**The Alien Exercise: A Basic Introduction to Sociology Fieldnote Exercise**

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**Abstract**

“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.

**Usage notes**

Getting a class on the same page early in the semester is often a challenge. This is an activity for early in the semester that aims to spark 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. 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 a thought experiment in Jen Sincero’s self-help book, *You Are A Badass* (2018).

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 pop culture 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*.) Students are placed in teams, then required to go on ‘missions’ to observe social setting around campus and report back to the group, then present their findings to the class. Students are given a detailed step-by-step worksheet to guide their observations and conversations.

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. For aspiring sociologists this activity is a way to illuminate our more hidden social interactional scripts, even our unspoken biases, by ‘making the familiar, strange.’

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

It is a simple exercise, yet some profound conversations can emerge from it—particularly if there are significant differences among student perspectives. As a very low-stakes assignment. If students write a report, and engage in the class conversation, they would receive full credit.

**Learning goals**

*Goal #1: Knowledge*. Students learnconcepts like subjectivity, objectivity, and reflexivity can be discussed in class.

Assessment of Goal #1: Students will have to identify and define these concepts, both in class and at the start of their assignments.

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

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

*Goal #3: Analysis.* Students will see their everyday worlds through a sociological lens, examining parts of their campus, and try to envision them anew.

Assessment of Goal #3: Students will meet in groups and produce a written document outlining the key ideas discussed in those group meetings.

*Goal #4: Synthesis.* Students will meet with other students and compare their fieldnotes.

Assessment of Goal #4: Students will meet in groups and produce a written document outlining the key ideas discussed in those group meetings.

*Goal #5: Evaluation:* Concepts like subjectivity, objectivity, and reflexivity will be discussed in class.

Assessment #5: Students will be asked to discuss these concepts through guided class conversation by the instructor.

*Goal #6: Classroom cohesion:* This assignment will also serve as an ‘ice breaker’ for the students

Assessment #6: Students will meet in small groups, and then introduce themselves to the wider class through this assignment.

**Proposed class schedule**

Class One: Introduction to Terms & Sending Teams on the Mission

Faculty should introduce the concepts of subjectivity, objectivity, reflexivity, and socialization, which are quite common in any Introduction to Sociology textbook. If not, they can be found in the OpenStax Introduction to Sociology open access textbook: https://openstax.org/details/books/introduction-sociology-2e (20 Minutes)

Introduce the exercise, and randomly split the students. (10 Minutes)

A few notes on introducing the exercise:

* Groups of three tend to work better than 4 or more.
* Students shy away from being too critical of other students, and their descriptions tend to be polite. Students should, therefore, be encouraged to make explicit connections to any assigned readings and course content, rather than directly engaging with each other.
* It would be a good idea to discuss the differences between descriptive writing (i.e., explaining what is going on) vs. reflective writing (i.e., interpreting what one thinks is going on).

Class Two: Reports & Post-Exercise Discussion

Have each group designate a representative to discuss the different missions and their group reports. Include time to have students make comparisons across groups. (20 Minutes)

After groups have made their reports, include time to have a meta-discussion about the overall exercise. (10 Minutes)

A few notes on class discussion:

* The instructor should be prepared with a few prompts for the groups (e.g., “What differences surprised your group?” “Did you expect that three different people all came to the same conclusions about what was going on here?”)
* If there are significant differences among student perspectives, this might require some added attention on the part of the instructor to racial, gender, religious, and sexual identities.

**Including a Reading**

I have found it useful to include a reading as a part of this exercise. One reading that could be paired with is Horace Miner’s 1956 classic, “Body Ritual Among the Nacirema.” It is an older piece, but still a staple of many sociology classes and the content harmonizes well with the Alien Exercise. The short essay describes a group of people who, through the descriptions seem very strange (e.g., odd morning rituals with secret medicine and charm shrines, elaborate ‘mouth-rites,’ a sense that the body is deficient and prone to diseases that can be warded off through elaborate body rituals, etc.), but the twist is that it is all describing American habits and rituals as if from a stranger’s perspective.

Perhaps a more advanced reading would be something from ethnomethodology. Garfinkel might be a challenge for a First Year student, but there are one or two more accessible essays on the subject as well both academic (Dennis 2011) and non-academic (Crossman 2017). The whole exercise could be seen as a part of the ethnomethodological tradition, a branch of sociology that is based around the idea of questioning the apparent order of social life. Among the many facets to this complicated sociological perspective is the idea of the documentary method of interpretation, wherein we take what we see as being evidence of underlying patterns often without much analysis or reflection. The idea of interpreting social acts, and finding alternative explanations of them, is central as well.

**Key words**

Socialization, Values, Norms, First Week Activities, Ethnomethodology, Undergraduate Research

**Possible Readings**

Crossman, Ashley. 2017. “What is Ethnomethodology in Sociology,”

<https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-ethnomethodology-3026553> (accessed April 7, 2019)

Dennis, Alex. 2011. “Symbolic Interactionism and Ethnomethodology,” *Symbolic Interaction*

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*Teaching Resources and Innovations Library for Sociology*. Washington DC: American Sociological Association. (http://trails.asanet.org)

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research projects,” *Teaching Sociology* 25(4): 278-291.

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*Sociology*. Originally published 2003 in *Social Psychology*, edited by R. Kettlitz. Washington DC: American Sociological Association. (http://trails.asanet.org)

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219-226.

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Vera, Henan. 1982. “Teaching Sociology’s Reflexivity,” *Teaching Sociology* 10(1): 126-131.

Walker, Rob. 2019. *The Art of Noticing.* New York: Penguin.

Wright, Mary C. 2000. “Getting More out of Less: The benefits of short-term experiential

learning in undergraduate sociology courses,” *Teaching Sociology* 28(2): 116-126.

**The Alien Assignment**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

You are assigned to examine a planet called ‘Earth’ and report on the local population. (Although a humorous fictional book called *The Hitchhiker’s Guide To the Galaxy* indicates that both mice and dolphins are the smartest beings on the planet, for the purposes of this mission you will be investigating humans.) For this mission, you will be assigned to a team to examine a finite part of human experience. The particular facet of human life (e.g., describing getting dinner at the cafeteria, attending a campus sports event, etc.) will be assigned to you by your division leader (teacher). We have determined that college campuses are perfect research sites as they are highly populated and it appears to be where humans learn a great deal about their own kind.

Team members (including emails):

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Assigned Human Experience:

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First, your team will split up for the investigation. Each will write a 350-word report that must address the following prompts:

* Describe the location. What do you think it’s social purpose is and why do you think that? Who are the humans around you? What do their mannerisms mean? What are the things that appear to be important in this culture?
* Describe an interaction between two or three humans. What do you think they communicate to each other verbally or non-verbally?
* What else can you say about this social setting?

Second, your team will reconvene and discuss what each team member found. After this discussion, each team member will write a 200-word summary about the group discussion that must address the following prompts:

* Reflect on your investigation and the resulting discussion. Discuss how the reports were similar and different. What can explain the differences and similarities?
* Connect the group’s conversation with two or threekey concepts and ideas introduced in the last class (e.g., subjectivity, objectivity, reflexivity, socialization, the scientific method).