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| Brainmass |
| A guide in Tackling Sociological Research |
| With a Focus on tackling a specific sociological Issue: The Inauguration of a non-traditional American Leader |
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| The solution is a step-by-step guide in tackling sociological research while at the same time focusing on narrowing down the challenge of researching potential social issues that will be brought about by a change in American Leadership by providing solution approaches and examples. |

**A Quick Note**

Prior to launching on explaining and guiding you by example on how to approach this problem, I would like to give you a bit of insight about approaching sociological research and easing your frustration a bit. When I started my own sociological studies I found it hard to tie concepts to reality. I get the general idea but at times theories and concepts seem to just hang in the air and I feel like I am grasping at straws. Do not worry, it is a normal feeling. In my graduate studies I have learned to look at the social world as an open system. If you are looking at it through sociological eyes you are an observer. To do it right you have to try your best to distance yourself and avoid subjectivity and observe it to try and understand the social mechanism that exists. It does not mean you have to be devoid of feelings - far from it. You just need to look at society as subject of study, an open system, a big massive experiment of nature. As a social scientist, you are equipped with tools to understand the social world - theories, perspectives, concepts, processes, schools of thought. Some scientists have preferences as to which theories and what methods to use when studying the social world. We have empiricists, ethnographers, positivists, post-modernists, conventionalists, feminists, etc. Do not let this 'scare' you as heavy and difficult concepts to use. Actually - these are all just tools. Like you have a preference for a certain car or a certain pair of shoes which you believe will fit your style, mood and purpose, theories, concepts and methods in the social sciences are chosen by researchers because of their aptness to the subject matter at hand. With this in mind, we can start looking at the sociological problem that is challenging you and approach it as a subject of study. We will draw from the tools on hand: theory & method then follow said method to produce a study design. I will guide you by example.

**Approaching Research**

I fondly recall my post grad tutor from Oxford, Dr. Sanders, a criminologist when she said that everything starts with a problem. When research is taken on whether in social or natural science, the researcher focuses on coming up with the right question to ask. This is when everything begins. In investigating crime for example, criminologists often ask - Who done it? Newton wanted to find the answers to the question - Why is everything 'falling' towards the ground? Einstein wanted to know how light travels. Derrida wanted to understand how language happens. Foucault wanted to know how human beings attach meaning and create knowledge. How? Why? What? From the root question, secondary and tertiary questions come forth, all asked to investigate the idea further. When the researcher has come upon a position where he has looked closely at the problem, he creates a hypothesis- that position that will either be proven or disproven by the research he/she will undertake. The next step is to design the research and decide upon a method. When the research is quantifiable for example, like investigating the current rate of homelessness in the streets of NY, it is advisable to use quantitative approaches relying on statistics and numbers to present and investigate a sociological problem (rate of homelessness). On the same subject matter, if the research would like to understand the 'state of being homeless', the data and information he is looking for cannot be quantified, it must be 'told' via what sociologists refer to as 'sense-data', felt, observed and shared in. In this case, the qualitative approach applies where the researcher immerses himself in the 'world' of the homeless, talking with them, befriending them, observing them, trying to understand and see how they move about in society, what they lack, how they cope. Like in quantitative, at the end, qualitative research gives the researcher enough data to create a picture of the subject matter and recommend, offer solutions to society to answer the problem of homelessness.

**Tackling Your Research Problem**

I can see why you feel difficulty in approaching this sociological problem. It is apt however since it applies to the state of things in America. For the first time since the beginning of American Democracy, it seems that equality has truly come to fore - the democrats have come to decide between a woman and an African-American presidentiable. The winner, Obama, pitted against the traditional Republican political 'type' McCain won. The last election was historic. One can say it is the culmination of the American ideal of freedom and equality. We can even push so far to say that Martin Luther King Jr. had dreamed of such a day. One can say that Obama was elected by a majority because the American people have decided it is time for change. All well and good. To approach this problem, you have to remove yourself from your ideals and who you believe should be elected or who should lead. This will taint your understanding of the problem. Also there are possible scenarios that you might come to disagree with. As a researcher, you have to put aside subjectivity and be objective about the problem and approach it as a Sociological Puzzle. So the Question is - "How is our society going to be affected by the 1st female president or the first black President?” You are to investigate the ramifications to society when either is elected to the highest office of the land. It seems a tall order, doesn't it? There are just too many possible answers. The thing in social sciences is to learn to create a focus and to practice reflexivity. In this kind of question, there are just so many ways you can go. Essentially, the root of the problem is this - America, for the first time in its history as a nation is doing away with the traditional and conventional 'leader type'. Once elected, what could be the possible problems that the leader and the nation could face because of the shift?

