Urban ethnography: approaches, perspectives and challenges In New approaches to qualitative research: wisdom and uncertainty

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INTRODUCTION

Urban ethnographies take place in the research spaces' of the home, family, school, work, and street life of people who often find themselves in the uncertain spaces of city life. As other chapters within this text have shown, the reality of research spaces impact how a researcher or research team might engage in research design, implementation and reporting of results. In this chapter, we examine possible approaches, perspectives, and challenges related to engaging in research in urban spaces. We rely on interdisciplinary work from that spans sociological, economic, and educational fields. We include the voices of other researchers and rely on our own experiences as researchers who focus on inquiry in urban spaces. Like other authors who contribute to this volume, we acknowledge that our work, our experiences, and perceptions of the work of others are transitory and context bound. We contend that conducting research in modern urban spaces is different than engaging in research projects with other populations and cultures, such as indigenous (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999), rural, and or suburban groups (Lareau, 2003). There are overlaps with these research spaces related to issues of imperialism, colonization, or mispresentations of voice, but the unique dynamic power structures within urban environs are nonetheless unique because of its particular focus on race and class based inequalities. In some cases, our suggestions and assertions may lead the reader to ask more questions, rather than provide finite answers. It can be argued that this sense of wanting to know more is part of the outcomes of the research process, whether qualitative, ethnographic, urban or not. However, this uncertainty does not free our writing team from attempting to provide meaningful structure and thoughtful conclusions. The chapter includes a discussion of common ethnographic tools used in urban ethnography, an evolving definition of urbanicity, and a discussion of linking theoretical perspectives to urban ethnographic work. Our central argument is that urban spaces are different from other research spaces, and therefore, deserve a more nuanced approach.

DEFINING URBAN SPACES

For the purposes of our chapter, *urban* is defined as a social, cultural, and physical space that is located within a major city setting. Urban city dwellers may experience condensed housing conditions, limited access to quality education, health care, transportation, and increased exposure to violence. A number of residents live below the federal poverty line (Bourgois, 1995; Newman, 1999). The residents are typically racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse. Some urbanites may engage in underground economies to support themselves or families (Bourgois, 1995). Urbanites with stable economic situations have access to higher quality education, health care, housing, and transportation than either less affluent counterparts (Bourgois, 1995). Urban environments are vividly enriched and sometimes segregated by cultural diversity through food, language, immigration and migration, and juxtaposed socioeconomic differences within close proximity (Farr, 2006).

The sharp differences for residents in urban environments are illustrated with the overwhelming social inequities encountered by impoverished city dwellers (Bourgois, 1995). Some examples include harassment from local law enforcement, perpetual cycles of poverty, and limited educational opportunities due to decrepit facilities or lower scholastic expectations from instructors (Newman, 1999). Another common characteristics of urban spaces, which include condensed living arrangements and overcrowded residences. The condensed and overcrowded residences may house multiple family generations compacted in one unit, and this arrangement may be omnipresent in the neighborhood. The physical space may raise the anxiety of the researcher because of their own economic and personal background may be unfamiliar with the struggles of low-income urban environments.

The perpetual cycle of poverty is a difficult path to deviate from due to multiple social pressures and family responsibilities such as child-care, low-wage employment, and low educational achievement (Bourgois, 1995; Newman, 1999). Our focus in these communities with limited opportunities, voice, and control of their environment is fundamental to extracting the experience through urban ethnographies lens. These living conditions also affect the ways in which these populations may or may not allow ethnographers to participate in understanding their lives. Ethnographic researchers in urban spaces have the opportunity to record the multiple stories and experiences of marginalized communities. These encounters provide a location to gain an understanding of the space, power dynamics, and relationships of between participants. For researchers who are not native to urban spaces, their personal challenges include acquiring the areas social capital and culture to integrate into the community (Bourgois, 1996), that information will provide the foundation to understand residents' social norms and expectations.

