A modest proposal…for curriculum

by Dr. David Hartmann, Chair

“…and you Senator, are no Jack Kennedy.” Quayle had famously claimed that he had as much experience as he ran for vice-president as Jack Kennedy had when he ran for president. Bensten’s dismissal was effective (though as we remember, not ultimately telling) but what is perhaps underappreciated is that it was a methods critique. Bensten was questioning the commensurability of the measurement scale - deflating the false equivalency of toting up years of experience as a valid measure of a candidate. Most simply, his jibe implied, particular years of experience for Kennedy do not equate - in important ways - to particular years of experience for Quayle.

Less simply, this is the measurement problem in the social sciences. When one realizes that our selection of facts, in Poincare’s phrase and James’ logic, is guided not by a precise mappings of ideas and the world but by “an aesthetic” process of transient attention, one must worry. When what we study is simultaneously created by our efforts, one must worry. When the complexities of the interpretation of acting agents by acting agents in service to the latter’s lightly cohering conceptual systems (to which they owe only limited loyalty) - are in play, one must worry. When, in sum, we have no solid position outside the fray from which to observe the fray, we would need a damned better scale than we currently have to fairly measure the weight of man and men and their worlds of endeavor. And don’t even get me started on gender…

And should we ever get agreement on the weight, most likely by act of God or Parliament, only then could the real work of scales (and science) - which is the equivalence and value of other objects on the same scales - begin. So the oldest question of social science continually reasserts itself – What are we and what is our social world such that we may measure it?

The logic is not unidirectional – we sometimes conceptualize society or some part of it and then set out to measure it. But we also, and apparently at random intervals, sometimes measure whatever comes in range of our bright new shiny instruments and fit worlds into the “facts” so obtained. The lesson is obvious and well known (if also well and often forgotten). Theory and method or conceptualization and observation are not really separable and probably should not be studied very long as if they were.

Lord Kelvin once said, “but when you cannot measure it, when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is of a meagre and unsatisfactory kind; it may be the beginning of knowledge, but you have scarcely in your thoughts advanced to the state of Science, whatever the matter may be.” The poet Auden once said, “Thou shalt not sit with statisticians nor commit a social science.” They were both right.

Worrying about what we can and should understand, while recognizing that some form of measurement is a part of that understanding, is what we are asked to do. The fact – in my aesthetic, my selection of facts – is that we do this pretty well a lot of the time. As always, this newsletter will highlight some of these attempts and some of those successes.
Dr. Barry Goetz

Dr. Barry Goetz has authored a new book that is coming out February 2017. *On the frontlines of the welfare state: how the fire service & police shape social problems* by Routledge Press. The book examines public safety programs and practices and their impact on community inequities and marginalized populations. It has a special focus on arson fraud and community policing initiatives.

Dr. Chien-Juh Gu

Dr. Gu finished her second book, *The Resilient Self*, with Rutgers University Press. In this book, Gu integrates Mead’s theory of self and Giddens’ concept of reflexive self to build her theoretical framework for analyzing women’s narratives of their lived experiences. Using a life-history approach in interviews and conducting ethnographic observations over 7 years, Gu examines how immigration interplays with gender to shape the work-family contexts in highly skilled women’s lives over time, and how the changes brought by immigration influence their understandings of themselves and their social surroundings in various relational contexts and social spheres.

Other Faculty Publications:


Faculty Publications (cont.)

Kramer, Ron & Rob White (University of Tasmania) co-edited a Special issue of The Journal of Critical Criminology (Volume 23, Issue 4, November 2015), titled “Climate change from a criminological perspective.”


Smith, Jesse M. (2016). Jesse was quoted in, The Atlantic, in an article by Isaac Anderson on a new secular group called the OASIS.

Smith, Jesse M. (Forthcoming). Can the secular be the object of belief and belonging? The Sunday Assembly. Qualitative Sociology.


What is New in the Department of Sociology?

Welcome to Ashlyn Kuersten

Dr. Ashlyn Kuersten is a faculty member in the Department of Sociology and an associate director of the Lewis Walker Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnic Relations. She is the Principal Investigator in a Department of Justice grant entitled “Postconviction Testing of DNA Evidence to Exonerate the Innocent”. She is currently the Director of the Wrongful Conviction Program at WMU.

Dr. Kuersten was made a Faculty Fellow in the Lee Honor’s College at WMU, and won the College of Arts and Sciences Faculty Achievement Award in Teaching, and the Outstanding Teacher of Political Science from the American Political Science Association. Her research focuses on the influence of race and gender in U.S. constitutional law. Recent publications include a book on gender and constitutional rights, and various articles on federal judicial behavior and presidential appointment strategy particularly with regard to criminal justice policy. She is the recipient of grants from the National Science Foundation that funded her research on the U.S. Courts of Appeals and recently from the Department of Justice.

