

SociONews

A Biannual Newsletter from the Sociology and Anthropology Department at the College of New Jersey



Volume 8 Issue 1

Fall 2006

Connecting with Other Cultures

Prague Paradoxes: Some Observations While Studying Abroad Sara Tomczuk

Milus made a face when she described her first hug from an American. She is my study abroad advisor during my fall semester in Prague, and I had only known her for less than a day. She said that the Czechs do not hug casually. Still, I find this a very odd formality when everyday I view at least two couples passionately kissing at tram stops. Coming to the Czech Republic, I was prepared for cultural differences, and after studying the history of the city, I felt moderately prepared for the different attitudes and actions of Prague-dwellers.

Still, nothing could quite prepare me for the plethora of paradoxes that would pervade my stay in Prague. First of all, the city emanates a tension between the old and the new. Romanesque and Gothic buildings were given new facades in the 18th century. The buildings seem unsure whether to conceal their older attributes or to bear them proudly. All the while, modern sculpture is oddly at ease surrounded by all this history. As an American, whose history only stretches back 300 years or so, the peculiar compromises between four or five or six centuries is surreal.

On the whole, the atmosphere while walking around Prague is quite cold, despite the publicly affectionate couples. Few speak, and contrary to if I caught someone looking at me on a New York subway, on a Prague metro, he or

she would continue to stare without looking away shyly or at least smiling. Still, if an elderly man or woman gets on the tram, two or three younger people instantly jump off to offer their seats. Similarly, when a woman is having trouble getting her baby carriage onto the tram, she is never at a loss for someone to help maneuver one bulky conveyance onto another.

Two odd relationships can be easily connected to the recent history of the Czech Republic being in the Soviet Union. First of all, though the churches are all empty on Sunday, almost all public places are closed. Part of the legacy of communism is that the discouragement of religion leaves much of the population atheist, at least this rings true for Bohemia.

Perhaps the most obvious and most puzzling of all these paradoxes is that of customer service. Nowhere else have I discovered such terrible service in restaurants, shops, and department stores. (continued ...)

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Even though many restaurant bills now have a neat little note by the total informing the customer that "Service is not included," few server seems to put any effort into attending the table. Sales associates seem more annoyed that someone is shopping in their store, than helpful or even pushy.

Surely, not all of these paradoxes can be taken at face value, and not all of them can be contributed to communism. While the lack of churchgoing can be explained, oddly, it does not seem important to make extra money on the weekends either. While the tourist industry is a crucial part of the economy in Prague especially, customer service is not at the forefront and cannot be compared to anywhere else I have traveled in Europe, let alone to anywhere in the States.

These observations are concluded simply from my short stay in Prague and traveling a bit around Central and Western Europe. Perhaps my conclusions will be different once I've returned home to the States, and I am looking back from afar. I find experiences with these paradoxes both confusing and oddly refreshing from the American paradoxes that I am no doubt partially blind to in my own life. For me personally, time here has been punctuated by the paradox that the world is both smaller and larger than it used to be to me.



**Professor Exchange: Dr. Gottowik from
Germany to America**
Jen Slavin

Over one hundred students at The College of New Jersey study abroad each year. This semester, many sociology students are lucky enough to have the opportunity to experience the teaching of a professor from

another country a without even leaving the campus. For over thirty years, The College of New Jersey has had an exchange program with Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität in Frankfurt Germany. Dr. Volker Gottowik, a professor from this school abroad, was excited to be able to gain and share knowledge and experiences with the students and faculty at The College of New Jersey. Dr. Gottowik, a cultural anthropologist, contributed his vast knowledge of ethnography, specifically on Indonesia, to the college. For more than sixteen months, he did fieldwork in Indonesia, looking at both religion and inter-ethnic relations between people in Bali, an island in Indonesia. This semester he is teaching courses on urban ethnography, the history of anthropology, and ethnographic reports on Germany. Much to his satisfaction, Dr. Gottowik, is providing his students with knowledge and cultural understanding that they could not have obtained without his first hand experience. Especially in the German ethnography course, Dr. Gottowik is able to provide personal information on German culture rather than have the students learn about Germany through an American perspective.

