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The Pain of Paying Attention

Dr. David Hartmann, Chair

Someone, it seems, has always been telling us to pay attention. Perhaps now, in the face of the speed and fragmentation of modern life, this old advice is repeated more often and more desperately and is even sometimes raised to extra-ordinary levels - as in the rhetoric and practice of mindfulness for example. These trends are not surprising since the expectation of fragmented consciousness can be glossed as a declining expectation of intense and sustained attention. Even as attention erodes there are still minimum expectations of course - a floor to its increasing obsolescence. These surround polite social interaction as we are still expected to pay attention in conversation with a friend or colleague. That is in fact a reasonable definition of friend or colleague, one to whom attention is owed. But even in these situations the floor is crumbling – who has not witnessed the couple out to dinner but with both parties focused on their phones? And the phone is not a link only to another friend in more immediate need but also and in flitting sequence to a range of other stimuli.

But paying attention was never only or even primarily about polite interaction. It was also a precondition of serious thinking. Paying attention to the world is a precursor to understanding and paying attention to that nascent understanding is the basis for reflection and, potentially, a new focus on what is then a new world. Attention, I think, classically alternates in this way between outward and inward phases. Focused outward, attention is the basis for fair hearing or fair seeing – that is, for lack of a better phrase, the sensory sense of the term. But that kind of observational attention is grist for the mill of inward attentiveness - a fair hearing in the judicial sense wherein relevant evidence is fitted to the question at hand. One can surely stay too long in observation or in contemplation but the alternation of phases is, I think, our *modus operandi* as critical and evaluative creatures and we are generally well served by it and by an innate curiosity about the world around us that makes it possible.



*Dr. David Hartmann
Chair, Department of Sociology*

If such utility and even humanity is attached to paying attention, I wonder simply when a person can stop doing it and still be a good person. This highlights an ethical dimension to the practice and I have in mind a line from Simon Leys that well expresses what I think is a fairly common insight. “The most fundamental form of respect for others is the attention one pays them.” (2013, p. 215). The obverse is also apparent, disrespect is fundamentally a decision that the other is not worthy of one’s (full) attention.

I will develop two short examples to make the point. To teach well - the first example - seems at least in part to be an exercise in respect. If one respects the material and the student, one will pay attention to the enterprise in every way that one can. I also believe that such attention will have generally happy results but that may not be a necessary part of the ethical story. In teaching, by the way, the instructor almost always respects the subject matter. We are drawn to our subjects as professionals and as devotees perhaps to an unnatural degree (is *The Odyssey* really so indispensable as my Greek literature professor seemed to think¹) and said attraction is conducive to our continued engagement.

The respect for students may not always be assumed or at least may more easily wane in the face of resistance and indifference but this is understandable – even more so when we recall our theme and therefore that the indifference of the student may well be taken by the perceptive teacher as a sign of disrespect. These are ultimately empirical points about which, today at least, I’ll say only one more thing.

If one respects the material and the student, one will pay attention to the enterprise in every way that one can.

Respect for a category of persons is not at all what I mean by respect in this context. Genuine respect is like genuine care, it is a salve that must be applied to an individual. I am in general wary of the man who loves humanity or the poor or what have you but seems to have difficulty with what we sociologists sometimes call the role incumbent. Categorical respect may be like other derivatives of a Kantian ethical perspective – a duty and even a felt allegiance – but it is not probably an ethics of care – an ethics of attention. Most importantly, it may not therefore sustain the instruction of the difficult student. That student must be met to some degree on his terms, at the start at least and I must therefore care to know him as an individual.

So, respect for the individual student leads to attentiveness to her learning and is an ethical demand of teaching. A second example is the ethics of attention to political discourse. Here the actor is the citizen - meaning the individual with participatory rights in the political system. What does it say of that person if she chooses not to pay attention? The related and frankly more sociological question is, what does it say about the system if it is so designed or operates in such a way as to (differentially) discourage participation? But the attentive reader will note that these columns are largely about the fuzzy limits of the sociological focus so I will leave that aside. For the individual as

¹ I believe that professor’s attachment – attention - to his material was and is important to me by the way, perhaps as important as what I learn(ed) directly from that great book.

the responsible agent - when can she stop paying attention to, for example, an annoying or to her mind unproductive aspect of the political discourse?

