A Personal Reflection on a Public Ethnography

The purpose of my group’s project was to explore the relations of Parkland students in social groups, and the interaction between those groups. Our initial hypotheses was that these groups, which are not hard to become a part of, remained isolated from each other and from other individual students at Parkland not involved in the group. To gather data, we first used participant observation, described in Aaron Podolefsky’s “Applying Cultural Anthropology” as the primary research method of cultural anthropology, involving long-term observations conducted in natural settings. In other words, we “people watched” students at Parkland to become aware of several different social groups, and then observed how these groups interacted. Eventually, we approached students that were part of these groups and conducted interviews in order to gain more personal insight on their feelings towards their own groups, as well as other groups and general social interaction at Parkland College. As a Parkland student, I was already aware of some of the groups present at the campus, but since I myself am not a part of any group, it was easy for me to start from the ground up and gather more subjective information on the groups I observed.

As I began to conduct my interview, the questions I asked my informant started off a little more on the broader side. When asked if he felt that he was a member of any group or social circle at Parkland, he responded that he was part of the radio/broadcasting group. One thing he said to me that stood out as significant is that he feels a connection with other members
of the radio group because they all take the same classes and share much of the same knowledge. There is an argot, or specialized, sometimes secret vocabulary particular to the radio group which was reminiscent of some of the specialized language that our textbook discussed in terms of how human groups will make up this specific code as part of socialization and group belonging (Podolefsky). My informant shared that their specialized language formed a connection within the group that “other people outside the group wouldn’t understand.”

As the interview progressed, when the respondent was asked about his relations with other students, he shared that interaction was minimal and usually only occurred within general education classes. In fact, my informant shared that apart from classes and group functions, he doesn’t spend much leisure time with anyone from Parkland. The same goes for myself and I feel it’s probably true for most students here at Parkland. Sadly, commuter schools seem to breed the perfect environment for this minimal interaction. Most students want to be in and out as fast as possible and just focus on the work they need to do. In our textbook we also read about the Western Apache culture members who are socialized for silence upon meeting strangers. In my questions about social interactions at Parkland, I believe that when at this community college we are socialized in a similar way (Podolefsky). Whether intentionally or unintentionally, I and many other students here, including our interviewees for the project, generally avoid contact with new people unless classes or groups force it upon us. My group mates and I discussed this phenomenon and believe that this is why students connected to groups have an easier time making friends at Parkland, and explains their tendency to remain within the group.

In conclusion, our research has primarily shown what we originally thought: students at Parkland College who are members of a group tend to stay within their groups and intergroup relation is not very prevalent. From the interviews my group members and I conducted, we
gathered evidence to support that Parkland students stick with the people they know, and as long as they have no need to do otherwise, tend to stay within their isolated group. Obviously we can’t know that this is always the case for every student at Parkland, but consistency of responses to interviews from our sample of informants allows us decent insight into the overall feelings of the Parkland campus as a whole. However, there were several topics this ethnography did not touch that I would be interested to see explored in the future. For example, I would be curious to know what groups don’t exist that Parkland students would like to see and become part of. Research on that topic could turn this academic project into applied anthropology for the betterment of Parkland College.

Works Cited