

Community Study Project

UNST 220: Understanding Communities

In the social sciences, there is a longstanding tradition and rich literature of community-based research. One of the classic forms this research takes is the community (or neighborhood) study. A community study paints a portrait of the inner-workings of community life and is conducted by researchers who fully immerse themselves in the community they are studying. While many social sciences are primarily concerned with understanding broad systems and institutions such as the economy, culture or political structures, the study of smaller social units like the community have yielded important insights into how these large-scale institutions influence and are influenced by our everyday social interactions and lives.

This term, you will complete a community study. You will choose a community that you belong to, become a participant observer of the daily workings and relationships within this community, and write an analytical description of the community life you observed.

During the research phase, you should plan to spend at least *five hours a week* participating in community life and observing specific relationships, structures, behaviors, and patterns that exist within your chosen social group. Once you've gathered enough observational and other forms of primary data, and found secondary sources to support your ideas, you'll begin to write-up your findings into a cohesive analytical narrative. The community study is due at the end of Week Seven. During Week Eight, you'll share your community study with other students and have an opportunity to read what they have written.

Project Outline

Weeks One and Two: Choose your community. Because this project involves intensive immersion into community life, you should focus on a community that you already have access to and are a member of. Community studies have focused on a variety of types of communities—neighborhoods are often studied, but so too are occupational communities, sub-cultural groups, and even virtual communities.

When you think about choosing a community, you should consider the following criteria:

- Is this group a community? Communities are social groups that have something in common, but just sharing a common trait doesn't necessarily make a group a community. For example, fans of salsa music may all like the same genre of music, but aside from sharing a particular taste, they don't necessarily have regular interaction or share a common identity. However, if you were a salsa musician and were active in your city's music scene, or if you spent every Friday dancing at the same club with the same group of salsa dancers then you might be a member of a community.
- Ease of access. Since you will be spending at least five hours a week for the next few weeks with your community, you need to choose a group that you already belong to and that you are willing to make that kind of time commitment to. Your immediate neighborhood or workplace could be ideal subjects of study because of the time that you probably already spend there. You might also consider focusing on a subset of the PSU

community, such as students in your major or cohort, a student group, student athletes, international students or other campus-based communities you might belong to.

- **Size and sensitivity.** You'll want to choose a community that is small enough for you to get a sense of how its members interact with one another and fit together, but you don't want to choose a group that is so small that its members don't have identifiable roles or varying levels of commitment to the group. Studying a community with this type of depth, can sometimes shed light on some uncomfortable truths or patterns. Studying a group such as your family or your roommates might not be the best choice for this assignment. Instead, choose a group that you have a connection to, but also some emotional distance from, so you can learn to see it from an "outsider's" perspective.
- **Gathers often and in one place.** Although some communities span the globe, for this particular project, it is not practical to try and observe the interactions of people who live in far-flung places. You'll need to select a community that gathers often, and when they do, they all hang-out in one general area. A place-based community, like your workplace or even your favorite coffee shop, would work well. Think about the feasibility of conducting observations when you select your community.

Submit the name and a brief description of your community to the Community Study topic Dropbox by the end of Week Two

Week Three: It's time to dive in! Community researchers use a method called **participant observation**. A participant observer is someone who observes social interaction and structure while actively engaging in community life. Participant observers want to blend into the community so that their presence doesn't impact how people behave or relate to one another.

What does observation entail? How do you know what you are looking for? How do you record what you see? Observation is pretty straightforward—you'll hang-out with your community as you normally do, but as you go about your business pay attention to particular patterns, structures or interactions. For each week of observation, you will have specific features of community life that you are assigned to look out for.

While you want to be unobtrusive and not disturb the natural flow of community life, observation is a fairly active process. As you observe, you'll need to open all of your senses to try and take-in the small details of community life. Things such as the way community members dress, their gestures, facial expressions, bits of overheard conversation can all provide insight into the relationships and structure of your community. Not only do you have to watch and listen, but you will also have to write down what you see. If you don't take notes as you observe, you'll fail to capture many of your basic impressions.

You'll record what you see in a **field journal**. Your field journal notes can take any form—handwritten, typed into your phone, or on a computer. Your writing can be informal, and it doesn't have to be grammatically correct, as long as it makes sense to you and records what you saw. You might want to include pictures, artifacts, sketches, diagrams or maps in your field journal. The only rules are that you must organize your notes by heading (For example, this week you'll make a relationship map and be looking at the social networks and demography of your community. For each trait you are observing, you should have a separate, identifiable heading, like "Demography."), and you need to date your observations. By dating your

observations, you'll be able to see patterns over time and/or trace a chronology when you write your paper.

As you observe, you'll also want to keep track of the connections and patterns that you are starting to see. Some researchers find it helpful to write themselves memos when they experience a particularly mind-blowing insight. You could also create a sidebar in your journal where you'll record your analysis and interpretations of what you see, any connections you make to our course materials and/or to other observations.

As you observe, your challenge is to try and view your community as an outsider would. Sociology has been called the process of seeing the "strange in the familiar," in other words, learning to identify and analyze the relationships and group behaviors that we often overlook or take for granted.

