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Penn and The Surrounding Community

SWRK 781: Qualitative Research
University of Pennsylvania

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PENN AND THE SURROUNDING COMMUNITY

Our class used qualitative methods to explore students’ perceptions of Penn’s relationship with the surrounding community.

BACKGROUND

Photo-elicitation was first named in a paper published by the photographer and researcher John Collier (1957). It involves a qualitative interview stimulated and guided by participant-generated photographs. This method can help break down barriers between researchers and participants and can promote rich and collaborative discussions (Harper, 1994).

Each student in the Fall 2016 Qualitative Methods Research Class recruited one study participant (n=25) (undergraduate and graduate students) and trained them in the appropriate and ethical use of this method. Study participants were asked to explore the meaning of “Penn’s relationship with the surrounding community” over the course of one week using their phones to document their exploration. Using the participant-generated photographs to guide conversation, each member of the research team conducted an interview with a participant. Additionally, each student investigator recruited five members of the Penn community (n=125) and asked them to answer a free-listing question designed to help us explore perceptions of Penn’s relationship with the surrounding community.

WHY EXAMINE PENN’S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SURROUNDING COMMUNITY?

The topic for this project was determined using nominal group technique (NGT). NGT is a structured small-group discussion approach used to reach consensus. A moderator (in this case the professor) asks the group a question and gathers the responses (in this case potential project topics) from each group member.

Once all potential topics are shared with the group, each member of the group prioritizes the topics. This process prevents one person from dominating the discussion, encourages all group members to participate, and results in a set of prioritized topics that represents the group’s preferences. The class, by way of NGT, decided to investigate how University of Pennsylvania students perceive Penn’s relationship with the surrounding community.

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FREE-LISTING FINDINGS

*Free-listing* can help researchers understand how a domain is perceived across a group of people by examining the average salience score (Smith’s S) of items. How do you know if an item is salient enough to be included and does not represent an idiosyncrasy of a particular respondent? One way is to plot all the items according to Smith’s S. In the plot to the left, the most salient terms are at the top left and the curve’s long tail represents items mentioned by only one or a few respondents.

THE TEAM IN ACTION

SELECT PRELIMINARY PHOTO-ELICITATION FINDINGS

Each student conducted a preliminary assessment of their interview and selected relevant quotes and images to potentially share in this exhibit. As a team, we decided which specific images to include in the exhibit, and organized images into preliminary thematic categories.

NEXT STEPS

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and will be analyzed by students. Thematic analysis will be facilitated by NVivo 11 software. Additionally, members of the research team will identify salient themes, summarize findings, prepare an abstract for presentation, and a manuscript for publication.

*The study protocol and consent procedures were approved by the University of Pennsylvania’s Institutional Review Board prior to data collection.*

If you have any questions or concerns about the study please feel free to contact Dr. Rosemary Frasso, 215-746-8554 or email her at rofrasso@mail.med.upenn.edu.
“We don’t really go past 38th Street. We don’t want parents and people to have the wrong perception of Penn and to be dissuaded by everything around Penn, so we kind of just stay in this Penn Bubble.”

(Speaking of her job as a tour guide)

“And all of the marches are going from City Hall to 30th Street or you know. No one is really going into the neighborhoods that are probably affected by these kinds of things the most. So that was kind of...because I always see things in this cynical way, but the fact that the solidarity walk just went right around College Green, it didn’t include the community at all.”

“I don’t think that Penn students really break the Penn bubble down unless maybe you are a graduate student...It is very present here because it feels like my greatest memory is based on campus rather than exploring the city or maybe meeting new people in different places. I think it is very comfortable to stay on campus.”

“Those that live in West Philadelphia that come out to the University/Penn area are not as accepted as those that visit from Penn into West Philadelphia. And I think that’s a huge barrier and maybe prevents people from the Penn area coming out to the West Philadelphia area and checking it out.”
“I think that one thing that I don’t see a lot of is that the use of Penn facility or Penn buildings by not only students but also people of the larger community. Even...the parking garage...represents this, but I think that buildings in general, within Penn’s campus are very unique and very exclusive to Penn students. I wouldn’t expect someone who is part of the West Philadelphia community to be in Van Pelt”

“It seemed almost intentionally creating an us vs. them, like privileging members of the Penn community over other community members...I thought it was a very surprising sign to see and I think it kind of reinforces the idea of academics maybe being out of touch or elitist”

“For me, I remember there was one class where we were talking about gentrification and some other topics in that area. And we were talking about how if you look around at park benches some of them...this bench doesn’t have it...but they’ll have a raised area in the center and it looks so benign, so harmless, but it’s actually...I don’t know if this is true... but it’s what this teacher said...it’s [raised area in the center] so homeless people can’t sleep there.”

