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Secrets and the Sociological Imagination: Using PostSecret.com to Illustrate Sociological Concepts

Shiri Noy¹

Abstract

Introductory sociology classes afford instructors an opportunity to expose students, often from a variety of backgrounds and majors, to the sociological imagination. In this article, I describe how the use of secrets from a popular website, PostSecret.com, can help teach students about the sociological imagination and incorporate biographical examples in explanations of broader social trends and sociological concepts. I present results from a survey of students in an introductory sociology class in order to gauge their response to the use of anonymous secrets. Results reveal that over 75 percent of students indicated that PostSecret helped them understand the sociological imagination and learn sociological concepts, 93 percent of students reported that it helped them understand course content through the use of examples, and 69 percent indicated that it helped them remember important concepts. Students also indicated that the discussion of secrets helped them recognize their own assumptions about the social world and provided them with a perspectives different from their own.

Keywords

introduction to sociology, sociological imagination, student learning, scholarship of teaching and learning, secrets

The sociological imagination is a central part of the sociological curriculum, especially in introductory courses (Mills 1959). Many studies have discussed different ways in which to instill the sociological imagination in our students: role-playing games (Simpson and Elias 2011), service-learning courses (Huisman 2010), and applying the sociological imagination to their own biographies (Kebede 2009). Others have highlighted the utility of the sociological imagination in assisting students' comprehension of subjects from academic dishonesty (Trautner and Borland 2013) to waste disposal habits (Dowell 2006). These are only some of a variety of ways in which instructors have taught students about the sociological imagination (Haddad and Lieberman 2002; Hironimus-Wendt and Wallace 2009; Hoffman 2006; Kaufman 1997; Mitra and Sarabia 2005). I propose another such

method that assists students' development of the sociological imagination by highlighting the relationship between biography and history, personal troubles, and public issues: the analysis of anonymous strangers' secrets. Secrets provide a way to discuss, from a concrete individual perspective that may be more engaging than some other teaching tools, issues that students might otherwise learn about only through abstract examples or general statistics.

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Secrets have long been a topic of sociological interest (dating back to Simmel 1906) and often represent information about hidden, nonnormative behaviors and attitudes. Secrets constitute a part of everyone's lived experience yet are typically absent from people's social, public presentation of self (Goffman 1956). For this reason, it is often either untenable (in non-writing-intensive classes) or impractical and ill-advised (for ethical reasons) to ask students to divulge their own biographical details and secrets. In addition, students may resent having to discuss their personal lives, even in individual papers meant for the instructor's eyes only. In this article, I propose the use of a popular internet resource to represent, from a first-person perspective, biography and personal troubles. This resource, which relies on other people's secrets anonymously written on postcards, might be best suited for introductory sociology classes as they are meant to introduce students to the discipline. Autobiographies, in contrast, may be better suited to advanced classes and for students with more extensive sociological training (cf., Kebede 2009).

On the first day of class I introduce the students to the website PostSecret.com. I explain to them that it began as an art project by Frank Warren, to whom people anonymously mailed their secrets on a postcard. This project began in 2004 when he printed 3,000 postcards and invited people to return them to him. The secrets, he stipulated on one side of the postcard, had to be true and had to have never been divulged to anyone. He passed these out in various locations, including subways and art galleries (Warren 2005:1). According to Warren, after several weeks he stopped giving out postcards but they continued to arrive at his home. Almost every week he selects approximately 20 of these postcards to post on his website on Sunday, "Sunday Secrets," while others have been published in five books: the latest book came out in 2009. Sometimes, the secrets will be organized around a theme, especially around holidays (for example, Father's Day or Thanksgiving), and Warren says the following about his selections:

I get about 1,000 [secrets] a week, and from that I select 20. I'm selecting secrets that really have a ring of authenticity to them, that express any human feeling, whether it's humor, fear, sexuality, a shocking secret. . . . Once I have that selection I arrange them in a way where I try and tell a story, or I compose a song. I'm thinking of trying to hit all the notes and get a nice rhythm, and

really taking people emotionally someplace different than where they were when they started [reading]. (Fox 2008)

In class, we discuss the possible issues with these secrets (also an excellent opportunity to discuss sampling and bias), noting that we are taking them at face value and assume them to represent true feelings, experiences, and behaviors. While we discuss the possibility that they may be fabrications, most students conclude this is unlikely.

