

OBJECTS FROM EVERYDAY LIFE: A CAN OF COCA-COLA

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SUGGESTED CITATION

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Abstract

"Objects From Everyday Life: A Can of Coca-Cola" is a detailed adaptation of an activity adapted by Peter Kaufman (1997) and published in *Teaching Sociology*. This exercise is designed to help students develop their sociological imagination. Specifically, students should walk away with an understanding of how one cultural object (i.e., a can of coke) can be interpreted in various ways and how that interpretation is influenced by our personal biographies and the historical moment. This activity can be used to introduce students to several course topics: research methods, culture, deviance, economy, environment, health, global issues, and education.

Details

Subject Areas: Introduction to Sociology/Social Problems

Resource Types: Class Activity

Class Levels: Any Level

Class Sizes: Any

Usage Notes

See attached

Learning Goals and Assessments

LEARNING GOALS

Help students develop their sociological imagination. Specifically, students should walk away with an understanding of how one cultural object has multiple interpretations, which are influenced by our personal biographies and the historical moment.

This activity can be used to introduce students to several course topics: research methods, culture, deviance, economy, environment, health, global issues, and education.

ASSESSMENTS

One-minute paper

Multiple choice exam questions

Essay exam questions

Resource Files

PPTX

DOCX

TECHNIQUE: *OBJECTS FROM EVERYDAY LIFE: A CAN OF COCA-COLA*

“Objects From Everyday Life: A Can of Coca-Cola” is a detailed adaptation of an activity adapted by Peter Kaufman (1997) and published in *Teaching Sociology*.

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COURSES: Introduction to Sociology (face-to-face)

TEACHING/LEARNING GOAL:

- Goal 1: This exercise is designed to help students develop their sociological imagination. Specifically, students should walk away with an understanding of how one cultural object has multiple interpretations, which are influenced by our personal biographies and the historical moment.
- Goal 2: This activity can be used to introduce students to several course topics: research methods, culture, deviance, economy, environment, health, global issues, and education.

TEACHING OBJECTIVES:

- Introduce the sociological imagination
- Examine how a cultural item that appears the same varies historically and cross-culturally
- Evaluate how personal biography and history are connected
- Contrast personal troubles and public issues

ANTICIPATED LEARNING OUTCOMES:

- Students will be introduced to the sociological imagination as a way of viewing the world.
- Students will practice connecting their individual biographies to the historical moment.
- Students will examine how culture varies in time and space through close study of a taken-for-granted cultural object.
- Students will be introduced to a global perspective by discussing how the taken-for-granted cultural object exists in other parts of the world and how the impact of this object is differentially experienced.

REFERENCES:

Kaufman, Peter. 1997. "Michael Jordan Meets C. Wright Mills: Illustrating the Sociological Imagination with Objects from Everyday Life." *Teaching Sociology* 25:309-314.

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- A can (or bottle) of Coca-Cola
- Websites to show to students during the activity (full URLs are included in the Appendix):
 1. [The Pop Vs. Soda Page](#) (see Step 1)
 2. [Coca-Cola Recipes](#) (see Step 1)
 3. [Soft Drink Consumption Comparison](#) (see Step 3)
 4. [Indian Farmers, Coca-Cola Vie for Scarce Water Supply](#) (see Step 3)
- Websites for your own reference are hyperlinked under "Procedure" and full reference details are included in the Appendix.

ESTIMATED TIME:

Approximately 40-60 minutes.

PROCEDURE:

For the Students:

I do not give any instructions to students before we begin the activity. I simply hold up the can or bottle of Coca-Cola and begin asking the students questions (listed under “For the Instructor”).

For the Instructor:

Timing

Kaufman uses the activity on the first or second day of class “to convince as many students as possible that the contents of the class will actually be relevant to their lives” (p. 310). I use the activity during my first module. Module One begins with introducing sociology and then going into the sociological imagination. Due to the length of the activity, it either takes place on day two or day three.

