Title: Breaking the Carnival Mirror: A Classroom Exercise to Reassess Criminality

By Kenneth R. Culton

The Department of Sociology – Arts and Sciences

I am receiving no other funds for this project.

Past CCTL grants: 2008

Let to a conference presentation: 2009

Title: Breaking the Carnival Mirror: A Classroom Exercise to Reassess Criminality

Description of Project: This project will be implemented in my Fall 2016 Sociology of Deviance class in conjunction with the book *The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison* (2010) by Jeffrey Reiman and Paul Leighton. In it the authors argue that the system of criminal justice presents a carnival mirror image of criminality, one that “shows a distorted image of the dangers that threaten us” (Reiman, Leighton 2010:60). The notion of “crime” presented is “reserved primarily for the dangerous actions of the poor” (Reiman, Leighton 2010:58). The criminal justice system, by focusing its efforts on the poor, young, urban, and black, sends the default message that from these categories arises the greatest source of harm. Sociologists have long sought to challenge this distorted view, originating from Edwin Southerland’s (1940) concept of “White-Collar Crime”. Sutherland intended to bring practices “not ordinarily called crime” into the “scope of criminality” (Sutherland 1940:5). In doing so he provided the theoretical tools that would allow sociologists to shift our focus from the old question, “Who are the criminals?” to the new, “From where does the greatest harm arise?”

The project I propose involves asking students to write a small essay where they examine the sources of harm that have befallen they or members of their immediate family. Research indicates that we can expect workplace injury, the institution of medicine, environmental pollution, and poverty, to be greater sources of harm than the “typical” criminal, the urban black male. After writing their essays students will discuss findings in class and along with the instructor, trends will be identified. This project calls on students to participate actively through careful introspection, writing, and orally communicating how their data relates to the theories put forth in the class text.

Goals of Project: The goals of the project are as follows. 1) To actively integrate students into the learning process by having them critically assess their own experiences relating to harm and criminality. 2) The help give students a sense of how social scientists test theories through the
Breaking the Carnival Mirror: A Classroom Exercise to Reassess Criminality

analysis of a data set, in this case one created by the class itself. 3) To “break the carnival mirror” so to speak, by allowing students to consider the serious long-term implications of linking harm from criminal activity to the “typical criminal” rather than other potential sources of harm.

Active Learning: Active learning is the essence of the project’s design. In past years teaching this particular text I found that students could understand Reiman and Leighton but they stopped short of internalizing their insights. This project leads students to personalize this theory by thinking long and hard about what harms they and their families have been victim to. After the writing step is complete students are expected to share their insights with the class. The classroom wide investigation not only personalizes the story but also unifies and integrates each student more definitively into the class where a spirit of investigation is prized and normalized.

Assessment Techniques: Students are assessed informally on their ability to engage with the material being taught. Students know that participation is worth 20% of the course grade and a rubric detailing appropriate active participation in the course is included in their syllabus. More formally, I will conduct a survey asking students to assess the usefulness of the exercise. I also will rely on assessments of a quiz on the material as well as open-ended comments, both from the survey and the class evaluations. I can also compare quiz grades between classes where this exercise was not used and classes where it was.

Advancing the Understanding of Active Learning at NU: This project will contribute to the active learning of students at Niagara University and the College of Arts and Sciences by existing as another opportunity for students to actively engage in their coursework. I have received a “revise and resubmit” directive from the peer-reviewed journal Teaching Sociology and if published this teaching exercise stands to build on the reputation of Niagara University as a University where active learning is prized and celebrated.

Dissemination: This project will be disseminated through a conference presentation at the Society for the Study of Social Problems conference in Seattle, Washington in August of 2016.