

Sociology 167: Virtual Communities/Social Media Fall 2021

Norm-Breaking Essay

Due: Friday, September 24 at 11:59pm on bCourses

In this paper you are being asked to choose a norm to break via a communication technology (texting, email, phone, or social media). You will record both the reactions of those who witness it/are impacted by it, as well as your own feelings about the breached norm.

You will need to apply concepts and theories from the course in your analysis.

To prepare for the experiment: read “Studies of the Routine Grounds of Everyday Activities” by Harold Garfinkel. Garfinkel argued that there are countless hidden rules for behavior throughout our social interactions and relationships. As you will read, in the 1960s Garfinkel gave his students an assignment over spring break:

“Students were required to spend from fifteen minutes to an hour in their homes imagining that they were boarders [renters] and acting out this assumption. They were instructed to conduct themselves in a circumspect and polite fashion. They were to avoid getting personal, to use formal address, to speak only when spoken to” (231-2).

The students were asked to record their family members’ reactions. Families generally reacted negatively and students were incredibly uncomfortable. Breaking norms in order to uncover hidden rules is called “breaching.” Think about what social norms were uncovered in this experiment.

You will, in a sense, replicate Garfinkel’s famous study, “The Boarder”, but utilizing today’s communication technology. Do the norms that govern face-to-face interactions carry over into the technology realm? Are there new norms?

Next: Choose one of the following norms to break:

Non-Social Media Options

Call Me Maybe: Many people in younger generations feel uncomfortable talking on the phone to friends and acquaintances. Either meet someone new and get their number or choose someone whose number you already have but who is just an acquaintance. Call the person and strike up a conversation.

Wrong Medium Email: For 24 hours use email to answer all texts, direct messages, Twitter @s, etc.

The Oversharer: Pick either an acquaintance you don't know well or, perhaps, a parent. For about 8-12 hours dramatically increase the amount of information you send them via text. For example, you could communicate with them every time you do anything ("hi I am getting on the bus", "class is boring," "having lunch").

Social Media Options

Spam Oversharer: Use the social media of your choosing and post something every 30 minutes or so for an entire day. Make your posts mundane and inconsequential. Talk about/upload pics or stories of what you are eating, watching on TV, etc. This is especially good for those who don't post often.

Insta-Crap: For three days post only photos/stories that are out of focus, are just everyday items—anything that is not particularly interesting or photo-worthy. Especially good if you are a frequent poster who spends a lot of time composing shots and filtering them—photos/stories should be "off brand".

Facebook/Instagram "Like" Machine: On friends; posts, "like" all their content for the last 3 months. OR: explain in the comments why you liked posts in great detail.

Snap Attack: Continue to snap someone who has left you on opened. Try to do this multiple times with different people. Or send streaks to people you don't know well.

Ghosting: Stop replying to snaps, dms, or chats for 6-12 hours. Good for those who maintain multiple and frequent communications every day. Especially good if you can end streaks.

Pesky Tweeter: Pick someone you don't know well and tweet at them 10-15 times a day for 3 days. OR: for 24 hours reply to every tweet they post with a comment back at them.

****No dating app experiments are allowed****

Be sure to carefully record the reactions of others to your norm breaching. Also document how the breach made you feel: leading up to the violation, during, and after getting feedback from others. Whenever it's appropriate, **reveal the experiment**. You might get some useful data from this confession.

If you are worried about upsetting someone, make sure that you are the one who faces the consequences of your breach—don't make someone else the target. Seriously consider whether you want to do this experiment with grandparents.

Structure of the Paper

Introduction: Describe the norm breaking exercise and be sure to identify which option you chose. Include a **thesis**. Your thesis should be an argument that reflects the insights you gained into social norms. (Write it last, after you have finished your analysis). Need some help writing a thesis? Try [here](#) and [here](#).

Discussion: Discuss the reactions you received to your norm violation and how you felt about the violation.

Analysis: (the most important part) What sociological conclusions did you come to? What social norms govern social interactions via communication technology? How can you explain your own and others' reactions to the breach?

In your analysis, draw upon Garfinkel and one of the following readings:

- Goffman: "On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction"
- Berger & Luckmann: "Introduction: The Problem of the Sociology of Knowledge"
- Zerubavel: "The Social Lens"
- Baym: "Chapter 2: Making New Media Make Sense"
- Lupton: "Theorising Digital Society"
- Baym: "Chapter 4: Communities and Networks"

An analysis requires an application of the course materials that leads to insights about your real life experiences. An insight should be a conclusion or realization that is illuminated through the application of course concepts or theories. Just because you are writing about your personal experiences doesn't mean this paper is just a reflection or an opinion piece. It should be *sociological*—you must **apply theory**. Subjective interpretation should not be used in lieu of sociology.

Explain concepts in your own words.

Conclusion: Reflect on the experiment and what you learned.

Mechanics

- ◆ Maximum **4 pages double-spaced**
- ◆ Should be cohesive essay with short introduction and conclusion
- ◆ Should be your own work; you may not collaborate
- ◆ Quotes can be used sparingly
- ◆ Standard one-inch margins
- ◆ Pages should be **numbered**
- ◆ Name should be on the top of the first page
- ◆ Cite your sources!
- ◆ Include a bibliography
- ◆ Be sure to carefully edit your paper for spelling, grammar and typos

If you want to include excerpts of your interactions (including screenshots), make sure that you remove identifying information. You can also put your excerpts into an appendix at the end of your paper and refer to them. This won't count against your page count.

Be sure to consult the [citation guides](#) on bCourses