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Jean H. Thoresen

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Teaching Notes

A Values Clarification Exercise as a Teaching Technique

Jean H. Thoresen

This exercise is designed to allow students to identify the values that are important to social interaction on several levels. The exercise is useful at the introductory level to sensitize students to the effect of values on their own choices, and to identify the social categories around which individuals develop values. It may be adapted to focus on micro-level interaction (e.g., within couples) in a course such as Marriage and the Family, or on interaction among groups (e.g., within a neighborhood) in courses such as Urban Sociology or Community. In using the exercise in Introductory Sociology, an appropriate placement might be as a supplement to material on socialization, or in a unit on general patterns of social interaction.

The exercise is called a "Planning Board." Students need to be supplied with two sheets of $8\frac{1}{2} \times 11$ paper, and need a pen or pencil. I introduce this exercise by telling the students that it is a Planning Board, and that the purpose of the exercise is to help see the relationship between individual choices and sociological variables.

The first instructions are technical. Each student divides one of the sheets of paper into twelve sections, by dividing the sheet in half vertically, and creating six sections on each side by drawing five horizontal lines to create equal-sized sections. The second sheet of paper is torn *into twelve* pieces of the same size and shape as the sections drawn on the first sheet. To save time and confusion, I usually provide each student with a previously prepared grid sheet, and use removable stick-on memo notes for the slips of paper. The twelve sections of the grid sheet are numbered from one to twelve, usually using the six sections on the left side of the paper first, from top to bottom, and proceeding to the right side of the sheet, top to bottom.

I explain to the students that the small slips of paper will be used to write down key words, which I will give to them, and that I will provide these key words or phrases one at a time. Each slip of paper will then be placed on the grid sheet in the position of priority, from one to twelve, the student feels it occupies in her or his hierarchy of choices with regard to the issue at hand.

For instance, the issue may be "intimate relationships." I present each key word or phrase (e.g., "being able to be totally honest"), and instruct the students to place that slip of paper in the relative position each feels this aspect of a relationship would have for her or him. I usually explain this by saying to

This exercise is an adaptation of material that I first learned about from Dianne Shapiro and Karen Riem at a workshop on Values Clarification at the YWCA in Hartford, Connecticut.

students, "How important is it to you to be able to be totally honest with the person with whom you have or would like to form an intimate relationship? Place this slip of paper in that position on your planning board." I then pause while each student does this. Then I give the key word for the second item: "Similar religion; how important is it to you that the person with whom you have or would like to form an intimate relationship be of the same religious background as you are?" Again, there is a pause while students place this slip of paper in the appropriate section. This format is repeated with eleven items, with physical placement of each slip of paper after each item. As more items are placed on the planning boards, students find that they wish to move slips up or down on the priority list; that's fine. In a sense, it is the basic point of the exercise: many things have to be balanced against each other, and priorities established, in making such evaluations.

Eleven items that I have used are:

1. being of equal intellectual ability
2. being able to be totally honest
3. having the same religious/spiritual interest
4. good sexual interaction
5. being socially skilled (can "dress up and take out")
6. potential for earning a lot of money
7. fidelity
8. being involved in a meaningful career
9. being physically attractive
10. willingness to be flexible and make changes
11. willingness to work on problems (to "stay up all night")

The twelfth item is always a "wild card," an attribute or characteristic that has not been mentioned in the first eleven items. I also change or tailor specific items each time I use this technique, with the particular group in mind. Depending on the level of trust in the group, I may ask members to share any reactions or feelings they had while doing the exercise, or the order of their choices.

The exercise is adaptable; if I wish to focus on macro-level variables, I include items such as "social class; how important is it to you that this person be of the same social class background as you are?" Ethnic background, region of the country, not having been previously married, and being near in age are some other possibilities. If I am working with a class or group interested in further applications of this technique, I suggest that the individuals redo the exercise, using the same slips of paper, but this time arranging the slips in the order that they think the person with whom they have or want to have an intimate relationship would rank them. In some cases, I also suggest that they

might wish to have the other person see and react to both the initial listing and the attempt to replicate the other person's priorities. This I would probably do in a Marriage and Family course, or in a course that focused on building relationships. I have also used it in a rap-group setting, with both members of couples present.

Another adaptation is to have students think in terms of groups within neighborhoods: "How important do you think it is for people in a neighborhood to be of the same ethnic group? Religion? Political philosophy? Sexual preference/orientation? Social class?" Again, the items are offered one at a time, and each slip is placed on the planning board, so that conflicts or changes in priority must be recognized and handled by physically moving the slips of paper around.

I have found students and members of groups other than classes to be very responsive to this exercise. It does not take a lot of time; a one-hour class period has proved more than ample to do the exercise and have some time available for discussing and processing. I also believe that, while the exercise does raise issues and concerns about membership in various social categories, it is safe and appropriate for classroom use.