She was a faculty member with a joint appointment in the Departments of Political Science and Gender and Women’s Studies before moving to the Department of Sociology in 2016.

The Wrongful Conviction Program

The Western Michigan University Wrongful Conviction Program is the public education section of The Western Michigan University-Cooley Law School Innocence Project, a part of the Innocence Network which has been credited with the release of over 329 wrongfully accused prisoners mainly through the use of DNA testing.

EXONERATIONS

In 2001, Michigan enacted a DNA statute (MLC 770.16) which provides a post-conviction remedy for wrongfully convicted people who are innocent of the charged offense and whose innocence can be established by DNA testing of the biological evidence collected at the time of the offense. In its short life, the WMU-CIP has exonerated three individuals: Kenneth Wyniemko, Nathaniel Hatchett and Donya Davis.

The Founding Members of the Wrongful Conviction Program: Front row: Olivia McLaughlin, PhD student, Kai Wright, Sr. Back Row: Laura Schafer, Sr., Mimi Abdul, Grad Student, Dr. Kuersten, Dvontae McGowan, Sr., Ashley Chlebek, Sr., Ryan Costello, MA student.
By Dr. Zoann Snyder

Life in Prague – June 2016

In the doldrums of winter 2016, I absent-mindedly read my email and saw the invitation from the Haenicke Institute in Global Education to apply for an International Faculty Development Seminar hosted by the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE). A quick perusal of the list yielded two possible seminars relevant to Sociology. One program was already filled so I opted for the seminar in Prague, “The Everyday Social, Psychological, and Economic Effects of Communism in Central Europe.” I knew very little about the history of Prague or the Czech Republic and only slightly more than college textbook level communism and socialism.

CIEE faculty and staff in Prague were quickly in communication with the seminar participants and provided an excellent overview of the coursework, activities, and everyday travel tips. The seminar was capped at eight participants and we quickly came to know one another and navigate the city together.

Exploring the city everyday was a necessity as we were all housed in a suburban hotel some distance from the CIEE Study Center located in the Vyšehrad, a historical fort dating back to the 10th century. Traveling to the Vyšehrad in a timely manner during the morning commute required using the subway system. The green line was conveniently located by our hotel. It is the deepest of the subway lines, accessed by very steep and fast moving escalators. I was always a bit disconcerted by the steel doors that were suspended above the foot of the escalators as the tunnels were built and reinforced as bomb shelters. I usually opted for the more leisurely tram ride along the river for the evening commute.

While at the Study Center, we had a series of mini lectures taught by a variety of faculty at Charles University covering everything from film and literature to the student movements during the 1960s. We had a number of city tours to explore the Old Town, the Jewish Quarter, Prague Castle, Wenceslas Square, and the Communist Museum. The architecture of the city is rich and varied, reflecting the varied eras of political, social, and religious leadership dating back over 10 centuries. There are a multitude of beautiful and ornate cathedrals for a country with a relatively low level of regular religious participation - about only about 1/3 of the population report regular church attendance.
Given the rich and varied history of Prague and the Czech Republic, I found most interesting the bits and pieces of information I received regarding Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the first president of Czechoslovakia. His areas of academic expertise were sociology and philosophy, and he was noted as being somewhat of a feminist, credited in large part to his American wife, Charlotte Garrigue. His leadership was characterized by a concern for democracy, ethics, and humanist issues.

The highlight of my CIEE experience was the country-side hike along and above the Vltava River. While this may seem like an ordinary nature walk, it was in fact a sociologically rich experience. The country homes of Prague residents were the only true free space where people could escape the rigors of communist surveillance and control. People could get away from the mind-numbing bureaucracy and deprivations of daily life to their own little camps in the mountains. The dachas – second home or vacation home – range from very humble little shelters to larger cottages. People often established their vacation home by taking over an abandoned building or by squatting on a section of land. Old school houses, sheds, and barns were among the renovated living spaces.

The social order surrounding vacation homes was in part built on a fantasy of the American west. A cowboy culture/dude ranch theme can be seen in the exterior décor – lots of cattle skulls – and in the informal social structure where community leaders were referred to as sheriffs. Some of the homes have witnessed modern renovation while others still have outdoor toilets and very simple architecture. One our hike we came across two men attempting to carry a very old and heavy cast iron stove down the trail. We didn’t ask any questions and they didn’t offer any explanation. Our tour guide said dacha life was SIY – “Steal it yourself.”

In sum, the CIEE seminar and the travel to Prague was an amazing and educational experience. Shortly after my return to Western, I was approached by the Director of Study Abroad to develop a study abroad component to one of my existing courses. I am currently in the planning and development stage of offering a section of Advanced Criminology that will include a study abroad component in the Netherlands. I strongly encourage everyone to consider IFDS-CIEE as a means of gaining and strengthening global inquiry for research and teaching.