AN ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE

I use the discussion of PostSecret to personalize many topics I teach. One of the most interesting topics to apply secrets from PostSecret to is that of suicide. Partly, this is because many secrets about suicide are featured on the website, which regularly raises funds for suicide prevention. Largely, however, this is due to the fact that the topic of suicide allows me to integrate several sociological topics: classical theory via a discussion of Durkheim's analysis of suicide; national and global statistics, which I discuss in the context of the classic sociological axes of inequality of race, class, and gender; and sampling and research methods. The application of secrets to the topic of suicide is an especially effective way to demonstrate the concept of the sociological imagination. By using individuals' secrets in tandem with contextual data about suicide rates across different racial groups, by gender, and globally, students are able to think about how the secrets match up with what we know statistically.

I begin by discussing Durkheim's analysis of suicide, detailing the four types of suicide as highlighted by Durkheim (anomic, egoistic, altruistic, and fatalistic) and his major findings. Particularly, Catholics were less likely to commit suicide than Protestants; suicide rates were lower among married compared with single, divorced, or widowed people; and people with children were less likely to commit suicide (Durkheim 1951; Selvin 1965). This allows me to introduce concepts of social control and anomie and how large-scale historical changes (the industrial revolution) may have biographical implications (weaker social ties and suicide). In this context I also introduce the concept of data collection and bias and share other scholars' assertions that among Catholics suicide was a "mortal sin" and therefore may have been under reported because of its repercussion for burial and the afterlife (cf. Stark, Doyle, and Rushing 1983). We discuss anomie in

the context of industrialization and urbanization as well as marriage and family given Durkheim's (1951) findings about the relationships between suicide, having children, and marital status.

The use of secrets allows me to explain how social structures and inequalities may manifest in people's personal lives, decisions, and emotions. It also makes students question their underlying assumptions. I ask who they think wrote a particular postcard, and students will respond that they think it is a young or old person; male or female; someone who is white, black, Hispanic, or another racial or ethnic group; a religious or nonreligious individual; and other such characteristics. As I question them about these assessments, we discuss the different assumptions we make and whether they are shared by the class and society as a whole. For example, if someone writes something about a "boyfriend," students assume that the author is female because the default for most students, at least in their current understanding, is heterosexuality. They also hypothesize about the gender, race, and social class of the writer based on a variety of things—from the image displayed, the handwriting, or the word choice. For example, if the postcard is colorful students will often assume it is a female writer, and we discuss different expectations and associations of masculinity and femininity and how we "do gender." We discuss why they believe what they do about the writer and I ask them to consider how this biographical information fits in with what we know about suicide statistically—how does seeing someone's personal writing about suicide square away with what we learned about trends in suicide by gender, ethnic and racial groups, cross-nationally, and over time? Which of Durkheim's four types of suicide do they think is being represented?

This example allows students to connect individual problems, decisions, actions, and interpretations with social structures. I use this example in the first week of class. In addition to touching on themes of gender, race, and age in the United States, I also present global statistics on suicide. We discuss how different social contexts, not just social institutions, may influence some thought or behavior expressed in a secret that, until that point, students considered to be personal and that most students had considered to be random—that is, not systematic. I also discuss privilege and social isolation, as many students are surprised that across age groups in the United States, white men are more likely to commit suicide than their female and African American counterparts, and that this difference is especially pronounced among the elderly

(Wray, Colen, and Pescosolido 2011). This typically leads to a discussion about what makes older white men likely to commit suicide, given the privileged position that white men generally occupy in the race-gender hierarchy. We also discuss gender differences: the finding that women are more likely to attempt suicide, but men are more often successful (Canetto and Sakinofsky 1998). All of these points foreshadow concepts we revisit when talking about gender, race, and aging in subsequent weeks. Later in the semester, when I get to those topics, I remind them of our first week's discussion of suicide. Throughout the course I continue to use secrets from PostSecret in lectures (typically every week) to demonstrate a variety of concepts. I continue to ask the students the same type of questions indicated above. This leads to a discussion in which students share their thoughts and conclusions about the writers of the secrets in relation to the sociological topic we are discussing at that time.

I have also used secrets from PostSecret to discuss a variety of other topics, among them race, racial identity, racism, and discrimination; gender roles, gender identity, and expectations by gender; inequality, conspicuous consumption, and social class; family, childhood, child-parent relationships, and aging; nationalism, immigration, and assimilation; sexuality including GLBT issues; education, the hidden curriculum, and credentialing; and religion, denominations, and the sacred and the profane. Students have commented on the utility of secrets from PostSecret as a teaching tool in overall course evaluations, in unsolicited student comments via e-mail, and in class as well as office hours. However, in order to systematically examine students' opinions on the use of PostSecret, I administered a survey asking students both closed- and open-ended questions about the use of PostSecret secrets in the class. Below I detail the data, methods, and results of this survey.

