

# Exploring Social Capital: An Ethnographic Evaluation of CommUniverCity Methods

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**ABSTRACT** *CommUniverCity San José is a partnership between the City of San José, San José State University, and the community neighborhood in the Five Wounds/Brookwood Terrace (FWBT) area. For this project, CommUniverCity enlisted an ethnographic team from San José State University to conduct a qualitative ethnographic project to complement its quantitative and other service-learning assessments. The ethnographic team was comprised of three graduate students in the applied anthropology master's program, two undergraduate anthropology students, and Dr. Jan English-Lueck, who specializes in applied, cultural, and medical anthropology at San José State University. The core objective of this research has been to provide a context for understanding the production of social capital by exploring the personal networks of the people who are part of the partnership between CommUniverCity, the Five Wounds/Brookwood Terrace area, and the City of San José. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the methods and tools utilized and the results of the findings by the ethnographic team at San José State University in the Five Wounds/Brookwood Terrace area. [Keywords: ethnographic evaluation, methods, social capital]*

## INTRODUCTION

Applied anthropologists apply method and theory to the analysis and "solution of real-world problems" (Gwynne 2003:2). They work for a variety of clients in social services, education, medical, government, and nongovernment agencies. They are familiar with qualitative and quantitative approaches, at times mingling the two to arrive at a comprehensive and detailed understanding of practical problems. Ethnography, participant-observation, and one-on-one interviewing are some of the research tools applied by anthropologists. The combination of these tools provides layers of data that contribute to a richer understanding of the issue being studied.

For our project, we defined social capital as "the capacity to build relationships between very different stakeholders to create lasting change" (English-Leuck 2009:2). We used a qualitative approach to provide a context for understanding the production of social capital in the Five Wounds/Brookwood Terrace (FWBT) by gathering information from the participants about their personal networks and their experiences with CommUniverCity. According to Perecman and Curran, *A Handbook for Social Science Field Research*, qualitative methods, "seek to explain what quantitative observations actually mean to actual individuals" (Perecman and Curran 2006:48).

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the methods and tools utilized by the ethnographic team at San José State University in the Five Wounds/Brookwood Terrace area and the methodological issues that the team encountered.

### *Clients*

CommUniverCity San José (CUC) is a partnership be-

tween the City of San José, San José State University, and the community neighborhood in the Five Wounds/Brookwood Terrace area. For this project, CUC enlisted an ethnographic team from San José State University (SJSU) to conduct a qualitative ethnographic project to complement its quantitative and other service-learning assessments.

***San José State University Ethnographic Team*** The ethnographic team was comprised of three graduate students in the applied anthropology master's program, two undergraduate anthropology students, and Dr. Jan English-Lueck, who specializes in applied, cultural, and medical Anthropology at San José State University. The SJSU ethnographic team initially met as part of a Spring 2009 course, Anthropology 280: Internship/Structured Fieldwork, in the master's program in applied anthropology at San José State University. The team met once a week for three hours for 16 weeks. Class time was spent going over the specifics of the project, discussing a framework for the data, and brainstorming the best methods and tools to use for data collection. A Wiki on My PBWorks was created so the team could have a shared forum for communication, an archive of research articles and CUC reports that were pertinent to the project, and a depository to upload documents for team access and editing. After the formal university class session ended, the SJSU team continued to meet for a year to complete the report to CUC and to prepare for a presentation at the April 2010 SWAA conference at the University of Nevada, Reno.

## METHODS

### *Research Goals*

The core objective of the research has been to provide a

context for understanding the production of social capital by exploring the personal networks of the people who are part of the partnership between CommUniverCity, the Five Wounds/Brookwood Terrace area, and the City of San José. The research objectives in this ethnographic evaluation are: 1) to conduct semi-structured interviews with interviewees to obtain a deeper and richer description of their experiences with CommUniverCity; 2) to conduct participant-observation at public CommUniverCity service learning events, to observe public meetings to gather information on possible cultural and structural factors that may facilitate and inhibit CommUniverCity participation in service learning; and 3) to analyze the data from participant-observations and interviews to get a better understanding of network-based social capital among community stakeholders.

#### *Selection of participants and site locations*

The type of sampling method that was used in this project was a nonprobability sampling strategy because the participants were chosen based on their positions within the partner organization. In this project, the SJSU ethnographic team compiled a list of possible participants to be interviewed. Participants were drawn from adults who reside or work in the Five Wounds/Brookwood Terrace region of downtown San José. During the interview process, a few of the participants recommended other possible people to contact. In addition, local business owners and staff from area schools and nonprofits were asked to participate. Activists from the Neighborhood Action Council and CommUniverCity formed the bulk of the sample.

