

"The official newsletter for the TCNJ Department of Sociology and Anthropology"

SocioNews

Welcome to SocioNews



Thank you for your interest in reading the Fall 2016 newsletter for TCNJ's Department of Sociology and Anthropology in collaboration with the Alpha Kappa Delta Sociology Honor Society! This issue features articles varying from sociological concepts and experiences beyond the classroom to reflections on global engagement and real-world applications of the sociology degree. We hope to engage, educate, and empower our readers to better understand the opportunities available within the undergraduate sociology department.

Today, college students are constantly bombarded with messages about individual differences that separate us from one another. A contemporary perspective inspired by sociology allows these students to move beyond a superficial view of global citizens and focus on our collective capabilities instead of our social divisions. This issue represents the united effort of TCNJ's sociology students to encourage the student body to come together and exemplify a campus-wide sense of unity.

-Meg Beane-Fox and Deontee Davis, Editors

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This newsletter is made as a collaborative effort by members and candidates of the Alpha Kappa Delta Sociology Honor Society

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Sociology and the Special Education Degree

As a double major in special education and sociology I often get asked "why sociology?" or "what good is sociology going to do for you as a teacher?" To many it would seem more practical to choose a second major I would more likely be teaching to my future students, such as math or English. Yet as I dive deeper into sociological topics and research, I have begun to realize just how lucky I am to be in the field. Sociology ultimately studies people and how they function within communities, societies and the world. It has offered me new insight into how our particular society is built and structured and opened my eyes to be more aware of the societal influence on people.

While disability is often related to biology, the way society perceives and deals with disability has a major effect on those who are disabled and is largely formed from cultural constructs. Disability is often stigmatized and well-endowed with negative connotations. Although those who are disabled have come a long way from being institutionalized and completely devalued, we still have a long way to go in creating an inclusive society where those who are disabled can truly thrive.

From what I have learned in various sociology courses, people with disabilities are often more likely to have lower socioeconomic status and overall less opportunities. Understanding the influence of the environment around students is an important pillar of teaching that has been reiterated throughout my special education courses. Having a better understanding of the kind of environment and societal impacts students may face and bring into the classroom with them, as sociology has taught me to better do, will ultimately aid me in becoming a more successful teacher and advocate for those with disabilities.

For me, being a special education teacher is more than just educating those with disabilities. It is about creating responsible and successful citizens while advocating and creating opportunities for my students. I know that my education in sociology and my ability to better understand how the world around my students works and how it may influence them will allow me to better serve my students and give them the support they really need.

-Becky Freeborn



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Changing Perspectives: A Unique Course Experience with Dr. Clydesdale

In the spring semester of 2016, we took a course with Dr. Clydesdale titled Introduction to American Cultural Critics. There were a total of 16 students in our class; however, this was not a typical sociology course. Half of the students in our class were TCNJ students, but the others were inmates at Alfred C. Wagner Correctional Facility in Bordentown, New Jersey. These inmates were extremely motivated, they enrolled themselves in the NJ-STEP college program in the facility, and passed the necessary prerequisites to take this course. What made this learning experience unique was the inclusive atmosphere where we shared our opinions and openly discussed American culture in a safe environment... which just happened to be in a maximum security prison.

Before starting this class, we did not know what our classmates' offenses were, so we treated them like we would typical classmates at TCNJ. Of course, there was a fear of the unknown and we had heard mixed stories from various corrections officers about how we would be treated by our new classmates. We all tried to go in with an open mind, but of course everyone has their personal biases. The class was very discussion based, mostly with small group discussion, about issues in America such as racism and classism. We really got to know our classmates. We learned what their hobbies and passions were, in addition to their family life. Through discussions and small group work we all became very comfortable with one another. The inmates, our classmates, were incredibly nice, passionate people, who we can say that we genuinely would have been friends with had we had the opportunity to see them outside the gates of the prison.

After the conclusion of the course and after we left the prison for the last time, the TCNJ students in our class met with Dr. Clydesdale back at TCNJ to discuss what we had learned and how we felt about the experience that we had.

We came to the conclusion that we gained more from class than we had ever anticipated, and were very thankful for this opportunity. Dr. Clydesdale then showed us something that we did not know we could see. He showed us that you can look up the inmates on the New Jersey Department of Corrections website to find out what their offenses were that brought them to the prison.

Some of our classmates had been involved in gang violence or drugs, which we had assumed was the case. However, after learning that one inmate had stabbed someone in an act of revenge over 40 times at the age of 16, and another had intentionally set his family home on fire with his parents inside when he was also just 16 years old, we became aware of the dark reality of the mistakes they had made to end up in a place stripped of their freedoms because of a bad choice when they were young. We had become close to these classmates of ours, and seeing that they were capable of such dark acts was surprising to us. This enlightened us as to how the world is not just black and white, and there is a lot of gray area in between. Even though our classmates may have committed heinous acts, we were still capable of seeing the good inside of them through our deep and meaningful conversations throughout the semester.