From his time here at The College of New Jersey, Dr. Gottowik was able to learn about the American educational system and compare it to education in Germany. In contrast to typical teaching in American society, schools in Germany focus on self-responsibility and initiative. Dr. Gottowik was shocked to discover that he needed to assign homework and assess the students' knowledge through exams. He also noticed that American students are more dependent on the teacher in order to learn. Whereas in Germany, students collaborate with the professor on research projects, at The College of New Jersey professors mostly give lectures. Also, Dr. Gottowik was impressed by the strong sense of community on campus; however he believes students may benefit from being more involved with the community surrounding the college.

I am fortunate enough to learn from this foreign professor by taking Dr. Gottowik's Urban

Ethnography course this semester. While he had some adjusting to do, Dr. Gottowik was able to benefit from his experience here at the college and strongly encourages students to study in Germany for a semester to truly feel the environment and culture abroad.

New Faces of the Sociology Department

New Faculty Spotlight: Dr. Sarah Spencer Matthew Keating

I recently had the opportunity to speak with one of the newest TCNJ professors in the sociology department, Dr. Sarah Spencer, who taught the fall sections of SOC 302: Quantitative Research Methods. Dr. Spencer received her undergraduate degree from Harvard University in the interdisciplinary field of social studies. This degree required intensive study of sociological theory, as well as courses in each of the social science branches. She graduated from The University of Chicago in 2003 with a doctorate in sociology, focusing on research in the area of economic sociology. To complete her doctoral studies, Dr. Spencer lived in Western Siberia for one year, doing her dissertation on urban residence in Novosibirsk. She studied how the people were adjusting to the introduction of a labor market, and how money suddenly became important and residents had to acquire it. One of her current projects is taking this dissertation research and turning it into a book, using specific organizational settings. Dr. Spencer is also collaborating on another project with some colleagues in the field of education at the University of Pittsburgh. After spending the last two years doing interviews and observations at elementary schools in New York City, they have just begun the writing and analysis phase. Several articles will come from this research looking at the teachers, how they worked with each other, and their social capital in facing the

challenges of the new curriculum they were required to implement.

Dr. Spencer found it very exciting to get to know the TCNJ campus and to get a feel for what students are like, what students interests are, and what students needs are. She said that it was important for her to bring things to campus that students have not been exposed to, thus enriching their experience. As an urban scholar, she is looking forward to teaching any class on topics such as urban research, social change, or urban environments. When asked if she had one piece of advice for TCNJ sociology students she responded, "My advice would be to take the discipline of sociology seriously, whether that's something you pursue as a career or something that launches you into other careers. But learning a discipline is very serious, ... learning to understand the methods that sociologists do but also the way that sociologists think, and to not just see it as a series of classes to get through but as a way of thinking about the world because that you take with you wherever you go."



Back and Relaxed Danielle Dowgin

Medical sociology is not a term I was very familiar with before writing this article. In talking to Dr. Regina Kenen, a sociology professor here at The College of New Jersey, I became inspired to learn more about the topic. Medical sociology is a sub-field of sociology, which analyzes issues such as the social aspects of physical and mental illness, the relationships between patients and physicians,

the organization and configuration of health systems, acting upon real or perceived illness, and the socio-economic foundation of the health care system. It also investigates the impact of the psychological conditions resulting from the environment on our health. The main focus of my conversation with Dr. Kenen however was her involvement and attitude toward teaching at TCNJ. Although she has taught here for many years, she recently retired in June 2005. Her retirement was short lived however; because she is back part-time teaching the Senior Seminar to students planning on graduating with a degree in Sociology. Through her career at the college, Dr. Kenen has not only taught classes, but also served on several boards and designed five classes for the new transformed curriculum as well. She has also completed a multitude of research and published several articles dealing with different aspects of sociology.

