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Ethnographically-Inspired Research Design
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Executive Summary

From May of 2018 until June of 2019, I have had the pleasure to intern for the ethnographically-inspired research project taken on by the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Irvine (UCI) on behalf of the Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority (SAWPA). In this time, I have been exposed to the ins-and-outs of qualitative research at a level I have never experienced.

The entire purpose of this research project was to flip the traditional water management model on its head, and instead ask communities directly what they think of their water supply. Through dozens of interviews, and hundreds of respondents, our team at UCI has accomplished this goal. These interviews and conversations form the backbone of UCI's data and subsequent analysis. Hours upon hours of audio needed to be transcribed, coded, and analyzed before any serious report writing can be undertaken. It has been a pleasure working on all aspects of this research, at every step through the process. Ultimately, the quality and quantity of useable data speaks for itself. This research is intended to be adopted as standard practice by water managers. There may still be some kinks in the process, but hopefully the work UCI has completed will inspire others to take on this new way of thinking.

Ethnographically-Inspired Research

Ethnographies are a commonly used qualitative research method meant to explore people and cultural phenomena from the viewpoint of those being studied. It capitalizes on the local expertise the study subjects provide. Traditional ethnographies often have study periods of multiple years, and involve the researcher fully partaking in a local culture. Most often the researcher lives amongst the subjects of their research. This process and research method provide an unparalleled level understanding of cultures, people, and local contexts. Ethnographies dive deeper and into more detail than most any other qualitative research methodology. However, this arrangement is time-consuming, and expensive.

The Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Irvine (UCI) was approached by the Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority (SAWPA) to write and ethnography about Disadvantaged Communities (DACs) in SAWPA's jurisdiction. Since the researchers at UCI were unable to commit to conducting field observations over year-long study periods, they had to engage communities through a series of interviews and listening sessions. Hence, the title of "Ethnographically-Informed Research Design." It is not a true ethnography, but it is inspired by the general format and spirit of a ground-up research method. In these interviews, focus group sessions conducted with community members of the public gave the most insight into how water is viewed by everyday people. The top-down notion of a water manager telling communities how to treat water was rejected, and flipped upside down.

That is not to say that expert opinions were rejected. In the spirit of a true ethnography where a researcher dives into the subject and locale of their study, UCI also conducted interviews with experts as well. In total, the Ethnographically-Inspired Research draws upon the following interviews and listening sessions:

-11 Interviews with Elected Officials
-13 Interviews with Water Agencies
-8 Interviews with Mutual Water Companies
-19 Community Listening Sessions

In total, these 51 pieces of audio and written data represent well over 200 individual voices. Collectively, this gives a much more complete picture of how communities think about and interact with their water. This data could not have been accessed in the traditional top-down model of water management. The ultimate goal is for SAWPA to use this study, and encourage individual water agencies to conduct similar studies on their own. The value of bottom-up thinking and research processes cannot be overstated.

In the sections below, the general process for conducting this research is outlined. Included in this outline are some of the best practices learned from the UCI project, as well as more general observations for any other agencies undertaking this work.

Data Collection

Step one in this ethnographically-inspired research was collecting the data. For the most part, in the 51 interviews and listening sessions mentioned above, UCI and their partners were able to glean data via audio recordings. Using audio data helped maintain accuracy of the comments being made by the participants. In order for the

ethnographically-inspired research method to truly represent the voices and opinions of the research subjects, using audio data was crucial.

Furthermore, interviewers had specific instructions to ask more open-ended questions. Asking open-ended minimized the risk that the interviewer would be steering the conversation towards certain topics or conclusions. The goal of the ethnographically-inspired research is to understand local perspectives on water. Asking specific or targeted questions would be counterproductive to this goal. Instead, interviewers asked the following four questions, or various iterations of these:

1.) What do you like about your community?
2.) What do you think can be improved in your community?
3.) What do you think of the water in your community?
4.) What can be improved upon the water in your community?