This experience was much more than just learning about American cultural critics and critiquing Friedan and Dr. King's work. Through this opportunity we became exposed to different viewpoints and life stories that we never would have heard without stepping through the prison gates each week. Especially for two privileged young women like ourselves, this not only gave us insight into a world we had only read about, but we became able to check our privilege and learn about how people growing up in diverse ways experience the world differently.

-Abbi Anker and Emily DiRusso

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Refugees and the Volunteer Effort

Last spring, I had the opportunity to study abroad in Bologna, Italy. The opportunity to learn about the Italian culture and travel to new places in Europe engendered two experiences in particular that were eye opening. Volunteering at two soup kitchens in Bologna and Athens allowed me to see a new side of Italy and have a closer look into the European refugee crisis. Both soup kitchens are run by Caritas, an international charity, that provides services in cities throughout the world. In Bologna, the main guests were homeless Italians and immigrants, while Athens welcomed families of Syrian refugees.

These experiences provided me with an insight into two critical populations both in Italy and Greece that are marginalized and ignored by system.

Italy is a country that is known for its tourism, however, its internal socioeconomic problems are not as widely known and commonly associated with Italian society. When volunteering at the soup kitchen, I saw firsthand the consequences of the high unemployment, marginalized immigrant population, and the Italian government's failure to provide for the welfare of its citizens. Prior to visiting Athens, I did not realize the severity of the refugee crisis. In Greece, Syrian refugees are not welcomed and have faced many struggles in their fight to survive. While volunteering in Greece, I was exposed to the diverse needs and challenges that the Syrian refugees experience upon their arrival at Europe.

-Carolina Charvet Pena

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Sociological Effects on a Journalism Degree

I thought I had a decent grasp on how society operates, but my perceived reality was shattered when I took Introduction to Sociology. There, I realized how truly uniformed I was. Growing up in a homogenous, affluent community left me with a very narrow take on the world. My beliefs were first challenged when I started meeting TCNJ students of different backgrounds. However, I only took what they said as political rhetoric trying to sway me from my beliefs. It was not until my sister, a TCNJ alumna, advised me to take classes that could enhance what I was learning in my journalism courses. I chose Intro to Sociology, and it changed my life.

I realized not only was the world vastly different from how I interpreted it, but that the seemingly political opinions I heard from TCNJ students were largely based on fact. Learning about the fundamentals of sociology opened my eyes to the experiences of people of differing socioeconomic backgrounds that I never saw throughout my sheltered life. What I learned in Intro to Sociology pushed me to pursue a minor in sociology.

However, the Development of Socio-Cultural Theory course made me want to upgrade it to a second major. Not only was I learning about theories that explain society as a whole, I was also able to apply what I was learning to explain certain phenomena in my own life. Sociology gave me the tools to understand my role in society, my connection to those around me, and much more.

Not only has pursuing sociology made me become a more well-round person, it has made me a better journalist, as well. While I consider myself a journalist more than a sociologist, I can apply what I have learned through sociology to my journalism career post-college. What I have learned from sociology has transformed the way in which I approach a journalistic piece—seeking out untold stories, asking questions that look at the bigger picture, talking to a variety of sources, among many other things. While journalists are already expected to do all of that, I believe my education makes me even more aware of the sociological factors that influence every story.

-Chelsea LoCascio

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The Failures of Capitalism and Social Theorists: Humanity

While in the 1600s, European owners of economic capital tended to enjoy the fruits of their land and labor. Luxuriating in its profits, Puritans, who had crossed the Atlantic Ocean to settle in the U.S., were guided by a more stringent ideology. Their Calvinist faith proclaimed that every person's position in afterlife was predetermined but unknown, so most Puritans worked anxiously to demonstrate their personal heaven-worthiness. Rather than actively enjoy leisure for its own sake, as their European peers did, Puritans funneled the profits from their business back into work. They developed a culture valuing honesty, punctuality, industriousness, and frugality to support their heaven-focused efforts. In large part due to the social norms around work, as Max Weber describes in the Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, when industrialization began, the Puritan's workaholic lifestyle encouraged the spread of capitalism much earlier and more thoroughly in the U.S than Europe. This is one reason why the effects of capitalism are seen most strongly in the U.S.

Seeing the shift towards industrialization and capitalism, theorist Karl Marx examined how social groups related to each other in the new economic order. Among other insights, he articulated a shift in the trend of economic production: while in the feudal system, owners of economic capital produced things because they were needed and useful, in capitalism, owners of capital produced goods and services for the sake of profit. This meant producing goods and services that were not primarily useful but instead had the lowest input costs for the highest returns. This feature of capitalism has continued today and affected both consumer habits and global styles of production on a broad scale.