“I’d be walking to my work and the office and, you know, this really interesting research and whatever, you know, not an ivory tower but, you know – metaphor – and then you’d see these people coming into the methadone clinic, you know, just like...uh...run down”
“Penn, I think, really has West Philly’s best interest at heart and Penn may not always go about it the right way and may overutilization West Philly for research participants and other things but I think when it comes down to it they’re really watching over West Philly and really want to take care of the citizens of West Philly, the green space, the buildings and everything there.”

“This one for me is more so the student’s willingness to be involved not so much the university but the students here being willing to take time and help out in any way they can. I’m there because of Penn but at the same time I still enjoy doing it and being there as a student. So I think it’s both the combination of the university presenting the opportunities and then the student’s willingness to go out and be a part of it.”

“I think sometimes the priorities – because we’re very focused on like programming and research and our priorities, we would go to parks and people would be like ‘I just want the bathroom to be open’ or ‘I just want there to be a water fountain’ or like and here we’re getting all this funding for – granted because maybe a water pump is not going to improve health outcomes but it might make them happy.”
“...I know a number of people who didn’t go to Penn for school and are from the area and are able to work here at Penn like in research or in the hospital as like nurses or lab techs, things like that. So giving that opportunity. And the benefits of working full time at Penn...You get health insurance, you get tuition benefits, you get discounts to different places. So it helps build the immediate community that way.”

*(referring to Penn as an employer)*

“So maybe there’s something to being on the ground and like actually talking instead of always being like I’m from Penn. I’m just here in my scrubs. I’m taking your blood pressure, talking about your health, and having those kinds of dialogues do help me feel less separated, but the separation still exists.”

*(speaking of a health fair)*

“Yeah, I think this one kind of gives a sense that there is a positive relationship with the community that, this particular med student is excited to be involved in something that is supporting the community in Philly. And it’s fun, the table is covered in treats and things so it’s yeah, I don’t know, there’s a sense of abundance, that they’re sharing this meal and these things together...”

“So this one is just Penn Medicine just because of the importance of...medicine. The influence that Penn has and the innovation and research not just here locally, but around the world. It’s just a very big thing and a lot of the surrounding community, you know, West Philly they benefit from that a lot.”
“There’s going to be some impacts both on the Sansom side of the street and on the Walnut side of the street…It’s impacting traffic both for automobiles and for people. It’s potentially hazardous to people walking…They’ve done a pretty good job of keeping things maintained. But, I mean, it’s a big imposing building – it’s going to have an impact probably in ways that we might not foresee.”

“It’s just interesting to think of the views…people at Drexel, people at Penn think and like, we’re building this like great new science building but then how does that really affect the people that actually have lived here a very long time? Um, and what does that mean to them?

“It’s construction. The theme that I thought of was like gentrification…But by doing that [construction] they created a higher value for those buildings and houses [surrounding it]. So sometimes if people don’t own those houses their rent or the amount they’re paying increases. And little by little for lack of a better word, fancier buildings from better institutions come…[and then] better grocery stores. That causes the community to be at a higher value so sometimes people have to move out.”

“This [graffiti] likely came from somebody in this community…it’s planful, it’s not arbitrary…West Philly was here before Penn became what it is…and [Penn] feels to me a little bit like graffiti on the area…we use up space, and we don’t really ask…and we just kind of planted down on everything else…”
“I don’t know, it’s a very ‘Welcome to Penn’ type of thing, but to me, it’s also like a giant wall, and I feel like that’s maybe why I find it odd that it’s there…Because what is University City? Is that a neighborhood? Like how far does that extend? And I – I’ve always wondered that. Like if you look at a map, what is it – like is that a neighborhood? Or is it just because of Penn that it’s now called University City?”

“Drexel and Penn being right against each other but having their own separate worlds, within someone else’s world of West Philly.”

“There are clear, invisible borders, not as apparent as this railway system, within the West Philly community and Penn.”

“They just keep building and building and building. This is always going to impact the community and keep pushing people who are from what is described as West Philly more West and more away from where they were traditionally defined their community, and I don’t know really what Penn could do about that. But, in many ways, being affiliated with Penn makes me feel like an outsider to West Philly even thought I think Penn is technically part of West Philly.”

