

**2016 Notre Dame Sociology Class Address:
Go Tell the World about Sociology!**

Kraig Beyerlein
Associate Professor Sociology

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Each year, I'm amazed at the unbelievable accomplishments of our undergraduate students. This year is no different. As you heard earlier, among other things, this year's graduating seniors will be attending graduate school at prestigious universities, engaging in social justice work through the Peace Corps and ACE, and working in various and diverse industries. What an amazing group of students! I wish I would have had all of you in class. Congratulations on your upcoming graduation. I know that your family is so very proud of you, and the praise is well deserved.

With that said, if your parents are like my parents, they wondered a lot over the last four years what you were doing studying sociology. The answer, of course, is having fun! To the mothers and fathers in the room, I assure you that our discipline is about much more than having fun. Your daughters and sons have gained a great deal from their degree in sociology. Among sociology's many virtues, two stand out. The first is that it significantly advances our understanding of human behavior; and second it cultivates unique skills that are broadly applicable and sought.

How has sociology expanded your daughters' and sons' explanation of human behavior? On the final exam in my freshman introductory class—"Understanding Societies"—I ask students to imagine that their high school principal has invited them back to talk to the graduating class about the merits of sociology. I specify that their principal believes the most effective strategy for doing so is to break their talk into two parts. In the first part, students are to discuss what they thought best explained human behavior before taking "Understanding Societies," while in the second they are to describe how their view of human behavior has changed since taking my class.

Over the years, students' answers to the first or *pre-sociology* part generally cohere around the following theme: people act the way they do mainly (if not completely) because of internal traits, such as genetics or personalities. This is not surprising given the strong tendency in U.S. culture to attribute success or failure to individualistic characteristics and qualities. Students' answers to the second or *post-sociology* part have largely gone as follows: While not denying the importance of genetics or personalities (a view I share), they point out that these factors are not enough to explain human behavior completely. Then, based on material we've covered during the semester, they argue—in elegant and sophisticated ways—that people's social context must be taken into account.

I experienced a similar transformation in thinking. Growing up, I had the good fortune of living close to and spending a lot of time with both sets of my grandparents. All of my grandparents were amazing people, and I had the utmost respect for them. In particular, I admired my maternal grandmother's commitment to helping others, especially strangers. All

told, she logged more than 8,000 volunteer hours and received numerous community-service awards.

As an adolescent, the explanation for my grandmother's generous behavior was simple: she had a heart of gold. Becoming a sociologist never made me doubt my grandmother's compassionate spirit. It did, however, make me realize that other factors were in play and that my grandmother's heart of gold *alone* did not fully account for the countless hours she worked helping others. From charitable programs that her church sponsored to supportive peer networks, my grandmother's social environment was rich in volunteering opportunities and resources. These factors allowed my grandmother to put her compassionate spirit into action. In other words, it was the combination of a conducive social context and my grandmother's caring disposition that explained her decades of continued generous acts. Had my grandmother lived in an unfavorable social setting, she still would have had the same heart of gold (her humble Midwest farm upbringing and loving parents guaranteed that), but she would have lacked the opportunities and resources necessary to act to help others.

Volunteerism is but just one example. Myriad other human behaviors such as academic pursuits, job placements, and even eating habits are subject to similar social forces. Study after study in the world of sociology demonstrates that people's successes or failures depend significantly on the particular social context in which they're embedded.

While this insight is of broad significance, it's particularly important for the Notre Dame community. Catholic Social Teaching motivates us to care for the less fortunate and mobilize for the common good. Equipped with the knowledge that social conditions play a key role in human flourishing, your daughters and sons have the potential to make the world a better place. And this, obviously, is no small thing!

Despite how much you love your daughter or son, I assume you'd prefer that they not move back home and live in your basement (at least long-term!) while they set out to make the world a better place. Have no fear: you're not in jeopardy of losing your empty-nester status as a degree in sociology has broad utility. In addition to fostering sensitivity to the social context for explaining human behavior, sociology brings a methodological rigor to bear on social life.

For instance, sociologists are often called on to take Americans' pulse, such as how the public thinks and feels about political candidates. This may seem like a daunting task, as there are over 300 million adults in the United States. But through scientific sampling practices, carefully-designed survey instruments, and complex statistical models, sociologists are up for the challenge and time after time deliver the goods. And this doesn't even include the gamut of qualitative methodologies that dig analytically deep to reveal the mechanisms and processes that motivate public opinion. What employer wouldn't covet the skills and the systematic results that sociologists produce?

In the coming days, months, and years, your daughters and sons will have much to say about the world, including what public policies will be best to reduce inequality or how communities can best unite to fight injustice. Their sociological training gives them a novel lens

through which to view human behavior, and I know that you will listen, and listen carefully, because that's what parents do.

But graduating sociology seniors, sharing your sociological perspective must **NOT** end with your parents, other family members, or friends. The world outside your social circle needs to hear this perspective as it carries a unique vision in which humanity's collective fate is inextricably linked to our social conditions.

Thank you, and good luck to all of you!