For consumers, this feature of capitalism has significantly increased the production of cheap goods. The availability of cheap goods has supported the growth of a consumerist culture, clearly seen in the U.S. Today as opposed to 70 years ago, it is much more common for Americans to buy cheap, short-term items and throw them out to replace them, rather than buying, reusing, or fixing a few quality items that last a long time. This has increased waste in the U.S. (Hickman 2000).

For producers of goods, the capitalism-required quest to have the lowest input costs and highest returns pushed businesses to mine the earth for resources, dispose of waste and toxic chemicals haphazardly, and seek to use the Earth's natural resources like oil and forests to their fullest economic potential, because it was more economically sound. This has been evident in the U.S. with the proliferation of coal plants, residual waste in oceans and rivers, and the spread of oil drilling and fracking. Many national governments outside of Europe have failed to provide sufficient economic incentives to reduce this behavior. Historically, in comparison to its economically developed peers, the U.S. has failed spectacularly at this endeavor. As a result of the capitalist-induced behavior and the weakness of federal legislation, the global health of air, water, and land has degraded considerably since industrial revolutions in the 1850s and 1950s. The effects of these phenomena are showing themselves through the dire effects of climate change.

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The Failures of Capitalism and Social Theorists: Humanity (cont.)

Theorist Max Weber points out that capitalism has spread to the structure of our organizations, in the form of bureaucracy. Sociologist George Ritzer points out that capitalism has spread more broadly into our social values, especially in the U.S., through a rationalization, or "McDonaldization," of society in which the values of the efficiency, calculability, predictability and non-human technology have become prized in everyday aspects of modern social life. In addition to their analyses of the spread of capitalist practices, Marx, Weber, and Ritzer each describe the negative consequences of this increased rationality, focusing on worker exploitation, an "iron cage" of social organization that acts as a "polar night of icy darkness" (Weber 1994), and social values that "deny the basic humanity, the human reason, of the people who work within or are served by rational systems" (Ritzer 1983). However, in describing the negative impacts and effects of capitalism for workers, social organizations, and social values, these theorists fail to account for the positive social activists and movements fighting these trends.

The degraded health of the environment is one clear situation that is a result of a structural feature of capitalism. While the U.S. especially has broadly failed to consider this in their legislative action, social movements sparked in the 1970s by Rachel Carson's book Silent Spring and publications like Limits to Growth, carried through continued news coverage, the growth of environmental organizations, and action by visible participants like Al Gore, other public figures, and recently, celebrities, have worked and succeeded at making environmental protection a part of public decision-making. The individuals and bodies supporting the social movement for environmentalism, motivated by reasons of humanity rather than economic rationality, have exerted power over this structural feature of capitalism. In the U.S., this human power has resulted in legislative changes like the Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act, and numerous other policies, and changes to everyday decision-making practices in the operation of businesses as well.

Social movements have fought features of capitalism in other aspects of life as well. Marx articulated that the functions of capitalism would result in the accumulation of wealth among a small number, which has become true in the U.S. The richest 1 percent in the U.S. have come to own more wealth than the bottom 90 percent (Kristoff 2014). The social movement of Occupy Wall Street in 2011 and the valuable conversation and public awareness afterwards brought attention to this issue. It resulted in a policy focus and action on the issue, mainly by the Democratic National Party.

The values of efficiency in everyday life, as Ritzer discussed, have resulted in the proliferation of social media, an efficient way to receive social information from a large number of people in a short amount of time. The social movement against this is not clearly defined, but instead based on the collection of individuals who prefer and believe in the power of in-person quality time over texting or interacting on social media. By pushing this behavior on their friends, these individuals make a difference in the social lives of others through requests to "put the phone down" or engaging others in personal interactions rather than computer-based discussions. This exhibits their value for human connection over economic rationality.

Social movements have long been a part of social life, worldwide, and have always played a role in society in the United States, arguably the most prominent capitalist nation worldwide. While the spread of capitalism has shifted producers towards profit (Marx), organizations towards bureaucracy (Weber) and social values towards calculability and rationality (Ritzer), with both positive and negative effects, the strength of social movements in fighting these structural features has been powerful. While rational systems have in many cases deprived individuals of their "basic humanity" (Ritzer), in rejection of these forces, individual action of micro conversations and mass organization have and will always make a difference.

-Elsa Leistikow

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Interview from the Qualitative Business Sector

As some of us near graduation, I know this thought has crossed our minds: "What am I going to do with my degree?"