The Item

Kaufman indicates that a variety of objects from everyday life could be used. In his 1997 article, he suggests “a Big Mac, a Barbie doll, and a pair of Air Jordan basketball shoes ... a beeper, a compact disk, a condom, a pack of cigarettes, or a laptop computer” (p. 310). I began using this activity in 2004 and settled on using a can of Coca-Cola. I chose Coca-Cola because

- I believed that all students could relate to the item even if they did not personally consume the item.
- I could be relatively certain that even my international students would at least recognize the item.
- I also selected this item for the sake of practicality. I probably remember to bring a can of Coca-Cola with me to campus the day I am using this activity as often as I

forget it. I have always worked on a campus where I could easily get a can of Coca-Cola.

- I have also had success using a generic can of Coca-Cola. Students still recognize it as a version of Coca-Cola.

Kaufman suggests passing the item around the classroom for everyone to study. I do not do this step. When I first used this activity, my Introduction to Sociology course had 90 students. I believed this to be too large of a class to effectively pass an item around. I also do not have good luck with students passing items around in my smaller sections (of 30-45 students). If you were to pass the item around, I would have at least two copies of the item to pass around and one copy of the item for you to hold up for the class to see.

The Questions and Steps

Kaufman gives students “a handout listing the four steps and the guiding questions for current and future reference” (p. 310). I have never done this. I have always taught in institutions where I needed to be conservative with my printing. Also, I do not always ask every question. I have listed the questions on PowerPoint in the past. More recently, I use images in the PowerPoint for each topic and read the questions aloud. Kaufman outlines a number of questions based on moving the analysis from the personal to the local, global, and historical. The numbered questions and steps listed below are from Kaufman. I have split the questions up in each section to indicate the order in which I ask them. I have added notes, examples, and resources to the questions. I do not ask every question or go through every example listed. I move through the steps based on what students are contributing. Typically, students will bring up many of the examples that I have identified, but not always.

Step One: Description

Hold up the object (pass it around if you choose) while asking the following questions:

1. What is the object under consideration?
 - a. Students usually need some prodding. They will say something like “it’s a Coke.”
Ask them, is that the only thing this is?
2. How would you describe it in detail?
 - a. Students will usually say it is a drink. I encourage them to think about the ingredients and the packaging as we move through this question. I might start reading the ingredients list to get them thinking beyond “it is a drink.”
3. What do you call it? How is it referred to?
 - a. If no one responds. I tell them what I call it: either a coke or soda. I ask them if they call it a soda, pop, coke, or something else. With this question, I show students the website for [The Pop vs. Soda Page](#).
 - b. I ask follow-up questions about the accuracy of the map. I explain that this map is not scientific, but is useful to see if our personal experiences line up at all with the map. I can refer back to this website and discussion when we discuss research methods in Module Two.
 - c. The map helps students see differences within the United States and how our language usage is regional. I refer back to this discussion in Module Three when we discuss culture and how culture varies.

Step Two: Local Analysis

1. How does this item relate to your personal life?
 - a. **As a drink:** Ask students when they drink it. With breakfast? As a snack? As a special treat? Ask students why they drink it. Did they grow up in a “coke-household”? Do they drink it for the caffeine? The taste?
 - b. **As a cooking ingredient:** Students are sometimes surprised that people cook with Coca-Cola. You might show students a website of [Coca-Cola recipes](#) to give students a visual of the range of recipes available.
 - c. **As a household cleaner:** Most students are surprised that people can clean with Coca-Cola. There are a number of websites listing ways to clean with Coca-Cola ([example one](#), [example two](#)). I usually point out that Coca-Cola can be used to clean a toilet and the corrosion off of car batteries.
 - d. **As a cocktail or drink mixer:** I usually have a student who will mention that Coca-Cola can be used as a cocktail or drink mixer. If you teach Howard Becker’s (1953) “Becoming a Marihuana User,” you can refer back to this example during that discussion as it illustrates how people have to learn to drink alcohol.
2. How does the object relate to other aspects of social life? How is it used?
 - a. Is it an everyday beverage or a special treat? What types of social occasions can you expect to find Coca-Cola (e.g., restaurants, parties, cookouts)?
 - b. Coca-Cola’s [Share a Coke campaign](#) really highlights the social side of the beverage. Ask students if they have shared a coke as the campaign promotes. What is their experience with the campaign? Is anyone excluded from participating due to their name (i.e., a less common name or an unusual spelling)?

