Ethnography Paper: Non Traditional Age Students at Parkland

For our group’s ethnography project, we conducted a native ethnography on non-traditional age students at Parkland College. We were interested in this topic because all of us either had or currently have family members attending Parkland College as non-traditional age students. My own mother, who participated in the study as one of our interviewees, has been attending Parkland College as a non-traditional age student for several years as an art student. The purpose of our ethnography was originally to learn about the social lives of non-traditional age students, as we were curious as to what sort of social lives they had given that it didn’t seem that they participated in student organizations and clubs. However, we ended up abandoning this idea as it soon became clear that it was not fruitful to our research.

Our research purpose then changed to a broader one, which was to learn about and examine the experiences of non-traditional age students at Parkland. In doing so, we learned that despite our initial preconceptions that non-traditional age students would have similar experiences to that of our research group members, that was not true at all and that non-traditional students and their experiences cannot be placed into a single category based on age. To do so is unfair and demonstrates an ageist. In other words, in the process of doing this ethnography, we were forced to confront our own ageist biases and preconceived notions towards non-traditional age students.
To conduct our ethnography, we interviewed three women who were either currently attending or had previously attended Parkland College as non-traditional age students. They were all Caucasian, mothers, and between the ages of fifty and sixty. Each interview took approximately twenty-five minutes and since some of our group members were related to these women, we chose to conduct the interviews in a panel style where we took turns asking different questions. In the future, if we were to expand upon this ethnography, having a more diverse selection of interviewees would be best.

We exercised reflexivity throughout our ethnography, which is defined in Keri Vacanti Brondo’s book *Cultural Anthropology: Contemporary, Public, and Critical Readings* as being aware of one’s positionality (16). We originally planned to practice participant observation in this ethnography and follow our interviewees around for a class period or so, but ended up not being able to do this due to time constraints. Participant observation is defined in Keri Vacanti Brondo’s book *Cultural Anthropology: Contemporary, Public, and Critical Readings* as a research method in which the anthropologists conducting the ethnography observe and participate with the subjects of their ethnography’s everyday lives (ibid).

The data we collected showed that non-traditional age students have very different experiences and reasons for attending Parkland College, even if their age, gender, and ethnic background is similar. One interviewee, who is currently taking several art classes for fun and as a way to keep busy post-retirement, mentioned that many art classes are often comprised mostly of non-traditional age students, as opposed to another interviewee who took classes for the purpose of pursuing a nursing degree, who was the only or one of the few non-traditional age students in her classes. Another interviewee described how she was sometimes offered help with going up stairs and other such physical activities, but apart from that, she was “treated like a
peer.” The interviewees all described largely positive experiences at Parkland, and expressed no grievances. One interviewee felt she was able to pursue her dreams through studying to become a social worker, another said she discovered a new confidence and joy in learning that she could create beautiful artworks. When asked what the easiest and hardest things about being a non-traditional age student at Parkland were, all interviewees answered that time management was a major difficulty, citing reasons such as having to balance schoolwork and classes with jobs and family life as being the cause for their problems with time management.

These results prove our thesis that non-traditional age students are a diverse group of people and that they and their experiences cannot be placed into a single category based on age. In completing this ethnography, we not only learned about our fellow students, but also learned important truths about ourselves. We realized our own biases towards non-traditional age students and were able to better ourselves, thanks to our research. This ethnography was important because it broke down social barriers between traditional age students and non-traditional age students, and enabled us to become closer to the interviewees who participated in the ethnography. We hope that those who listen to the podcast created to showcase the ethnography are also able to realize and confront their own ageist biases and grow closer to their fellow non-traditional age students at Parkland College or whatever other college or university they may attend. In the future, if we were to continue this ethnography or do it over, we would consult a more diverse pool of interviewees, not just caucasian mothers in their fifties and sixties. A group of non-traditional age students that would fall outside these characteristics would be veteran students at Parkland College, a large group that we feel a similar project should interview in order to gain valuable information which, we believe, could yield a very interesting and different perspective of the Parkland College experience.
Works Cited