DATA AND METHODS

I collected survey data from students in a large introductory sociology course at a midsized public university ($N = 94$). The course goals as stated on the syllabus are threefold: First, I want students to develop their critical thinking skills by thinking broadly about the intersection between history and biography in their lives and more generally—the sociological imagination. Second, I want to teach students to apply sociological theories to social phenomena, a skill that they will be able to use long after the course is complete. Third, I want the

course to increase students' intercultural and global knowledge as we learn about other countries and social groups.

We discuss secrets from PostSecret in class at least every other class and I select them by browsing the week's secrets and picking those that are relevant to the week's topic. However, since I have been using PostSecret in class for the past several years, I will often reuse secrets from previous courses. I select secrets that are relevant to the topic and secrets that I think will stimulate discussion. Finally, I try to use secrets that exemplify concepts from a different perspective than other in-class examples (e.g., media) that I will be using that week. The discussion of these secrets is most closely aligned with the first goal—teaching students about the sociological imagination. However, when we are discussing the secrets, I often challenge students to approach a secret from different perspectives (we focus on functionalist and conflict perspectives in the course), asking them how they would approach the secret and interpret it from different theoretical perspectives. On average, I will cover one or two secrets during class time, and we will spend approximately 5 to 7 minutes on each secret. Therefore, at least once a week, we spend approximately 15 to 20 minutes discussing PostSecret secrets.

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for the sociodemographic characteristics of respondents. The survey questionnaire was administered midway through the course, anonymously, after being approved by the university's institutional review board. I chose to administer it midway through the course since class evaluations were being conducted at the end of the semester, as required by the university, and I did not want to take up too much course time at the end of the semester having students fill out both the survey and course evaluation. I was also worried that if the surveys and evaluations were administered too closely together, students would be primed to think about the PostSecret component of the class more heavily than other course components in the final evaluations.

The survey collected sociodemographic information about gender, class rank, parents' education, GPA, and the student's major. The university is public and coeducational, with approximately 10,000 undergraduates enrolled, and the faculty to student ratio is 14:1. Overall, the student body is 53 percent female, compared with 56 percent of the survey respondents as indicated in Table 1. Degrees conferred by the university in 2011–2012 (the previous year) indicated that approximately 32 percent

of graduates had been social science majors, compared with 47 percent in the course; 37 percent of graduates had been natural science majors, compared with 26 percent in the course; 14 percent of graduates had been education majors, compared with 2 percent in the course; 12 percent of graduates had been business majors, compared with 4 percent in the course; and 5 percent of university graduates had had another major, while 15 percent of those in the course indicated another major. This skew toward the social sciences is not surprising given that this is an introductory social science course. Yet, there is representation of students from a variety of academic backgrounds or, rather, intended academic backgrounds, since many of the students enrolled in the course are in the early stages of their academic careers. Indeed, 78 percent are freshmen or sophomores. Finally, 6 percent of students in the course were undecided about their major, as indicated in Table 1.

In addition, students were asked whether they had heard of PostSecret.com prior to the class (only 15 percent had) and whether they had previously taken a sociology course at the college level. Four questions were included asking students whether they agreed or disagreed with four statements: (1) discussion of PostSecret in this class has helped me learn sociological concepts, (2) discussion of PostSecret in this class has helped me understand course concepts through the use of examples, (3) discussion of PostSecret in this class has helped me remember important concepts, and (4) discussion of PostSecret in this class has helped me to better understand the sociological imagination. In addition, I included open-ended questions in the survey instrument: First, I asked students to discuss any concepts that the use of secrets from PostSecret helped them better understand. Second, I asked them their general opinion of the use of PostSecret in this class and whether it was effective and helped their learning.

RESULTS

The use of PostSecret is especially effective, according to the students, for learning through the use of examples, as indicated in Figure 1. More than 9 in 10 students, that is, 93 percent of students, indicated that PostSecret has helped them understand the content of the course through the use of examples. In addition, 85 percent of students reported that PostSecret helped them better understand sociological concepts. Seventy-seven percent of students indicated that the discussion of

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, PostSecret Survey, *N* = 94.

