

4-2006

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The Importance of Place:
Using Local-Focus Videos
to Spark the Sociological Imagination

Teaching Sociology 34(2)
April, 2006

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approximate word count: 4,179 words
suggested running head: Importance of Place

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THEORETICAL CONTEXT:

LOCAL-FOCUS VIDEOS AND THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

Sociologists have documented how important place is in people's lives. For example, certain places are associated with various emotions, such as triumph, sadness, fear, and contentment (Gieryn 2000). We also know that as people live in a place for more time, they become more attached to it (e.g., Herting et al 1997). Other scholars have shown that the bonds people create between themselves and certain geographic places reframe how certain sites are understood both by those involved and by outsiders (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). These geographic-human bonds shape how people identify themselves and others, and how they understand the issues of people from other places. Thus, "place matters" in how we know ourselves, how we know others, and how we interpret the world (Gieryn 2000: 463).

In this paper, I propose a teaching technique that builds upon students' connections to "place." The strategy involves the use of videos that feature local issues. By using local-focus videos, students are able to apply sociological concepts to their everyday lives. In addition, use of local-focus videos can enhance students' sociological imagination.

C. Wright Mills argued that people must understand that they do not exist in a vacuum, but that their values, beliefs, and behaviors are influenced by the particular time and place in which they, themselves, exist (1959). The development of this "sociological imagination," as Mills called it, is a key goal for every sociology class (Kaufman 1997). The sociology instructor provides students with a "framework for analyzing how the sociohistoric context in which they live informs their individual choices and chances" (Kaufman 1997: 309). By applying sociological concepts to their everyday lives, students thus increase their sociological imagination (Mills 1959).

This paper explores the importance of place in using videos to encourage students' sociological imagination. This study draws on feedback from two different sociology classes: "Sociology of Law" and "Criminology." Students' feedback is analyzed regarding two types of videos: those that focus on regional topics or that take place in local areas (which I refer to as "local-focus videos") and those that have a more national focus or address topics that are relevant to the greater society across the country (what I refer to as "general videos").

Many students (70%) in these courses were in-state, residents of Indiana, while other students (30%) were drawn to this university from neighboring states, especially Illinois and Michigan, as well as states and countries quite far away from the Midwest. The two courses from which this study's data are drawn, Sociology of Law and Criminology, are upper- to mid-level courses that included both majors and many non-majors.

ENHANCING CONNECTIONS TO PLACE

I sought to help my students engage their sociological imagination by encouraging them to relate concepts from the course and the videos to their own lives. In these two classes, I used five different videos or portions of videos, by the time of the surveys. At the time that I showed these videos, I did not label some as "local" and others as "general." Rather, I placed them in the context of what we were discussing at the time. With each video, I provided a short introduction and gave students a worksheet to fill out during the video, which we discussed afterward.

In the Sociology of Law course, I showed one local-focus video and one general video. The local-focus video examined the efforts by local activists who were trying to preserve the boyhood home of Abraham Lincoln (*Abraham Lincoln in Indiana*). The ideological battle of these activists was to re-claim Lincoln for Indiana, arguing that he spent more formative years in

this state than he did in Illinois or elsewhere. I used this video to discuss the concept of hegemony. This show was filmed and produced by the local Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) affiliate and was somewhat low-tech. The general video examined jury deliberations and the concept of jury nullification, going into the jury room and watching the arguments of an actual jury (*Inside the Jury Room*). This video was an episode of the PBS series *Frontline*. I used it to illustrate some of the institutional filters in the legal system.

In the Criminology course, I showed one local-focus video and three general videos. This time, the local-focus video was an episode of the PBS series *Frontline* (specifically, *America's War on Marijuana*). Although this was a nationally aired show, most of it was filmed in Indiana. The high schools the *Frontline* reporter visited, the special anti-drug police teams he followed, and the neighborhoods he highlighted, all were in Indiana. The first general video looked at Sing Sing, Alcatraz, and Leavenworth prisons (*The Big House*). The second examined the crime of kidnapping in various contexts (*Kidnapped!*). The final general video for the Criminology course was the same jury video that I showed in the Sociology of Law course (*Inside the Jury Room*).