One guide is that we must respect the process and those who put themselves forward to participate in that process. That respect demands attention and a democratic system could work on that basis – an attentive and informed citizenry will generally make a choice which (we trust) will not go too far afield. But it seems that the current political climate is dramatically marked by a lack of respect and therefore a lack of attention. If I really did respect the politician talking, or more importantly in our system, the

persons for whom that politician is speaking - those to whom he or she appeals – I would be obligated to pay attention.

Let us be clear – attention is not agreement but it is, through the link of respect, a form of sympathy. That, it seems to me, would strengthen

the political discourse at all levels. It would demand a more inclusive attention and therefore a more inclusive language – one that stressed our commonalities rather than exaggerated our differences. It would not probably be as much fun in the short run because the degradation of others seems to be satisfying in a way that can only be based in a stance of difference in the first place. This is the “othering” of the opponent that seems so pervasive now and perhaps always was. But in a time and place where no segment of the population has *a priori* claims on the right and the good – real listening is required. The ever more vehement claims of moral and intellectual superiority are in this context as much a result as a cause of the chasm in sympathy and respect.

Both examples, of learning and of political compromise draw on the basic model with which we started – the expectation of respectful attention in polite social discourse. The lesson now is that more impactful social interactions are also forms of discourse, or should be, and are no less dependent on respectful attention – as a mindset and a practice. Until we can engage each other as persons deserving of respect real attention is unlikely. We will find it impossible then to hear each other, our mishearing will further discourage sympathy and even encourage the shout and the jibe and the last word rather than the open respectful communication on which we depend.



Patrick Cundiff and Alwin, D.F. (2015). Changing Beliefs about Crime and Punishment in American Society. *Journal of Law and Criminal Justice*, 3(1), 49-66.

Patrick Cundiff. (forthcoming). Erasing the Mark of a Criminal Record: Examining the Effect of Education on Ex-Offender Employment. *Corrections: Policy, Practice, and Research*.

Whitney DeCamp and Nicholas W. Bakken. (2016). Self-Injury, Suicide Ideation, and Sexual Orientation: Differences in Causes and Correlates among High School Students. *Journal of Injury and Violence Research*, 8, 15-24. doi: 10.5249/jivr.v8i1.545

Whitney DeCamp, James Herzig, Brooke O'Neil, and Daniel O'Connell. (2016). Motivation is Key: The Differing Predictors of Adolescents' Nonmedical Use of Prescription Drugs. *Childhoods Today*, 10, 24-42.

Whitney DeCamp and Matthew J. Manierre. (2016). "Money Will Solve the Problem": Testing the Effectiveness of Conditional Incentives for Online Surveys. *Survey Practice*, 9, 18-27.

Chien-Juh Gu, (2016). *Taiwanese Immigrants Medical Experiences: An Exploratory Study*, Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies.

Elena Lisovskaya, (2016). "Religious Education in Russia: Inter-Faith Harmony or Neo-Imperial Toleration?" *Social Inclusion* 4 (2): 1 -16. This is an open-access journal and, therefore, can be accessed by anyone freely.

Angela Moe and Catherine Kothari , Michael Liepman, R. Shama Tareen, Phyllis Florian, Remitha Charoth, Suzanna Haas, Joseph McKean, James Wiley, & Amy Curtis (2016). Intimate Partner Violence Associated with Postpartum Depression, Regardless of Socioeconomic Status. *Maternal Child Health Journal* (DOI 10.1007/s10995-016-1925-0).

