Daniel Karell has left his post as Assistant Professor of Social Research and Public Policy at New York University Abu Dhabi to join Yale University as an Assistant Professor of Sociology. Previously, he was a Fung Global Fellow at Princeton University's Institute for International and Regional Studies and a postdoctoral research associate at New York University Abu Dhabi. He received his PhD in 2014 in Sociology from the University of Washington and his AB in Comparative Study of Religion from Harvard University. Karell's research focuses on social movements, conflict, migration, and propaganda—social dynamics “that bring us together and, at times, drive us apart.”

What is your teaching approach? What kinds of skills and values do you hope to impart as an educator?

I have primarily taught upper-level undergraduate courses on research design and methods. These courses are structured as seminars and practicums, so my teaching approach has involved lots of discussion, one-on-one help, and guidance of original individual- and group-project work. I have enjoyed this approach: I get to tailor lessons to students' needs and interests, and help them overcome challenges that they personally encounter (and are difficult to anticipate for every student). Overall, my goal is to impart skills that would help students get (independently) from any kind of question about the social world to a well-reasoned answer by drawing on appropriate data and analytical reasoning.

What first drew you to studying sociology? And what was particularly compelling to you about studying propaganda, radicalism, identity, migration, nationalism etc.?

As an undergraduate, I majored in a humanities subject -- comparative religion. It was a great major, but I was often frustrated with discussions that did not dive deeply into dynamics, such as how religious ideas have changed over time and how religious ideas reflect changes in society. I mentioned this to a faculty member and they said, "it sounds like you want to study sociology." That simple remark planted the idea in my head!

Taking a step back and considering the topics I have been interested in, I have been very influenced by a couple major national and global crises I lived through. The first was September 11, 2001. This was a rupture point for everyone who experienced it, and my response was that I wanted to learn as much as I could about radicalism, identity, and the Middle East. (And then, once I started spending time in the Middle East, I became exposed to regionally pressing questions of nationalism and migration.) The second crisis is happening now: the disruption of knowledge, information, and communication. This has turned my attention to questions of propaganda, which has been extensively studied in communication and media research, but so far has not been a major focus of sociologists’ research. I think there is a lot that sociologists can uncover about propaganda today, especially the interplay of propaganda and social relationships and boundaries.

How has your experience teaching in the UAE differed from teaching in the US?

My experiences teaching in the UAE and US differed mainly because of the students in the classroom. Most residents of the UAE are from someplace else, and New York University Abu Dhabi is no different. About 20% of the student body holds a United States passport, another 20% hold an Emirati passport, and the remaining students are nationals of almost 100 different countries. (In addition, many students have multiple-migration backgrounds.) The students in my classroom often each came from a different country. As a result, I had to learn how to create a classroom environment that individually engaged students from all around the world while also engaging a hyper-diverse group as a whole. It was very fun. Often, teaching seemed more like partaking in sociological dynamics than instructing about them. All this said, there were many similarities. For example, it is heartening to see how students in such different places as Seattle and Abu Dhabi care deeply
about issues of inequity and social (in)justice.

**How has your research evolved since your PhD years at UW?**

In some ways, I feel like a completely different researcher now. My research has shifted significantly towards the sociology of culture—specifically, what some people are calling “formal cultural sociology”—as well as large, complex datasets and computational methods. Looking back at my time at UW, I am somewhat surprised at this shift. While at UW, I was focused on qualitative, field-based research. I spent a lot of my time in graduate school learning Arabic (to do my dissertation fieldwork partly while speaking Arabic). Moreover, one of my close friends at UW was involved in a very early incarnation of what we now call computational sociology. He talked a lot about his research, but it never really interested me then. Yet, despite the seemingly unexpected evolution in my research, it makes sense to me. My fieldwork got me very interested in tricky questions about the interplay of ideas and social relationships that could not be captured in “traditional” datasets. Around the same time, text-as-data and large scale, fine-grained relational data were becoming more prominent—and these seemed like a natural fit for what I wanted to research. As soon as I realized this, I began learning about the data and methods.

**What are you most proud of in your career to date?**

I have been teaching a practicum to third-year undergraduates for the last couple of years. The course focuses on research design and helps students prepare to do their (obligatory) senior-year capstone projects. I spend a lot of time helping students develop and fine-tune their research ideas and plans. Several students have emailed me the year after taking my course saying that their capstones exceed their own expectations because of the work we did together in my course. Some of these students have highlighted their capstones in successful applications to top-ranked graduate school programs. It's nice to have outcomes like these because they are clear, tangible indications that I am helping my students.

**Any tips for sociology PhDs? For undergrads?**

First of all, I want to offer encouragement. There are many social problems and injustices in our world right now, and sociology can help take steps towards mitigating them—or at least help make people aware of them! I have a lot of advice for sociology PhDs—it would not all fit here. One thing I will suggest here is to read broadly, including related disciplines. I personally learned a lot—especially about methodology—from reading political science research; it also helped me understand sociology better. Another recommendation is to collaborate on projects with other people, either grad students or faculty members, and not only at UW but also other institutions. That is another great way to learn new skills and strategies for conducting research. The connections to people at other institutions can be made at summer workshops and small, topic-specific conferences.

For undergrads, I suggest thinking about doing original research. I have seen undergrads produce very interesting original projects, and, as mentioned earlier, we need more research to tackle the serious social problems and injustices we face today.