EXPLAINING OUR ENGAGEMENT WITHIN URBAN SPACES, ETHNOGRAPHY, AND CONTEXTS

To ground our claims and research stance, we include a brief discussion on our work as urban ethnographers. Venegas' work has focused primarily on educational settings within urban environments in South Central Los Angeles, Downtown Los Angeles, and Las Vegas, Nevada. She has worked primarily with students, teachers, administrators, community advocates, college preparation program staff, and families in postsecondary, community based, community college and university settings. Her work has been developed to speak to research, policy and practice audiences. She comes to this work with her own lens as someone who grew up in the urban sprawl of Los Angeles County. She comes from a low-income family, was a first generation college student, and attended schools in urban settings.

Huerta's research has developed along two thematic strands. He is engaged in educational work as well, with a focus on the college access process for low-income Black and Latino males in Los Angeles and the persistence of urban Latinos in Midwest graduate schools. His work is influenced by his experiences as a youth in Las Vegas, Nevada. He is heavily influenced by his early and continuing experiences within the Chicano movement and the influence of critical race theory within research and practice. The authors are connected in their work as ethnographers and as individuals with a clear interest in issues of social justice. As a pair, we come to the development of this chapter with these lived experiences and social commitments in mind. In addition to our own work, we rely on respected examples from Farr (2006), Bourgois (1995) Duneier (1999), Newman (1999), Suskind (1998) and others to explore and explain how urban ethnography "works" in practice and publishing. We acknowledge and assert the importance of the researcher as an ally, the researcher as participant, and the researcher as a vehicle for empowering while observing individuals in their social spaces.

USING ETHNOGRAPHIC TOOLS IN URBAN SPACES

Urban ethnography employs many of the typical interdisciplinary approaches used in other ethnographic work. Borne out of an anthropological approach, ethnography is systematic and features a detailed study of the social environment including physical spaces and customs. The use of participant observation, field notes, and traditional interview are the basic tools of ethnography (Creswell, 2008). Urban ethnography has been viewed as a subfield of sociology, with a connection to the Chicago School ethnographic approaches that emerged post World War II and linked to shifts in ethnographic cultural shifts in the 1960s. An urban ethnographer relies on these simple tools to understand and explain the social environment, but they may find themselves engaged in the work and lives of those they seek to study in a more complex way. Deep engagement in the social structure and an explicit valuing of cultural reproduction of a particular space is part of a modern urban ethnographic style. Duneier (1999) found himself working as a magazine street vendor in his ethnographic work, *Sidewalk.* He began as a helper within this informal industry and later moved up the ranks and was enabled to run the magazine vendor's tables while they were away. Similarly, Bourgois (1995) served as a lookout for drug dealers in the urban spaces through which he collected data for his ethnographic work. Their data collection process necessitated that they were deeply engaged in the lives and work they observed.

Whether or not urban ethnographers need to reach this level of intimacy and trust to gather solid data and produce a meaningful snapshot of their study space is a distinctive feature of an urban ethnographic approach.. Further, the researchers who produced the studies mentioned here as well as the authors of this chapter, emphasize the importance of gaining trust and respect from urban study participants. To be sure, these issues appear in investigations of other social spaces, but arguably not in the same ways that one might experience when studying the corporate world or child rearing practices of middle and upper income families. Before moving into a more in-depth discussion of the role of the researcher, within urban ethnographic work, Lichtman's (2006) "ten critical elements of qualitative research" are noted here as a plausible foundation for thinking about the key pieces of qualitative work, regardless of the space that is to be studied. These research essentials include:

- The role of description, understanding, and interpretation;
- The import of dynamism;
- Attention to the multiple ways of approaching the same study;
- A decision to practice inductive thinking;
- A commitment to a holistic investigation;
- The need to gather a variety of data within the same natural setting;
- The need for in-depth study;
- The notion that qualitative research is not linear;
- The acknowledgement of the importance of words, themes and writing, and;
- An understanding of the role of the researcher within the research process.

Taken together, these fundamentals outline considerations and practices that are meaningful to the practice of ethnography. These suggestions are reflected in the work of others who study social settings (Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Weis & Fine, 2004) and provide a useful framework for thinking about developing one's own ethnographic approaches.

