

Good afternoon everyone. I am so pleased to be here to celebrate the accomplishments of our many wonderful students, and have the opportunity to share some reflections with you. Let me begin by congratulating our sociology majors for their hard work and many achievements. I speak for my fellow faculty members when I say it is really a joy to work with such talented, eager, and passionate students in our classes. Let me also congratulate the parents and relatives who have joined us. I study education and inequality, and one of the most well-established findings in our field is that family background is the most important predictor of a student's academic success. So – nice job parents!

OK, my goal today is not to look back, but instead to look forward. Students – we have spent many hours training you how to “think like a sociologist.” Granted, there is no class entitled, “How to think like a sociologist.” But that has been our objective all along. Before we send you out into the world, I want to take a few minutes and

clarify what it means to “think like a sociologist,” and explain why it is both important and useful to do so.

“Think like a sociologist”: I can boil down it to three main practices that are fairly easy to remember and enact on a daily basis: (1) follow the evidence, wherever it leads you; (2) seek cognitive empathy; and (3) focus less on people, and more on institutions.

First – follow the evidence wherever it leads you. If you want to think like a sociologist, you must recognize that any attempt to understand the social world must be based on *evidence*. Recall my earlier claim: family background is the most important predictor of student achievement. That’s not merely my opinion; it’s the conclusion of hundreds of studies that analyze dozens of different data sets over the past 50 years. It is as close to a “fact” as we get in sociology. When I first began studying educational inequality as a graduate student, I thought that school quality was the best predictor of student performance. The overwhelming evidence convinced me otherwise. That’s happened a lot in the last 20 plus years as a sociologist.

Now, often, “following the evidence” actually leads us to towards greater uncertainty about the world. Counter-intuitively, that can *actually* be a **good** thing. Another example. Does school spending affect student learning? As a graduate student, I thought the answer

to this question was “yes.” However, after reviewing the research on this question, it became obvious that the answer is in fact: complicated.

Some studies find that school spending matters, but some find that it doesn't. What does that mean? Well, it could mean a lot of things. In this case, I think it means that the relationship between spending and achievement is complex. Much depends on: *how* the money is spent, *how much* money is spent (or *not* spent), and upon *which students* the money is spent.

As this example shows, following the evidence can lead us away from simplicity towards complexity. And that's a good thing because the world is a complicated place, and simple answers rarely get the job done.

Now, it is frustrating to me, and my fellow sociologists, that many people confuse sociology with political discourse. It's understandable because the two sometimes sound similar. (Although, if you've ever read an article in a sociology journal, the difference would quickly become apparent!) Politicians and political commentators use "evidence" to construct narratives about how the social, economic, and political worlds work. However, political discourse typically begins with a conclusion, and then applies evidence selectively (and sometimes deceptively) as supporting material for that conclusion. Ideology is an endless closed loop. With political discourse, if "truthiness" or "alternative facts" win votes and gain political support, then so be it. Mission accomplished.

Sociology should never work that way. Our studies must begin with *research questions*, not *research answers*. We don't deal in "alternative facts" – believing what we want to believe. Instead, we

generate “*provisional* facts.” “Provisional” means that a given finding is considered the *best available* answer to a given question. Indeed, sometimes the best answer is: “we don’t know yet.” Better answers will likely come along in the future and displace many of today’s provisional facts. That’s totally OK. In fact, it is a strength of social science; it is a self-correcting enterprise, and indeed, it is one thing that makes it *exciting* be a sociologist.

My second tip for thinking like a sociologist is *to seek cognitive empathy*. By cognitive empathy, I mean: thinking about the world as your research subjects think about it, not as you think about it.

Consider the following question: why would a young person join a gang? That is a question that I explore with my students in a course that I teach, entitled “Inner City America.” Based solely on my own life experiences, I can’t think of a single compelling reason why I (or my children) would join a gang. Many people would stop there and conclude that young people who join gangs must have some character defect, or moral weakness that leads them down this path.

Several years ago, I taught a course in a prison, and one of the inmates shared a surprising insight with me. He said: “The only time I ever felt like I was part of something bigger than myself, was when I was in a gang.” Imagine that. This man’s need for belonging

and status is probably familiar to us. However, imagine feeling so socially marginalized that a gang seems like the best alternative for meeting that need for belonging and identity. That only makes sense if we understand how this person sees the world in *his own terms* (not ours). This man also said that, at the time he joined a gang, he was young and scared, and he believed that being in a gang would keep him safe. No one would mess with him anymore. From his perspective, his decision seems quite sensible, and cognitive empathy helps me recognize that. Of course – understanding my student's thinking doesn't mean that I condone his decision. My goal is simply to understand it.

