

Aaron Hoyle-Katz

Professor Scarborough

ANT 103, Spring 2013

### **Ethnography of Community Service**

Our ethnography topic was on Parkland clubs and organizations that specialize in community service and/or volunteer work. Further focus was on the students' reasons for participating in these organizations and what they gained from their experiences academically and personally.

In our research group, two members had previously participated in a volunteer work-based club: The Homework Club. This club brings Parkland student volunteers to a Garden Hills elementary school to tutor students on their homework. Their previous experience at The Homework Club provided a practical *emic* point of view during our fieldwork - they personally knew staff members involved and had the know-how of the club's inner workings. This allowed us to easily get started on our field work at The Homework Club. Oppositely, I provided an *etic* perspective, as I had never even known of The Homework Club before. All of our Homework Club research was fresh information to me, leaving me free to study its workings without any misleading preconceptions. I attempted to make the unfamiliar familiar, and my research group members attempted to make the familiar unfamiliar, giving our group a well-rounded perspective. This is similar to what Richard Borshay Lee learned in the Kalahari, that only with the emic and etic perspectives combined can one begin to truly understand a group socially (2013: 11)

To begin our research, we contacted and set out to interview Brian Nudelman who we reasoned would be a great resource as he is a coordinator of The Homework Club as well as the advisor chair to Alphi Phi Omega. Alphi Phi Omega is a co-ed community service fraternity with a branch at Parkland College that we chose to also include in our research. This interview laid out the basic information on each group and acted as a rough framework for our ethnographic research. While this was not fieldwork from *within* each group, it did provide us with crucial information and a perspective from an authority figure on the organizations.

To learn more about Parkland's Alphi Phi Omega branch, we also interviewed its student president, Katherine Klindworth. When we asked her why she believes students participate in Alphi Phi Omega, simply to volunteer, to help out, or to build their resume, she strongly stated that most members genuinely just want to help. As a two-year college most Parkland students possess, as Klindworth put it, a "do things because I need to do it" mentality. Because of this, Alphi Phi Omega has a very active member base with few resume-builders, so much so that they received a section distinguished award for their dedicated work in the community. Klindworth also informed us of the many ways Alphi Phi Omega helps its members through their experience. Alphi Phi Omega pledgers have to create their own service projects, meaning they have to go out, set up, and organize these events on their own. She emphasized how this kind of work promotes actively learning real world skills that students simply cannot get in a classroom or textbook. Personally, Klindworth said her work in Alphi Phi Omega has taught her better speech skills as well as people skills. She originally joined to help others, but also helped herself in unexpected ways. This suggested that this could also be the case with many other

students in Alpha Phi Omega. Another individual-level example she gave was a member that was a shy quiet individual who flourished as an Alpha Phi Omega member, exhibited significant personal growth, and eventually became their service VP. Sadly, she passed away in a car wreck recently. After these events, Klindworth came to realize the opportunity Alpha Phi Omega gave her to grow and improve personally in this last period of her life. In a very powerful quote, Klindworth stated that she has no doubts in her mind that the student she referenced spent the last few months of her life happier than she had ever been before.

To learn more about The Homework Club, we paid a visit to one of their regular tutoring sessions at Garden Hills Elementary. While waiting for the tutoring to begin, we pulled aside a few of the Parkland students present for quick interviews. These interviews showed a few key differences from Alpha Phi Omega - unlike in Alpha Phi Omega, most students initially had other motives besides simply helping others. This is because some Parkland courses suggest attending the Homework Club and some also offer extra credit for attending. The Homework Club acts as complementary learning to some Parkland Classes. As Nudelman had put it, Homework Club takes what students learn in lectures and textbooks and frames it in a real world situation so students can start to see how working in a similar field might work out. Some students attend this club as a resume-builder, in fact, one estimate was that about half of the students use The Homework Club as resume-boosting material. However, similarly to Alpha Phi Omega, many members reported unexpected personal growth from their experience at The Homework Club. Much of this growth seemed to be in communication skills, but also in emotional growth by their interactions with the children they tutor - many build personal relationships with

the children that they closely value. After the interviews, we followed the student tutors to the classrooms where the main event takes place. We observed how the tutoring works from classroom to classroom, and I gained my bearings in this new environment. Before long, I realized that further observation from afar wouldn't teach me anything more, so I hopped in to the action and gave my try at tutoring. I helped a student struggling through reading a book by helping her sound out words and explain definitions. I myself struggled to help her at times, but other more experienced student tutors were there to help, and they proficiently smoothed things over. I started to handle the tutoring better but before long time was up. By the end of my short session, I could already start to see how it could benefit students and how it had already benefitted many of those present there that day through the participant observation I had engaged in.

These community service and volunteer based organizations clearly provide many benefits for participating students. Students began their work in these organizations for multiple reasons: As a class recommendation, as a resume-building opportunity, or simply to help others. Many started out blind to the personal benefits they could reap from their work in these organizations, but came to realize and appreciate the benefits. Most significantly, students found that they improved their communication skills, real-world skills, as well as personal emotional growth. In-class learning and readings can only go so far in education. Jointly, class work and such organizations as Alpha Phi Omega and The Homework Club offer students significant opportunities in different but equally important ways. Similarly to how Matthew Steinglass pointed out in his article "It takes a Village Healer", radically different methods to achieve a common goal can coexist to offer greater overall benefits (2013: 151).

## **Works Cited**

Lee, Richard Borshay. 2013. "Eating Christmas in the Kalahari" in *Applying Cultural Anthropology: And Introductory Reader*, Aaron Podelefsky, Peter Brown and Scott Lacy, editors. New York: McGraw Hill.

Steinglass, Matthew. 2013. "It Takes a Village Healer" in *Applying Cultural Anthropology: And Introductory Reader*, Aaron Podelefsky, Peter Brown and Scott Lacy, editors. New York: McGraw Hill.