Participation in the project was voluntary and participants signed consent forms to participate before data collection or interviewing began. For those participants whose primary language was Spanish, both the consent form and interview protocol was translated into Spanish. The identities of many of the participants were kept confidential, with the exception of key public officials and San José State University administrators because of their visible positions in the various organizations. Interviews were conducted in a participant's workplace, neighborhood community center, CommUniverCity events or San José State University as appropriate. Observations were conducted in the Five Wounds/Brookwood Terrace neighborhoods, public meetings at the Roosevelt or McKinley community center, and at public learning activity sites such as local churches, community centers, and at San José State University.

#### *Data Collection*

The data collected were used to conduct an ethnographic evaluation of the CUC partnership, its affiliation to the City of San José, and its community partners in the Five Wounds/Brookwood Terrace. According to Perelman

and Curran, ethnography offers a set of "methods for exploring and gaining insight into people's values, beliefs, and behaviors" (Perelman and Curran 2006:47-48). The SJSU ethnographic team utilized a variety of techniques to explore social capital as a concept. By applying several methods of obtaining and analyzing data, practitioners can compensate for many of the shortcomings of using a single method (Harrison 1994:34).

The approach that was used in the ethnographic evaluation of CommUniverCity was inspired by Eve Pinsky's and Michawli Lieber's evaluation of the Community Outreach Partnership Center at the University of Illinois in Chicago. Participant-observation and semi-structured interviews were some of the research tools utilized to obtain a better understanding of network-based social capital among stakeholders. Observations were conducted in real time. Field notes were reworked and annotated. Interviews were transcribed, annotated, and reviewed by the team. By sampling formal and informal networks, the team was able to attune itself to the action of both social capital and networks.

Digital recordings were used to capture conversations and open-ended interviews. Transcriptions were made from the interviews and edited to remove information that would identify the identity of the participant. Conversations were initially recorded with the participant's first name and the initial of the last name. Pseudonyms were created during transcriptions to protect the anonymity of the participants, with the exception of key public officials. Field notes were used during observations and transcribed as soon as possible.

The team analyzed CommUniverCity publications, social capital, and ethnographic evaluation literature, and reviewed field notes and interview transcripts. The team conducted 333 hours of observation, facilitated two focus groups, and conducted 25 interviews to learn about that person's experience with CUC and/or the FWBT neighborhood, and to examine his or her social connections and activities—particularly as they related to CUC. The 25 interviewees were selected to represent different points of view including City of San José staff, SJSU faculty, staff, and administration, and FWBT residents. All interviews were transcribed (and if in Spanish, translated) using a common training module for ethnographic transcription and modified to remove identifiers of interviewees and add interviewer comments on the exclamations or conditions that would not come across in written form. Interviews were then posted to a common project Wiki for the ethnographic team's access.

#### **FINDINGS**

Most of the stakeholders reported CommUniverCity San José as a successful organization. Marianne M, a FWBT resident, had this to say about CommUniverCity, "These are people with such a vast diversity of knowledge and

connections and experiences that it – I mean – it’s really like some kind of a – that sounds too stupid – like a miracle team. They’ve [meaning CommUniverCity] helped miracles happen in that neighborhood” (English-Lueck 2009:25). The ethnographic team did find areas that worked well in building relationships and areas that could be improved upon. Some of the team recommendations to CUC included identifying what is successful and where to concentrate their energy and resources, working actively on raising the awareness of CommUniverCity’s role in events, building “pools of reliable competence,” creating a standard operating procedure for events that repeatedly “train a new generation of players,” making self-analysis a systematic practice, reframing “barriers into bridges,” creating “a conscious ecology of projects,” developing a set of tactics, defining a comprehensive outreach strategy, and building dialogue and communication at events (English-Lueck 2009).

### METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Two of the challenges a researcher comes across in any project are determining how to 1) measure an abstract idea and 2) define it. In terms of the CUC evaluation project, having multiple stakeholders, each with a different definition of success, makes measurement a formidable task. In principle, measuring success of an organization depends on the practitioner’s ability to develop measures that “reflect the divergent priorities of key stakeholders, assess the organization in terms of these measures and provide clients with feedback on how well they are meeting those divergent standards” (Harrison 1994:46). Unless a practitioner keeps a clear conceptual and operational definition of success, defining and measuring effectiveness becomes problematic if they interpret the data inadequately, or if they overlook important phenomena that were not covered by those measures (Harrison 1994).

Although the vignettes collected on the success of CUC were informative, they do not yield a clear operational definition on the effectiveness of the organization. Instead, they provide multiple perspectives on success from different stakeholders. From the data we collected, we were able to define the effectiveness of CUC through the participant’s definition of success. In short, the participants hinged their organization assessment of success on whether the service or activity met the needs of the community. For example, a theme that ran through many of the responses was that CUC was a miracle team because they were able to revitalize neighborhoods by removal of graffiti, trash, and repainting individual houses through CUC’s Annual Day of Service event.

