

University of Wisconsin-La Crosse
International Undergraduate Research Grant Application Cover Sheet - Spring

1. Title of Project: Panhandling in Puebla: An Ethnographic Study
2. Applicant: Hollie Nyseth SS#: _____
Major: Sociology Year in School: Junior (Senior by credit)
Date of Graduation: May 2008 Local Phone: _____
Local Address: _____
Email: nyseth.holl@students.uwlax.edu
3. Faculty Sponsor: Timothy Gongaware Email: gongawar.timo@uwlax.edu
Department: Sociology Campus Phone: (608) 785-6772
Campus Address: 1725 State Street La Crosse, WI 54601

4. Synopsis of proposed research (do not exceed space provided)

The proposed study seeks to produce an ethnographic study of panhandling in Puebla, Mexico. Overall, there is a sufficient amount of research on panhandling. This research has focused on the social interaction between the panhandler and the passersby and on the link between panhandling and homelessness. The proposed study seeks to continue to explore the social interactions involved in panhandling through participant observation, formal interviews, and informal conversations. These methods will provide empirical data coupled with personal perspectives to generate a better understanding of panhandling, in Puebla, Mexico.

The final product of the study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge about panhandling and homelessness and will perhaps give insight to the phenomenon of panhandling in the particular location. The final results will be presented at the Celebration of Undergraduate Research and Creativity Ceremony at the University of Wisconsin—La Crosse and will also be submitted for publication in the *UWL Journal of Undergraduate Research*. Furthermore, I would stand ready, willing and able to share the results with as many people as possible. It is my sincere hope as a future sociologist that the results will serve as a catalyst for further research by me and others.

5. Grant Effort. (Provide dates of research and time to be spent on project):
Data will be collected from May 14, 2007 to June 30, 2007; analysis and production of final results will last from August 2007 to approximately February 2007.
6. Total amount requested for completion of research project (from Budget Summary page):
\$ 2000.00
7. Compliances. (If "yes" for any of the below, compliance documentation **must** be filed if this proposal is funded.) Does this proposal require review for:

- a. Human Subjects? Yes X No _____
b. Animal Care? Yes _____ No X
c. Hazardous materials? Yes _____ No X

8. Signatures

- a. Applicant: _____ Date: _____
b. Faculty Advisor: _____ Date: _____
c. Department Chair: _____ Date: _____
d. Academic Dean: _____ Date: _____
e. International Ed Staff: _____ Date: _____

Background/Statement of the Problem

Poverty and homelessness are phenomena that have plagued the world for centuries. Even tonight as many as one billion people around the globe are without a house to sleep in (Alekseeva 2005). The extent and profusion of this social problem has prompted multiple research initiatives in attempts to define and explain the causes and conditions of homelessness. To add to the growing body of literature, I intend to conduct an ethnographic study of poverty stricken people as they interact with others on the streets of Puebla, Mexico.

With over one million inhabitants, Puebla is Mexico's sixth largest city. While this city is famous for its cultural architecture and historical landmarks, a number of social service groups note the consistent level of poverty that plagues the city. With such poverty, Puebla is an ideal location to conduct a research study on interactions between those on the streets and other citizens of the city.

Rigorous scientific research on the lives of those who live on the streets can be traced back to the early 1900s. These efforts were sporadic and oftentimes biased due to the changing image of homelessness. Thus, the recognized "landmark study" concerning the homeless was not conducted until 1991. Completed by David Snow and Leon Anderson, this study took an in-depth look into the lives of the American homeless. Among their main conclusions were that homelessness is highly transient and dynamic and that street life is decidedly patterned (Snow and Anderson 1993).

Snow and Anderson's study served as a catalyst for an explosion of research on the homeless. While many of the researchers have been interested in classifying and profiling homeless people, multiple sociologists have particularly been interested in homeless people's interactions in the social world and the meaning assigned to those daily interactions. In order to

investigate this meaning, sociologists have often focused on a main form of interaction between the homeless and the non-homeless: panhandling.

