

Analysis of Duneier's Ethnography: Sidewalk

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Part A

After moving to Greenwich Village, New York, Sociologist, Michelle Duneier became curious about a group of mostly black African American books and magazine vendors not too far from his apartment (sixth Avenue and Eight street). Duneier developed relationship with one of the vendor, Hakim Hasan. One day, Duneier asked him how he saw his role on the street. To which Hakim responded by saying: "I'm a public character". Duneier had no idea what this meant and Hakim suggested he read a book. After reading the book, Duneier felt more comfortable with the idea of seeing him as a public character, rather than a broken window. He decided that he wanted to learn more about him along with his fellow vendors. For weeks, he recorded many conversations between the vendors and their customers. While collecting data, Duneier worked alongside the vendors. Additionally, Duneier went out on "hunt" with the vendors to see where they get their products. Throughout this, he interviewed a number of the vendors to understand their stories. Due to a number of issues in the life of his subject, Duneier had a different perspective of them initially. However, throughout the book, he had many moments of realization. After five years of extensive research, Duneier produced a very compelling argument for many of the issues he observed and suggested some potential solutions. (Duneier, 1999, P. 1-200}

Part B

First, because Duneier is a white, educated, middle-class man and was studying black, mostly uneducated street vendors, there was a huge relationship difference for him to overcome. This is clearly illustrated in Duneier (1999): "when I stood at Hakim's table, I felt that, as a white male, I stood out. In my mind, I had no place at his table, because he was selling so-called black books" (P. 10). From this we can see that Duneier, as a white man, felt that he was different and

held different values than the respondents who were black. He also initially saw the vendors as broken windows but he later adjusted this view to that of a public character.

Secondly, in terms of generally accepted civil behavior, he could not comprehend behavior such as sidewalk sleeping, urinating in public, or selling stolen goods (Duneier and Carter, 2001). According to Duneier, he did not view this kind of behavior as civil behavior that was generally acceptable to him and as a result, viewed this as uncivil behavior.

Finally, Duneier was very patient and this enabled him to get clear inside understanding of the group by integrating with the vendors. He was also very thorough, since he was able to take more time in his research after Hakim pointed out that he focused more on him in his research as opposed to also focusing on other vendors.

From his research we can clearly see an important transformation of data derived from the research he conducted among the vendors. This is demonstrated by the fact that he was very keen to obtain an inside understanding of the various intricate relationships among the vendors. Duneier employed participant observation in the sense that he was directly involved with his subjects. He worked as a magazine scavenger and a street vendor on and off for seven years.

Duneier drew various conclusions from his research, primarily about the vendors whom he initially viewed as broken windows (Duneier, 1999). His research ultimately showed that most of the vendors had actually become public characters that create a set of expectations. The vendors had expectations and even aspired to live better lives. He also argued that driving the vendors off the street and away from their livelihoods would be far more likely to cause crime than allowing them to exist on the street. He also argued that the widespread misunderstanding that the vendors regularly deal with was as a result of judgment based simply on race and class. I don't agree with his presumption that driving these men from the street will lead to crime, as

some could be rehabilitated and seek better lives, and further, some of the vendors already engaged in criminal activities such a drug dealing and selling stolen books.

From his research we can clearly conclude that Duneier, due to his initial views about the vendors as broken windows, tried to better understand the vendors as public characters who could be able to enter into relationships and even aspire to better lives. Starting with Hakim, he was able to have an open mind and even became one of the vendors for seven years and was able to mitigate and change the negative views he had about the vendors. I do believe in most of Duneier conclusions, apart from the presumption that forcing vendors out of the street would lead to more crime. Because vendors were already engaged in criminal activities (Duneier and Carter 2001), their conclusion is unpersuasive. The research, however, does not provide adequate discussion of the arguments against the researcher's assertions and at some stages is hugely focused on Hakim's view of Sixth Avenue. Duneier also considered arguments against his views. A good example was the notion of vendors enhancing social order as far-fetched and some indecent behavior, such as vendors urinating in Washington Court Condominium, being comparable to behavior observed in Hillcrest in Beverly Hills, where white men pee on the golf course. He also did not seek enough information from shopkeepers or apartment owners, who were also interviewed, but whose views were not included in the final research findings by Duneier and Carter.

Part C

I consulted two external sources in order to help me clearly understand ethnography that entails participant observation. The first was "Prevalence of Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders among Homeless and Low-Income Housed Mothers" by Ellen L. Bassuk, M.D, John C. Buckner, Ph.D., Jennifer N. Perloff, M.P.A., and Shari S. Bassuk, Sc.D. The objective of this study compared the prevalence of DSM-III-R disorders among homeless and low-income housed

mothers with the prevalence of these disorders among all women in the National Comorbidity Survey. The results were that homeless and housed mothers had similar rates of psychiatric and substance use disorders. Both groups had higher lifetime and current rates of major depression and substance abuse than did all women in the National Comorbidity Survey.

The second external source I used was “Family homelessness: Background Research Findings and Policy Options,” by Mary Beth Shinn, Ph.D., Debra J. Rog, Ph.D., and Dennis P. Culhane, Ph.D. Prepared for the US Interagency Council on Homelessness in May 2005, this study examined the various policy options and suggested some combination of options may help in chipping away at the factors that create homelessness. They concluded that any choice of options needs to be made judiciously and with a broad perspective.

Both of the above sources used participant observation as Duneier used in his study of vendors on Sixth Avenue, but a key point to note here is that Duneier used a longer time, approximately seven years as one of the vendors so as to better understand the vendors.

Sources for data collection in the studies were participant observation, interviews with key informants, and methodology that entailed first gaining access to the setting, then selecting key informants and taking field notes.

Part D

According to recent studies on homeless families in New York by the Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness, 12,000 families are currently sleeping in shelters, including 24,000 children. This is a 250% increase in 20 years. The city's homelessness problem is increasingly dire because many homeless families are unable to get into shelters. Ethnography is describing and understanding another way of life from a native point of view and entails documenting routine daily lives of people (Del Rio-Roberts ,2010).

To undertake this project I would first conduct detailed observation of homeless families in the Bronx and also conduct detailed interviews with the various parties in the homeless family community. I would seek to understand what kind of jobs members in a homeless family engage in, the prevalence of drug use, the link between the crime rate and the increasing numbers of homeless families, and finally get an inside understanding of the various relationships within homeless families. I would also seek to be integrated into one of the homeless families in the Bronx in order to gain an inside understanding of the various relationships within the homeless family. This integration would be important in understanding the position and experience of the homeless families. Living among the homeless family, I would be able to experience firsthand what they go through on a daily basis.

Ethnography would be effective to conduct this qualitative research because it yields an in-depth understanding of the culture of a specific group of people and it also gives a voice for the culture to express their views, which might not otherwise be heard. Through this method, I will be able to gain a good understanding of all the dynamics involved in the operation homeless families.

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