It is no surprise that all of her accomplishments have taken time and sheer dedication to the field of sociology. Dr. Kenen feels medical sociology is very important because it affects everyone on one way or another, but said she would have also gone into environmental sociology because that interests her as well. She also said she has always enjoyed teaching and the benefits that come along with teaching, however, now that she is back as a part-time professor there are some distinct differences. To begin, she now has more time to focus on the students she is teaching, as well as the work she is assigning.

"There are no more competing allegiances," she said, such as committee meetings, staff meeting, etc. Instead of worrying about multiple classes, or who will be hired for which position, she can focus her attention solely on her single class of students. She also feels she can enjoy teaching more now because there is less stress and not as much pressure put on her.

Not only does Dr. Kenen have more time to focus on the needs of students, she also has much more free time outside of the college to spend with her family and on the various

hobbies she enjoys. "I have four grandchildren, two step-grandchildren and one half-step grandchild through marriage," she said, and the free time she now has away from the college is partially devoted to spending time with them. She also has further free time to travel. Although she has been to several places such as New Zealand, Australia, and Kenya, she has a lot of friends in England through her various trips and research conducted there, rendering it one of her favorite places to travel. She also has additional free time to devote to her play-reading group, and swimming. Dr. Kenen says she also enjoys teaching more as a part-time professor because she is more relaxed, but perhaps that is because she now has more time to do tai chi as well. In general, besides having free time and feeling more relaxed, Dr. Kenen acknowledges that there are not many differences to being back as a professor. Although she is only back temporarily, The College of New Jersey is exceedingly fortunate to have a professor of such caliber in the Sociology department.

Faculty Involved in Sociological Research Projects

Dr. Clydesdale Puts his Expertise to Work for the Lilly Endowment Frank Janks

I recently sat with Dr. Tim Clydesdale in his office on the third floor of the Social Sciences building. We discussed the grant that he received from the Lilly Endowment for an ongoing project. The project is being undertaken for the purposes of evaluating the effectiveness and subsequent outcomes of a nationwide religious program funded on various campuses by the Lilly Endowment. The Lilly Endowment put nearly 220 million dollars towards 88 college campuses which were chosen through an application process. Seton Hall is the only

school located in New Jersey that has the program and the schools included are of various religious affiliations. The program is called PTEV and it stands for Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation. Although the intensity and design of the program changes from school to school, in a broad sense the program asks students to reflect on the following three questions: What am I passionate about? Do I do it well? Does anyone need me to do it?

This is where Dr. Clydesdale comes into the picture. As a graduate of Princeton and a sociology professor whose area of expertise is religion, he took advantage of an opportunity. At a dinner including guests involved in the field of sociology of religion, Dr. Clydesdale posed a question to representatives of the Lilly Endowment. He wondered if they had evidence that the PTEV was beneficial to students, especially considering the amount of money that The Lilly Endowment was putting into the program. In the fall of last year the Program Officer from the Lilly Endowment decided it was time to follow up on this question and contacted Dr. Clydesdale to see what he could do to help assess the program. Dr. Clydesdale is currently doing research to evaluate the effects of the program on the students at the participating colleges.

This is all in connection with a book that Dr. Clydesdale is writing. The focus of the book is how youth go about deciding on a vocation and to what extent, if any, religion affects the decision. I was enrolled in a tutorial with Dr. Clydesdale last spring and we carried out some interviews, which partially focused on the extent to which religion motivates college students. He explained the task he was undertaking for the Lilly Endowment and that our interviews were useful for getting ideas of how to get at the information he was interested in. During course of the class he was busy putting together a planning proposal that was submitted in May. He currently has an alum named Keith Brown, a former sociology student helping with the evaluation and will have more students involved in the project as it continues. I am privileged to

have worked with Dr. Clydesdale on the initial stages of this project. I will be working with him further on his research in the spring of this year and am anxious to get involved and see what has developed.