Some of us are planning to go to graduate school, some want to jump right into working, some want to take other paths after graduation, but our common link is that we are all probably pretty nervous to take the next step towards the real world. Some of us are still figuring out where we want to take our sociology degree post-graduation. In order to calm these nerves, I interviewed Brandon Cook, our very own TCNJ Alum who graduated with a major in sociology and a minor in finance and has been working as a Practice Manager in Media, Pennsylvania since August 2015. He sheds some light onto the job application process he went through, how he got to where he is, and how the sociological skills he learned help him with his position.

1. What do your everyday responsibilities include?

I oversee clients by producing monthly financial statements, presenting those reports at monthly meetings, acting as a liaison between clients and my company, resolved issues brought forward by clients, meet with clients to communicate practice results, discuss practice and industry trends, and share intellectual capital, compile data, analyze trends, and summarize into executive briefings, identify problems, develop solutions and ensure timely resolution, work closely with Practice Administrator and Physicians to understand practice pattern and trends and provide specific requests from client, and I also work with multiple levels of senior management on new projects including: product development, marketing & sales, consulting, compliance and other areas.

2. How do you use sociology in your current job? What sociological (qualitative and quantitative) skills do you use the most? When do you use these skills?

Data analysis, problem solving, and communication (writing/presenting). I use these skills every day. I am always performing data analysis to take large masses of data and turn it into meaningful and actionable information. Data analysis has got to be the most important skill that I've taken from Sociology. I always am presenting performance to clients in meetings, or presenting to senior management. Communication both verbal and written is crucial skills in the business world. I use data analysis to identify trends, areas of improvement, financial impacts (negative or positive impacts to revenue), Returns on investments, contracts. I also use data analysis to analyze survey results, or for other actionable data. I use communication skills with emails to clients, phone meetings or in person meetings, and when I am presenting things to senior management.

3. How did you find out about your current job? What was the process you went through in getting this job?

I found out through my Aunt who has a good friend who is the Chief Operating Officer. The COO posted something on Facebook to her friends and family, my aunt sent me the posting and I ended up applying. I applied to the Chief Operating Officer and had an interview about 2 weeks later with the COO and the CEO/President (and this case the CEO is the owner too). After a month passed, I was about to accept another job in NYC, but received an email the morning of. The COO set up a phone call with me for the next day and offered me the job. That afternoon I received a contract through email and gave me 2 weeks to accept/deny. I accepted 10 days after receiving it.

4. Did you have any jobs (either on- or off-campus) while going to college that helped you in getting your current job?

Community service was something that made me stand out from many other candidates and a big part of why I was chosen. I also worked at Retro Fitness during college. This was important because it showed the ability to manage school, which is basically a full-time job in itself, and a part time job on the side.

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Interview from the Qualitative Business Sector (cont.)

5. Are there any classes you remember specifically that helped you get to where you are or taught you skills that you use now?

Sociology 302, the dreaded spss course. I had it with Dr. Clydesdale who stressed the importance of the ability to use statistical software and data analysis as well as the report writing. Now I use all three of those things every single day. Senior seminar also contributed to my communication skills. The report writing, interviewing, and presenting have added tremendously to my success.

6. Did you have any internship(s) while at TCNJ that helped either get you your job or helped you in terms of skills you use now?

I had an internship my junior year in healthcare – specifically pharmaceutical. I also had an internship at Retro Fitness as a manager, which gave me experience managing multiple parts of a business. I learned about pricing, marketing, sales, customer service, and purchasing at retro fitness.

7. Did you talk to your professors/advisors a lot?

I met with Dr. Clydesdale many times throughout my senior year. I often met with Dr. Bates as well throughout my junior and senior year.

8. Is there anything else from your years at TCNJ that you think helped you get to where you are/help you now?

Joining a fraternity has helped me tremendously in so many ways. While in the fraternity, I held several committee advisor positions within the organization. This gave me experience managing people, delegating tasks, and the ability to work in teams. All of which are crucial skills in management. The fraternity also pushed its members to be actively involved in community service and on-campus events such as relay-for-life. Community service was a big topic when I had my in-person interview.

9. Is there any advice you would offer to current students who are worried about what they can do with a sociology degree?

My advice is to take a step back and identify all of the skills that you have gained throughout your 4 years in sociology. A few of the key ones that I have highlighted are: data analysis, report writing, presenting, interpersonal and communication. These are skills that can be transferred to almost any industry. Make sure to stress upon those skills in your resume and stress them even more in your interviews. If you find yourself applying for jobs that require other skills that you don't believe you have, go out and train yourself and learn those skills. My example is Microsoft excel. I use a data reporting tool and excel every day and I wouldn't be anywhere I'm at now, without excel. I knew I needed excel going into the business world, so I watched countless hours of YouTube until I learned that skill that I knew was crucial for my future.

- Yani Aldrich

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