

FROM THE EDITOR

Every year, undergraduate students nationwide write tens of thousands of social science papers. A small, yet substantial, portion of this undergraduate research makes significant theoretical and empirical contributions to the social sciences. These findings rarely reach the attention of professional social scientists, however, because knowledge in the academic community is mostly disseminated in the form of journal articles, a venue unfamiliar to many undergraduates. As a consequence, not only is potentially important research ignored, but the social science community loses an opportunity to attract and engage the youngest generation of scholars in the enterprise of academic knowledge production.

Sociological Insight was founded in July 2008 with the goal of establishing the first fully refereed national undergraduate research journal aimed at publishing only the highest quality of social science research. While there are many undergraduate research journals dedicated to the social sciences, *Sociological Insight* sets itself apart by capitalizing on the lode of excellent research produced by undergraduates with the primary purpose of making a serious impact on the scholarly literature, and secondarily to encourage undergraduates to engage in the research process.

Our most significant challenges this year have been two-fold. First, we had to attract original, recent (2007-2009), theory-driven, methodologically sound, professionally written submissions which made important findings. Second, we needed to ensure that every published article would have been subjected to a rigorous review process that guaranteed their academic worthiness on a battery of professional benchmarks. Essentially, we needed to render any published article in *Sociological Insight* suitable for citation in the academic community.

To these ends, we undertook a massive advertising effort in which 125 Sociology Departments around the United States were contacted by phone and email. The great majority responded enthusiastically, posting *Sociological Insight* flyers around their departments and sending undergraduates multiple reminders of this opportunity. More selectively, we targeted the winners of awards at various conferences, prestigious research fellowships, and undergraduate paper competitions. These efforts proved fruitful, as *Sociological Insight* attracted 52 submissions from 33 U.S. universities:

American University, Augusta State University, Beloit College, Bethune-Cook-

man College, Davidson College, Fisk University, Harvard University, Loyola University Chicago, Macalester College, New York University, Pennsylvania State University, Presbyterian College, Princeton University, Rice University, Sonoma University, Southwestern University, Spelman College, Syracuse University, Texas State University, Truman University, University of California Santa Cruz, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, University of Chicago, University of Alabama-Birmingham, University of Iowa, University of Maryland, University of Minnesota, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, University of Wisconsin-Madison, University of Texas at Austin, Vanderbilt University, Virginia Commonwealth University, and Wake Forest University.

After a preliminary evaluation process, 36 of the initial 52 submissions which were considered for publication were selected to be sent to reviewers. Each manuscript was evaluated by three or four external reviewers, usually one sociology professor, one graduate student, and one undergraduate. All in all, 28 faculty, 42 graduate students, and 36 undergraduates around the United States participated in the review process. If an article was not reviewed by a faculty member, then it was sent to two graduate students and one undergraduate. All manuscripts were assigned to reviewers based on research interests through an anonymous review process.

Selecting undergraduates to serve as reviewers is central to *Sociological Insight's* mission. As the Roman Stoic philosopher Lucius Seneca wrote, *docendo discimus*: we learn when we teach. By critically evaluating a research paper on a number of specified criteria, students learn to identify the objective strengths and weaknesses of a paper and grow to develop an intuitive sense of what constitutes good research. Thus, undergraduates can benefit greatly from evaluating the work of their peers. Undergraduate reviewers had to submit a writing sample, a letter of recommendation, or a curriculum vitae before they could qualify to serve as reviewers, and they received a slightly adjusted article evaluation form.

We emphasized in our correspondences with each reviewer—particularly faculty and graduate students—that their overall recommendation as to whether a manuscript should be accepted for publication, rejected, or sent for “revise and resubmit” should reflect the fact that *Sociological Insight* is a highly selective journal. It was well-understood by reviewers that we were seeking to publish only the very best of undergraduate research; articles which could potentially make an impact on the scholarly literature.

Ultimately, seven articles and one research note were accepted for publication in this issue, as well as seven book reviews written by gradu-

ate students and PhD candidates. We are extremely proud of the excellent quality of all of these articles, each of which adds important insights to its area of study.

In this issue, Collin Payne fills a crucial gap in the scholarly literature on religion, family, and health by studying the effects of religious switching on marital stability and happiness. He finds that marital stability and happiness tend to be lower in religiously heterogamous marriages than in same-faith marriages. However, he also identifies important differences within “religiously homogamous” marriages. Homogamous marriages in which one partner made a relatively large switch to his or her spouse’s religion were characterized by lower levels of marital stability and happiness than homogamous marriages in which no switch occurred. Moreover, Payne found that religious service attendance does not increase the marital stability and happiness of homogamous couples in which one partner switched, while it does in the case of homogamous couples in which there was no switch. These differences challenge the common conceptualization of homogamous marriages and suggest that more nuanced distinctions among homogamous marriages, based on the presence and relative size of a religious switch, are needed.

Alex Park weighs in on heated debates in political sociology on the causes of civil violence. He uses journalistic accounts, human rights documentation, and government data to examine why the residents of two South African townships which had remarkably similar cultural and structural backgrounds, exhibited drastically different behaviors during a twenty-day period of xenophobic violence in May 2008. While one township acted violently against local immigrants, the residents of the other township mobilized to protect their immigrant population. Park shows how the choice of tactics that residents use in order to exert control over their particular political situation depends primarily on the political opportunities that result from local and national political dynamics. This supports theories in sociology and political science that emphasize the primacy of political context over socio-economic or cultural factors in determining social action.