In the Sociology of Law class, the local video is less polished and less high-tech than the general video; while the Criminology class's local video is made by *Frontline* and is more slick. I believe this is an important qualitative difference between the two local videos that could have affected how students reacted to them, which I address later.

Before writing this article, I wanted to be sure that my technique of using local-focus videos is an option for teachers across the country. I believe it is. I looked at the programming available from PBS in 20 cities around the country — from Montpelier, VT, to Duluth, MN, to Seattle, WA. In all of these towns, I found shows that highlighted issues or people in that state.

For example, the PBS station for central Indiana, had “Across Indiana,” which features quirky people or amusing community happenings, “Communities Building Community,” which focuses on philanthropic and charity events, and “Indiana Week in Review,” which summarizes local news stories. Other local PBS stations offered shows that highlighted events and anecdotes from their states’ histories, such as “Wisconsin Stories” and “Our Ohio Stories.” As an appendix to this article, I have compiled a chart of cities I surveyed, with a sample of what local-focus programs are available there.

The use of local-focus videos could be employed to cover a wide range of topics in other courses. For example, historic local-focus videos that address family dynamics could be used in Sociology of the Gender or Sociology of Family classes to explore gender and the family in civil society. Other local-focus videos I have seen discuss how local communities withstood various hardships: e.g., famous blizzards, the Depression, World War II. These could be used in introductory sociology courses to discuss a wide array of topics, including social response to crises, power and authority, scapegoating, functional imperatives and structural equivalents, ethnocentrism, instrumentalism vs. structuralism, and group interests vs. individual interests.

In the Criminology and Sociology of Law courses, I use the local-focus videos to bring in students’ connections to place. I ask students what other connections they might make beyond those explicitly stated in the video. I also have students think about other places that might touch on the same subject. In addition to focusing solely on the local, however, I also turn the discussion to the more general and how those local insights connect to the larger social structure. In this way, the local-focus videos draw students to the particular, with the students making the more basic connections, and then the videos help them think beyond that to expand their sociological imagination to the more general, more macro social structure.

Let me offer a specific example of how I use the local-focus videos to generate students' sociological imagination. In the Sociology of Law course, I show a video that explains that Abraham Lincoln spent much of his boyhood in Indiana (where this university is located) and discusses the efforts of some local history enthusiasts to reframe the public image of Abraham Lincoln as being primarily from Illinois. We begin by talking about what the students had learned at home or in school on the topic of the video. This always generates a lively discussion, since most students have some anecdote to share. We talk about how other people elsewhere, or the general public across the nation, might have learned different versions of this local issue. We then connect this discussion of local perspectives to our course topic of hegemonic power. I help the students move from their new insights on a familiar, local controversy to the broader issues of hegemony and ideological power in greater society.

This technique could be used in a variety of ways in many different sociology courses. Let me offer some discussion questions that instructors could use or adapt for their own classrooms. In contrast to the paragraph above in which I offer a specific example of what I do, here I wish to walk instructors through the exercise in such a way that they can directly use this for their own classes. Therefore, below, I provide a more general discussion, but specific sample language; instructors will need to adapt the suggested language to their own course goals and topics.

Immediately after showing the video, ask students to share their connections to the video. For example, instructors could ask students, "Have you had any experiences like the ones described in the video." or "When you were growing up, did your hometown have any similarities to the towns discussed in the video?" Then ask students to contrast their own experiences with those of others. For example, instructors could ask students, "In what ways

would the stories you just shared be different if you were from a lower/higher socio-economic status or if you were your opposite gender or race?” or “How would your experience be different if you lived in (Chicago / rural Kansas / La Paz)?” Instructors may need to provide opening examples for students to follow and offer initial comparisons in order to begin the discussion.