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Response Categories
Female	0.56	0.50	0	1	No Yes
Heard of the sociological imagination before this class	0.17	0.38	0	1	No Yes
Taken a college level sociology class before this class	0.07	0.26	0	1	No Yes
Class standing	1.99	1.03	1	5	Freshman—43% Sophomore—35% Junior—27% Senior—4% Other—2%
Mother's education	—	—	1	7	Did not finish high school—4% Graduated from high school—20% Attended college but did not complete degree—22% Completed an associate's degree—11% Completed a bachelor's degree—26% Completed a master's degree—13% Completed a doctoral degree—6% Do not know—0%
Father's education	—	—	1	7	Did not finish high school—5% Graduated from high school—26% Attended college but did not complete degree—19% Completed an associate's degree—2% Completed a bachelor's degree—20% Completed a master's degree—20% Completed a doctoral degree—5% Do not know—<1%
Major	—	—	1	7	Sociology—3% Other social sciences—44% Natural sciences—26% Education—2% Business—4% Undecided—6% Other—15%
GPA	—	—	0	4	Below 2.0—2% 2.0-2.49—3% 2.5-2.99—30% 3.0-3.49—37% 3.5 or above—28%

PostSecret secrets helped them better understand the sociological imagination, whereas 69 percent indicated that the use of PostSecret helped them remember important concepts.

Interestingly, supplementary chi-square analyses (not shown, but available on request) indicate that there were no statistically significant differences at the 0.05 alpha level across gender, class standing, parents' education, students' major, whether students had ever taken a sociology class before, and whether students had heard of PostSecret.com before. This provides some evidence that the use of secrets from PostSecret is effective at teaching students from a variety of backgrounds. That is, the use of PostSecret is equally effective in engaging students of differing academic and home backgrounds, making it an especially valuable tool for use in introductory sociology courses, which often include students from a variety of majors and academic experiences at the college level.

Students have remarked both informally and in this survey that they believe this is a valuable teaching tool that assists their learning and makes sociology more accessible and relevant to them. It demonstrates, they feel, the way in which a range of individual secrets, ideas, and emotions are related to social institutions and helps them apply sociological concepts and theories. Furthermore, it makes them question their assumptions about the writers of the secret (how do they interpret the language choice and imagery to make guesses about who wrote the secret?). Below I describe four central themes that emerged from the open-ended questions.

The first and most common theme that emerged in the qualitative responses was the utility of secrets as examples, consistent with the results in Figure 1, which indicate that 93 percent of students found them useful in providing examples. One student notes, "It made me see real, applicable examples of different concepts" (19),¹ while another writes, "Using PostSecret helped me learn terms and concepts because it showed me a real life example and these terms/concepts were easier to apply to real life" (38). Other students noted how class discussions of the secrets made them view the social problem from a different perspective: "[PostSecret] gave examples of another way to look at the problem. Helped apply the topic" (92). The use of secrets, then, made the sociological concepts come to life for many of the students: "[PostSecret] made me really relate to the class" (88) and "they help me relate it to my daily life" (90).

Students also cited PostSecret as useful in helping them demarcate particular topics, days, and concepts in the course. Students noted that in addition to providing real-life examples, secrets were able to convey information in a memorable way, distinct from the largely lecture format of the rest of the course. For example, one student writes, "I think using PostSecrets is helpful because they are interesting and sort of stand out from the lectures so they stick in my mind better" (21), while another writes, "They usually make an impression so that I can recall it later and reconnect it to the concept we were talking about at the time" (77). Others note the visual nature of the secrets: "It gives me an image to keep in my head about that term" (32), while another student notes, "It allowed us to pause and turn things over in our minds using an interesting real life example" (29). Other students point to the utility of PostSecret in grounding abstract concepts noting that it "helped make the material relatable" (60).

The second theme that emerged is that of students recognizing assumptions in their own perspectives and thinking. Students frequently mentioned this self-reflection and the recognition and interrogation of their assumptions in the qualitative portion of the survey. One student wrote, "[It made me realize] how we stereotype and judge everyone and everything without even realizing it" (11) and "It helped me see how often we jump to conclusions before even knowing all the facts" (30). Another student notes, "It helped me to understand our preconceived ideas we have of other people, even if we don't know who they are" (61). Yet another student highlighted how his or her assumptions, particularly about the gender of the secret writer, influenced his or her interpretation of the contents: "If a PostSecret is vague about the gender of the writer then multiple meanings can be taken away depending on if you think it [the writer] was male or female" (12). In this way students were forced to acknowledge their own biases and stereotypes in a concrete way, as a direct response to the secrets. In doing so, students questioned their assumptions about the writers' biographies—their intentions, feelings, emotions, and how these relate to their presumed gender, race, and class—"You are asked to think critically to determine what message lies behind the postcard" (43), "it is interesting as well as entertaining to dissect a secret and hypothesize about its origins and details" (24), and "I like trying to figure out the story behind them" (63).