In this week's field notes, you will be observing the following aspects of your community:

- **Relationship Map:** As you observe, you'll create a basic relationship map that shows the members of your community and how they are connected to one another. This can be a simple diagram of dots or initials representing each community member and lines showing who interacts with whom. You could use bold, heavy lines to represent close relationships and broken or dotted lines to show weaker ones. Feel free to be as detailed and creative as you like with your map.
- **Social Network:** The relationship map is one way to represent the social network of community members, but you also might consider how your community is networked to other communities, which members play a role in facilitating that connection, who, if anyone, is the hub of your community or plays a specific role holding everyone together, and who is on the fringes of your group. Keep notes on the network(s) within and connected to your community and the roles members play in those networks.
- **Demography:** How would you describe the members of your community? Note some of their characteristics like age, gender, race/ethnicity, whatever seems relevant to your particular group. If you are studying your workplace, you might note people's job titles or responsibilities. If you are studying your neighborhood, maybe you'll notice patterns about who lives where or who uses certain areas of the community at various times, as Jane Jacobs did.
- **Belonging:** How does your community determine who belongs to it? Are there specific attributes, values or commonalities that all members share? What holds you together as a community?
- **Rituals/Activities:** What types of activities do community members engage in on a day-to-day basis? Are these activities divided-up in any particular way? Does your community have specific rituals or customs that you follow?
- **Rules/Behaviors:** This may overlap with rituals/activities and sense of belonging, but what formal and informal rules exist within your community? How do members recognize these rules? When, if ever, is it acceptable to break them?

You may not have in-depth observations for all of these categories, but try to observe at least one thing for each heading. You will turn-in your field notes at the end of Week Three. If you've taken hand-written notes or have sketches or diagrams, you can scan these into your computer

and save them as a doc or pdf. There's no need to "clean-up" your notes before submitting them to the Dropbox.

Submit a copy of your field notes to the Field Note Journal #1 Dropbox at the end of Week Three.

Weeks Four and Five: Continue to be a participant observer of the everyday life of your community. Keep recording any new insights or evidence you come across that fit the categories from your first set of field notes. Starting this week, you will also be observing stratification within your community. Create new headings in your field journal for:

- 1. Organization of your Community:** Is there a formal or informal organizational structure within your community? If it's informal, who makes decisions in your community or gathers people together? Is your community organized in a horizontal (everyone shares equal responsibilities) or hierarchical manner? Does your community have leaders or members who everyone respects and listens to? What evidence do you see of their leadership?
- 2. Sub-groups:** Are there sub-groups or sub-cultures within your community? How do these sub-groups fit into the structure of the larger community? Do sub-group members share any specific traits or characteristics? Do they have separate rules of behavior or rituals apart from the overall community? Are there certain physical spaces where sub-groups gather?
- 3. Deviance:** How does the community deal with members who deviate from the group's rules, norms or values? Are there sub-groups that have conflicting or competing rules, values or rituals? By what process can a community member who has deviated from the group's rules of behavior be welcomed back into the larger group?
- 4. Mobility:** Do community members shift roles or responsibilities? How often does this happen? How does that change occur? Can community members shift positions in your group's formal or informal organization structure? Can members move between various sub-groups? How do members gain or lose status or privileges within your community?

When you turn-in this second set of field notes, you'll also need to submit a thesis statement for your Community Study paper. In order to come-up with a strong thesis statement, you'll have to identify a theme that you want to focus on for the paper. Think about the patterns that you've noticed in your community so far, are there any aspects of your community's structure, organization or stratification that seem particularly unique or interesting? Does your community embody a particular theory or idea about community life that we've read about in our course materials so far (social capital, stratification, etc)? Does your community seem like an anomaly compared to similar groups? Is your community a model for how other social groups could organize or overcome a particular challenge or hurdle? Is there something that shocked or surprised you as you began observing?

Often times, in this type of research, a theme will emerge. Is there a particular topic (deviance, unspoken rules, conflicts over community structure) that you find yourself thinking about or observing more than others? Once you have an area of focus identified, you'll need to do a little more thinking. What fresh perspective can you bring to this topic? What lens do you want to look at this idea from? What are you seeing in your particular community that you think others can learn from? Now that you have a theme and a unique viewpoint from which you are

examining this theme, it should be relatively easy to come-up with a thesis statement for your paper.

Remember that your thesis statement is a work in progress. You will need to spend at least another week collecting additional data and/or conducting some library research to have enough material to begin writing your paper. As you continue to collect data, your thesis may be reworked or refined.

Submit a copy of your second field notes (on stratification) and your thesis to the Field Note Journal #2 Dropbox at the end of Week Five

Week Six:

This week, you will finish collecting data and start drafting your paper. Some writers find it helpful to create a paper outline before they finish collecting their data. This approach allows you to organize your thoughts, plug in the material you already have, and see where there might be gaps or holes. If you don't usually make outlines of your paper, try it early this week. You may find it helpful!