How might each of these facets of investigation affect the kinds of work that would be produced in an urban environment? What additional time commitments, social commitments and personal risks come into play when working within urban contexts? While professional training and the constraints of our university institutional review boards provide guidance, rules, and limitations, our own sense of connection to the researched muddy the professional waters. The need for in-depth study and openness to inductive reasoning may challenge these boundaries. Such considerations are especially salient given the risks and commitments of studying people and culture within the urban context. Urban ethnographic exploration, especially work within educational contexts, has been further characterized as applied, reformist, or prescriptive (Yon, 2003). Weis and Fine (2004) suggest that these approaches are connected to a mission of social justice. If either Yon or Weis and Fine's assertions are true, researcher reflexivity is central to conducting and sharing the results of an urban ethnography study.

THE ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER

Garnering the necessary relationships with gatekeepers or urban insiders to gain access with desired study participants eases the transition into the environment and provides necessary social connections. Some researchers choose to move into their study location. This decision provides unlimited access to their participants, which allows them to cultivate meaningful and deep relationships. For example, in her work with Mexican transnational immigrants in Chicago, Farr (2006) highlights her intimate relationship with Mexican women in Chicago, Illinois and in a small village in Michoacán, Mexico. This shifting of spaces allowed access to daily activities, cultural phenomenon, and gender roles. These interactions were only possible through steady and unanticipated interactions.

Once the researcher enters an urban space, he or she needs to gauge their relationship with the community members. These connections can be measured on a continuum and are contingent on the researchers' progress with community agents. Developing contacts within urban spaces may pose challenges for researchers if they do not share the same ethnic or racial background, socio-economic status, or personal background. The depth of a researchers' relationship with their participants is contingent on understanding one's social position. Exploring the environmental conditions of marginalized space should be conducted with caution due to the influence and perceptions of the area using a middle-class or upper-class educated lens (Dillabough, 2008). Where a person with middle class sensibility might see untenable living conditions, a person from a less economically privileged background might find an improved state of being.

Secondly, researchers' must be cognizant of their *insider/outsider* status. An *insider* is a native of that particular geographic area, culture, or acutely aware of social norms whereas an *outsider* does not possess any of the previous listed characteristics. Bourgois (1995) and Farr (2006) assert their researcher status should not be misused because of the sensitive nature of their position. The vulnerability of the researchers' newcomer status can easily be shunned and lose access to their study participants should they cross the tacit urban boundaries of respect and culture. Moreover, insider/outsider status is impacted by the conflict in value system and possible challenges to personal cultural beliefs (Weis & Fine, 2004).

Thirdly, the power dynamics between research and participants impacts the stories recorded, the meaning created from their participants' experiences, and cultural references point such as academic and the streets. Researchers should be mindful of stories published and they create the meaning behind the voices and experiences of urban residents. This is notably significant when exploring the stories of urban rationally marginalized communities. There may be additional challenges to the researchers in deciphering the participants' interviews, if their responses are infused with multiple personal adversities that are not immediately shared with the researcher. When engaging with urban participants who lack secondary and post-secondary education complications may occur with verbal communication due to the usage of educated language that may surpass their academic acumen (Bourgois, 1995; Newman, 1999).

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES IN URBAN ETHNOGRAPHY

Other sections of this volume have thoughtfully engaged in the discussion of truth, stance, and other aspects of positioning oneself and perspective with research paradigms in ethnographic work would illicit a broader, more complex debate (Anafara, Jr. & Mertz, 2006; Creswell 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Rather than dwell on these philosophical differences and which one might better contribute to ethnographic work, we discuss the use of both theoretical frameworks and social research models (i.e. Postmodern approaches) within urban ethnographic work. Some urban ethnographic researchers emphasize the use of grounded theory or phenomonological approaches to position their work. No one theory or epistemological standpoint fits any one or all urban spaces. The goal is to select a standpoint that allows one "to see" and understand the environment that is under investigation (Anfara, Jr. & Mertz, 2006).

From our experience as researchers, we have engaged in research processes that were more loosely coupled to a particular theoretical stance. Venegas was a member of a research team that developed two major research studies on college access in urban schools over a period of seven years. She joined the team during year two and participated in a research project that focused on nine core tenets or beliefs about college access as the foundation for thinking about the development of protocol, research design and final analysis of data. These nine tenets grew through findings from previous research studies with the same evolving student population in the same urban spaces (Tierney, Colyar & Corwin, 2005; Tierney & Jun 2001) The theoretical foundation for this investigation fits on the continuum of grounded theory. The grounded theoretical standpoint that guided the research did link to this particular data, however it did not emerge solely from this data set (Lichtman, 2004). Yet, the coding practices, which are essential to the grounded theory process, were closely connected to the final analysis and writing of results.