3. How is it bought and sold?
 - a. **Packaging:** How is it packaged (e.g., cans, bottles (plastic and glass), fountain, [freestyle mixing machines](#), [Soda Streams](#))?
 - b. **Different sizes:** What is a size of can? What about bottles?
 - c. **Different flavors and sweeteners:** What varieties exist (e.g., classic, diet coke, cherry coke, diet coke with lime, diet coke with Splenda, coke zero, caffeine free diet coke)?
4. Who buys and sells it?
 - a. **Who are the customers?:** Students might respond that they are the customers. You can also point out that [McDonald's restaurant is Coca-Cola's biggest customer](#).
 - b. **Where is it purchased?:** Where do they buy it (if they use it) (e.g., gas stations, restaurants, campus, grocery stores, soda/pop machines)? Why is it purchased there?
5. In what context does it exist?
 - a. I use this question if students are still struggling with answering the previous questions. If discussion is going ok, then I skip this question.
6. Who benefits from it? Who suffers because of it?
 - a. You can highlight future course topics very easily with this question. In particular, topics related to health, medicine, the economy, and the environment could be addressed depending on your semester topic plans.
 - b. **Benefits:** I encourage students think broadly about the various groups that benefit and how they benefit. Examples include the Coca-Cola company (making money); doctors and dentists (more patients with health problems related to soda consumption); local bottlers and truck drivers (jobs), gas station owners and

- restaurants (make money, jobs), consumers (like the taste or need the caffeine), and [Olympic athletes](#) (through sponsorship). Your campus may even have an exclusive contract with Coca-Cola that could be mentioned.
- c. **uffers:** You may not have to ask this question as the groups that suffer might come up during the question about who benefits. Examples of sufferers include [consumers](#) (harm to health, no nutritional value, so on) and the [environment](#) (plastic bottles in landfills, water usage, and so on).
 - d. **Personal troubles and public issues:** These questions lend themselves to discussing personal troubles and public issues. Follow-up questions should be asked about the harms from Coca-Cola. Ask students: Is this harm a personal trouble or a public issue?
7. Why does it appear the way it does?
- a. **Why bottles or cans?:** You might point out how vending machines increasingly only have bottles instead of cans. Ask students why this might be.
 - b. **Why these sweeteners?:** You might point out [health concerns over the various sweeteners and artificial sweeteners](#).
 - c. **Why these sizes?:** What preferences do students have regarding the size of the beverage? Currently, there is a marketing push [by soft drink companies for their smaller cans](#). You can also explain how the bottles and cans list the total calories for the entire bottle or can rather than based on serving size as was done in the past.
8. How does it directly relate to your life?
- a. By this point, even students who never drink Coca-Cola typically start seeing how it relates to their own life.

Step Three: Global Analysis

Step Three is particularly challenging if yourself or your students have limited experience traveling abroad, there are few international students in your class, or both.

1. How is this item used in other cultures?
 - a. I do not spend a lot of time on this question. I pose it and if no one responds, we move immediately to the next question. If students respond, many of the other topics in Step Three will be brought up and can be skipped over as warranted.
2. Does this object exist in other countries? If so, in what form? How is it used? How is this use different than its use in the United States? Is it altered in any way when used elsewhere?
 - a. **The water:** Here, you can discuss the use of local bottlers and how using local bottlers means that the water used may alter the taste. Students in more rural areas can usually relate to this if you bring up the difference in taste between “city” water and “country” water (i.e., well water).
 - b. **The sweeteners:** The sweeteners used vary depending on country and what sweetener is most affordable in the region. Students might be familiar with Mexican cokes (which can be purchased at Wal-Mart and Mexican grocery stores in the United States). Mexican coke uses more cane sugar instead of high fructose corn syrup like American coke, but does [contain some high fructose corn syrup](#).
 - c. **Temperature or ice cubes:** Students who have traveled internationally might mention that beverages are not usually served with as much (if any) ice like in the United States. I like the question posed in the linked article: [why do Americans use so much ice?](#) to spur further discussion.