Further highlighting the importance of contextual factors in explaining social behavior is Ashley Leyda’s article on sex offender recidivism. While most statistical models that predict the risk of sex offender recidivism focus on offender-level variables, Leyda investigates the effect of media coverage on recidivism rates in Minnesota. She finds that sex offenders who were released from jail in years in which there was relatively higher coverage of sex crimes in a major Minnesotan newspaper were more likely to recidivate. This finding could possibly pose a challenge to

rational choice models of criminal behavior which may predict that increased coverage of sex crimes would raise the perceived risk of reconviction for committing a sex crime (a disincentive). Alternatively, Leyda suggests that news coverage of sex crimes could reinforce sexual criminal activity through social learning mechanisms or vicarious reinforcement.

Low-income African American women often feel that effective communication with their doctors is strained by the impersonal, didactic tone of physicians. Dayna Fondell uses a structural violence model to understand the complex nature of HIV-risk among low-income African American women in Houston. This model moves beyond risky individual behaviors to encompass a broader range of social factors, daily experiences, and power systems, which together influence the high HIV-risk among African American women. She investigates a nonprofit health organization whose staff is comprised of members of the communities that the organization serves. Based on interviews with staff members and their clients, Fondell finds that staff members implicitly draw on a “structural violence” framework in using their personal histories to relate to the experiences of their African American clients. The organization’s approach is largely successful but is limited by funding stipulations that focus on the medical aspects of AIDS, as opposed to contextual factors.

We are also excited to publish Jennifer Barnes’ fascinating research on the intersection of consumer habits and ethnic identity among East African Muslim immigrant women. Through nine in-depth interviews, Barnes shows how these particular women reconcile assimilative pressures from mainstream American culture with pressures toward “cultural maintenance” emanating from their ethnic communities. They frame their dress in collectivist, Islamic terms, reinforcing their ethno-religious identity. On the other hand, they interpret shopping behaviors and experiences in American stores as an expression of agency and individuality. Many respondents took pride in their knowledge of American fashion and use it to assert their inclusion in American society and to create a sense of belonging as a minority group. Thus, Barnes’ research provides valuable insight into how an understudied immigrant population uses consumption to form an individualist identity based on agency and social power, while also using dress to construct a collectivist identity based on ethno-religious membership.

Alissa Tombaugh makes innovative use of wedding advice articles online to analyze how the language surrounding wedding functions reinforces category-bound behaviors pertaining to brides, women, grooms, and men, in the context of wedding planning. Tombaugh focuses on how brides are expected to fulfill a multitude of category-bound behaviors

pertaining to an unrealistic notion of idealized femininity. Interestingly, Tombaugh shows how the persistence of traditional inequality in wedding work is evidenced in new social mediums, in which social constructions of gender and structures of heteronormativity take new forms but are nonetheless part of the same systems of inequality.

Tristine Baccam's research on the ways in which gay rights organizations form coalitions with "straight allies" is especially important in light of the current national debate on the rights of same-sex couples to marry. Baccam shows how the LGBT movement has expanded its membership base by constructing a collectivist identity focused on a set of grievances to which disparate groups, gay and straight alike, can relate. The LGBT organizations that Baccam studied used an "injustice frame" and a "family frame" to express its grievances, the latter of which was essential to the movement's ability to attract straight families and individuals. Baccam draws similarities between the roles of straight allies in the LGBT movement and the involvement of whites in the civil rights movement and men in women's rights movements. While these framing tactics aimed at inclusiveness can create internal weaknesses, they can also greatly expand a group's social influence.

Finally, Samuel Taylor comments on the need for sociologists to investigate the potential effects of rapid technological advancement on reconfiguring social relations to reduce social inequities. The accelerating technological progression that has characterized the past few decades has rendered information the key component of modern economic, political, and cultural activity. Taylor propounds that as information becomes an increasingly valuable resource, a neo-Marxist class conflict centered on the freedom/control of information will constitute the dominant force shaping social relations. He emphasizes that this social struggle is already taking place in debates around network neutrality, file sharing, censorship, surveillance, copyright legislation, and in numerous other venues. As those who aim to restrict the freedom of information continue to define information as a scarce resource subject to the same legal/economic regulations as property rights, this struggle will become increasingly salient in social life.

We hope you will enjoy the diverse intellectual perspectives, innovative methods, and exciting findings presented in this first issue of *Sociological Insight*. Also included are seven book reviews that cover a wide range of important issues, trends, and social problems, from globalization and human rights to neighborhood social change and middle-school sex education.

Sociological Insight looks forward to bringing its readers many more

excellent publications in future years. Next year, we will reach an even greater number of undergraduates by expanding our faculty network, contacting more universities in and outside the United States, selling subscriptions to university libraries nationwide, and advertising at major sociological conferences. We will continue to devise plans to grow *Sociological Insight* with the goal of making it the leading fully refereed undergraduate research journal in the social sciences.

Enjoy reading!

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