

# Using Ethnography of a Long-Term Care Facility to Understand Leisure and Aging

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For several years, I have required students in my Aging and Leisure course to complete volunteer hours with a senior program or facility. The intention of this requirement was to enhance the students' understanding of the importance of meaningful activity in the lives of older adults. The volunteer hours were completed under the supervision of an activity director or recreational therapist at an adult day care program and two long-term care facilities. The student volunteers were assigned to assist with scheduled activities at one of the sites for at least 10 hours during the semester. Students reported on their experiences through a reflective writing assignment at the end of the semester and periodic class discussions. Over the course of a five-year period I found that, although students indicated they enjoyed the assignment and learned a great deal about aging, the experience often supported the development of negative, stereotypical views of aging. Specifically, I had the following concerns:

- Students learned to view activity programs as diversionary activities with little connection to other aspects of life at the facility.
- Students learned to evaluate residents based almost entirely on the individual resident's willingness and desire to participate in scheduled activities. Residents who declined to participate in activities were described as grouchy, withdrawn, [I added a comma-APA] and unmotivated.
- Little consideration was given to the individual leisure preferences of residents. Students learned to view client populations as homogeneous. Scheduled activities were viewed as "good for the residents," regardless of whether individual residents actually enjoyed participating in the activity.
- Infantilizing behavior toward older adults was supported by the tendency of all of the facilities to offer childlike programs to the residents on a regular basis. Furthermore, students modeled staff behavior and learned to address residents as "sweetie," "honey," or other monikers that are not age appropriate.

The volunteer assignment did not provide a sufficient opportunity for students to engage in critical reflection of life in the long-term care facility and the role of activity in later life.

## Critical Ethnography Assignment

Ethnography is the use of multiple methods, including prolonged participant observation, to discover the meanings of individuals' actions within the context of everyday settings (Savage, 2000). The term ethnography refers to both the research process and the written product of the research. The design of ethnographic research evolves during the process. The product of ethnographic research explores the perspectives of the researcher and the participants (Savage).

Ethnography is particularly useful as critical pedagogy as it allows the students to "bring the outside in" through immersion in ethnographic fieldwork (Sotirin, 1999). In the context of this project, students are required to re-evaluate their assumptions about older adults and long-term care and engage older adults in a manner that often is unfamiliar (Gordon, 1998). The long-term care facility resident is no longer a passive recipient of the student's sympathy, rather the resident is an active contributor in the construction of knowledge. According to Savage (2000), ethnography is especially suitable for in-depth study of health care settings as it is "a way of accessing beliefs and practices, allowing these to be viewed in the context in which they occur and thereby aiding understanding of behavior surrounding health and illness" (p. 1401). Ethnography has been utilized to evaluate a variety of clinical settings similar to long-term care facilities, including mental health centers and health clinics (Savage).

I addressed the previous concerns through utilization of a critical ethnography project with the following objectives:

1. Students will study the ecology of a long-term care facility. Specifically, students will develop an understanding of the interrelatedness of different aspects of life at the facility.
2. Students will conduct a critical and systematic evaluation of the facility through interaction with residents and staff and observations of activity programs resident/staff interactions, and resident/resident interactions.

These objectives were met through the development of a written ethnography of a long-term care facility.

The assignment was introduced during the third week of the semester when students were given basic instruction in ethnography. This unit covered the following topics:

- What is ethnography? Topics included the purpose of ethnography, a description of ethnography, and the uses and limitations of ethnography (Stringer, Agnello, & Baldwin, 1997).
- How is ethnography conducted? Topics included conducting and documenting observations and in-depth interviews and the role of informants and participant observers.

- How is qualitative data analyzed? Students were taught to use the constant comparative method to look for common themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).
- How is ethnography reported? This section focused on how students would present their findings.

In addition to an overview of ethnography, students were instructed in issues surrounding human subjects and informed consent. This project was not subject to institutional review, however, students were required to follow institutional procedures regarding informed consent and confidentiality.

Students completed the ethnography assignment in groups of 4-6. Each student was required to spend a minimum of 5 hours participating in the activity program, complete a thorough in-depth interview of a resident, and spend additional time observing some aspect of life in the facility. Although each group had flexibility in determining what specific interactions or behaviors to observe, groups were required to address informal interactions between residents, interactions between staff and residents, resident and staff behavior during scheduled activities, informal leisure behavior, and the rhythm of daily life in the facility in the final report. In addition to addressing these issues, each group was required to summarize areas of concerns and develop recommendations for practice. At the end of the semester the final report was submitted to the instructor and summarized in a brief report to the class. Two fifty-minute class periods were dedicated to discussion of group findings.

### Outcomes

Generally, I have been pleased with the outcomes of this assignment and feel the assignment objectives have been met. After completion of the assignment, students were better able to articulate the role of recreation and leisure in the long-term care facility and the lives of residents, evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of recreation programs, and assess resident/staff interactions. Furthermore, they have a deeper understanding of the concept of infantilization and its presence in staff/resident interactions and organized recreation programs.

Development of ethnography could be an appropriate assignment for a variety of types of programs and facilities including youth centers, rehabilitation hospitals, mental health facilities, camps, senior centers, and sports leagues. This assignment is particularly suitable for programs and facilities with a small, regular clientele that interact with staff on a regular basis.

### References

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