

**An Ethnographic
Strengths and
Needs Assessment**

**REFLECTIONS ON THE
SANTA ANA RIVER
WATERSHED COMMUNITY
WATER EXPERIENCES
PROJECT**

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INTRODUCTION

As a Public Health major, my primary research interest is the well-being of individuals and communities. Prior to joining this project, I have had the privilege of conducting research with local residents of Orange County, who were facing food insecurity. I have also conducted research with parents, who had strong beliefs about their children's wellbeing in relation to vaccination practices. When I first learned about WRPI, I was excited to dive into a public health topic that affects many, as water is one of the most basic human needs and its quality must be adequate for human consumption.

Doing research related to issues of communal water quality opened doors for me. I came to realize that social research can lead to public health policies, thus transforming my views on the importance of action research. Using research as a means to listen to community needs and build a policy from the ground up can ultimately bridge communication gaps between residents and policy makers. Qualitative research allows researchers to highlight the most recurring issues communities face and ultimately help policy makers understand the need to address common issues in their city/county.



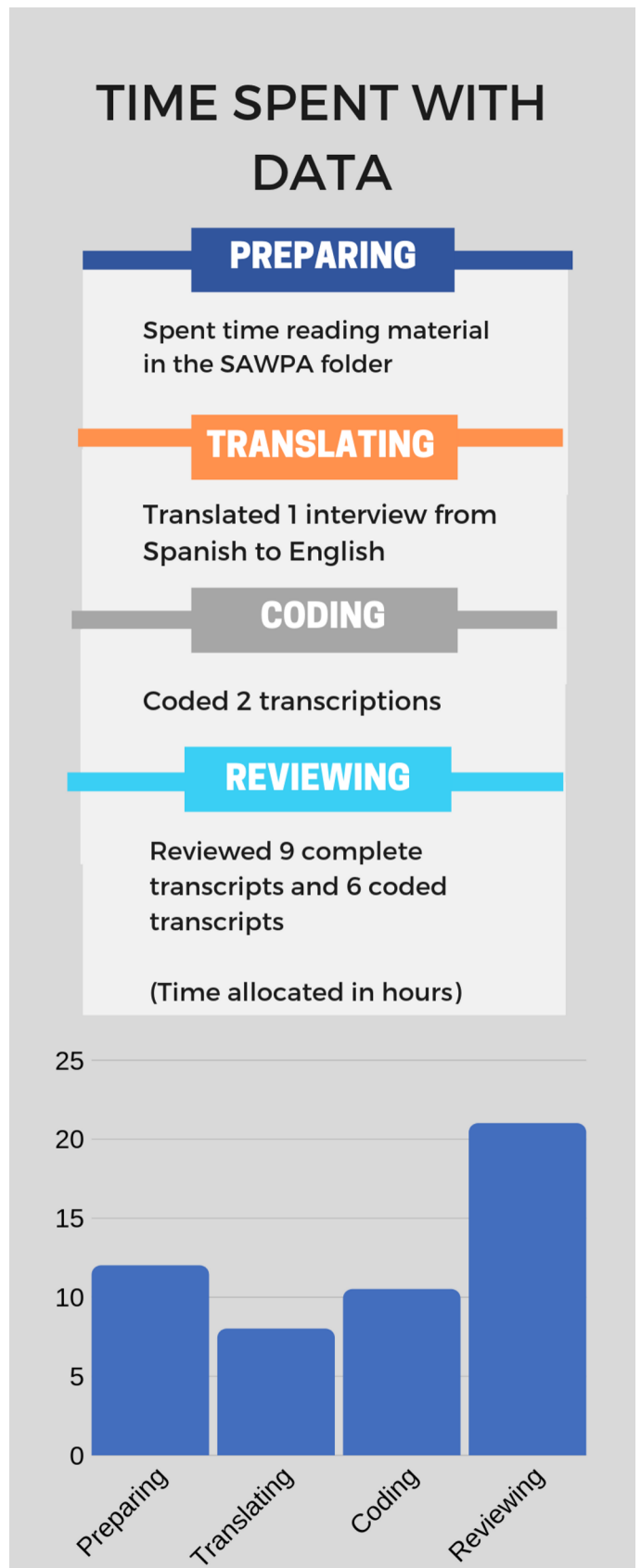
DATA COLLECTION

My first task was familiarizing myself with the focus group data collected in community listening sessions. I did so by listening to the actual audio recordings myself. The data set also included fieldnotes and audio recordings of listening sessions that happened before I became a part of the research team.

Every community listening session was led by the research informants - meaning that the topics vary from one listening session to the other depending on the issues they chose to discuss in relation to their community. The only common topic was about the water quality as this was the main topic of this research project. In each audio recording, the people from that specific community would speak about the strengths and weaknesses they saw in their community. They first had a conversation about what they thought worked well and then one about the things they thought needed to improve and/or be fixed: Some community members spoke positively about public resources, such as the number of green spaces, grocery stores, and public offices, and others spoke about needing those resources, among others. People's water experiences encompassed their use of water for consumption, bathing, or anything around their home. By opening up the conversation about what they thought worked well and what didn't, the researchers who interviewed these communities eased them into conversations related to water and their own experiences with water.

