

The Alien Exercise: A Basic Introduction to Sociology Fieldnote Exercise

Jonathan R. Wynn

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SUGGESTED CITATION

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Abstract

Getting a class on the same page early in the semester is often a challenge. A quick activity that sparks a lot of conversation without presuming too much knowledge about sociology, and that can bring everyone in regardless of their preparedness for college and the variety of backgrounds in class, can be a valuable commodity in the instructor's toolkit. "The Alien Exercise," as described here, asks students to take the position of an extreme outsider—an alien from another planet—and encourages them to describe their everyday experiences in a new way, meet and discuss their findings in small groups outside of class, and then report as groups during class time. The exercise can be introduced in one class, carried out over the weekend, and then discussed in the next class period. A worksheet for the assignment is included below.

Scarce (1997) encourages sociologists to include "short-term experiential learning" (i.e., short observations and learning experiences integrated with course materials) in our teaching. Undergraduate sociology courses should encourage students to be interested in conducting research at an early stage (Wright 2000), and research engagement in Introduction to Sociology courses leads to improved critical thinking (Misra

1997) and may lead to greater commitment to the major. "The Alien Exercise" can be included in this pedagogical practice and a part of this wider disciplinary mission.

Details

Subject Areas: Introduction to Sociology/Social Problems

Resource Types: Class Activity

Class Levels: College 100

Class Sizes: Medium

Usage Notes

This activity is best suited for the first few weeks of class, when students are reading about socialization and culture. It is also a good 'ice breaker' for a class. The exercise is inspired by thought experiment in Jen Sincero's self-help book, *You Are A Badass* (2018).

Essentially, the exercise invites students to pretend they are alien visitors who are collecting data on human society. The Alien Visitors inhabit human form (i.e., the students look the same), but do not have an understanding of what is happening around them. (There are any number of examples of aliens inhabiting human forms to understand human society, from 1956's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* to 2013's *Under the Skin* to 2019's *Captain Marvel*.) For Sincero, this trick is designed to give the reader a 'reboot,' in order to get them to notice all the people and activities that they might not pay close enough attention to, and to begin a process of determining what is important to them.

It is a surprisingly simple exercise, sure, yet I suspect that some profound conversations could emerge from it—particularly if there are significant differences among student perspectives. Although the exercise is geared toward a 'reboot' of one's life, I can see the activity as a way to render our more hidden social interactional scripts, even our unspoken biases, more explicit.

Of course, students are not aliens. We know a lot about the world around us. Class conversation could turn around all of the things that were mentioned, and then all of the things that were left unspoken. Did the groups talk about race? What were the gaps of knowledge these aliens did not report?

I would consider this a very low-stakes assignment. So long as students conduct the exercise in good faith, write a report, and engage in the class conversation, they would receive full credit.

Learning Goals and Assessments

LEARNING GOALS

Goal #1: Seeing the everyday world through a sociological lens

Goal #2: Students will be introduced to the qualitative methods, and begin to understand the challenges of a scientific method based upon empirical observations.

Goal #3: Concepts like subjectivity, objectivity, and reflexivity can be discussed in class.

ASSESSMENTS

Assessment #1: Students will be invited to examine parts of their campus that they likely see every day, and try to envision them anew.

Assessment #2: Students will write very rudimentary fieldnotes through with achievable goals.

Assessment #3: Students will be asked to discuss these concepts through guided class conversation by the instructor.

Resource Files

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