The third central theme that emerged from student responses is that PostSecret provided a different perspective. Students noted that it provided

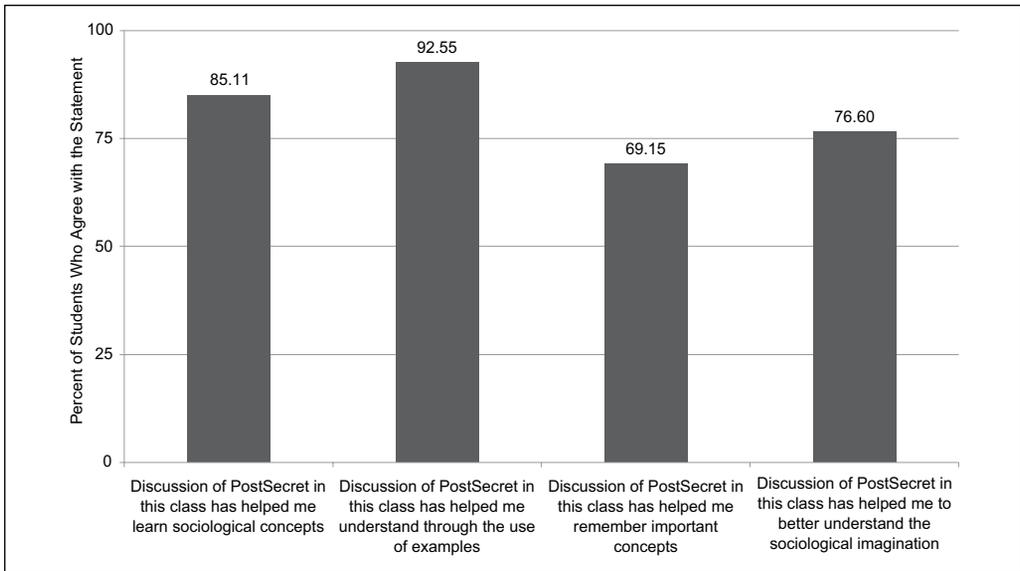


Figure 1. Percentage of Students Who Agree with Statements about the Utility of PostSecret
 Note: $N = 94$ students in an introductory sociology course.

variation: “I love it because it gives a ‘real-world’ example that might be different from my own” (10). Another student notes that it helped him or her “see the perspectives of people with different experiences and life situations” (51). These responses underscore the utility of considering other people’s biographies—and particularly their secrets—rather than only the students’ own lives in teaching the sociological imagination. In encouraging these kinds of discussions some students seemed surprised at the views that their own classmates held; one student writes, “[They helped me understand] the different views that people have around me, and helped to look at other people’s problems/achievements from their point of view” (28).

Finally, students noted that discussions of PostSecret fostered more inclusivity in participation in that they inspired students who would not have otherwise participated to do so. Often students are wary of sharing personal information or participating at all in a larger classroom. Being able to talk about an individual issue that is not their own may inspire them to participate. Especially in a large class, PostSecret may then encourage students to speak who would not have otherwise participated. As one student notes, “PostSecret really helps with discussion of stereotypes, as well as putting our class discussions into real-world examples.

They also add more discussion in class by students who may not normally participate” (16).

Some students noted that they thought PostSecret enhanced inclusivity not just in terms of the student participation but in the topics being discussed. That is, the use of secrets facilitated the discussion of more sensitive subjects and topics: “I think they [the secrets] were more honest than anyone would be willing to be in class so it was easier to talk about touchy subjects” (25). The anonymity of the secrets therefore seemed to make students feel they could be more honest: “It helps to force yourself to look at something subjectively since they are anonymous” (50). This student points to the fact that due to the anonymity of the secrets, students really allowed themselves to discuss their subjective, personal opinions about the content of the PostSecret. Another student stated that the students “enjoy the PostSecrets because they invite discussion that would not come about without them” (57).

