

## Faculty Remarks

The 14<sup>th</sup> Annual Lavender Graduation Celebration

Prof. Martha L. Olney

April 25, 2014

Thank you very much.

On behalf of the faculty of the University of California at Berkeley,  
Let me be among the first to say to the Class of 2014:  
Congratulations!

I have one message for you this evening: I want you to take what you've learned, and more importantly who you are, and make a difference in the world.

That after all, is what it means to be a Golden Bear, right? Embracing an ethic of public service – using your education to make the world a better place.

But I want you to use not just your education and what you've learned in your years at Berkeley. I want you to use . . . *you*, use who you are, to make a difference in the world.

I want you to take what you've learned, and more importantly who you are, and make a difference in the world.

Let me explain.

In economics, our method of discourse emphasizes the role of assumptions in arguments.

For instance: You hear a conclusion that you disagree with. What do you do? First, identify the assumptions the author/speaker has made in their argument. Some assumptions will be explicit, some implicit. Next, change one assumption (or change several, but change them one at a time so you can isolate the effect). With this new assumption and the same logical structure, argue through to the

conclusion. If by changing an assumption you have changed the conclusion, VOILA! You have identified an assumption that is critical (necessary) to the argument. The final step then is to justify your alternative assumption: what's the evidence in support of making the new assumption?

So: identify, change, argue, VOILA, justify.

This method of argument is common to many fields, not just economics. Master this method and you'll ace the LSAT. Master it and you'll make news in science. Master this method and you'll be a brilliant social scientist.

identify assumptions, change one, argue, VOILA!, justify – that's how you are going to change the world. That method is how you will take what you've learned, and more importantly who you are, and make a difference in the world.

There are plenty of conclusions out there that rest on bad assumptions. Often that assumption is “everyone is heterosexual.”

What I want you to do is to challenge those assumptions. You can do that even if you know nothing about the field (that's the “take who you are” part of my charge). And you certainly can make a difference if the challenge you're offering is in your field.

Take what you've learned, and more importantly who you are, and make a difference in the world.

For example.

### 1. Mom & Dad, or two parents?

You've heard this as often as I have: “A child needs a mother and a father.” What's that conclusion based on? What are the assumptions behind that statement?

There are plenty of academic studies that look at the effect of family structure on child outcomes. An oft-cited 1994 book concludes that children growing up in

single-family households have worse outcomes (lower test scores, higher adult poverty rates, lower educational attainment).<sup>1</sup> Many scholars have built on this work.<sup>2</sup> Some studies simply compare married (straight) couple families with single-parent households. A typical such study would then conclude “Children do better with married couple parents than with single parents.” If you assume that all married parents are straight, it’s a small step from there to “Children do better with a mom and a dad.”

But – assumptions – what if we don’t assume all parents are straight? Maybe it’s not the maleness and femaleness of the parents. Maybe it’s the existence of a second parent, independent of the gender of the two parents. Triangulation, anyone? It’s a teenager’s dominant manage-the-parents strategy. (Not to mention, having someone to parent with is key to sanity-preservation among the parents.)

Challenge the assumption: what if instead of assuming it’s the gender mix of the parents, we assume instead that it’s the number of parents that affects child outcomes? Then what do we conclude?

You don’t have to be a social scientist to do this. You just have to draw on who you are. “But what if we don’t assume all parents are straight?”

## 2. Health Outcomes

Let me offer an example from the deep, dark ages of the 1980s. There were two bits of public health news then, buried on about page A9 of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. One was of course “the gay plague.” There was a pneumonia, the news reported, that affected only gay men. In 1982, they called it “GRID”: Gay-

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<sup>1</sup>McLanahan S, Sandefur G (1994) *Growing Up in a Single-Parent Household: What Hurts, What Helps*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge

<sup>2</sup>For a decade old list of research, see Mary Parke, “Are Married Parents Really Better for Children? What Research Says About the Effects of Family Structure on Child Well-Being,” (May 2003, Brief No. 3), Center for Law and Social Policy. [http://www.clasp.org/DMS/Documents/1052841451.72/Marriage\\_Brief3.pdf](http://www.clasp.org/DMS/Documents/1052841451.72/Marriage_Brief3.pdf).

related immune deficiency.<sup>3</sup> Being a gay man – just being gay – meant you could get this pneumonia, or more generally this plague, and die.

The other bit of news was about lesbians and breast cancer: Being lesbian – just being lesbian – meant you were more likely to get breast cancer, and die.

In economics (as in many fields) we constantly caution “correlation is not causation” – just because two things happen together doesn’t mean one causes the other.