To further generate this discussion, instructors could also ask, “Has anyone experienced this (whatever the topic is) in one way when they lived in one place, and differently after they moved elsewhere.” In this way, the instructor could invite an individual student to make her or his own contrasts; however, many students may not be able to do so either because they have never lived elsewhere or cannot make the contrasts themselves. Alternatively, students with contrasting stories could compare their experiences with each other.

Next, instructors should ask the students to broaden their discussion to include the theoretical concept on which the instructor is trying to focus (such as structural models and instrumental models of legal power). For example, instructors could ask students “How would certain laws (e.g., right-to-work laws, environmental laws) affect you differently if you were (in a different state, different area of the country, other country)? How would you benefit more from these laws? How would you potentially be harmed or disadvantaged by these laws?” Instructors could follow up with questions more closely related to the lecture’s focus, such as “How could you use the law instrumentally in your present position? How could you use the law instrumentally if you were (of a different SES, race, or sex)?”

Once students have focused on instrumental uses of law, instructors could guide the discussion more explicitly to structural advantages through such questions as: “How would you benefit from this law without consciously trying to work for a certain outcome?” or “How would the law benefit you (in any of various scenarios) without you even thinking about the law?”

MEASUREMENT OF LEARNING OUTCOMES – SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

A few weeks¹ after seeing the last video, students were asked to fill out a brief survey at the end of a class period. They were told that they were free to leave immediately rather than answering the survey. The majority of students in both classes stayed to complete the survey, but some from both classes did leave instead of responding. In the Sociology of Law class, 34 students (out of 43 enrolled) completed the survey; in the Criminology class, 69 students (out of 85 enrolled) completed it.

The survey had them write briefly about the videos and invited them to rank each video. Specifically, the survey asked the students how the various videos helped them to understand course concepts and how the videos helped them to relate the concepts to their personal lives. The surveys did not simply ask students which video most inspired their sociological imagination. Instead, the surveys asked questions that addressed the sociological imagination with regard to the different videos. For example, the Sociology of Law survey asked the students: “Did the video, *Abraham Lincoln in Indiana*, help you to relate to the theories and course materials – such as hegemony and ideology – that were illustrated by the videos? How?” “Did the video, *Abraham Lincoln in Indiana*, help you to relate the material to your own life? How?” “Did the videos with a general, national focus help you to relate to the theories and course materials that were illustrated by the videos during the discussion? How?” and “Did the “general focus” videos help you to relate the material to your own life? How?”

These questions were designed for short-answer responses. Most students wrote between one and seven sentences on each question. I coded and analyzed the content of each statement myself; no additional coders were used, so inter-coder reliability is not an issue. Some responses

were coded as strongly indicating inspiration of the sociological imagination, others mildly indicated it, others were neutral or blank, others mildly indicated their sociological imagination was not inspired, and, finally, others strongly indicated the negative response. Due to the small number of students, the categories of strongly- and mildly-inspired responses were collapsed and the categories of mildly- and strongly-not-inspired responses were collapsed. The following codes remained: inspiration of the sociological imagination, neutral response or blank, and no inspiration of the sociological imagination. (Examples of the positive and negative responses are provided in the following section.)

The responses of students who found the local video stimulated their sociological imagination more were placed in a “local video more stimulating of soc. imagination” category. For this variable, “more stimulating was operationalized as whenever the student response was greater for the local video. This means that if a student was neutral regarding the general video but reported that the local video inspired her/his imagination, then that student’s response would be categorized as “local video more inspiring.” Additionally, if a student found the general video decidedly not inspirational of her/his sociological imagination, but was neutral regarding the local video, the response of this student, too, would be categorized as “local video more inspiring.”²

These data were then analyzed for patterns, one of which was differences between in-state and out-of-state students’ responses. I also noted how often each video was ranked as the favorite by the students to see if favorite videos were more likely to inspire the sociological imagination.