**Concentrating on Concepts**

Like I said earlier, when approaching such a potentially 'big' question, you have to set limits. These Limits are expressed in the beginning of research. For example, if I were you, I will pick from the following potential topics to concentrate on:

* *The American Image* - investigating the social ramifications of inaugurating a non-traditional American Leader in terms of maintaining and creating American relations and leadership in the international scene as the Superpower it is today. How will American leadership be viewed?
* *A Society of Potential Divide* - investigating the effect of a non-traditional President in terms of social opinion. It is no secret that the American society has its share of conventionalists, traditionalists and extremists. Certain States are deeply holding on to what they see as Conventional America. Is it possible that because of this policies will be harder to impose and the nation easily divided by deep demarcation lines?
* *Potential Extremist Interpretation* - it is no secret that political feminists and their counterpart in the African American 'power' movement harbour ill feelings towards society since the Civil Rights movement. Is it possible that such groups will mine the nature of the leadership for their own aims to interpret new policies and move to either alienate or radicalise others?
* *Trends* - the possible trends that the shift in American leadership might start within the American Society and the rest of the world. This will explore the positive and negative trends in terms of leadership and social movement. Example: pros - a more open society, promotion of equality, politics is about leadership capabilities and not about social ties, encourage other nations to be open to positive change, a more flexible and capable image of the American Nation to the rest of the world, possible economic & social change; cons - the rise of radicalisation in political opinions, social alienation, weakening of American image due to divided opinions, possible economic difficulties due to weakened American Image, a less congealed nation due to deep divide of strong political opinions.

**How to Approach the Problem**

When you have chosen a concept, you will have to choose how to approach it. You will have 3 choices: qualitative, quantitative or a combination of both. Then you will have to choose a philosophy to use, something apt. If I was to choose, I'd use a multi-platform approach. I'd use quantitative data in terms of statistics from published studies and papers then I'd use qualitative data via interviews, immersion and other sources including multimedia (TV, internet, radio). As for the Philosophy with which to guide me, I'd choose Critical Theory. If you have not come across critical theory before, let me paraphrase an explanation I have written on the theory previously -

*"Critical theories are a postmodern paradigm of analysing social & literary conundrums or challenges - there is no single 'critical theory', the theory is dependent upon the interpretation of the philosopher, the social scientist or the author. Think of Critical Theory as a genre, like there are genres in movies & genres in music. Horror movies scare, intimidate & intend to give you the chills just like love songs sing about love. Critical theories are a 'genre' of theories of knowledge that in the social sciences if referred to as an epistemology."*

*"Critical theories are used in the social sciences and in Literature to 'critique' and examine society as well as literary works informed by knowledge across said disciplines. While in the Social Sciences a critical theory would be a lot different in application than it is in the Humanities/literature, they share specific attributes. There are a lot of Philosophers, Sociologists, Authors & Writers who have adopted or come up with their own particular 'critical theories' they apply when examining society or a literary work. In the Social Sciences Jurgen Habermas, Theodor Adorno & Anthony Giddens are known postmodern social philosophers with their own interpretation or proposed critical theories that have received acclaim being that they have informed & influenced other studies as well as given a new understanding of society."*

- Jones, 2008

Critical theories are meant to do more than just investigate or 'know'. A critical theory observes analyzes & critiques the social problem and goes one step further - it provides a venue whereupon the findings are used to 'correct' things, to instigate change. A critical theory therefore must be relevant to the social situation of the culture/society where it is hatched to serve as a social agent. In order for a critical theory to cover all areas of society, it must draw on all necessary disciplines, not just on one (sociology combines with economics, anthropology, biology, geography, mathematics, history, psychology, political science, etc.). A Critical theory is an emergent theory. What this means is the theory comes 'out' of the research as it is proven by research. Your hypothesis will be based on the concept you chose and the 'main' question you will ask. Your hypothesis, proven or disproven results to an emergent critical theory from which you can base recommendations on to 'advise' society possible areas of improvement and what/which situations to avoid.