**Faculty Grants:**

**Dr. Elena Gapova** received Support for Faculty Scholars Award (SFSA) from Western Michigan University for her project “National Activist Communities in Post-socialist Belarus in Cyberspace and Beyond”.

**Dr. Chien-Juh Gu** received a grant from the Asian Americans Advancing Justice-Chicago to study Burmese refugees who are on welfare. This study is one of the Organization’s featured projects by its Midwest Asian American Research Collaboratory, a research network funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation.
A word from our Director of Graduate Programs

Another academic year is in full swing. It is a time of greeting new students and wishing our graduates a fond farewell.

First, graduates since the last newsletter through July 1 2016:

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<th>M.A. Graduates</th>
<th>Ph.D. Graduates</th>
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<td>Olivia McLaughlin – Chair, Jesse Smith</td>
<td>Cleran Hollancid – Chair, Tim Ready</td>
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<td>Brooke O’Neil – Chair, Whitney DeCamp</td>
<td>Jenn Marson – Chair, Angie Moe</td>
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<td>Melinda McCormick – Chair, Angie Moe</td>
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<td>Simon Purdy – Chair, Whitney DeCamp</td>
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<td>Amanda Smith – Chair, Susan Carlson</td>
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We are also proud to announce that the following graduates have accepted tenure-track positions at the following schools:

- **Jenn Marson** – Fayetteville State University, NC
- **Melinda McCormick** – Marian University, WI
- **Amanda Smith** – University of Michigan-Flint, MI

We are pleased to welcome 9 students to the Fall 2016 cohort:

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<th>M.A. Students</th>
<th>Ph.D. Students</th>
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<tr>
<td>Blake Darling</td>
<td>Rob Fritchman</td>
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<td>Sam Imbody</td>
<td>Olivia McLaughlin</td>
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<td>Mike Mendenhall</td>
<td>Ronnie Miller</td>
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<td>Zach Oaster</td>
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<td>Diane Roushanger</td>
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<td>Casey Schotter</td>
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Continuing and new students are engaged in a variety of research projects to develop conference presentations, publications, and theses and dissertations. The graduate students are also involved in the classroom as teaching assistants or instructing their own classes. The Graduate Student Association (GSA) is active this year with graduate students serving on department committees, organizing colloquiums and workshops, and serving as mentors to the new students. It is good to see the energy and creativity among the graduate students, and I look forward to seeing and celebrating their accomplishments this year. Stay tuned!
**Elena Gapova** gave a keynote address “Suffering and the Soviet Man’s Search for Meaning: the Moral Revolutions of Svetlana Alexievich” at the U of Alberta (Edmonton, Canada).

**Ron Kramer** delivered the 2016 *Ladhoff Lecture* at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona on February 18, titled “Climate Crimes: Exxon and Thirty Years of Corporate Climate Deception.”

**Ron Kramer** participated in a variety of ways at the Annual Meeting of *The American Society of Criminology*, November 19-20, 2015 in Washington, D.C.

- Chaired a session titled “United States Government Crimes in the 21st Century”
- Presented “Empire, Exceptionalism, and U.S. State Crimes Since World War II”
- Participated in the Annual Workshop on “State Crime”
- Served as a Discussant on the Roundtable, “Exploring State-Corporate Crime and Criminogenic Industry Structures”
- Served as a Critic on the Author Meets Critics: *The Routledge International Handbook of the Crimes of the Powerful* session


**Ron Kramer** also presented “Conceptualizing Climate Change as Crime” at the *International Conference on State Crime* at the Free University of Berlin, February 11, 2015 Berlin, Germany.

**Angie Moe** attended the International Sociological Association meeting in Vienna, Austria July 10-14, and presented the following co-authored piece with Dr. Catherine Kothari, "Constrained Choice, Perinatal Health, and Intimate Partner Violence."


Rebecca Sevin (PhD student) attended the Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research (IQMR) at Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY on behalf of the department in June 2016. IQMR is a two-week intensive series of courses for social science graduate students that focus on qualitative and mixed methods. Participants pick daily sessions to attend on specific methods or topics, and there are also daily paper sessions where two to four students receive feedback on their research proposals from other students.

IQMR is open to all social scientists and much of the reading material draws heavily from sociologists, but it is predominately political scientists who attend. As a result, some of the methods they discuss are not as common in sociology, such as process tracing. It was overall a good opportunity to see how social sciences differ. Similarly, the paper sessions are arranged by topic, and topics that could also be done within sociology gave her new perspectives on how sociological approaches differ from the political science ones.

See Rebecca and her classmates in the photo below.
Last spring, Dr. Chien-Juh Gu, faculty advisor for AKD led a group of Alpha Kappa Delta honor students to prepare a presentation, “What is Sociology?” These AKD students visited a local high school in May and made two presentations. Through the presentations, we showcased our best students while recruiting potential sociology majors.