EVIDENCE OF EFFECTIVENESS

In evaluating the effectiveness of local-focus videos, I included data both on how well students liked the videos as well as whether the local video stimulated students' sociological imagination in order to explore whether a relationship existed between students' preference for a local-focus video and their finding the video helpful with regard to their sociological imagination. I wondered if, for example, the more polished, more professional local-focus video shown in the Criminology class would yield more responses indicating that it stimulated students' sociological imagination than the rough, almost amateur video shown in the Sociology of Law class. The results show that popularity of the local-focus video is not strongly linked with how effective it is in inspiring the students' sociological imagination, although whether a student is in-state or out-of-state does seem to impact how well the local videos inspire their sociological imagination, as I discuss below.

I do wish to emphasize that I do not have any measures of *change* in students' learning. Rather, I draw on descriptive data that suggest students were more engaged with the local videos. These local-focus videos helped the students make sociological connections and sparked their sociological imagination.

Table One
Student Preferences: local and general videos

Sociology of Law	total Sociology of Law respondents (34 students)	in-state (25 students)	out-of-state (9 students)
local video=favorite	10 (29% of total)	8 (24% of total)	2 (6% of total)
general video=favorite	24 (71% of total)	17 (50% of total)	7 (21% of total)
Criminology	total Criminology respondents (69 students)	in-state (47 students)	out-of-state (22 students)
local video=favorite	26 (38% of total)	18 (26% of total)	8 (12% of total)
general video=favorite	43 (62% of total)	29 (42% of total)	14 (20% of total)

The local-focus videos were better able to inspire students' sociological imagination (see Table Two). In both classes, the students credited the local-focus video with inspiring their sociological imagination, even though the two classes' ranking of the local video was quite different. In the Sociology of Law course, most students (71%) who responded preferred the "general" video over the "local-focus" video. This is perhaps not surprising, since the "general" video was produced by *Frontline* and extremely professional, while the "local" video was made by the local PBS station affiliate and lacked the more sophisticated production technology. In contrast, in the Criminology course, it was the local video that was the sophisticated *Frontline* episode and a slight plurality of the in-state students and over a third of the out-of-state students rated the local-focus video as their favorite among the four videos.

Table Two

Which Video Most Stimulates the Sociological Imagination

	more stimulating S.I.	neutral	less stimulating S.I.
Sociology of Law			
general video	4% in-state (n=1) 33% out-of-state (n=3)	12% in-state (n=3) 33% out-of-state (n=3)	84% in-state (n=21) 33% out-of-state (n=3)
local video	84% in-state (n=21) 33% out-of-state (n=3)	12% in-state (n=3) 33% out-of-state (n=3)	4% in-state (n=1) 33% out-of-state (n=3)
Criminology			
general video	4% in-state (n=2) 36% out-of-state (n=8)	9% in-state (n=4) 23% out-of-state (n=5)	87% in-state (n=41) 41% out-of-state (n=9)
local video	87% in-state (n=41) 41% out-of-state (n=9)	9% in-state (n=4) 23% out-of-state (n=5)	4% in-state (n=2) 36% out-of-state (n=8)

In both courses, the in-state students were more likely to respond that the local-focus video inspired their sociological imagination. Eighty-four percent of in-state students in Sociology of Law and 87% in Criminology expressed this. For example, a Criminology student wrote that the video helped her/him engage with the material differently than the general videos:

I knew a lot of the places where the reporters went. The fact that the events took place in Indiana related to me. I could imagine it happening to me because I've been there [at some of those geographic places]...because it was filmed in Indiana
I was able to realize what things are like in my home state.

Another Criminology student wrote:

Some of the issues in class I had thought about before, but the video helped me think about how these issues are part of my everyday life. It helped me think about my life and how it fits with bigger aspects of society.