Angela Moe and Catherine Kothari, James Wiley, Michael Liepman, R. Shama Tareen, & Amy Curtis. (2016). Maternal Depression is Not Just a Problem Early On. *Public Health* (DOI: 101016/j.puhe.2016.01.003)

Jesse M. Smith, 2016. "Whither American Freethinking? Recent Developments, Future Possibilities." *Free Inquiry* April/May Vol.36 No.2

Jesse M. Smith, 2016. "Expressive Nontheism: Moral Communities and Promoting the Social Good." Pp. 98-117 in *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion* Vol. 7, edited by Franco Garelli and Roberto Cipriani. Brill Publications.

Jesse M. Smith, 2016. Review of *American Secularism: Cultural Contours of Nonreligious Belief Systems*, by Joseph O. Baker and Buster G. Smith. *American Journal of Sociology* (scheduled for Vol.122 No. 1)

Jesse M. Smith has been named to a new Editorial Position: Editorial Board, *Secularism and Nonreligion*

Dr. Zoann Snyder had a paper presentation and a panel discussion at the Midwest Sociological Society Annual 2016 annual meeting held in March in Chicago:

"Reentry and Restorative Justice: The Challenges for Persons Returning from Prison," with Marcus Collins (research paper presentation)

"Service Learning and Community Engagement: Defining, Building and Maintaining Partnerships," with **Anthony Frontiera** and Jaishree Khatri (panel presentation).

Presentations and Awards

Presentations:

Patrick Cundiff and Maskaly, J. (2015). *Police Personality: A Question of Selection or Socialization*. Presented at the ASC annual meeting.

Whitney DeCamp, and Heather Zaykowski. (2016, March). *Victimization and Offending: Overlapping Trajectories and Risks*. Presented at the Midwest Sociological Society and the North Central Sociological Association, Chicago, IL.

Chien-Juh Gu, 2016. *From Religious Minority to Racial Minority: An Exploratory Study of Burmese Refugees in Battle Creek, Michigan*. Annual meeting of the Midwest Sociological Society, Chicago, IL.



Patrick Cundiff



Whitney DeCamp



Dr. Chien-Juh Gu receives the College of Arts and Sciences *Faculty Achievement Award* in Teaching.

Dr. Ann Miles Continues Research in Ecuador

Professor Ann Miles has been on sabbatical Spring 2016 and she spent three months in highland Ecuador following up on her earlier research on the chronic illness lupus as well as doing preliminary work on a new project documenting the changes to the city of Cuenca where she has been conducting ethnographic research for 27 years. Cuenca, once considered relatively isolated, has changed considerably since Ann started working there in 1989. For example, in 1999 the city was declared a UNESCO World Patrimonial site inaugurating a tourist boom and in recent decades there have been waves of working age Ecuadorians immigrating to the U.S., and sending remittances home, as well as significant immigration to Cuenca of American retirees and other North American and European ex-pats. All of these have contributed to altering the physical, social and cultural landscape of the city. Ann is interested in capturing how in this unique period of intense globalization a place does and does not change, how culture is embodied, remembered and imagined over time and how the contexts of telling and writing about culture at different discursive moments reflects and produces meaning.

Ann's project on lupus revisits work she conducted almost a decade ago interviewing women diagnosed with the auto-immune disease. That work documented how women from various walks of life cope with an ambiguous chronic illness and the gendered meaning of illness and suffering in Ecuador. This time around she conducted follow-up interviews to determine how the "socialist revolution" in Ecuador and the renewed state commitment to health care has affected the delivery of services to lupus patients, and how



Ann Miles with her godchildren in Cuenca, Ecuador



Ann reconnecting with old friends in the Valley of Yunguilla, Ecuador

patients have continued to adjust to their chronic illness as they move through the life cycle. While publicly supported health care in Ecuador improved considerably since 2009, declines in oil revenues over the last two years have meant that those gains have been hard to sustain. After a few years of steadily improving conditions, long lines and frustrations over the insecure supply of medications are once again the norm. The recent devastating earthquake in Ecuador will no doubt further strain that country's abilities to fulfill its own objectives to provide quality health care.

