discrimination, failing schools, or inadequate government programs as their reason for their lack of upward mobility? How do managers or owners subjectively view the situations of their workforce?

The last question is especially important, as many workers will fear that participating while they are on-the-clock may be perceived by employers as “stealing time.” Most of my students arrange employee interviews during breaks, lunches, or at the end of shifts. They reported that about 75

make sure to include the phrase “except where required by a court of law” in order to protect themselves from possible, but unlikely, legal ramifications.

percent of the approached workers and 50 percent of the approached managers/owners agreed to participate. Low participation rates can spark discussion about selection biases (could the workers and employees who agreed to participate differ in any observed or unobserved ways from those who declined?). Students should make sure to mention that during the interview an interviewee can decline to answer any question that he or she wishes.

Table 2. Sample Interview Questions for Employees Devised by Students.

1. Do you rely on the income from this job to survive, or do you use it only for supplemental (extra) income? Do you work any other jobs?
2. How many previous jobs have you held? What type of work have you done in the past? Did you earn higher or lower wages at previous jobs?
3. How long have you worked at this establishment? How long do your coworkers usually work here before leaving?
4. Do you belong to a labor union? Why or why not?
5. What is your hourly wage? Do you receive tips? Have you ever been promoted? What was your starting wage? When did you start? Does your employer provide benefits (health,
6. Have you ever been instructed to keep working after you have punched out or asked to start working before punching in (i.e., working off the clock)?
7. What type of hours do you typically work (predictable, irregular, day-shift, swing-shift, graveyard, etc)? Do irregular hours make childcare difficult?
8. How many hours per week do you usually work? Do you receive time-and-a-half after 40 hours?
9. Are you able to make ends meet with the income from this job? If not, what other help do you receive? What hourly wage (and number of hours) does it take to make ends meet in
10. What transportation arrangements do you have (cost of transportation, length of commute)?
11. Are there any out-of-pocket work expenses associated with the job (uniforms, manuals, etc)?
12. What is the highest degree you have earned? (How many years of school?)
13. What are your views on the minimum wage? Should it be higher? (currently \$5.85 in most states)
14. What are your views on public assistance? Is it sufficient? Should it be easier to obtain? Harder? Should it be made more available to working people?
15. Have you ever received (or do you currently receive) government assistance (AFDC/TANF, Medicaid, Food Stamps, WIC, SSI/Disability, Earned Income Tax Credit)?

Students are instructed to choose one particular type of service-sector workplace; for instance, a particular student might do her fieldwork in supermarkets while another interviews only in gas stations. This ensures comparability. I provide students with a list of possible locations such as Wal-Mart, Target, Dairy Queen, Subway, Big Lots, Hampton Inn, and a number of locally-specific service-sector workplaces. Generally, if the student chooses very similar establishments, the results will be more comparable. For example, comparing workers at Subway to those at another sandwich shop will be better than comparing workers at Subway to those at McDonald's.

Table 3. Sample Interview Questions for Managers/Owners Devised by Students.

1. How long have you been a manager or owner here?
2. How many employees do you have?
3. What is your average turnover rate? (how often do workers come and go?)
4. What is the average starting wage here? Do you believe this a fair wage for the work performed and the skills required? (Remember: don't ask accusingly—be objective).
5. Do jobs here provide any benefits (health insurance, retirement)?
6. What expectations do you have of your employees?
7. Are workers typically offered as many hours as they want? How many hours does the average worker receive? How do you decide on the number of hours each person works? Do family
8. What are your views on the minimum wage (currently \$5.85 in most states)? Should it go up, go down, or no change?
9. What would you do if the minimum wage was raised substantially? (\$10 per hour, for example). Cut back workforce? Raise Prices? Nothing? Why?
10. Is it an advantage or disadvantage for workers to join unions? Why? Would you resist if workers tried to join a labor union? How?
11. What are your views on the overall quality of your workforce?
12. What are your views on different demographic groups who apply for jobs (racial minorities, men/women, college students)? Are some typically better employees than others?
13. Do any of your workers receive government assistance (TANF, Medicaid, Food Stamps, WIC, SSI/Disability, Earned Income Tax Credit)? What are your views on workers receiving government assistance?
14. Can most workers make ends meet on the wages paid by his/her establishment? What hourly wage (and number of hours) do you think it take to make ends meet in (CITY)? Could you make ends meet on the wage paid to new workers here?
15. Do you advertise for open positions? Where? How?