This is a busy week. You'll need to wrap-up any additional observations you want to make and collect data from other primary and secondary sources. While participant observation is a valid and very intensive form of data collection, good research relies on multiple types of data collection. Sometimes, just relying on your own observations can give you skewed sense of what's going on. Checking-in with other community members, testing your conclusions against statistics, and/or reading what other researchers have found when exploring similar situations are all ways in which you can validate your observations. In research, we call this process of coming to similar conclusions via multiple data sources and methods, **triangulation**. Triangulation is important because it lends credence to your conclusions and helps you refine and better understand your own perspective.

At the beginning of the week, continue to collect data but expand your sources beyond first-person observation. There are two main types of data sources—primary and secondary. Primary data is evidence that you collect yourself (like the observations you've been recording, interviews, short surveys, oral histories or reading historical records or artifacts). Secondary data is data collected by other researchers. It can include journal or magazine articles, newspaper stories, Census data, books, radio or television shows, movies, etc. You will need to collect data from at least on other primary source and from some secondary sources.

Towards the end of the week, start drafting your paper. You'll need to have a first draft ready to exchange for peer feedback by early next week (Tuesday).

Community Study Paper

Your Community Study Paper will follow a basic research paper format with an introduction with a clear thesis statement, body and conclusion; however, it will not be a formal, argumentative essay. Many Community Studies read like highly descriptive novels. Think of Jane Jacob's urban ballet, or the stark picture Eliot Liebow painted of the day-to-day lives of homeless women, or Elijah Anderson's stories of young black men's everyday encounters with the police.

In each of these community studies, the author connected their observations to a particular theme or purpose. Jacobs used the story of the everyday happenings on her block to demonstrate the value of mixed-use, dense urban neighborhoods. Liebow related how homeless women survive by staying hiding their homelessness and staying invisible in public spaces, and Anderson revealed how young black men are systematically harassed and subsequently criminalized by police in their communities. You will need to find the thread or theme that ties some of your observations together.

Possible themes include:

- Unique aspects of your community that differ from society at large or most other communities
- Impact of social forces or structures on your community
- Stratification within your community
- Changes you've noticed in your community

You'll have an opportunity to work with your peers to identify a theme and thesis for your community study paper.

Once you have a clear theme or thesis, how will you organize your paper? Your "evidence" is your observations, the other primary data you collected (like from interviews), and any relevant secondary sources you found. In the community studies we've read, authors often tell a brief story to supports their idea or thesis. Anderson used vignettes to illustrate his analysis of how the police criminalize young black men. Jacobs told a longer story to make her point, and Engels used vivid description.

You don't have to include all of your observations or primary data you collected in the body of the paper. Just choose those that are connected to your theme and prioritize the observations and data that provide the strongest evidence, those that really capture community life or those that are controversial or contradictory. The body of your paper should not just be a rewriting of your field notes. It needs to incorporate your voice and analysis. Weave your ideas throughout your observations and let readers know how these observations are connected to one another and to your overall theme. Feel free to include diagrams, photos, maps, sketches or any other materials you think are relevant.

You should also support and frame your paper with the secondary data you collected. For example, if you are writing about your neighborhood, you may want to refer to some of the ideas or terms Jane Jacobs coined like the notion of “eyes on the street.” You can weave this secondary data through your narrative and even use it to help organize your paper by having each discreet paragraph/sub-theme be linked to theoretical concepts or research findings.

You’ll need to start your paper with an introductory paragraph that captures your readers attention and clearly states your thesis. By the end of the first paragraph, the reader should know which community you studied and what your main theme or thesis is. However, the reader will need some more background information or context about your community to be able to fully understand your thesis or theme.

The next logical paragraph would be one that fully introduces your community. Remember, your reader most likely knows nothing about this group. In your next paragraph(s), outline the defining features of your community—Who is in it? What makes them unique? What values/commonalities do you all share? You might want to include a brief history of your community or some demographic data here. You could also supplement this section with some photographs, artifacts and/or your social network map.

The introductory sections will be followed by the body of your paper. This is where you tell your story and flesh out your theme. Your observational, primary and secondary supportive data should be organized in a logical, easy-to-follow fashion. You may need to include additional background information here to explain some of your observations. For example, if you interviewed a community member, you might want to briefly describe why or how they are significant to your community before quoting or paraphrasing them. The body of your paper should be at least 4-6 paragraphs long.

Finally, you’ll end with a conclusion. In your conclusion, restate your thesis and consider what the implications of your research are. What questions are you left with? What should the reader learn from this? What broader lessons are there?

There is no required page length for this paper. I’m looking for a clear argument or theme that has ample evidence (at least 4-5 distinct paragraphs, each elaborating on a sub-theme or building your argument) to support it. I doubt you can make your claim in just two or three pages, but it shouldn’t take twenty or thirty either. I’m estimating that most papers will be between 6-10 pages. I will not deduct points for not falling within a certain page length.

Please follow basic writing conventions. Be sure to cite any ideas, thoughts, or quotes that are not your own. Please use MLA format for citations.

Submit your Community Study to the Dropbox at the end of Week Seven