2015-2016 Graduate Honors Banquet

Departmental Awards:

Master's Level:

Honorable Mention Research & Creative Scholar Award, MA: **Brooke O'Neil**

Outstanding Research & Creative Scholar Award, M.A.: **Zach Oaster**

Honorable Mention Graduate Teaching Effectiveness Award, MA: **Robert Fritchman**

Outstanding Graduate Teaching Effectiveness Award, MA: **Katherine Brown**

PhD Level:

Honorable Mention Graduate Teaching Effectiveness Award, PhD:
Yevgeniya Leont'yeva

Outstanding Graduate Teaching Effectiveness Award, PhD: **Rebecca Sevin**

Honorable Mention Graduate Research & Creative Scholar, PhD: **Kristin Witzel**

All University Graduate Research & Creative Scholar, PhD : **Melinda McCormick**

***The 2015-2016 Wally Post Award
for Departmental Service:
Ryan Costello and Olivia McLaughlin***



Awards Presented by GSA:

Outstanding Faculty Mentor – **Dr. Whitney DeCamp**

Outstanding Student Instructor, Ph.D. – **Matt Reid**

Outstanding Student Researcher, Ph.D. – **Jennifer Marson**

Outstanding Student Mentor, Ph.D. – **Codie Stone**

Outstanding Future Academic, Ph.D. – **Codie Stone**

Outstanding Student Researcher, M.A. – **Olivia McLaughlin**

Outstanding Student Mentor, M.A. – **Brooke O'Neil**

Outstanding Teaching Assistant M.A. or Ph.D. – **Olivia McLaughlin**

Outstanding Future Academic, M.A. – **Olivia McLaughlin**

Recognition for Teaching:

- ❖ *Alexander Fether*
- ❖ *Traci Joseph*
- ❖ *Brian Lunn*
- ❖ *Daniel Patten*
- ❖ *Simon Purdy*
- ❖ *Matt Reid*
- ❖ *Brian Rossana*
- ❖ *Robert Roznowski*
- ❖ *Rachel Schroeder*
- ❖ *Rebecca Sevin*
- ❖ *Codie Stone*
- ❖ *Jessica Sullivan*



Recognition for Presenting or Publishing in 2015-2016

- *Anthony Frontiera*
- *Kieondra Grace*
- *Cleran Hollancid*
- *Jennifer Marson*
- *Melinda McCormick*
- *Daniel Patten*
- *Simon Purdy*
- *Matt Reid*
- *Rachel Schroeder*
- *Rebecca Sevin*
- *Christine Strayer*
- *Jessica Sullivan*



2015-2016 Doctoral Graduate



Dr. Cleran Hollancid (center) would like to say "I am very thankful for the very faithful and valuable role all my committee members played on this crucial journey (i.e., Professors Timothy Ready (left), Douglas Davidson, Lewis Walker (right) and Brian Wilson). Thank the Lord for that.

All University PhD Graduate Research Scholar for 2015-2016!



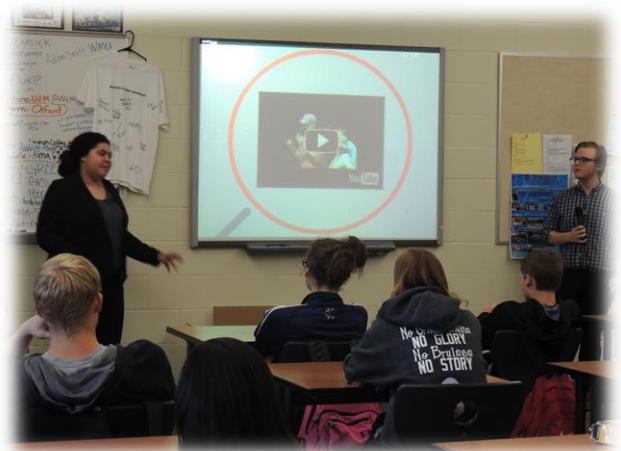
Melinda McCormick

Alpha Kappa Delta

The International Sociology Honor Society



Two new AKD members
were inducted March 22, 2016.
Sarah Mead (left) Cody Akers (right)



Our AKD co-presidents, Amber Emmons and Cody Akers, visited Otsego High School. They made a presentation, "What is Sociology?" to two classes at the school and did an excellent job. We'd like to thank a doctoral student, Christine Strayer, who helped make the connection with the school.