I instruct students that these establishments must require no training, only the physical ability to work. For example, they should not speak with forklift operators or plumbers, both of which require training and certification. Limiting the sample this way encourages discussion about the definition of a “skilled” occupation versus “unskilled” labor and usually several students vehemently object to this dichotomy, as they realize that most “unskilled” jobs actually require substantial skills. Table 4 includes a list of possible establishment-types, as well as several common businesses that would fall in each type. I encourage my students to avoid utilizing the same types of businesses as their colleagues; after viewing “Fast Food Women” most students gravitate toward the fast food industry if not encouraged to go elsewhere. Even within these

types, students may find it helpful to select only one type of employee. For example, they may interview two baristas, two hotel housekeepers, or two dishwashers.

Table 4. Examples of Possible Establishment-Types for Student Interviews.

1. Fast Food (Wendy's, Burger King, Taco Bell, Carl's Jr., Popeye's, local alternatives)
2. Retail, Discount (Wal-Mart, Target, ShopKo, Sam's Club, Costco, K-Mart, Big Lots, local alternatives)
3. Retail, Other (Sears, Kohls, Bed, Bath and Beyond, Mervyns, Pottery Barn, Dillard's, local alternatives)
4. Chain Restaurants (Outback, TGI Friday's, Olive Garden, I-Hop, local alternatives)
5. Local Restaurants (Chinese Buffet, Sushi Bar, Mexican, Family Restaurants, Diners)
6. Fueling Stations (76, Amoco, BP, Shell)
7. Supermarkets (Kroger, Safeway, Winn-Dixie, Piggly Wiggly, local alternatives)
8. Hotels (Hampton Inn, Motel 6, Super 8, Country Inn and Suites, Ramada, local alternatives)
9. Pet Stores (Petco, Petsmart, local alternatives)
10. Home Improvement Stores (Home Depot, Lowes, local alternatives)
11. Book Stores (Barnes and Noble, Borders, local alternatives)
12. Coffee Shops (Starbucks, local alternatives)
13. Movie Rental (Blockbuster, Family Video, Hollywood Video, local alternatives)
14. Office Supply Stores (OfficeMax, Staples, Office Depot, local alternatives)
15. Pharmacies/Drug Stores (Walgreens, Rite Aid, CVS, Osco, local alternatives)

V. Ethical Concerns.

The chief ethical concern involves, of course, the protection of human subjects. At many universities, Human Subjects/Internal Review Board rules severely limit the ability for classroom research to involve human subjects. At others, including my home university, classroom exercises are exempt from Human Subjects review. Becoming aware of your university's guidelines prior to the start of the exercise will avoid any unforeseen ethical dilemmas. If students wish to present findings at a conference, submit the paper along with a graduate school application, or otherwise use the paper beyond the classroom, they would also need to secure

Human Subjects/IRB approval. At many institutions, this needs to take place before data collection could commence; at others, a post hoc IRB review can take place if the purpose of data collection has changed. In the former case, students may treat their four interviews as a trial study before completing IRB approval for continued interviews—the ones they will use in the final product.

Another pressing concern involves ensuring that students cause no psychological damage to interviewees. Much potential harm can be assuaged by reviewing students' proposed interview questions, discussing proper objective interviewing techniques (avoiding emotional responses that may alter the way interviewees assess their own situations), and even practicing mock-interviews so that students become comfortable with the interview protocol.