These broad questions led to wide-open conversations. In true ethnographies, conversations are a key source of data. The UCI project wanted to mimic that same feel. An open conversation puts the onus on the interviewer, or agency, to listen just as much as they speak. If the goal is to have a more bottom-up research approach, those at the top need to listen. This format does just that.

Data Transcription

Once the audio data from the interviews and listening sessions are created, they need to be converted into a more usable format. Since the ultimate deliverable of the UCI project is a written report, the audio data needed to be turned into written data. Hence, every piece of audio was transcribed. At times, this is a painstaking process of listening to audio, typing up word-for-word exchanges, and assigning timestamps and respondent attributes to each piece of conversation. In community listening sessions, where the respondents numbered anywhere from 5-20 people, this task gets more complicated, and more time consuming.

Regardless of how long the process takes, this is arguably the most crucial step in this research process. Collecting data is one thing, but the transcription of data is what makes the whole project possible. Ultimately, the entire data set the UCI team based their analysis from is the transcribed audio. The project would simply not have been possible in its current form without the transcribed audio.

In making this research more accessible to water agencies, the UCI team also considered non-audio data, and non-transcription data collection and processing. A few interview sessions were conducted in this manner instead. These forms are inherently not as accurate, but depending on the quality of hand-written notes, and interactive engagement activities, alternatives could potentially be substituted for audio data.

Data Analysis

After the data has been transcribed, it is analyzed. In particular common themes are noted across the different sources of data (e.g. elected officials, listening sessions, etc.). Once the common themes are found, they can be cross-referenced to see how different groups and organizations view and talk about that topic. Weights can be assigned so that the more frequently a theme comes up in conversation, and

across different conversations, the more important it is. The frequency and weight of different themes can then be compared for commonalities and differences, as well as potential solutions. This analysis can prioritize projects and processes for water agencies to undertake.

For example, if the price of water was a theme that came up in multiple sessions, it would be assigned a weight based on the frequency it was repeated within that session, and the frequency it was repeated across different sessions. It is important to note the water agencies and the lay public are both talking about water pricing. Then, from within that, the data might reveal solutions suggested by the respondents. In this hypothetical case, community groups might be insistent on lowering the price of water. Whereas water agencies may frequently talk about infrastructure upgrades to make the transport of water more efficient. Put these two together, and a potential project may be a leak detection program. The public would be spending less on water, and the water agency would be more efficient in delivery.

This sort of analysis was done for all themes across all of the data. Some of this falls on the intuition of the researcher, but cross-examination across the research group helped neutralize biases. As is the case with any qualitative research, there is a need for a certain level of the researcher's own best judgement.

Report Writing

Lastly, once these analyses are complete, they are compiled, screened for pertinence, and then summarized in a report. The major findings are still being compiled as the newest sets of listening session data are taken through the process above. In addition to the key findings, particularly in the differences between the public and water agencies, the report also summarizes the methodology. As has been described, this project was not a traditional ethnography, and has some significant differences in its methodology. As such, great care was given to the methodology section of the report to maintain integrity and validity.

Next Steps

As project partners finish up the last of the community listening sessions, that data needs to go through the transcription process above in order to be fully implemented into the existing analysis and draft report. The listening sessions are scheduled to be completed in June, with the transcription completed in July, of 2019. From there, the data will be analyzed and used to further strengthen the preliminary findings from the 2018 draft report. The final version of the UCI report is to be finished by the end of Summer 2019.

Conclusions

It has been a delight working on this qualitative research. Having a degree in City Planning, and in Public Policy, my public outreach experiences have been vastly different from the analysis conducted here. Being able to work with the data from start to finish, throughout the entire process, has been a rare opportunity. It is not every day that someone gets to work on an ethnography. The experiences I have had in this process have changed my view on how to best engage with the public, and make the most of their input. That alone will help me in enumerable ways in my career. I cannot stress enough how much I loved this project.