2015-2016 Undergraduate Student Awards Ceremony

A reception was held for the Department of Sociology's Undergraduate Award Winners. It was held Wednesday April 13, 2016 in the Department of Sociology in Sangren Hall.



Dr. Hartmann, Chair, and Sarah Wirth, Departmental Presidential Scholar.



Dr. David Hartmann (left) and Criminal Justice Scholar Alec Kraus (right)



Dr. Hartmann, Chair, and Amber Emmons, Leonard R. Kercher Scholarship winner.



Dr. Hartmann, Chair, and Aaron Begley, Sociology Scholar.

Not pictured is Andrea Miller, the Stanley S. and Helenan S. Robin Scholarship winner.



Alumni News

Please keep in touch with us and let us know what you are doing! We love to hear about how successful you have been and what WMU has meant to you!

Hí! I am a sociology major alumni. I graduated western in 2013! I've been working with children and families for the past few years. I've become a certified applied behavior analysis technician working with children with autism. I am also currently enrolled at GVSU in their master's program for social work.

Kayla Paavola (formally Green)

Department of Sociology

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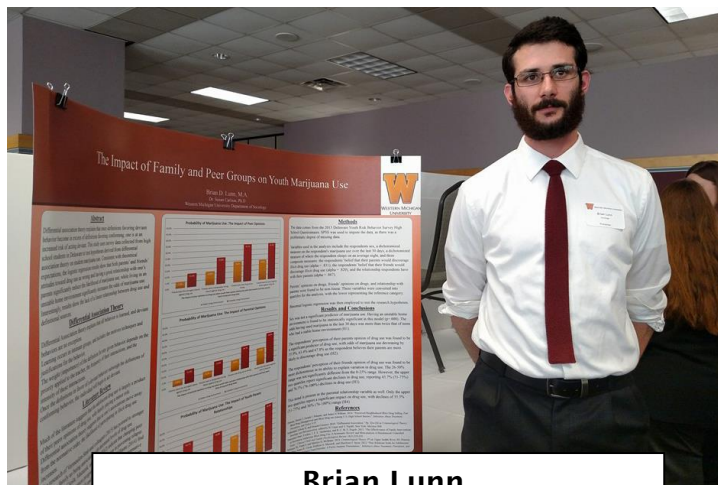
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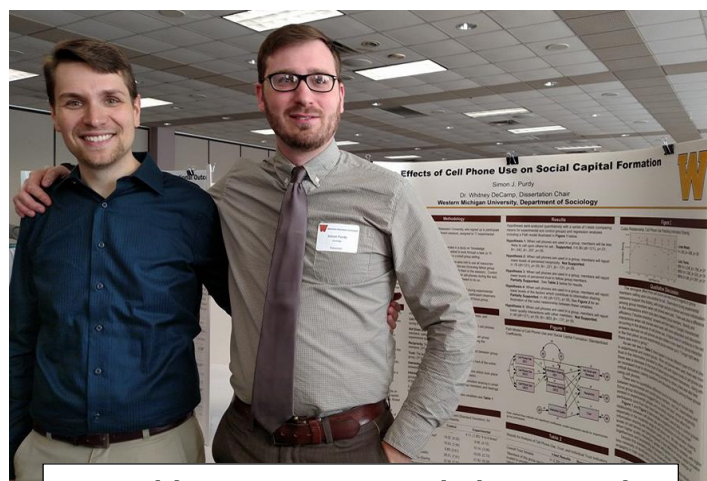
Graduate College Research & Creative Activities Poster and Performance Day



Brian Lunn



Zach Oaster



Dr. Whitney DeCamp and Simon Purdy