- d. **Everyday use v. Special treat:** For example, this semester a student shared that in Nigeria (where he is from), the drink is called “American drink” and is drunk only on special occasions. Show students a [chart comparing US soda consumption with the rest of the world](#) (though dated) to emphasize how prevalent soft drink consumption is in the United States compared to the rest of the world.
3. Does it affect life on the planet in any significant way? Where and how is it made?
 - a. **Farmers v. Coca-Cola in India over groundwater:** Have students read about or watch this [PBS report about Coca-Cola’s use of water in India](#) (Length: 8:20) (and [a more recent article on the topic](#)). Alternatively, you could summarize the controversy.
 - b. **Water usage:** Point out to students that Coca-Cola (and other soft drinks) use of water is not only an issue in India, but also something to consider everywhere. The article “[Yet Another ‘Footprint’ to Worry About: Water](#)” provides water usage estimates. Students might be familiar with the 2015 California drought and controversies surrounding [Nestlé’s continued bottled water operations in the region](#) (see also “[Drought Turns Californians against Water Bottling Companies](#)”).
 - c. **Personal trouble and public issue:** This is another good point in the activity to discuss the difference between personal troubles and public issues. At what point does groundwater usage move from a personal trouble to a public issue?

Step Four: Historical Analysis

1. What is the history of this object?
 - a. **The history of Coca-Cola:** For those unfamiliar with the history of the beverage, [this website is useful](#).

2. When did the object come into existence? Why did it appear at this time? How has the object changed over time?
 - a. If these topics have not already come up, you can point out the different flavors Coca-Cola has had over time and the switch from cane sugar to high fructose corn syrup as a sweetener. Other topics students might bring up or you might introduce include whether Coca-Cola ever contained cocaine and New Coke.
 - b. **Did/Does Coca-Cola contain cocaine?:** You can explain to students that yes, Coca-Cola began as a French Wine Coca until prohibition in Atlanta (1886) outlawed the wine portion of the beverage. It was at that time that John Pemberton (the inventor) replaced wine with a sugar syrup. Today, Coca-Cola contains coca but without the ecgonine alkaloid (see [“Why We Took the Cocaine out of Soda”](#)).
 - c. **New Coke:** Most students are not familiar with New Coke from 1985. After consumer testing, Coca-Cola [introduced a reformulated product on April 23, 1985 and switched back to the original formula 79 days later on July 11, 1985](#). I usually mention that people began [hoarding the old coke until it was brought back](#).
3. What other aspects of social life have changed as a result of this object?
 - a. **Santa Claus:** Students might be familiar with the conspiracy theory that Coca-Cola is responsible for how we see Santa Claus today and that he actually wore a green suit before Coca-Cola started using him in marketing. [Snopes indicates that no, Santa Claus was already becoming standardized before Coca-Cola began using him](#). (See also [Coca-Cola’s history of their use of Santa Claus](#).)