The quote from the following student uses the phrase “in action” in describing her/his increased understanding of how theoretical concepts are played out in people’s day-to-day lives.

I had never really thought about [the course concepts] in that way before. They had seemed just theoretical and abstract. The video helped me see it in my actual life. It let me think about it ‘in action’ rather than just theoretically, and it helped me see how my experience fits with the theory.

Similarly, a Sociology of Law student wrote that, although she/he had visited one of the “Lincoln Childhood” sites targeted in the video, until seeing the video and discussing it and the worksheet in class, she/he had not considered it from a sociological perspective. Now, her/his sociological imagination is heightened as she/he can see this issue that she/he had dismissed in a greater social context, applying sociological theory to what she/he had thought of as trivial.

While the argument of Lincoln in Indiana may seem trivial, the example of hegemony is there and it provides a tangible idea for us to use. My grandparents live near one of the sites in the video. I’ve been there. But I had never [before] thought about it in a sociological way.

Another Sociology of Law student wrote that:

It brought the [course] terms to a real life level. Seeing it in action helped me recall what each term meant. The specific example gave me a guide as to what hegemony could be defined as...I was able to see how the material could be looked at on both macro and micro scales.

This student, in responding to another question, added specifically that the *general* focus video was not as helpful to her/him in relating the material to her/his own life.

Students' responsiveness to the "local" video varied somewhat depending on whether they were in-state or out-of-state students. In contrast to in-state students, the out-of-state students from both classes were less likely to find that the local video inspired their sociological imagination. For example, an out-of-state Sociology of Law student from Colorado responded that the "local focus" didn't capture her/his interest: "I thought the other video was more interesting. I'm not an Indiana native, so I really didn't care about the issues in the video." Although this same student did say that the local-focus video was somewhat helpful in understanding course theories: "I was able to relate the video to the theories. I thought that the issue discussed in the video was a decent illustration of the theories discussed in class."

Interestingly, Sociology of Law students from Illinois were also likely to find the "local issues" video helpful. I believe this is because the "local" video dealt with the rivalry between Indiana and Illinois. Thus, Illinois out-of-state students and Indiana in-state students could both relate similarly to the "local issues" video. For example, one student from Illinois wrote that the "local-focus" video enabled her/him to relate to the theories and course material and helped her/him engage with material differently than the more general video: "I could relate more to the info. more. Especially, the Lincoln video for me, since I am from Illinois, so I could relate to it and more easily understand the concepts."

CONCLUSION

The advantage of using videos with a local focus to kindle the sociological imagination, rather than doing so through lecture, discussion, and/or other techniques, is that the students

relate to videos in a way that is not captured by lectures or other communication forms. Students experience videos differently because they approach videos with heightened interest which helps them concentrate more on the topic (Baker-Sperry, Behringer, and Grauerholz 1999). Thus, local-focus videos offer the opportunity to develop students' sociological imagination through a medium with which the students are very comfortable and which captures their attention. Having students apply course concepts to situations depicted in videos they have just viewed can be a powerful teaching technique (Misra 2000). By doing this, "students learn that sociological concepts are important tools that can help them make sense of everyday life, and gain an appreciation for the complexity and value of the sociological imagination" (Misra 2000: 347). They become able to blend "real" life and the intellectual tools of theory and inquiry.³

Nevertheless, place might be brought into the classroom in other ways, as well as through the use of local videos. Other possibilities are still images of local sites, articles from local papers, and field trips to nearby places. Using these might also be helpful to begin discussions to apply course theory to students' own lives.

One possible limitation of this technique is that students may find it difficult to move from the local and personal level to the social, more macro level. Some student may prefer to stay at the micro level. Thus, instructors may need to overcome a certain level of reluctance on the students' part.