Importantly, I reinforce that students must not tape-record the interviews. They likewise must not record names of interviewees (they create pseudonyms in their papers), and must not record the specific place of employment. They are instructed to record “a Mexican fast food establishment” rather than “The Taco Bell on 5th Street.” Students are instructed to inform interviewees of this strict confidentiality. Ultimately, the student will remember the location of the establishment, but if a third party were to happen upon the research notes or the student paper, they would be unable to identify the location or employee. Lastly, as a safeguard, I instruct students to interview no more than one person per location. This decision undoubtedly harms their ability to directly compare managers and employees at specific establishments (i.e., they cannot interview an employee and then interview his or her employer), but also helps employees feel certain that the information they provide will not be revealed to their supervisors, thus jeopardizing their jobs. Better disclaimers regarding confidentiality may allay some of these concerns, however, instructors can choose whether to opt for this extra safeguard.

VI. Paper Assignment.

I suggest that students type their interview notes upon returning home from the interviews and they can copy and paste from these notes into the relevant sections that will make up their paper. I generally instruct students to read through their interview notes looking for patterns and using the highlight feature available in most word processing programs to denote the emerging themes. During class, we discuss the tendency to see what one wants to see, and I instruct them to present evidence that both supports and refutes their hypotheses. Students are instructed to write a five to seven page reaction paper, consisting of the five main sections below:

- a) Framework. What is your research question? What were your expected findings (hypotheses)? Did you have any secondary research questions?
- b) Fieldwork Recall. Describe the people you spoke with and the places they worked. How well did your interviews go? Where they hesitant to talk with you? Why? Do you think they were honest? Other observations?
- c) Application. Compare and contrast your findings with course reading. Are your findings consistent with (author's) insights into the low-wage, service sector labor market? Did you find any paradoxes or contradictions? What are the largest obstacles for workers in service-sector occupations? How did managers' and workers' views clash? Whose arguments did you find most convincing? Use these

questions as general guides, but also use your qualitative data to explore topics you feel are most relevant.

- d) Policy Analysis. Do you think that low-wage earners are amply supported by today's government programs? Why or why not? If you were a government policy maker, would you make any changes to federal policies designed to help low-wage workers? What would those changes be?
- e) Assessment. Were your hypotheses (expectations) substantiated or unsupported? Did any of your findings surprise you? Have you learned anything new about low-wage, service sector work?

I find this framework quite successful for producing high-quality papers, with the notable exception that many students dedicate far too much space summarizing their fieldwork experience (recall) at the expense of analyzing their findings with course reading and/or lecture material (application). Yet, I generally place more grading emphasis on the latter, as it better reflects critical thinking and it requires the use of relevant concepts and theories from the course materials. While introducing the assignment, I ensure the students are aware of the evaluative focus on application prior to writing their papers. Even after substantial class discussion about government policy and our various safety nets, many students give only cursory consideration to relevant policy alternatives, possibly suggesting the complexity and interconnectedness of many problems facing low-wage workers in the United States. Instructors may likewise require that students submit interview notes along with their papers as an extra safeguard against plagiarism (i.e., it will help ensure that a student actually did the interviews).

On the day papers are due, I instruct students to utilize 10 or 15 minutes to create a “research brief” in which they summarize their findings in five or 10 main points. This involves a brief discussion of the importance of summarizing complex findings in a few short bullet-points. I then divide students in groups of five to seven people and ask them to share their findings with their group. I likewise encourage group members to ask questions and engage in dialogue with each other. Rather than having a group spokesperson summarize the group’s findings, which may be quite divergent, I then reassign new groups and repeat the exercise, allowing students to share their findings with others. This approach successfully fostered engaging group discussions. Upon completion, I work with the class as a whole to develop a list of several main points that summarize our overall research findings.

