Emergence... (or not?)

There is a tendency in academic work, perhaps bordering on a trend, about which I wish to file a protest. The tendency is to take a perfectly good word—resonant as well as useful—and to appropriate it for a technical and (therefore) uninspiring use. “Rubric” was like that—the education professionals ruined that word for me. It used to suggest an organizing idea or principle that could assist in understanding something otherwise unapproachable, now it’s a scorecard. “Emergence” is another—I’m afraid we sociologists have been right in the middle of this one. Emergence used to connote, and still does among those with an ounce or two of spirit left in them, an inexplicable coming into the world, a new birth as if from nothing—a miracle of a sort I suppose. That sense is certainly consistent with the new technical use but the poetry is just as definitely gone. In one of several competing forms, emergence is the presence of properties at a higher level of organization that cannot be attributed to a simple aggregation of the properties of lower level phenomena. And by the way, “simple” is itself no longer the friendly helper of our youth—not simple now means “not elegantly formalized in an axiomatic system or a closed set of equations” or some such very serious worry—as if there is anything worthwhile that IS expressible in axiomatic systems or closed sets of formal equations.

In any event, sociology is the queen science of this new emergence since it typically argues, contra microeconomics and its own rational action adherents, that social systems are sui generis—are not reducible to their constituent parts. That which is to be explained cannot, therefore, be completely or fundamentally explained in a reductionist manner—through an understanding of the properties of the constituent elements. Emergence is this special province of non-reducible system properties and it is a rich and pragmatically important realm. However, some philosophers and not a few wayward social scientists take issue. Emergence to them is merely a misinterpretation based on a still incomplete appreciation of reductionist dependencies. As William Wimsatt (2007) put it, “Philosophers … if they are reductionists, treat claims of emergence as counsels of ignorance.” (p. 174). By these lights then, it is a placeholder status—descriptive of our current state of (accepted) knowledge but epiphenomenal as regards ontology. There is no “real” emergence, no real miracle. A more promising contention, I think, is that emergent properties are dependent on lower level entities but in highly contingent ways—ways dramatically influenced by the form of organization of the system. In any event, I think all this is a very promising perspective for sociology which, since its founding, has been concerned with the creative importance of particular system forms as against others. One of my own current areas of work involves elaborating and playing out this theme for particular areas of both social organization and the organization of individual thinking (what are commonly called cognitive heuristics). But that is not the point of this little excursion.

The point here is to lament “the world we have lost” in Peter Laslett’s fine phrase. In teasing apart and dissecting emergent properties, we strive to eliminate the mystery of emergence. That “miracle of a sort”, that philosopher’s stone of something from nothing was just sloppy romantic thinking. And so it is with much of our effort to replace mystery with analysis and wonder with explanation. With discipline, focus and specification we can and will do better—those acts of discipline, focus and specification are in fact defined as better... whether it feels like it or not.

This tension of sacred and social and whole and part is at the core of what has always drawn people to sociology and may not be resolvable within the discipline as now constituted. Formal, technical and reductionist explanations of the physical world give us a
Faculty Presentations and Publications

Faculty and graduate students continue to uphold their reputation for outstanding and numerous publications and presentations.

Barry Goetz


Presented, in November 2010, at the American Society of Criminology Meeting in San Francisco a paper entitled “Public Safety Agencies as Public Welfar Agencies,” in the session “Social Responses to Crime: Policing and Law Enforcement.” He will also chair the session. The paper is derived from his book manuscript, Fire Control, Policing: The Limits of Social Outreach; on the Selectivity of Local State Institutions.

An interview on radio station WMUK regarding “Statistics Give Mixed Picture of Police Shootings Nationwide” aired on April 20, 2011. The program was in response to Kalamazoo Public Safety’s only deadly shooting of a Public Safety Officer, Eric Zapata.

Susan Carlson was re-elected for a third term as Treasurer of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, a national professional organization of scholar activists. http://www.sssp1.org.

Publications:


Continued on page 3
Yuan-Kang Wang

Gave a book talk at WMU’s Light Center for Chinese Studies (January 28, 2011), Calvin College (April 7, 2011), and University of Notre Dame (April 20, 2011).