Another limitation of this technique is its limited helpfulness for out-of-state students from distant areas. This use of local-focus videos may be inappropriate for schools that attract students from a large geographic area, and, hence, have a high proportion of students who are neither in-state nor from neighboring states. Thus, this teaching technique might be most

applicable at schools that draw mainly from the local area, where most students are in-state or from neighboring states.

However, instructors need not limit their use of these ideas to privileging in-state students and students from nearby states. In addition to local videos, photographs, articles, and field trips, classroom instructors could also include similar items on the hometowns of students who live farther away. Possibly the sociological imaginations of the students could be further inspired by a comparison of social life “here” versus “there.” This might require collecting new “distant local” items each semester, if out-of-state students’ hometowns vary from semester to semester. However, as one builds up a “library” of “distant local” items pertaining to the various out-of-state hometowns, this effort should not be too burdensome.

APPENDIX

area code	city	PBS affiliate	shows
317	Indianapolis, IN	WFYI	1. Across Indiana 2. Indiana Week in Review 3. Communities Building Community
608	Madison, WI	WMYS	1. Wisconsin Stories
773	Chicago, IL	WTTW	1. Chicago Tonight 2. Illinois Lawmakers
614	Columbus, OH	WOSU	1. Buckeye Landmarks 2. Our Ohio Stories 3. Viewpoint / View From Malabar
517	Lansing, MI	WKAR	1. Michigan at Risk 2. Off the Record 3. State of the State
502	Louisville, KY	KET	1. World of Our Own: Kentucky Folkways 2. Comment on Kentucky 3. Kentucky Life
513 and 859	Cincinnati, OH	WCET	1. Focus 2. Common Ground 3. Cincinnati Reflections
206	Seattle, WA	KCTS	1. KCTS Connects 2. Rhona Onair 3. Ask the Governor
218	Duluth, MN	WDSE	1. Almanac North 2. Venture North 3. Minnesota Legislative Report
321 and 407	Orlando, FL	WMFE	1. Life in Orlando's Neighborhoods 2. Ask a Lawyer 3. WMFE In-depth
404, 678, and 770	Atlanta, GA	WPBA	1. In Contact 2. Leyes Cotidianas
520	Tucson, AZ	KUAT/KUAS	1. Arizona Illustrated 2. The Desert Speaks 3. Reflexiones
785	Topeka, KS	KTWU	1. Sunflower Journeys 2. Kansas Week
419	Toledo, OH	WGTE	1. Toledo Stories
412	Pittsburgh, PA	WQED	1. Pittsburgh History Series Specials
802	Montpellier, VT	VPT	1. Vermont This Week 2. VPT's Outdoor Journal 3. Points North
716	Buffalo, NY	WNED	1. OurTown 2. Buffalo's Houses of Worship
704 and 980	Charlotte, NC	WTVI	1. Carolina Business Review 2. Final Edition
415 and 650	San Francisco, CA	KQED	1. This Week in Northern California 2. California Heartland 3. California's Gold

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ENDNOTES

¹ This was three weeks after the Sociology of Law course saw its last video and one week after the Criminology class saw its last video.

² If a student found both the general video and the local video equally stimulating, then s/he would have been dropped from the data set. However, the coding did not reveal any student responses as finding both general and local videos equally inspirational.

³ Ideally, students with a fully employed, keen sociological imagination would be able to relate theories and concepts from class to their own lives even with the general focus videos. My study underscores the difficulty of sparking students' sociological imagination when they do not have a keenly developed sociological imagination. This makes the use of local videos all the more important. The local videos help students develop their nascent sociological imagination and offer them assistance in developing their rudimentary sociological imagination. As their sociological imagination develops, students may be able to resonate with non-local themes – however, this requires a more developed sociological imagination. Thus, as the local videos help students cultivate their sociological imagination – if not a more sophisticated, advanced application – the local videos create an early step in the development of their sociological imagination. These local videos help students move from the immediately personal to the merely local, on their way to eventually seeing the relevance to general, larger social issues.