I found it interesting to hear so many stories in terms of the water they use and reasons why they choose to buy water or use tap. After listening to these stories, I then transcribed and later analyzed the interviews and audio recordings.

Data collection and analysis can be done in many ways. For the purposes of this project, I translated an audio recording, coded a couple of transcriptions, and reviewed many coded transcriptions that other interns coded. All together, this work enabled our team to understand common themes and issues communities face. By highlighting these issues, we hope public administrators, elected officials, and others will take action to achieve meaningful changes in public policy.



This Infograph that shows how much time the data collection process took me.

DATA TRANSCRIPTION

After listening to these audio recordings, I transcribed some of the audio files into written text. This task gave purpose to the research. I documented people's words, opinions, emotions with respect to water topics and wrote them down for the policy makers and researchers to see. I gained the ability to interpret their trains of thought and where they were going, whether it was positive or negative water experience.

The beauty of community listening sessions is that those who participated had conversations that gave others ideas. This mutual exchange enabled people to feel comfortable talking about certain topics with the researchers. Although the exchanges were tricky to transcribe verbatim, it was worth the time to deep dive into the specific words and phrases the community was using to express themselves. I also believe that the community felt more comfortable having others with the same experiences share their stories, knowing others would back up what they were saying.

Another integral part of data stewardship also included my translating some of the listening sessions from Spanish to English. Our team at UCI had to ensure that the audios were not only transcribed in their appropriate language, but also translated into English without losing sense of the way topics were discussed. It was a hard duty making sure that people's words in Spanish carried the same strength in English.

Our UCI research team then used the written transcriptions to analyze word-for-word and sentence-by-sentence the types of information and experiences shared among community members. Looking at the transcriptions also allowed the researchers to take note of the number of times specific a certain topic would be mentioned.



NVivo 12

NVivo was the main program used during both the data collection and the data analysis. This is a very complex program, in which the audio files of the community listening sessions were uploaded in order to write the transcriptions for them. As an intern, I was able to transcribe one listening session over the period of 7 hours. Using NVivo 12 to transcribe was not a hard process; the only thing I struggled with was making sure that everything said was appropriately transcribed. I would go back and listen to certain sections a couple of times to make sure I took note of everything that was said. When it was time to analyze the data, NVivo 12 helped with the coding process. My co-intern and I coded 2 transcriptions together using the program. It was a very quick process in the sense that we were already familiar with the material, as we both helped with transcribe those audio recordings and had previously reviewed those transcriptions as well. For that reason, we understood what most of the transcriptions covered. As a team, we came up with multiple codes for a single paragraph, which ultimately indicates that the topics and themes discussed in the listening sessions are connected with other topics. For example, the code "affordable housing" was also in the same paragraph as "available resources" and "access to roads." Coding helped me see which topics were the most common for a specific listening session/ area.

DATA ANALYSIS

Once all of the data had been collected, transcribed, and translated, it was time to start analyzing the data. As previously mentioned, having a transcribed document helped the researchers take note of the specific words used to describe conversation topics and - to an extent - informants' emotions. Specific words that were used frequently allowed the researchers to know whether the person was talking positively or negatively about the topic and also allowed the researchers to gain knowledge about their specific community experiences with water by reading their stories and their words verbatim.

It is important to code the text. Coding is when you go through the written text, and you highlight specific topics and words being used to further understand how many times a topic was brought up and talked about in each of the community listening sessions. It is important to note these issues in order to gain a sense of how that topic, such as housing, is working among residents in the Santa Ana Watershed region. It allows the researchers to gain knowledge about the topics and how they are similar or different across the Watershed. Some residents may express themselves positively about the water quality and others may express themselves negatively, and it is important to note where those people reside and the specific experiences they had with the water quality. This infograph shows five of the most common codes that I saw in the transcriptions I analyzed and provides a brief reason why these specific codes were very common in conversations with residents.



Common Codes



Water Quality

Open and Green Spaces



Housing

Public Services



Safety and Hazards



CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This internship gave me a real world look into social research. I knew policy could be done with research backing up the claims, but I had never seen an actual process like this unfold. Our efforts resulted in a final strengths and needs assessment report. This internship was my first experience on a project related to public health and social research, a nexus which which I hope to pursue in my career post graduation. Every assignment was a challenge and taught me something different about the research process. I liked the challenge and most of all helping bring the project to its final state, in which the strengths and needs assessment report could be written using the data analyzed. I am so happy that I was able to be a part of something so important and so crucial for those who live relying on the Santa Ana Watershed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Erica Hua Fletcher from the Department of Anthropology at University of California, Irvine for allowing me to be a part of this project and for teaching me about how social research is conducted. Thank you Professor Valerie Olson as well for welcoming me onto the UCI team and also aiding me in the research process. Thank you Joseph Garcia, my fellow co-intern, for working with me on many assignments and teaching more about your personal career interest. May life take you to amazing places. Lastly, thank you to my parents for supporting me every step of the way in college; their moral support is what keeps me going. I wouldn't be doing amazing things without amazing people. Thank you so much!