Conference presentations:


- “China’s Rise in Historical Perspective: Ming China as a Regional Hegemon,” paper presented at the 39th Taiwan-American Conference on Contemporary China, National Chengchi University, Taipei (December 9-10, 2010). [invited]

New book:

Graduate Student News

Tim Bauer presented at two conferences this spring. At the NCSA, in Cleveland, OH he and Jessica Sullivan presented “Living a Life of Free: a Trashy New Social Movement”. He also presented at MSS in St. Louis, MO, “The Importance of Activism in the Frames of Environmental Groups.”

Darrick Brake presented at the Michigan Sociological Association meeting in Bay City, MI. He presented a paper on Metatheory. He also organized a session on issues in social theory at the Midwest Sociological society’s meeting in St. Louis, MO. At the North Central Sociological Association meeting in Cleveland, OH he organized a session on Issues in Sociological Theory.

Lori Jo Verspoor presented at the Midwest Sociological Society (MSS), “The Educational and Ministerial Goals of Female Seminarians.”

Emergence… (or not?) cont.

sense of accomplishment and even of mastery—they are consistent with the hubris of our self-image. But such explanations of ourselves—of people and society and of their very ideas and accomplishments—seem to diminish us. This tension may help us to understand why we both tenaciously pursue and just as vigorously disdain those solutions sociology has so far offered.

Anyway, in the old and cherished sense, there are bright ideas, new scholars and exciting projects emerging all over our department. In one particularly important example; Dr. Whitney Gunter has emerged here at WMU as our newest Assistant Professor of Sociology. Fresh from the University of Delaware but more, certainly, than that simple reduction can explain. We are thrilled to have him here as we are thrilled by the other goings-on described herein. Read on in this newsletter, check out our other web offerings and even talk to the non-virtual sources of these snippets to learn more.

Laslett, P. 1965. The World We Have Lost. Charles Scribner’s Sons.
32nd Annual Undergraduate Spring Honors Reception
April 20, 2011

Presidential Scholar  Natalie Gandy
Sociology Scholar  Rebecca Durkee
Criminal Justice Scholar  Michael Corbeil
Leonard C. Kercher Award  Kimberly Bogema
Lanny Wilde Scholarship  Brandon Pierman
Stanley S. and Helenan S. Robin Scholarship  Romy Bond
Lloyd Braithwaite Scholarship  Heather Krestik

From left, Dr. Ron Kramer, Heather Krestik, and Dr. Zoann Snyder.

Undergraduate Teaching Assistants
Heather Krestik for Dr. Snyder
Kristina Dristy for Dr. Gu

Department of Sociology Work Study Student
Tiffany Crowe
Rebecca Durkee

Alpha Phi Sigma The National Criminal Justice Honor Society presented by Dr. Charles Crawford, Faculty Advisor
Marvenious Garrett
Erica Gloster
Kevin Halladay
George Neal
Adam Poole

Alpha Kappa Delta International Sociology Honor Society presented by Dr. David Hartmann, Faculty Advisor
Rebecca Durkee
Steven Hard
Alexander Sanchez

AnnaLee Miller (left), and Tiffany Crowe.

Kristina Dristy (left) with Dr. Chien-Ju Gu.

Alpha Phi Sigma Members (from left) Erica Gloster (left) and Kevin Halladay with Dr. Charles Crawford.

Alpha Kappa Delta Member, Steven Hard (left), with Dr. David Hartmann.
Graduate Student Association Awards

Outstanding Faculty Mentor
Dr. Susan Carlson

Outstanding Student Mentor, Ph.D.
Lisa Kruse

Outstanding Mentor, M.A.
John Chew

Outstanding Ph.D. Instructor
Elizabeth Bradshaw

Outstanding Student Researcher, Ph.D.
Tim Bauer
Cynthia Visscher

Outstanding Student Researcher, M.A.
John Chew

Department Awards:

All-University Student Teaching Effectiveness Award
Jacob Armstrong

Department Graduate Research Award, Ph.D.
Elizabeth Bradshaw

All-University Graduate Research Award, M.A.
Amanda Meyer

All-University Graduate Research Award, Ph.D.
David Barry

The Wally Post Award for Exceptional Departmental Service
Lisa Kruse

Outstanding Graduate Teachers

Joseph Abbot
David Barry
Jacquelynn Doyon
Kelly Faust
Matthew Klepac
Zhenia L'eontyeva
Lisa Sanders
Cody Wedge

Jacob Armstrong
Elizabeth Bradshaw
Nicholas Budimir
Lori DeVries
Jessica Edel
Tamica Frison
Lisa Kruse
Melinda McCormick
Cynthia Visscher

Outstanding Graduate Scholars

Jacob Armstrong
Tim Bauer
Darrick Brake
Carrie Buist
Lori DeVries
Andrew Evans
Karolina Jedrzejczak
Matthew Klepac
Ladel Lewis
Amanda Meyer
Jessica Sullivan
Andrew Verheek
Cody Wedge

David Barry
Elizabeth Bradshaw
Nicholas Budimir
John Chew
Jacquelynn Doyon
Kelly Faust
Traci Joseph
Lisa Kruse
Zhenia L'eontyeva
Lisa Sanders
Adrienne Trier-Bieniek
Cynthia Visscher
Fall 2010 Graduates
Dr. Adrienne Trier-Bieniekk (Ph.D. Degree Conferred)
Dr. Michael Gillespie (Ph.D. Degree Conferred)

Spring 2011 Graduates
Dr. Sara Brightman (Ph.D. Degree Conferred)
Cody L. Wedge (M.A. Graduate)

Summer 2011 Graduates
Carolina Calvillo (Summer I 2010 - M.A. Graduate)
Lori J. DeVries (Summer II 2010 - M.A. Graduate)
Kristy N. Niblock (Summer II 2010 - M.A. Graduate)
Shannon E. Vacek (Summer II 2010 - M.A. Graduate)
Announcements!

Ph.D. Student Darrick Brake became engaged to Kimberly Underwood, (WMU alum and current MSU Ph.D. Student) on November 6, 2011.

Ph.D. Student David Barry and his wife had a baby boy, Felix Gordan Harris Barry on April 10, 2011. Congrats to the very busy and tired parents!

Correction to Identification of New Graduate Student Jessica Sullivan, Ph.D.

Congratulations to Dr. Angie Moe and her husband Aaron on the birth of their second daughter Sofia Marie Moe-Abla.

SOFIA MARIE MOE-ABLA
Born March 13, 2011 at 8:25 am
7 lbs, 6 oz; 19.5 inches

Alumni Information Update

We want to hear from you!

Our strong suit is our alumni. In each issue, we will focus on YOU, so PLEASE consider yourself selected for upcoming issues. We enjoy receiving your announcements: marriages, job changes, presentations, promotions, advanced degrees, etc. All you need to do is fill out any portion of the form below (with a picture, if possible) and send to ann.browning@wmich.edu, or mail to Newsletter Editor, Department of Sociology, 2406 Sangren Hall, 1903 West Michigan Ave., Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5257.

Name _______________________________ Email _______________________________

Home address ___________________________________________________________ City__________________________

State _______ Zip_________________ Home phone _____________________________

Employer ____________________________ Job title ______________________________

If alumni, degree and year: ___________________________________________________________________

Tell us more about yourself, and/or what you would like to see in future newsletters:
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________

Official WMU Alumni Update here: www.wmich.edu/friends/
Yes, I want to support the WMU Department of Sociology!

As our student numbers continue to grow, and in a time when state funding is increasingly restricted, the support we receive from friends and alumni is vitally important. Such funds are used to take advantage of new or unbudgeted opportunities in order to enhance the teaching or the research of the department.

Thank you for considering a gift to the WMU Department of Sociology.

The WMU Foundation processes all gifts that come to the University and turns them over to the department. Michigan residents: Remember that 50 percent of your gift to a Michigan University is returned to you as a tax credit on your state income tax (up to $200 for a single filer; $400 for joint filers).

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