“Our relationship with West Philly is increasing through means of education, but at the same time [like a plant] it is very vulnerable…and the relationship could easily be broken if we don’t continue to water and nurture this plant…it can grow in any direction, like up, down, to the side…Penn’s relationship with West Philly really depends on what we give to West Philly and what West Philly gives to us…continually watering and nurturing our relationship with West Philadelphia”
“Universities employ a lot of people in the communities that they’re located in. Penn does employ a lot of West Philly. Ok, so you give them jobs, but in the same breath what are you taking away from them? You’re taking away a sense of community. It doesn’t matter how horrid you think their living conditions are, whatever, it doesn’t matter. That’s somebody’s community, that’s where they raise their family, generations could have raised their family there, you don’t know. It means something to someone.”

(referring to the gentrification of Graduate Hospital)

“I wanted to emphasize how West Philly currently has a broken foundation, but as of Penn’s positive impact of late we are creating steps for students to get out to these communities and improve these communities…it’s important to point out that as Penn expands…companies like University City housing…are buying more properties in West Philadelphia and it’s increasingly gentrifying the area. So it’s not that the community…is becoming better; we are just gentrifying it more and we are pushing away the community and the people that used to live there by increasing the rent”

“Sometimes West Philly kind of gets treated like the trash of Penn. Penn sometimes disrespects West Philly and like I said before I don’t think they mean it, I do think they have West Philly’s best interest at heart but I don’t think they always go about it in the right way and they push citizens out through gentrification and stuff, so in a sense it’s kind of like taking out the trash.”
“At the beginning of service on Sunday the pastor said take some invitations to give out to friends and we’re having it pretty early in December so that Penn students can come before they leave for their break and so I guess this is less of Penn’s involvement with the community and more of something in the community’s involvement with trying to be inclusive to Penn students.”

“…And while you do see trees in this one, you see this like modernity, industrial, Penn-kind of taking over the West Philadelphia area. But then it kind of gives this symbol of like, here we are, we’ve built all this stuff, but then we’re also kind of keeping you out with our security guards…I kind of feel that a lot with Penn, where we kind of create this little micro-environment, and kind of say we want to integrate our surrounding community, but aren’t necessarily following through with that.”

“Penn has such a good reputation of being such a fancy ivy league school…but we are the outsider.”
“Having a higher density population means more people are using transit, there’s more people to like patronize businesses and West Philadelphia has a lot of small business like there’s not a lot of chains...because most chains don’t believe there...is business for them in West Philadelphia, which is actually kind of the advantage of small businesses.”

“I decided to take a picture of the books through the stepping stool because through education is the stepping stool to get out of your neighborhood, because West Philadelphia is known as a very poor neighborhood with underprivileged kids and the school education system is not the best, and living conditions in which the students live is not the best so through education and Penn’s influence, hopefully positively influence, the students have a chance to go to better schools”

“It’s more like this is a space that is specifically for Penn students. It’s almost like you have a stretch of homes and have areas that are homes that or like housing that’s being marketed to students that are primarily lived in by students. So that’s housing that is not going to families or to anyone else. So I don’t know if it’s a good or a bad thing.”

“I think this such a benefit and resource for the community...because Penn is such a big name in medicine I probably see as many patients not from West Philadelphia as I do from West Philadelphia...So, I’ll have patients from Delaware. I’ve had some as far as Florida. And like every once and awhile, I’ll see people who live right down the street. So it kind of makes me wonder how often people from Philadelphia get to...use this resource, but I still think just proximity-wise this is such a benefit to West Philly.”
“There was this freshman orientation…about like how to be safe on campus…they tell this story of this girl who was out at night past 40th street and she got shot in the leg and then there’s her testimony, like and I think it’s a video they show everybody. And that’s like your first week on campus. So I think they really like emphasize that into you that if you go past 40th, be careful.”

“And so think that at the end of the day, it’s a good thing especially for the businesses around there because they have all these hungry students who eat out a lot and like to shop at random hipster stores and go to dive bars…they can only do better with more young people…Penn has an imperative to keep them safe. Penn’s safety patrol goes all the way, I think, to 48th, which is far beyond the school’s boundaries but it’s to keep their students safe, which keeps the neighborhood safe, which creates this better environment for everything.”

“This is…40th and Spring Garden. I’ve had several reactions from people where they look at me strangely or they’re like…One girl last week she was like, ‘Oh, I heard that’s where it starts to get sketch’…And I’ve never had any problem…you know it’s completely fine for me you know, it’s a nice place to live. I’m starting to refer to it as home. But at the same time I feel like there’s such a disconnect because this is a mile away from campus, probably not even a mile”