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How to Pay Attention

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By Nick Seaver

The main challenge in running a seminar on the anthropology of attention is that such a thing doesn't exist.* While anthropologists often think quite deeply about attention, worrying about our own noticing practices or what our interlocutors focus on, we rarely write about the concept head-on. When we do write about attention, we rarely problematize it in the way we might problematize other key terms like "the body" or "kinship" or "health." Instead, we draw on common attentional tropes: if only we could pay *more* attention, or notice more neglected things, then the world might be a better place and we might become more virtuous people.

For the past two years, I've run an advanced undergraduate seminar called "How to Pay Attention," which is oriented around this basic problem: What might it be like to understand attention anthropologically, as a social and cultural phenomenon? I suggest to my students, who are mostly senior anthropology majors, that this means examining how attention is culturally organized and valued. In other words, we need to examine those ideas about attention's virtue and value that most people, anthropologists included, usually take for granted. We learn how to pay attention and what to pay attention to from other people, and we attend within technological and mediated settings designed to shape our attentional practices. No one pays attention alone.

This is all fairly routine anthropological work, but attention seems especially slippery, both because it is stuck deep in the foundations of how we experience the world and because it is the subject of intense contemporary debate—about social media, screen time, ADHD, and so on. As William James famously wrote in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890), "Everyone knows what attention is"—and that's the problem. Students arrive in my class, like everyone else, worried about their ability to pay attention, hoping for strategies that might help them focus or manage information overload. As they often note in their evaluations, "How to Pay Attention" is a somewhat misleading name: rather than learning tricks for getting more out of class or resisting the enticements of their smartphones, they encounter a dizzying array of texts, practices, and artifacts through which they might reimagine what attention is. In general, they don't seem too disappointed by the bait and switch.

The seminar is organized around three main themes: ethnographic methodology (how do anthropologists pay attention?), the sensorium (how do we attend through our various senses?), and attentional key terms (what is distraction? overload? the attention economy?). Throughout, the class is especially concerned with the various metaphors people use to make sense of attention: as a form of care, payment, discipline, filtering, spotlighting, and so on. By weaving all of this together, students are able, in the last week of the course, to have a discussion about, for instance, ADHD diagnosis that draws together the history of distraction as a religious and capitalist sin, the specificities of auditory metaphors for attention, a critique of the cybernetic notion of information overload, and questions of how to represent the mental experiences of others.

Because there is relatively little anthropological writing directly focused on attention, students each week read roughly five article-length pieces that vary widely in disciplinary origin. Many of these are primary sources (or secondary sources that we treat as though they were primary sources). I've been thrilled to have students rise to this challenge, drawing on their anthropology training from prior coursework to produce their own interpretations, rather than simply working through a well-established canon of anthropological wisdom. We are, as one student remarked near the end of the course, trying to create this field—to imagine what an anthropology of attention might be. To this end, I try to bring as much material into class discussion as possible: students maintain journals and, every week, they write up an exercise related to the readings—from going on a sound walk to analyzing clickbait headlines—which we discuss together with the readings. They also collect interesting attentional artifacts that may prove to be useful paper topics: iPhone apps to promote mindful usage, news stories about facial recognition technology, or a collection of "focus" playlists on Spotify. (Some of these examples, from the most recent iteration of the course, are collected [here](#).)

I try to capture the kaleidoscopic quality of the discipline of cultural anthropology for my students, embodying our wide range of objects and approaches in class discussions. In our week on the attention economy, for instance, we worked through a 1990s internet manifesto, classic mid-century work from economic anthropology about economies' socially embeddedness, recent media theory that argues for replacing "economy" with "ecology," and journalistic coverage of the new "Time Well Spent" movement that draws on behaviorist theorizing to agitate against social media's addictive power. In the first half of class, I distributed tokens we had to use to "buy" time to speak (even me!), literalizing the economic metaphor; in the latter half, we discussed the experiment's effects on our classroom dynamics, along with the problems that might attend "ecological" alternatives to the attention "economy."

Having two and a half hours gives us time for in-class activities like watching a selection from the Sensory Ethnography Lab's fishing documentary *Leviathan* during our day on ethnographic "immersion" or trying out "deep listening" with Pauline Oliveros' 22-minute voice and accordion drone piece "Horse Sings from Cloud" on our day dedicated to "sound." In other class meetings, I've brought in guests to run short proprioception exercises using the Alexander Technique, a smelling and tasting workshop, and an exercise preparing ethograms from footage of wild primates. I've also been lucky enough to host about half of the class meetings in our campus art gallery. Our fantastic academic programs coordinator brings thematically relevant work from the collection out into the teaching space, where we can bring it into discussion as desired. Students get to experiment with their own attentional practices, drawing on their personal experiences in addition to the readings.

For me, the seminar has been a key part of my preparation for a new ethnographic project on the technocultural life of attention in the US. As I continue to teach it, I hope to integrate my ongoing ethnographic work more directly with the class. My ongoing suspicion is that "attention" in the contemporary moment is really a generic way to talk about what we value, at the interface of many different regimes of valuation. Most critical work on attention as a cultural phenomenon comes from media studies, and while it is very useful, it tends to have a universalizing Euro-American bias, lacking the concern for variety that I think of as the hallmark of an anthropological approach. This bias is so pronounced that I've wondered whether "attention" itself is a distinctively Euro-American category for capturing concerns about the interrelation of mind, media, and social existence. I'm always on the lookout for attention-related work that may not use the term "attention," as a way to diversify the syllabus and my own theoretical background, so please feel free to share in the comments below!

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Note
* Putting a statement like this on the internet is my way of tempting fate: please email me references or post them in the comments below to prove me wrong! One exciting piece in the field that came out since I last ran this class is [this one](#) by Joanna Cook, drawing on her research on mindfulness in the UK.

[Download syllabus here](#)

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