Social & Cultural Sources of the Self (PSYC 415): An Autobiographical Photography Assignment

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Course Structure

Class Size: 19 students (Juniors & Seniors)

PSYC 415 is discussion based, and mimics a graduate-level seminar. Each class, students have on average 30-50 pages of reading which come from research papers and book chapters in psychology, sociology, and philosophy.

Autobiographical Photography Assignment

Part I:
Students were asked to take and submit 10 photographs that best represent “who you are” (identifying photos not allowed). Given that students are limited in the amount of pictures that can be taken, they have to think carefully about what kinds of things to photograph, which I expect to be challenging and enlightening.

Part II:
Students were paired & received two sets of photos and were asked to write a “personality profile” of the person represented in each set using course concepts/themes to guide their assessments.

Part III:
Students shared assessments with the class and we tried to guess who the photos belonged to and assess their accuracy.

Assignment Purpose

Illustrates the extent to which the self can be known from objects, events, other people, etc.

Students will come to a rich understanding of the “self” by applying ideas, theories, and perspectives from this course.

It also allows me to illustrate the notion of “extended mind” as cameras are objects that allow memory to be recorded and stored in the world rather than in the brain.

Samples of Work

This person has high mobility because she likes going to different places in her spare time. She’s always concerned about her family & the fact that she moves around so much she keeps a necklace to remind her of her family…She goes to school & enjoys the KU tradition. She is also athletic & played volleyball, so she has height. She has a picture of an award so her self-esteem is moderate or high.

This student was able to discern from the photos that the person was high in “mobility,” which is the extent to which an individual has moved geographically, or relationally, over their lifetime. People high in mobility seek familiarity as a result of their “rootlessness.” The student noticed the photo of the necklace & speculated that the connection to family embodied by a necklace was a way for the person to deal with their mobility.

Family is obviously important to this person… She likes to travel, but prefers the city… It looks like she has moved more than once… She seems to be adventurous. She seems composed; the pictures are very particular… Probably a compassionate person. She invests herself emotionally in things that she feels are important. I would say she has secure attachment style and has mostly human attachments… I would say she has high mobility because of all of the times she moved.

Again we see a connection to mobility. The student noticed that the person in the photos seemed to live in a big city & liked to travel, which are often characteristics of high mobility. People high in mobility are often defined by their individual traits, & this student indeed noticed that the person in the photos was “compassionate” & “adventurous” which are individualistic traits. However, the student also made a connection to “secure attachment” which is revealed through the photos of family & close relationships.

Reflections and Future Directions

This project was successful overall. Students looked forward to it for several weeks & benefited from the introspection needed to select quality photos.

Pairing students facilitated learning through dialogue, a central tenet of my teaching philosophy.

There was some difficulty in connecting to course topics. In the future, I might provide students with more direction; rather than have students choose from a large list of course topics to apply, I might ask them specific questions about course topics that are most relevant to the activity.

I’d love to hear your suggestions!

Student Reactions

5. Was able to connect course topics to the activity
6. Facilitated dialogue about the things I learned this semester
7. Recommend doing it again

5. Fun
6. Helped apply the things I have learned
7. Helped think about course material in a new way

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