

Speech Given at Induction Ceremony for Alpha Kappa Delta

California State University – Channel Islands

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Congratulations to all of you on your accomplishments and your academic success. And thank you for asking me to speak to you today. It is always such a pleasure to be around good, hard working students and your dedicated teachers. And it is so nice that you have been honored for your accomplishments within sociology.

Most sociology majors, at one point or another, have been in a situation – perhaps Thanksgiving dinner or a family reunion – where someone asks what your major is. When you reply, “Sociology,” they look a bit askance and say something like, “Well, what will you do with that?” At that point most of us bite our tongues and say something like, “Would you like more salad?” or “Look at what Cousin Sue is doing.” Yet, we are really thinking something else. What I really would like to say is, “Sociology majors make the world a better place.”

These thoughts aren’t at all original. The AKD website says something very similar, but more eloquently. Part of its stated purpose is encouraging “social and intellectual activities” that “will lead to improvement in the human condition.” I believe that this goal has been part of sociology for many years. If you look at the writings and careers of many early sociologists you will find a long tradition of concern with the wellbeing of people in our communities and society and, at its core, a hope that the social world will be better for all of us if we understand it more thoroughly.

But today should be about you. And so I want to be a bit more specific and talk about all the good that you can do with your life and, especially, how your studies in sociology have prepared you for this good work. I believe that this potential for good will come no matter what field you enter, for it involves more than specific actions. Instead it involves your intellectual abilities and skills.

Throughout your college years, you have developed the ability to think logically and analytically – to examine the world by stepping back, looking at what is there, and making sense of what you see. In other words, you have learned to take a sociological perspective. At this point in your career, many elements of this sociological perspective may have become common place to you – things that you just assume or take for granted. What I want to do this afternoon is remind you of how important – and useful – many of the things you have learned will be to you throughout life. In other words, I want to go over five of the “big ideas” in sociology and how these can help each of us in our interactions with families and friends, in the work place, and in the community at large. Your understanding of these “big ideas” will provide you with intellectual power throughout your life, multiplying your ability to do good. So let me review some of these big ideas – and then return to the theme of how your knowledge of sociology can help make the world a better place.

One of the biggest, overarching “big ideas” involves the relationship of **theories and data**. We use theories to offer explanations of how the world works and then we test the theories with data. Even though many in the current political scene challenge the use of data and facts – you have learned how important they are – both in understanding how the world works and also in showing us how it could be better. A few weeks ago I got to hear some of Dr.

Sanchez's students describe results from their data analyses, and last weekend I got to see some of their posters. The skills they, and all of you, have developed in examining and interpreting data and comparing those data to theoretical expectations will serve you for many years to come. You will be able to develop better solutions to problems and be better equipped to show others why these solutions are appropriate.

The second important big idea is **levels of analysis**. Sociological analyses are so powerful because they allow us to look at the world from various perspectives, much like you can zoom in or out with a camera. We have theories that address the lives of individuals; group interactions between dyads, within families and organizations; and the nature of much larger entities such as entire societies and nations. For instance, we can look at trends in demographic data as well as changes in individuals' attitudes and beliefs. I'd be willing to bet that you often pull out nuggets from theories that you've studied to explain things you see on various levels of analysis, from interactions in your families to relationships between nations. Even though your friends or family may not find these understandings as interesting as you and I do, the fact that you can think in this way is important and will help you make sense of what you observe in years to come.

A third, very important big idea is the notion of **social structures** – the underpinnings of our lives and interactions. You have learned about many different elements of social structure and are no doubt comfortable with concepts such as norms, values, power relationships, stratification, and inequality. You know that, even though we can't see or touch something like inequality, it profoundly affects our lives and those of others. More specifically, the environments in which we live and interact – these social structures – provide constraints and

opportunities for our lives and those of others. Often these constraints and opportunities are inequitably distributed. While these inequities can be frustrating and certainly are often unfair, the fact that we can understand what they are and why they occur is actually a source of incredible power. Power that one can use to help make the world a better place and help lessen the burdens that individuals face.

While you have learned about the reality of social structures, you also know that these structures are produced by **social actions**, the fourth big idea. Even though social structures constrain our choices, these structures are human creations – the product of social actions. All social structures – norms, values, power relationships – are created by humans. And thus we can recreate or modify them.

This brings me to the fifth big idea I wanted to highlight: **social networks** – the ways in which we are related to each other. These networks can be observed at all levels of analysis – between individuals, groups and organizations, and societies. We interact with our friends and families; our work organizations are linked to other organizations as well as individual clients or customers; our communities are linked with other communities and larger groups such as states or nations. Again, the nature of our networks produce constraints and opportunities. More important, social actions occur through social networks. Understanding the nature of these networks can be a key element in both comprehending situations and encouraging change.

I've only listed five big ideas here and all of you are probably thinking of some key ones that I've omitted. And that is certainly true.

Some of you may also be thinking, “But these are only ideas. How can they make a difference?” Yet, we must remember that ideas are very powerful. Historically and across the world, the first targets of repressive governments have been artists, journalists, and social scientists, and, especially, among social scientists, sociologists. Good art, in-depth journalism, and good sociological analyses challenge the status quo. They make us look behind facades. Thus, by their very nature, they can challenge systems of oppression and interactions that harm others.

We, in the United States, are currently living in an unprecedented political atmosphere – one in which the chief executive and his followers says the most horrific, hateful things. Even worse, these statements and thoughts seem to be becoming legitimized in many sectors of our society, both through what people say and also in the policies that are enacted. In addition, the scientific enterprise has been devalued, both through political statements but also through various policy maneuvers. Phrases such as “alternative facts” are bandied around and high level officials actively ignore and even ban the use of empirical data. Very dedicated public servants, who have devoted their lives to serving all of us and many of whom were sociology majors, are demeaned and denigrated for simply following the law and long standing norms.

This situation makes it even more important that we remember the power of knowledge and sociological understanding. The ability to analyze the world – to think sociologically – imparts power. Such power can, of course, result in bad outcomes, where sociological understandings are used to manipulate and control others. But, they also can give the power to do good – to help the world become a better place for all of us. I do believe that

this hateful, post-fact, anti-science atmosphere will eventually pass, demonstrating once again the power of social networks and social actions to shape our society and social structures.

I know that this process will not be easy. Yet, I also know that our sociological knowledge and skills will help all of us withstand these times and help rebuild our society and political system to one that is accepting and humane – guided by moral tenets of fairness and equity. Each of you, in your own way, will take a role in this rebuilding process. Your sociological understandings, including some of the “big ideas” I’ve reviewed, will help give you the courage and insight to do good within your families, your work organizations, your community, and the society as a whole.

Just one final comment: One of the most exciting things about being a sociologist is the dynamism of the field. We have so much to learn. It has been exactly 50 years since I did my first summer research project in sociology, and in this last half century we have learned a lot about how the world works. But there is so much more we can learn. And that is what makes sociology so much fun. I know that only some of you will pursue careers within academic sociology, but I hope that you always remember the way in which developing sociological knowledge is dynamic and ongoing (and fun) and that you never lose your interest in the field. Congratulations to all of you for your hard work and for your selection for Alpha Kappa Delta. I wish each of you the very best in the coming years.