Phenomenology is the study of the experiences of individuals who have lived through the similar events and circumstances. We might also claim that the individuals might engage in these events within the same space. As such, the social environment can be carefully explored in terms of culture and space. It is not uncommon for ethnographers to engage in phenomenological inquiry based on a personal observation from his or her lived experience. Venegas has conducted ethnographic research following multiple phenomenological questions within the same public and private spaces throughout South Central Los Angeles. Space is a significant aspect of this work because interactions and observations take place within the urban milieu.

How might space or perceptions of space shape individuals who identify themselves as urban and experience their lives through this lens, even when they are outside of their urban contexts?

Huerta's experience as an urban Chicano researcher while completing a graduate degree at a large Midwestern university led him to further engage in a study of other urban Latino graduate students with similar experiences. Through his nuanced experiences, he began to understand that other Latino/Chicano male students from similar environments were facing similar trials. There are three facets of the research design to consider as they relate to constructions of urbanicity, space, and study participant perceptions. The first concern is that urbanicity, like many other social constructs can exist within and without the experience of the context within "real time." A second possibility is that space does not necessarily have set boundaries. Thirdly, and perhaps, most importantly, an individual's perceptions about the space and time in which he or she dwells effects how he or she sees themselves within their own environment. Some individuals may place themselves within a specific urban environment because they live that reality on a daily basis (Newman, 1999). Other individuals may place themselves within an urban context as a means of understanding their own identity, even though they may not be currently living in a defined urban context. Such an occurrence is essential to Huerta's work with urban graduate students; it emerges as a phemonena that study participants' share. Urbanicity and the study of urban contexts in this case are not confined to physical space; it also exists in the minds and described behaviors of the study participants.

CONCLUSION

Understanding urban populations in research means understanding the context of space, the history of a community, and the current economic and sociopolitical conditions that impact residential experiences and cohesion (Cohen, 2006). The primary commitment of the researcher is to remain true to the ethnographic naturalism of a particular setting (Schwandt, 2007). As ethnographic researchers, we would also argue that an obligation to the people within the setting is equally as important within an urban environment. The research and research approaches that we have noted in here emphasize the distinctive qualities of an urban ethnography, while making connections to more traditional methods. In this chapter, we have unpacked some of the issues that challenge the goals of gathering data within an urban environment: understanding context; connecting with study participants; selecting an appropriate method and showing respect for study participants. We have identified starting points for research design and data analysis, theoretical grounding, as well as an emphasis on the role and commitments of the research. Lichtman's (2006) seven suggestions, Anfara and Mertz's thoughts about utilizing theoretical perspectives (2006), and the examples given through our own work and the work of others serve as reference points for those engaging or reflecting on their practice as urban ethnographers.

Developing a clear voice while acknowledging one's own role within the research, as a scholar and as a person are crucial points of consideration that deserve a final iteration. The choices that are made related to sharing the stories that are gathered through the ethnographic process also brings a set of important choices to light. Again, these conclusions are not made with ease; uncertainty can guide the onset of the writing process. Goodall, Jr (2008) and Madison (2008), frame these choices within an ethnographic lens as they consider the politics of narratives that share the experiences of those in marginalized, and in this case, urban spaces. They acknowledge that personal reflexivity is important, perhaps especially in the midst of practicing a "dangerous ethnography" that disrupts what we accept as true from political and social perspectives. Rogler (2008) shares his more than 40-year journey with understanding and deciding to pursue and share narratives from his ethnographic work. In the end, he relies upon decades old advice that encouraged him to study and share life "as life itself," rather than through manufactured experience (p. 10). The decision to bring his research to life required a close understanding of his role and social commitments within the context of what he studies and who he is as a person within the space in which he gathers his data. For the urban ethnographer, who chooses to represent the voice of the marginalized other in urban spaces, there is a need to consider the place of social justice and the impact of their work in moving a particular agenda forward or keeping it in the same place.

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