Interviews and participant narratives are subject to many biases. Every person has an image of the world and their place in it. Participants’ verbal testimonies to anthropologists are affected by their perspective (Pelto

and Pelto 1970). The SJSU ethnographic team conducted 25 open-ended, semi-structured interviews. The problem with open-ended interviewing as a research instrument is that it hinges on “the capacity of the individual researcher to generate surprises, to recognize patterns, and to organize those patterns to form a theory” (Perecman and Curran 2006:146).

During the interview, the practitioner must recognize answers that reveal information that is important to the interviewee and encourage him or her to expand on those key points. As a research technique, open-ended interviewing relies on the researcher to “draw out of the interview material something that is interesting and meaningful” (Perecman and Curran 2006:145). In other words, open-ended interviewing depends on the ability of the researcher to read and interpret the interviews. To address this issue, the SJSU team analyzed the transcripts of the interviews individually and as a group. In this way, we were able to have multiple researchers analyzing the same data. This approach could reveal important themes that would have been missed by any one researcher.

A nonprobability sampling strategy was used in this project and the participants were chosen based on their positions within the partner organization. Although a number of community participants from the Five Wounds/Brookwood Terrace were recruited for the research project, the bulk of the sample consisted of CUC activists and City of San José employees. Therefore the pool of participants is skewed towards those who are actively involved in CUC activities, because they are staff or community leaders, rather than the community members at large. The data is not as representative as it could be due to this bias. To provide a more balanced perspective for understanding the production of social capital and the effectiveness of CUC, a more varied sample from the Five Wounds/Brookwood Terrace area and all of its communities should be considered in future studies.

To better understand an organization, it is “best to choose settings for observation that are as central to group operations as possible, since behavior can vary from one context to another” (Harrison 1994:68). This includes important public meetings and critical events, as was done in this project. The SJSU team performed participation observation at CUC events and at the Steering Committee meetings. Observation can help the researcher get a feel for the behavior and process that transpire in an organization and provides information that is more independent of the member’s viewpoint (Harrison 1994:73). The advantage of observation is that much information can be obtained unobtrusively.

The disadvantage is that data gathering through participation observation does raise sampling issues. Validity and reliability are two important components

“that are commonly encountered in methodological discussions” (Pelto and Pelto 1970:33), and in some case are the reasons for sampling issues. According to Pelto and Pelto, in *Anthropological Research: The Structure of Inquiry*, validity refers “to the degree to which scientific observations actually measure” (Pelto and Pelto 1970:33). Reliability refers to the degree in which an instrument measures the same way each time it is used.

In a qualitative approach, sampling issues occur more with reliability than with validity because the data is harder to generalize (Harrison 1994:96-97). In ethnographic evaluation such as CUC, validity was high but reliability was low because in our interviews the same question would have different responses depending on the participant.

## DISCUSSION

In any research project, a practitioner needs to consider the ethical issues that arise when working with their partners/clients. At many colleges, universities, and research institutions that perform research involving human subjects there are review boards put in place to evaluate the ethical implications of that research. Institutional review boards (IRB) are there to “protect research subjects from unacceptable risks, but also protect researchers in the event of complaints or legal suits” (Gwynne 2003:94). In the case of our evaluation of CUC, submitting forms for approval to our IRB not only alerted us to the ethical concerns in our project, but also to the challenges of working within a university environment. For example, interviewing a protected class, such as minors, requires special considerations. For this reason, we chose to exclude them from the interview process because of the extra precautions that were required to protect the interest of the minors and our time constraints.

To conduct this research a high degree of trust was necessary between the researchers and the community and between community members themselves. Confidentiality was an issue that needed to be addressed in our project. Our IRB felt it was harder to mask the identity of public figures because of the nature of their position. We were required to submit a separate signed release form that informed our public figures that their identity would not be kept confidential.

In a project, a researcher strives to maintain the confidentiality of each participant by conducting interviews in private in order to maintain the anonymity of that person. In the CUC, we found that confidentiality and anonymity could not always be met. Not all participants could meet at a private location. In some cases, interviews were conducted in a cubicle, café, or other public space, either at the request of the participant or due to convenience. Real world situations require flexibility from the researcher.

A researcher cannot always anticipate the ways

in which confidentiality and anonymity can be breached. In the CUC project, we found we were unable to use some responses because they would reveal the identity of the person interviewed. In these cases, we could not use their response in our report because it would be a violation of ethical conduct.

Flexibility is a key requirement of any researcher who undertakes a study. The methods themselves are not perfect, and a good researcher takes on these challenges when formulating their approach. In the CUC project, our team mitigated these methodological challenges and unexpected issues through group discussion and collaboration. This enabled us to use our varied knowledge and perspectives to come up with novel ways of addressing these issues. In a way, this strengthened our research because it reduces personal bias in our project.

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