Dr. Li's Spends Sabbatical Researching and Writing in Asia Kelly Dowd

Dr. Rebecca Li, a Sociology professor and former head of the Sociology and Anthropology department at the college, is currently on sabbatical while she concludes her book on globalization and social change in China. She spent six weeks abroad this past summer during the months of June and July, and traveled throughout China, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan. She spent much of her time abroad writing the first half of her book, which she described as a long and rigorous process.

During her time abroad, Dr. Li also developed a new area of interest, and utilized her time there to begin early exploratory research on this new topic. Due to her expertise in social change and globalization, she became interested in how these topics have affected China's middle-class population. To gain insight, she talked with professional and educated middle-class citizens on various aspects of globalization, such as outsourcing, the loss of jobs, and pressures to cut costs in their businesses.

Dr. Li is currently home in New Jersey while she continues to write the second half of her book, but plans on returning to Shanghai and Beijing in January of 2007 for another six week period. While there, she plans on continuing the writing of her book and her research on the middle-class and how globalization has affected their lives.

Dr. Li is also in the process of developing a new first year seminar by utilizing the research she has gathered while abroad and also from a research seminar she taught at the college

during the spring of 2006. The seminar will examine globalization and social change in China, and will teach students how to conduct basic methods of qualitative research. She says the seminar will be extremely beneficial to first year students because it will teach fundamental research tools that will be useful throughout their college careers.

Dr. Li will return as a full-time professor at the college's Sociology and Anthropology department for the 2007-2008 school year. Alpha Kappa Delta would like to wish her the best of luck in the completion of her book and during her remaining time abroad.



Student Insights through a Sociological Lens

Transgender Americans:
Understanding the
Misunderstood
Alexandra Tarsitano

There is a new kind of employment discrimination that is receiving particular attention in New Jersey: transgender discrimination. Broadly speaking, transgendered people are individuals whose gender expression and/or gender identity differs from that of the physical sex into which they were born. As an intern at the New Jersey Division on Civil Rights, I recently had the opportunity to attend a training session for investigators and management with the Division. One of the speakers at this training session was Babs Casbar, President of Gender Rights Advocacy Association of New Jersey.

Babs spoke briefly about her experiences as a transgendered individual in the workforce and discussed some of the issues regarding the protection of transgendered Americans under the Law Against Discrimination. The LAD is a law that protects individuals from discrimination in the realm of housing and employment based on marital status, sexual orientation, race, color, age, sex, creed, national origin, ancestry, domestic partnership status, disability, HIV/AIDS, and liability for armed services.

Not included in the LAD is gender identity, which would protect transgendered individuals. At present, employers have the freedom not to hire an individual based on transgender status. The story of Diane Schroer, a male-to-female transgendered individual, is an example of the consequences of not having anti-discrimination legislation to protect transgendered individuals. Diane had been an Army Special Forces Officer for 25 years, specializing in counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency. She spent her career working to keep our homeland safe, and upon her retirement was offered a government job as a counter-terrorism expert. Although she was born a man, and had spent her life living and working as a man during her career as a Special Forces Officer, Diane identified more with the female gender. She decided it was time to make the transformation. Upon informing her employers that she would be starting her new job as a woman, the job offer was withdrawn.

Most people do not realize that individuals such as Diane Schroer, who could be assets to our workforce and economy, are not protected from discrimination. It is hard to believe that in this day and age there are still classes of people who are not protected by law. The Gender Rights Advocacy Association of New Jersey and other such organizations are working hard to gain support for the passage of a bill that would amend the LAD to include gender identity as a protected class. According to their website, a recent Zogby-Garden State Equality poll showed that 70% of NJ voters

avored such legislation. Clearly there is hope for the passage of such a bill in the near future.

Sociology in the Classroom

Christine Luettchau

As an Early Childhood or Elementary Education major at The College of New Jersey, a student has the option of several second majors. These second majors range from “teachable majors” including such majors as English and Mathematics to interdisciplinary majors. The interdisciplinary option includes the field of Sociology. Each second major enhances the ability of a teacher in a specific way; however, the Sociology major offers insights unlike any other. As a Sociology major, a teacher gains an understanding of their actual classroom and the interactions which occur in it.

