

2024

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Recommended Citation

Bernet, Hailey Elizabeth and Derné, Steve (2024) "An Interview with Steve Derné, Professor of Sociology of Wonder," *Proceedings of GREAT Day*. Vol. 15, Article 3.

Available at: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/proceedings-of-great-day/vol15/iss1/3>

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An Interview with Steve Derné, Professor of Sociology of Wonder

Hailey Bernet

Did Kate’s paper offer something you hadn’t encountered until now? And what were some of the strengths of her paper?

Steve Derné: So the great thing about Kate’s paper was of course that, well there’s two great things. First of all, the studies of wonder tend to say that people don’t have an intense experience of self, but she did have an intense experience of self during her wonder experience and seeing how she overcame some anxieties. And the second good thing about it is that people also talk about how there’s a dark part of wonder too, that is when you look at life and death or you know, you come into contact with some existential realities. So in her case, she did get at that kind of dark wonder or anxiety but also how she experienced wonder being able to overcome anxieties as much more of a process. So wonder also had a negative emotion and you can see that in her great title “wonder Overcoming Anxiety, Feelings of Self-negative Emotion, and Encounters with the Ugly and wonder Experiences” so that’s what was good.

What were some of the strengths that led you to nominate this paper?

Steve Derné: Well again, it was the complexity. So I often ask students to do research and, you know, we can’t do extensive research with the students so we can only do kind of like intensive research, so there are some things we can learn from close study of particular cases. So, in this case, you know, it’s just that recognition of complexity that things are not-- It’s to recognize that things are not as simple as it seems. She recognized the complexity of the wonder experience I think the main thing, and also that she had good, descriptive stuff on everything that she did.

What should students expect to take away from this class? Assuming you’re teaching it again?

Steve Derné: Well, so the truth is that this is a senior seminar class, and the first thing is you get real experience doing research and real experience doing discovery. They should just learn what the research process is about, but guess what? In reality in this class we got a sense of community that was just great and it was really a one of a kind thing, so I don’t believe we’re really, I don’t know if I’m ever gonna get it again, you know, I can’t. I’m not interested in teaching it again because this class just cannot be topped. I just think, you know, I’m always trying to put ourselves on a voyage of discovery so that we can discover some new things. This class had a super strong community so that turns out that was the big thing so the last day of class the final

exam was, we sat in a circle to say what the most important things we've learned are. It was just like a tremendous wonder experience, there's no way to describe it. It was a community experience. There was a student that came back for their last class, after all those years. She drove from Syracuse twice a week for the class, and she drove back for the GREAT day of the six students who presented, not her because she graduated, and one student did not [present]. So the main thing to get out of it was community it turns out. The big thing is presence.

How might your research fit into the grand scheme of sociological introspection?

Steve Derné: So turns out sociological introspection helps us get at the processes and helps us get complexities because a lot of what we do is we design studies to find out particular things, and so we tend to find out what it is we set to find out, and we often miss out on a lot of complexities and processes and that sort of thing. So the great thing to do is just, first of all, to explore topics of the students so I learn something new. So I'm thinking I'm gonna do some stuff about non-ordinary experiences and stuff on the sociology of wonder. I think introspection is just great to give insight, I said to complexities and processes while the rest of sociology tends to just take all of that out of it. And there's like completely different methodologies to like when we do surveys, we like catching people in like some snapshot of a moment. Wouldn't it be more interesting to try and study decisive moments when people make some changes to how they think? So I'm done basically brainwashing people into existing sociological methods, and the great thing is that the students can do research that make real contributions, so that's what I find to be the most exciting part of it. The whole methodological focus it's just a problem you know? I'm happy to just keep learning this stuff, and once we get outside of the limitations of our methods, we can learn all kinds of things so that's the way I see it.