

Using **Ethnographic Methods** **to** Facilitate Equitable Involvement in Regional Water Planning

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Policy problem: water planning

- **Goal:** Improve water systems & infrastructures
- **Need:** Publicly engaged project development
 - Prop 1: “Disadvantaged” Communities
- **Challenges**
 - Non-community centered evidence bases
 - Sustainable involvement
- **Scale**
 - Watershed

Solution: Ethnography

Method

- The **situated** qualitative research and analysis of human social experience
 - Community-based
 - Relational process: interviewing, participant observation
 - Open-ended qualitative data: capture context & experience

Products

- Ethnographies, ethnographically informed reports

See: Ethnographic Studies Can Inform Agencies' Actions.

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Policy Project: Civic Ethnography

Funder: Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority (SAWPA)

- **Prop 1 DCI Program: Needs assessment**
 - Technical assistance funding
 - Participatory planning

Project partners

- Universities: CSU San Bernardino & Fullerton, UC Irvine
- Sacred Places Institute for Indigenous Peoples
- Local Government Commission
- Cal Rural Water Association
- Water Education Foundation

Santa Ana Watershed Community

<https://sawwa.org/owow/dci-program/strengths-and-needs/> **Ethnography**

Project Innovation

- Strengths **and** Needs Assessment
- GIS tool: **accurate** disadvantage mapping (CSUSB)
- **Civic ethnography**
 - Electeds, water providers, tribal groups, local community groups

Novel Aims

- Reverse “expert” info flow: **listening** to “water stories”
- **Engaged** and **responsive** research
- Expand participatory **collaboration networks**

Ethnography vs. Dominant Methods

Method	Advantage	Disadvantage
Surveys	Cost, finite variables, statistically authoritative	Admin biases, limited engagement
Ethnography	Whole data forms, sustained engagement	Sampling, intensive, infinite variables, trained analysts

Santa Ana Watershed Community Ethnography

Ethnographically-informed

- **Instrument:** 2 open-ended Qs
- **Research modes**
 - Engaged listening
 - Academic-agency partnerships
- **Analysis**
 - Narrative/content analysis
 - Trainings for agency personnel
- **“Connections and disconnections”**



Strength/need example: “Water Quality”

- **Problem:** “Trusting the tap”

- **Findings**

 - **Connections**

 - Concern with information and experiences of “quality”

 - **Disconnections**

 - Agencies, electeds, advantaged persons vs. lay community “tap-based” perspectives

Ethnography reveals hidden factors of power and exclusion: “trust” as a situated variable, housing status, tap-based sensory evidence, contradictory info systems

“The water that we get...I use to shower, to wash, to clean... But I do not drink it. I cook with that water, knowing that because of the boiling process, in a sense, it will kill any bacteria or germs... Drinking straight out of the tap? Never. I will never do that.”

- OC RESIDENT

Possibilities: Beyond Dominant Methods of Soliciting Local Knowledge and Needs

- ✓ Reversing the flow of “expertise”
- ✓ Redefining water planning
- ✓ Establishing new community relations structures
- ✓ Identifying Community-centered topics of conversation
- ✓ Diversifying and training water policy & research participants

Limitations: time constraints, relationship building, group inclusion, more attention to race and class variables