Sociology is the study of group life and in a society. This field is focused upon societies and how they work. In this way, it is directly relatable to a classroom. Each classroom is its very own society. Therefore, through the understanding of societies and how they function, one may be able to fully understand the happenings in any classroom, from a preschool group to a 12th grade classroom. These groupings of students possess similar characteristics to all other societies. They have a form of government in their teacher and develop norms and standards for behavior through their classroom rules. Classrooms provide sanctions for various kinds of behavior, from a time out chair or name on the board for bad behavior to a sticker or praise for exceptional acts. Sociological ideas such as these are obvious within all classrooms and more complex ideas may be utilized in understanding what is going and why within the small society a teacher call her classroom.

In speaking to several Education and Sociology majors, one can see how the ideas concerning the interactions, which play such a dominant part in the study of sociology, can be implemented in a classroom. A teacher interacts with students everyday. It is their job

to interact in a manner which will benefit children and increase their learning capabilities. A teacher must not only focus on their own interactions, but also on the interactions of the students with one another in the classroom. Understanding how and why students interact in the ways they do is essential to being a good teacher and a second major of Sociology provides this important knowledge.

Understanding your environment is important in every field of work. However, in a classroom this capability is essential. In order to provide a beneficial learning experience to the children in a classroom, a teacher must understand the basic components of their classroom, including the interactions which occur in it daily. Thus, Sociology as a second major will prepare any Education major for their future in the classroom.

Students Gain Knowledge through Experience and Research

Kelly Dowd’s Summer
Work with HomeFront
Emily Stark

Last summer Kelly Dowd worked as a summer camp counselor for HomeFront. HomeFront is a nonprofit organization in Trenton with a mission to end homelessness and offers many programs to help the homeless succeed. She learned about the organization through a friend who had participated in the program in years past and recommended it to Kelly.

Kelly’s program was run through the Family Preservation Center, a shelter for single mothers. It was started initially as a free daycare program for parents who were busily enrolled in classes offered by HomeFront such as working toward a GED or college degree. The program soon grew into a summer camp for

ages 5-14 offering children with meals, field trips, and activities such as reading, gym, and art. Kelly worked with a group of 7 and 8 year olds from June until August for more than forty hours a week.

Before Kelly started her work, she had to attend several workshops addressing some of the issues the children face, which helped prepare her for the often emotional work. Kelly found that many of the children were living extremely difficult lives because they were homeless. Most of them lived in hotels along Route 1 or transitional housing in Trenton. Some of the children would start the morning with four bowls of cereal because they had not eaten since the day before. Many of them wore the same clothes day after day. Some of the children were obviously growing up around the influences of gangs. They would talk about it, use the jargon, and even wear gang colors. Kelly noted that despite all this, they were “still just kids” and appreciative of everything they were being provided with through the program.

Kelly feels she learned a great deal from her experience over the summer. Her time with HomeFront taught her about homelessness and overcrowding in the area. She also feels that her idea of homelessness changed after working with them.

Overall, Kelly enjoyed her summer experiences and is considering doing it again next year. While she calls it an “emotional job” for which you “have to be a certain kind of person” Kelly enjoyed working with the children and feels it was a very valuable experience for her. She describes it as a “great experience” and recommends it to anyone who might be interested.



Parenting, Youth Spirituality & the Immigrant Experience of the American Coptic Orthodox Diaspora Mena Gawargi

Under the guidance of Dr. Clydesdale and Dr. Kenen, I have had the very fortunate pleasure of interning at a local Coptic Orthodox community center in order to study how parenting affects youth spirituality within the Coptic community. While the Coptic Orthodox Church was founded in 42 AD, the American Diaspora did not begin until the mid-fifties as the persecution of Christians in Egypt reached an all time high. In the 2000 census, the US Census Bureau estimated the number of Coptic Orthodox Christians living in America to be almost two million strong. However, the past half a century has been a very difficult time for the Coptic American Diaspora with a large portion of Coptic American youth choosing to disassociate from the Church.