VII. Student Findings.

Students are generally surprised by the richness of their data. One student, interested in the minimum wage and potential effects of a substantial increase, found one coffee-shop manager who said that he felt he would not be able to handle a minimum wage increase without limiting workers’ hours or laying off employees. For him, raising prices was not an option since he was competing with large corporations who could better absorb the increased labor costs. The same student found that workers felt they “could be fired and replaced very quickly.” Another student, concerned with how workers balanced work and family, had an interviewee who said that “work understands that I have other things going on, but I always feel that they can use that against me. Like if I have to do something with my daughter, they can just cut my hours and give them to

someone else.” This sense of vulnerability and expendability permeated most of the student papers. Many employees looked over their shoulders before making any critical comments about management, presumably out of fear that such criticism may endanger their jobs. Despite the care they take protecting their jobs, few employees noted any beneficial aspects of their jobs. For the employees, “the constant dissatisfaction with their job [sic] was always in the back of their mind.” Students generally find that workers were allotted few or no sick days, were discouraged from filing accident reports, often found themselves overworked, and quite often felt that although their jobs are undesirable and insufficient, the alternatives are equally unattractive, given current levels of human capital.

Interviews with managers and owners confirmed the precariousness of the workers’ labor market positions. One manager commented to a student that “people who work [here] are a dime a dozen.” Yet, students often question the sincerity of managers’ or owners’ responses. Several students noted that the managers viewed the students as little more than a potential sale or an outlet for public relations. One student commented that “each one of them also tried pushing their company and products they sold on me which I felt was very interesting. Even during an interview they were still trying to make a sale.” Another student felt that “the managers sounded to me like they had already something pre-written for them [sic] when situations like these take place” and yet another felt that “It appeared that [the manager] may have tried to answer in a way that would make her decisions appear more generous for her workers.”

Many students concluded that the managers/owners are singularly focused on maximizing profits. They actively resist increases in wages and the provision of benefits, send workers home when customers are scarce, prefer to hire workers who are aesthetically and interactionally pleasing to customers, and admittedly overworked employees who found themselves working on “a skeleton crew.” Managers were generally aware that employees struggled to live on their current wages, yet intense competition and a large pool of job-seekers kept wages low and benefits non-existent (Marx’s “industrial reserve army”). Others at franchise stores reported they had no control over wages and benefits; those were determined by corporate executives. They occasionally provided discounts or competition-based bonuses to employees, chiefly because these could be taken away during hard times. Interestingly, managers often reported that they struggled to make ends meet themselves; one manager reported an hourly wage only \$1.50 above the state minimum, with several others lacking employer-provided health insurance.

Students interested in hiring decisions quite often found that such decisions are made as much by ascribed statuses (particularly race, ethnicity, and gender) as by education, training, and work experience. One student found in his interviews with restaurant managers that “the restaurants tend to hire people according to their ethnicity, not how much education they have or how much experience they have to be qualified for the job.” Although I typically discuss ascribed statuses in class and we may talk about how research has pinpointed the frequent use of gender (Reskin and Roos 1990) and race/ethnicity (Waldinger and Lichter 2003) in ranking candidates for hiring and promotion, students were excited to both see this knowledge substantiated through real-world experience and to add to our knowledge about how and why such decisions are made.

VIII. Student Reactions.

At the completion of the exercise I administered a feedback survey consisting of both open-ended and closed-ended questions to my students. In total, 28 students completed the feedback form. A colleague of mine was generous enough to both try the exercise and administer the evaluation in his course, adding 35 additional cases for a total of 63 student evaluations. Roughly 40 percent of the students said that they had done an interview project in a previous class (most in a Research Methods course), but I found it noteworthy that in upper-level (400-level) courses, more than half had not. Therefore, consistent with the third objective, it did provide most students with their first experience collecting and analyzing original data. Students revealed that their interviews averaged about 16 minutes, and they felt only moderately comfortable approaching strangers to ask for an interview (mean of 5.8 where 1 indicates extremely uncomfortable and 10 indicates complete ease). Yet, when asked the extent to which the project helped them feel more comfortable conducting interviews, responses averaged 6.8 (where 1 indicates “Not at all” and 10 indicates “Substantially”). When asked to what extent the views of managers/owners and employees differed or clashed, student responses averaged 6.5 (where 1 indicates “Not at all” and 10 indicates “Entirely”). This finding informs the second main objective of the exercise; too see if the views of managers and owners clashed with those of workers, which students felt they often did. And, consistent with the first objective, when asked whether the project helped them better understand the working conditions in service-sector employment, quantitative responses averaged 6.7 (same scale as above). And, when asked whether the exercise should be used again in future courses, 85 percent responded “Yes.”