**Making Your Research Systematic & Unique**

Now that we have concepts to choose from, methods to use and a Theory to Guide us, how do we proceed? This is now the part where we design your research and create a timetable. Usually, this depends on the resources you have available. But If I were you, I would do it as such:

1. Ponder on a main Question from the concept, then choose a hypothesis. See my example below:

* Main Question: The American Image - How will America be viewed by its people and the International Community with reference to the shift in American Leadership?
* Hypothesis: America will be viewed as a nation of shifting opinions and as a collective of peoples who are willing to elect a leader due to capacity to lead as needed and demanded by current social demands to lead the nation in a time of turmoil and change.

2. Approach to Use : multi-platform, half-quantitative/qualitative. For quantitative, I will look to published statistics on electoral results and opinion polls published in the US and globally. My source would be the library and the internet. for qualitative, I will interview a sampling of Americans from varied Age groups to socio economic status and I will ask pertinent questions in the many ways the American internally and externally might change and how this will affect them and their communities. I will also collect varied published text on the subject matter as well as international opinions from Europe, Asia, Africa, Australasia, South America, etc. I will also relate these opinions to pressing issues involving America - the current global economic crisis and the War on Terror as well as American relations with China & the Middle East.

3. Data Analysis - with all this collated information, I will now how to reflect upon the data I have gathered to arrive at answers, to see social relationships, to arrive at trends and relationships. For example, I might arrive at a possible social trend wherein the political situation in America has encouraged a change of Opinion towards the nation in the Middle East and other problematic nations. Also, I might arrive at data that the change in America has created a positive image for the nation and is helping to combat the worsening economic woes. It is via data analysis that I can either prove or disprove my hypothesis.

4. Presenting Findings - With the analysis complete, I will now write my research in a paper that will be understood by my audience - my professor and fellow students.

**Important Parts of a Research Paper**

It is very important to follow formats. If you are following the APA format, do not forget to cite and present a reference section. I advise to ensure the following parts are present in your final paper:

1. Cover page - The title of your paper, your name, the subject/course the paper is intended for, your university & faculty, your adviser/professor.

2. Abstract Page - A quick summary of what your paper is about.

3. Introduction - Here, you can explain your chosen 'narrowed' focus and why you chose to investigate such. Also, explain what the reader can expect in your paper, your sources and your methods and what you hope to achieve in the research. Then introduce your hypothesis.

4. The Body of your research - how many pages and paragraphs it will be is entirely up to you and the data you have and wish to present.

5. Analysis - here, present your analysis & observation.

6. Conclusion - when we say conclusion, we are only concluding based on the data presented and the analysis you have done. Here, you can declare your hypothesis valid or invalid.

7. Opinions & Recommendations - since we are going for creating a critical theory here, this is where your hypothesis results to an emergent theory from your data. Present your final opinions based on your results and why you think it is so and how it is relevant and critical in terms of real world applications.

8. Word count - very important.

9. References - a list of your sources

10. Offprints - this is usually skipped but in the social sciences, when presenting research, it is usually appreciated to share 'part' of your data and sources like articles and studies. You can refer to them in the body of your paper (i.e. See offprint 1) when you are explaining a concept. For example, you would like to refer to a set of statistics and you have included it as an offprint. Just refer to it as such.

I hope that this Guide has explained to you what Sociological research is about as well as helped you in gaining that necessary insight to help you approach your research. I have listed a set of references below that might help you. They are either guides in doing and thinking through research or possible sources for your research itself. In the Web section, the first 2 links are videos that will be of great source & help for you.

**Word count:** 2,807

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