With very little existing research on this social phenomenon specifically concerning the Coptic Diaspora and a growing outcry of help from community leaders, it seemed advantageous to begin an exploratory study with the hopes of one day reversing the current trend. After reading through much of the research on the American immigrant experience and similar Orthodox churches that had gone through similar hardships in America, studying how parenting affects spirituality quickly became the most logical place to start.

While it is too early to make any substantive claims concerning the research topic, I would like to share a brief summary of some of the data collected so far through personal interviews, parent focus groups, and participant observation. While many of the research subjects have had different points to make as to why spirituality among Coptic American youth is waning, they all seem to agree on one factor almost unanimously: fear.

Almost all of the Coptic parents interviewed share a common fear that their children will suffer a fate similar to theirs. The

vast majority of Coptic immigrants interviewed came from their homeland usually with some kind of bachelors or graduate degree. The difficulty of learning English made it extremely complicated for these immigrants to validate these degrees in American universities in order to work appropriate jobs. Therefore, most of these immigrants sought blue collar, low paying jobs while studying to become re-accredited. Life is a daily struggle for these immigrants especially since both adults must work labor intensive jobs if they are to provide basic needs for their children. They experience extreme racism in the workplace and are given heavy blows to their self-esteem from daily interaction with several elements of American society. This destruction of confidence is added to when immigrant parents do in fact take these accreditation tests. Many of those interviewed had failed over and over again forcing most to just give up.

After experiencing such daily struggle and misery, it is no surprise that Coptic parents are both afraid and determined that their children do not suffer the same fate as they did. After all, a fair chance at success for their children is the main reason why most families immigrate to the United States in the first place. Therefore, in most of the Coptic families studied, a strong emphasis is placed on studying and achieving a credible graduate degree. Unfortunately, this means that within many of these homes, spirituality takes *second* place to a child's studies.

At the same time, fear of bridging the cultural and age gap between parents and their children is another major contributing factor in the failure to instill a strong sense of spirituality within Coptic youth. It is commonly known that during the teenage years, many young adolescents begin to seek ways of self-expression and rebellion against their parents in an attempt to discover an independent and unique identity. While Coptic American teenagers experience the same drive and emotions, their plight is compounded by the stresses of being an immigrant or part of the first generation of American Copts who have

immigrant parents. Most of the teenagers and young adults interviewed claim to always be conscious of how their parents are negatively treated by society because of their immigrant identity and fear that the same fate runs through their blood.

Coptic American teenagers do all they can to fit into mainstream American culture, many times this means turning their back on the Coptic sub-culture which their parents try to give them including the strict orthodox moral code of the Coptic Church. Many of the parents interviewed are aware of their children's struggle, yet few can rationalize the mechanics of adolescent socialization and therefore feel lost in guiding their children. Their children grow up in a completely different culture, which has different values and morals than these parents experienced in Egypt's highly restrictive Islamic society. Recognizing such social dangers, many of the Coptic parents interviewed are immediately immobilized by fear. While they do not understand much of American culture, they are fully aware that a complete acceptance of American culture would mean disaster for the future of both the Coptic sub-culture and religion which just serves to further push parents into worry, fear, and despair.

It should be clearly stated that no substantive conclusions can yet be drawn, due to the fact that there is still much data to collect and analyze from this ongoing study. Over time the sample size will continue to grow with the hopes of diversifying our understanding of Coptic parenting. Through this study and under the guidance of Dr. Clydesdale and Dr. Kenen, I am very much looking forward to shedding as much light as possible on how parenting affects the spirituality of Coptic American youth. One thing has become very obvious for me during this study. Studying the Coptic American community and its ongoing struggle to survive within mainstream American society is something I would like to do for the rest of my professional career.

SOCIONEWS Fall 2006 Contributors:

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