Thirty years later we have better understandings of the epidemiology of both HIV/AIDS and breast cancer. People weren’t dying because of who they were. HIV/AIDS and breast cancer deaths were not simply about *being* gay or lesbian. But it took people examining assumptions, asking “but what is it about being lesbian that might increase breast cancer risk?” to eventually get us to a place where we recognized things like “never having been pregnant” as a risk factor for breast cancer.

### 3. Financial Behavior

Lee Badgett (UCB Ph.D. in Economics, 1990) in her book *Money, Myths, and Change: The Economic Lives of Lesbians and Gay Men* (University of Chicago Press, 2001) was one of the first economists to focus on lesbians and gay men in economic research. She truly pioneered the field. When she conducted her research, there were very few data sources that allowed us to identify peoples’ sexual orientation.

Frankly, there still are very few.

A lot of the work that’s been done – and it’s not a lot overall – has focused on same-sex couples and compared them with opposite-sex couples. Marielka

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<sup>3</sup>[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gay-related\\_immune\\_deficiency](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gay-related_immune_deficiency), accessed 4/25/2014.

Klawitter looks at how couples hold their money.<sup>4</sup> She concludes “Data . . . suggest that married couples are much more likely to hold money jointly than are same-sex ... couples.” Her data are from SCF surveys taken in 1992 - 2004.

But what if the legal protections extended to straight married couples were also extended to same-sex couples?

Others have looked at saving behavior and concluded (with questionable data & analytical methods, I think) that same-sex couples save more than opposite-sex couples.

But what if estate taxes had the same effect on a same-sex as an opposite-sex surviving spouse? What if a surviving same-sex spouse was eligible for her wife’s Social Security benefits? Would we still see differences in saving rates?

Is it being gay that accounts for differences in financial behavior, or is it the lack of legal protections?

We need to bring who we are and what we’ve learned to these questions. The answers will change.

I could offer many more examples, but three is enough.

I want you to take what you’ve learned, and more importantly who you are, and make a difference in the world.

One last thing. A plug for answering the phone: many of the empirical studies used in the health & social sciences are based on survey responses. One of the limitations we face in including same-sex couples or I’m-not-straight people in

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<sup>4</sup>Klawitter, M. (2008). The effects of sexual orientation and marital status on how couples hold their money. *Review of Economics of the Household*, 6-4, 423-446.

empirical studies is simply a numbers problem. If you've got a survey of 4,000 people and only 10 of them identify as gay or lesbian, 10 observations are simply not enough to allow a scholar to say anything. And so in that case, they may continue to say "well, yes, the <whatever> I'm discussing may work differently for gay than for straight folks, and yes that might give me better insight into the true causal factors in my analysis, but with only 10 observations of gay people, there's nothing I can do." And that's right.

Here's the next part of the "who you are" part of my charge. Answer the phone. Do the surveys. Become part of the sample. You would not believe how many surveys are out there.

CDC Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System

Consumer Expenditure Survey

Current Population Survey

DOJ: Bureau of Justice Statistics

National Crime Victimization Survey

National Former Prisoner Survey

HUD: Datasets

American Housing Survey

Property Owners & Managers Survey

Residential Finance Survey

NCES - National Center for Education Statistics

Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey

National Household Education Survey

NCHS - National Center for Health Statistics

National Hospital Discharge Survey

National Ambulatory Medical Care Survey

National Longitudinal Surveys Home Page

NLSY 1997

NLSY 1979

The Urban Institute | National Survey of America's Families

Neighborhood Change Database

PSID Panel Study of Income Dynamics: Data Center

Survey of Consumer Finances (FRB)

## SIPP - Survey of Income & Program Participation

Answer them. Make the world a better place by becoming part of the data.

So that's my charge for you

I want you to take what you've learned, and more importantly who you are, and make a difference in the world.

When someone offers a conclusion or an argument, think about whether the conclusions might depend on only looking at a sample of straight people, or on assuming everyone in the sample is straight, and then say "But what if instead you assume not everyone is straight?"

When you are looking for a topic for your master's thesis or doctoral dissertation, think about whether there are good, important, substantive questions in your field that might be answered differently if we assumed not everyone is straight.

When you are implementing policy, think about whether or not the research that the policy prescription is based on assumed everyone is straight, and be willing to ask of your bosses and anyone who will listen "But what if instead you assume not everyone is straight?"

Go out there and be a Golden Bear and make the world a better place. Take what you've learned, and more importantly who you are, and make a difference in the world.

Thank you.

And *Go Bears!*