The most common qualitative critique of the assignment was that students wanted more time to complete it. Because I use this exercise in an expedited four-week course, they have less than two weeks to complete interviews and write the analysis; one student commented that he/she “felt rushed” and another five students simply said “More time.” Even in my colleague’s 10-week course, where the students were given an extra week, some students felt rushed. Conversely, a small minority felt that, given the amount of time allocated, they could have undertaken even more interviews in order to ensure that their interviews were not atypical cases. This prompted class discussions about reliability, generalizability, and issues related to sample size. Some students felt that the questions they needed to ask were too personal and in one student’s words, sociologists need to take better care to “respect people’s personal business.” Comments such as these encourage interesting discussions about the sociological enterprise, the offering of incentives to interviewees, and the extent to which social science research necessitates intrusions into subjects’ personal matters. Other students said “I liked the way it went” and “Nothing [should be changed].” When asked about the most important lesson they learned from the project, one student said “The importance of real world experience in study” while another student said “personal skills, speaking, interviewing, etc.”

Students were generally surprised with their findings. During our class discussion, one student commented that “The managers knew about pay inequalities but didn’t do anything about it!” Others benefited from hearing the managers’ points of view, something often missing from similar projects. One student commented that the “minimum wage is more complicated than I assumed. You can’t just raise it because someone has to pay it.” Comments such as these encouraged class discussion about the relationship between employee pay, the price of goods and services, and inflation. Another student commented that he/she was surprised by “the amount of blatant discrimination managers use when hiring employees. [They admitted] it had a lot to do

with ascribed status.” Finally, one student commented on her feedback form that it is unfair that “employers sending people home so they don’t reach 40 hours-- that says...that companies are more concerned about money [sic] than people.” Relatedly, a student commented that “I did not realize that so many companies, large and small, don’t provide anyone with benefits.” Taken in aggregate, these comments may best be summed up by one student’s conclusion that “Employers can be very shady” Comments like these present ample opportunity for discussing how this “shady” behavior can often be structurally-driven. For example, employers statistically discriminate, choosing workers from groups with which they believe they will obtain the most work with the least resistance. These perceptions can be fueled by the media, popular images, or past interactions. In either case, such decisions are often viewed as quite rational, but ultimately driven by pre-existing structural inequalities. Even more importantly, however, one student noted on his or her feedback form that the exercise provided him or her with motivation to challenge systematic workplace inequalities, saying that “discussing these problems with [interviewees] made the problem more personal and real for me....now I really feel there needs to be a change in order to bring about more equality.”

IX. Conclusions.

Many students in my class were surprised by the inequalities they discovered, ranging from the expendability of workers to the markedly unpredictable working hours encountered by many service sector employees. These findings are particularly powerful because they reinforce what one might learn by reading *Nickel and Dimed*, *No Shame in My Game*, or *The Working Poor*, but such discoveries have more staying power when they are derived from a student-designed project. Similarly, the richness of their findings underscores the need to develop and implement more exercises that allow students to design a research project using pre-existing theories (i.e., information from course readings), create a research question or hypotheses, collect data germane to those hypotheses, systematically analyze their interview data, and write up conclusions. Such an exercise requires students to observe the social world and to use those observations to critically consider the textual information that they encounter in their classes. Such critical inquiry carries the possibility that student findings will diverge substantially from prior academic knowledge and will help students feel as if they are contributing to, not passively receiving, knowledge about the social world. It also provides practice in deductive logic, as they are asked to generate research questions using preexisting theory and evidence and to answer those questions using real-world data. Furthermore, I know of no existing exercises that ask students to interview both managers and workers, with the goal of assessing convergence and divergence. In sum, this exercise gives students experience “doing what sociologists do”, from start to finish. As one student eloquently wrote, “It’s one thing to listen to statistics from your professor about workplace inequality, but it is quite another to go out into the field and actually experience the emotion that these people feel about these issues.”

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