4. How has your use of this object changed over time?
 - a. How do students consume the beverage today compared to in the past? What are they drinking instead of Coca-Cola? Why?
5. What will the object be like in the future? Will it still exist?
 - a. **Sugar is evil:** More people contend that sugar is what is killing us and even comparing its harms to tobacco's harms ([example one](#), [example two](#)). I ask students if drinking soda will one day be stigmatized and regulated like cigarette smoking. Alternatively, you could ask students if the beverage might become healthier (e.g., smaller portions, healthier sweeteners, added nutrients, fewer calories)?
 - b. **Personal trouble and public issue:** Additional questions could be posed to bring the discussion back to the sociological imagination. Options include:
 - i. If someone is obese from consuming too many sugary drinks, is this likely a personal trouble or public issue? Defend your choice.
 - ii. Why do many low income parents give their children sugary drinks like Coke instead of healthier alternatives? Follow up with a question to get students thinking about the sociological imagination: Are these parents simply guilty of poor parenting (i.e., personal trouble) or is there some other structural cause here (i.e., public issue), such as the affordability and availability of soft drinks?

The Takeaway/Wrap-Up

One-Minute Paper: Depending on time, I have a one-minute writing prompt for students:

How does a can of Coca-Cola® help us use the sociological imagination?

PowerPoint Takeaway Point: “A can of Coca-Cola may appear obvious, but our culture influences our perspective on this cultural object. Using our sociological imagination, we can see how what we call the item, how we use the item, and how it impacts our lives varies depending on our cultural location. Moreover, examining the consequences of soda consumption can help us differentiate between personal troubles and public issues further developing our sociological imagination.”

Wrap-up Questions: How does the historical moment influence our personal choice to consume this and similar beverages? (Possible answers: We are reducing our consumption because sugar is evil. We are drinking more of it because the portion sizes are larger in bottles compared to cans. Americans have a different relationship to Coca-Cola than other nations.)

INTERPRETATION:

All students have some knowledge of Coca-Cola. Most have consumed the beverage or have some understanding of its usage and history. Most, however, have not thought much about Coca-Cola beyond their own personal biographies. This activity encourages them to develop their sociological imagination by interpreting the object under consideration with an eye towards how other people, cultures, and historical periods have used the item.

POSSIBLE PITFALLS:

- **Lack of international experience:** I have used this assignment across different institutions. The most difficult institution to use this activity was at a rural community college. There were very few international students and even fewer students with any international travel. I usually had at least one student who had been on a cruise or a church mission trip to Central America, but that was about it. I relied on my own international travel experiences to help fill in the gaps. Another option might be to add a taste-test in class with a few volunteers. They

could taste American coke and Mexican coke. Or, you could serve students coke with a lot of ice or little ice (or ice-cold or room temperature) to give them some experience with global differences in its use. You might also consider inviting someone who has international experiences to class the day (or for during Step Three) of the activity to discuss their experience with Coca-Cola internationally.

- **Fewer students are consuming the beverage.** I have observed fewer students with a lot of first-hand knowledge of consuming Coca-Cola (and [the trend exists](#)). Nearly all have drunk Coca-Cola at some point in their life, but fewer consume it with any regularity compared to when I began using this activity in 2004. Traditional-aged college students are less likely to have had soda machines in their schools. They also have many other beverage options: gourmet coffees, energy drinks, flavored waters, flavored iced teas, alcohol (craft beer), and so on. Coca-Cola is just one of many options today.

ASSESSMENT EXAMPLES:

Test question for first exam or quiz after the activity:

1. Studying a can of Coca-Cola helps us to develop our
 - a. dramaturgical analysis.
 - b. sociological imagination.**
 - c. feminist perspective.
 - d. social construction of reality.
2. How does analyzing a can of Coca-Cola help us to develop our sociological imagination? Be sure to define sociological imagination and give at least two examples of how one's sociological imagination is exercised by this analysis.

Test question for exam after the activity, but also after the unit on culture.

3. Coca-Cola is part of our material culture. Which characteristic of culture does Coca-Cola illustrate?
- a. The words people use to refer to Coca-Cola vary by region.
 - b. The Coca-Cola formula has changed over time.
 - c. All of these answers.**
 - d. Nearly everyone is familiar with Coca-Cola even if they are not regular consumers of it.

APPENDIX. REFERENCES AND RESOURCES.

Step One: Description

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Step Two: Local Analysis

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Step Four: Historical Analysis

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The Takeaway/Wrap-Up

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