Interestingly, one student discussed the additive knowledge that students were able to bring to bear on each subsequent secret in following classes: “With each new PostSecret we can look at it with new and further knowledge” (46). Indeed, revisiting the same PostSecret, which might apply to two different themes (e.g., suicide and gender), is especially valuable. It pushes students to consider what

new sociological vocabulary and concepts they have learned that can aid them in thinking about, analyzing, and discussing the secret since the last time they saw the secret. Doing this may also make them more aware of their own progress and learning. This is evident from the survey results described above, but there is also evidence from in-class discussions and an in-class exercise that students were able to connect concepts to the secrets and that these in turn helped them remember and better understand some concepts. For example, I revisit secrets throughout the course and students remember the context in which we previously discussed then. Again, while it is observational, my experience is that more students and different students participate when discussing PostSecret secrets than when I ask questions about the material more generally or about the book. This provides preliminary evidence that the use of PostSecret accomplishes some of the goals the students identified in the survey and discussed above.

Toward the end of the semester, in the context of an in-class exercise for which students could receive extra credit, I displayed a secret and asked students to consider it. I then told them to take 5 to 10 minutes to write down who they thought wrote the PostSecret and explain their reasoning using concepts we learned during the semester. The PostSecret is a photo of a matching white cup and saucer, and the cup contains black coffee. On the coffee, in white type, is written, "I drink my coffee black to impress people." Most students brought up the concepts of gender and gender roles as well as stereotypes about masculinity and femininity. Specifically, most students hypothesized that the secret was written by a man, arguing that it is unlikely that women would try to impress their peers by drinking their coffee black (with several noting that women impress other women by being "girly" in their physical appearance, whereas men display "toughness" by their possessions and habits, such as exercise and drinking black coffee). Many students also mentioned this as an example of front-stage behavior, consistent with Goffman's (1956) writing, arguing that at home, when they were not trying to impress people they probably did add sugar and/or cream since it indicated that they only drank their coffee black to impress people. Several students indicated that they believed the writer was working-class, as it would be more important to appear "manly" among working-class men. The responses to this exercise indicate that the discussion of PostSecret secrets provides a space for students to reflect critically on

the course material and apply abstract concepts to individual experiences and lived realities.

CONCLUSION

There are many ways we can teach students about the richness and utility of the sociological imagination and to illustrate various concepts taught in sociological courses. PostSecret.com offers one such strategy of illustrating the relationship between history and biography and personalizing sometimes abstract concepts and theoretical approaches. PostSecret can serve to engage students on a personal level without requiring personal biographical essays, which are often unfeasible in large classes. They allow an interjection of the personal into a course where students are exposed to information about sometimes seemingly impersonal social institutions and structures.

Results from this study point to the utility of using PostSecret: The majority of students indicate that PostSecret helped them both learn (85 percent) and remember (69 percent) sociological concepts, assisted them in understanding the sociological imagination (77 percent), and aided their learning through the use of examples (93 percent). Importantly, these results do not vary across students' major, gender, class standing, gender, or parents' education, indicating the general utility of this method. PostSecret personalizes important sociological concepts by providing first-person narratives without requesting or requiring students to divulge their own secrets, especially as many of these involve nonnormative behavior. Results from the quantitative and qualitative data indicate that PostSecret's most obvious function is that it provides examples that supplement general concepts. Results also indicate that the discussion of secrets accomplishes several additional goals: While PostSecret helped students apply some more abstract concepts to daily life, it also provided different perspectives than those held by students. Additionally, the use of PostSecret seemingly promoted participation on the part of students who felt more comfortable discussing far-removed and anonymous others' personal issues rather than their own. Finally, PostSecret often made students recognize and consider their own assumptions, illuminating their judgments and pushing them to consider their sources.

PostSecret might be especially useful in larger classes, where intensive writing assignments, service learning, and other components are perhaps

less tenable. PostSecret secrets serve as a complement to the discussion of sociological concepts and the description of historical events and social and group-level statistics, helping ground these in lived experiences. Therefore, even in smaller courses, they may offer another way by which to illustrate sociological concepts and the sociological imagination. PostSecret can also be used in topical and upper division courses: Since the secrets cover a wide array of topics, they can easily be applied to a variety of class topics, including but not limited to gender, race, class, immigration, nationalism, sexuality, health, education, and religion, to name a few. PostSecret offers a way to get students engaged in a discussion about tangible issues without requiring them to divulge their own (sometimes secret) biographical details. As such, PostSecret.com represents a contemporary, novel, and dynamic source of biographical information that can illustrate the sociological imagination across a range of sociological topics and themes.

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1. These numbers represent those assigned to each completed survey, that is, this is survey number 19 of the 94 completed surveys.

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