Cognitive empathy is hard to achieve because we live in a very diverse society, but the range of our personal experiences is very limited. People are very good at ignoring this important fact. For example, we believe that our friends are more similar to us than they actually are. In contrast, we *also believe* that people who are

*not* members of our “in group” differ from us *more* than they actually do. Our friends are *less like us* that we think; and our rivals are *more similar to us* than we believe. These biases make cognitive empathy difficult because they undermine our ability to accurately depict how others think about the world.

Good sociologists recognize this bias, and fight to overcome it by seeking cognitive empathy. So – be humble, and don’t assume that you know how other people view the world. Don’t assume that you know what other people have experienced in their daily lives. Seek cognitive empathy, and try to understand other’s people ideas and experiences in *their* terms. Doing so allows us to learn about how the social world really works.

Finally, tip #3 for thinking like a sociologist: focus less on people, and more on institutions. What is an institution? Institutions serve as the “rules of the game” that reward and constrain social actors, and thereby create stable, predictable patterns of behavior.

Think of baseball. Imagine if we watched every single game in the 2017 season. Each game would play out differently in the details, but across these many different games, the players would behave in very similar ways. Indeed, if we paused a given game at certain key moments (a fly ball to the warning track with a runner on 3<sup>rd</sup>, and one out), we can easily predict what will happen next after we un-pause our remotes. Why? Because baseball is an institution. It has formal and informal rules that are enforced, which makes the behaviors of the players highly stable and predictable from game to game. The formal rules are written and enforced by Major League Baseball. Players adapt their behaviors accordingly. Batters don't

swing at pitches out of the strike zone because the formal rules reward them for doing so.

There are also informal rules of the game that are collectively held and enforced by players themselves. There is no formal rule that sanctions players for flipping their bats in celebration after hitting a home run. However – players have a code of conduct that discourages such behavior out of “respect for the game.” We just saw an example of this the other day. Juan Batista is a notorious bat flipper. Other players hate him for it. He flipped his bat to celebrate a homer in Atlanta on Wednesday. The benches cleared. Words were exchanged. Last night, in his first “at bat,” the Braves pitcher threw inside and missed him. He hit Batista on the thigh on his second pitch. And that was that. Order was established, and the matter was resolved. The incident only makes sense if we understand the informal rules of baseball. This same scene has played out similarly hundreds of different times in baseball’s

history. It's not about the players. It's about the enduring power of institutions.

Ok. So, how does this help us understand the social world? Well, all facets of the social world have "rules of the game" (institutions) that shape behavior and affect outcomes for individuals. However, they are often hidden from view, especially to outsiders. I recently attended a baseball game with a colleague who grew up in Ecuador, and knew nothing about baseball. The action on the field made little sense to him, until I began to explain the rules and strategy. It was a lot to absorb – he left in the 5<sup>th</sup> inning! But, highlighting the *institution of baseball* helped him gain *insight into what he was seeing*.

For the most part, people go through life like my Ecuadorian colleague. We see the people and organizations that make up society, but *the institutions that shape their behaviors* are harder to

identify. For example, it is well-established that the United States has the greatest level of income inequality among industrialized nations. How can we explain that? Most people look at workers, employers, firms, and maybe, labor unions and think about how these actors behaviors create more inequality in the U.S. compared to other nations. That's fine, but it misses the most important part of the story: we must look beyond these actors, and *focus on the institutions that shape how earnings* are distributed in the labor market. Collective bargaining, labor laws and regulations, worker representation, access to welfare state provisions – these are the “rules of the game” that determine how wages are allocated in modern industrialized economies. The U.S. relies more heavily on *market forces* than any other nation to set workers' wages, and that's why America has more income inequality than other nations.

This is how sociologists make sense of the social world. Business, education, entertainment, politics, family, criminal justice – in any

of these systems, institutions provide the key to understanding how actors within the system behave. If we want to change any of these systems for the better, focus less on people, and more changing the institutions.

So – to conclude: students, I hope that my three tips for thinking like a sociologist sound familiar to you. If we did our jobs well in teaching you, these three practices should be second nature to you by now. I hope that you go out in the world and practice them regularly, in the home, in the workplace, in the public square, in the voting booth, and encourage others to do likewise. Doing so can lead us to a world with greater empathy, compassion, and mutual understanding; a world guided by reason and intellect; a world with smarter, more effective, and more humane social policies. Best of luck with all of your future pursuits – we look forward to celebrating your successes and many accomplishments in the years to come.