Panhandling refers to a public request for money, food, or other goods with little or nothing of value given in return to the potential donor (Snow and Anderson 1993; Lee and Farrell 2003; Fitzpatrick and Kennedy 2005). While not all homeless people are panhandlers and panhandlers are not always homeless, the average person tends to associate homelessness with panhandling (Snow and Anderson 1993; Lee and Farrell 2003). Even for researchers, it is difficult to ascertain the actual percentage of homeless people who panhandle; and, as a consequence, estimates vary from 16% to 80% (Snow and Anderson 1993; Williams 1995; Fitzpatrick and Kennedy 2001).

Importantly, panhandling is a two-way process that involves both the panhandler and the potential donor (Snow and Anderson 1993; Lee and Farrell, 2003). Due to the double-edged nature of the process, research has been split between these two distinct groups. However, the panhandlers themselves have been much more heavily studied (Snow and Anderson 1993; Williams 1995; Lankenau 1999; Lee and Farrell 2003).

Researchers around the world have conducted mainly qualitative studies to get an insight into the phenomena of panhandlers. Results indicate that panhandlers try to capture the attention of the passersby through greetings, stories, entertainments, or small services. Outward appearances and outfits are crucial. For example, many panhandlers try to fit the stereotype of the unkempt, dirty homeless person in order to appear needy. Furthermore, panhandlers frequently try to conform to other social norms in order to collect the maximum amount of donations. For instance, women panhandlers often hold their babies to conform to the “mother” role while they beseech people for money (Lankenau 1999; Lee and Farrell 2003).

The social interaction between the panhandler and the passersby has also been found to contain complex elements. Many panhandlers are particular about who they request donations from. A general preference has been found for soliciting male passersby. The reason for this is unclear, although possible explanations include that men are more likely to have change in their pockets and that approaching men creates fewer hassles with law enforcement officers (Snow and Anderson 1993; Lee and Farrell 2003).

Despite a growing accumulation of research, our understanding of panhandling is limited. Researchers need to look further into the specific dynamics of panhandling to better understand the process. Additionally, as little has been done in Mexico and none is available for the city of Puebla, research on the conditions of panhandling in this particular setting is necessary.

Objectives

The objective of the proposed study is to better interactions of panhandlers in Puebla, Mexico. According to Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), “an ethnographer seeks a deeper immersion in others’ worlds in order to grasp what is meaningful and important” (p. 2). Thus, I will utilize the symbolic interactionist perspective to examine meanings associated with the daily lives of panhandlers in Puebla, and to generate an in-depth analysis of that meaning.

The study will include participant observation, interviews, as well as informal discussions with panhandlers. Initial observations and discussions will be used as a guide to narrow research goals, and further observations will direct the evolution of a theory about panhandling in Puebla. Results will stem from an analysis of repeated observations, and interviews will hopefully provide further knowledge and better understanding of a nebulous topic. Furthermore, the analysis may offer clues to the social significance of begging.

Research Methods

I will reside and engage in research in Puebla, Mexico from May 13, 2007 to July 21, 2007. Upon arrival, I will first determine how best to access the desired setting. I have corresponded with a professor in Mexico (Monica Huerta, Universidad Veracruzana) and know that panhandlers can be found on most of the main streets. This information confirms the information found in studies that panhandlers tend to gravitate toward central business districts because of the dense population, converging transportation lines, tolerance of local residents, and abundance of niches (Dunier 1999; Lee and Farrell 2003).

Once I have gained access to an appropriate site (which will involve some forethought and some discussions with my professors as to safety and visibility), I will begin my observations. Since I wish to gain what Lofland and Lofland (2006) call “intimate familiarity with the sector of social life” (p.16), I intend to return to the same spot each day to take fieldnotes on observations and interactions of the panhandlers. Using my knowledge of Spanish (currently enrolled in Spanish 304), I will immerse myself each day within the setting and strive to become an *invisible researcher*: an observer who is taken for granted by those in the setting. Immersing myself in this natural setting will allow me to get a glimpse of daily actions, which will, in turn, provide empirical data. I will then immediately record the data on my laptop after I finish observations each day, as is suggested by Emerson et al (1995).

Since the utilization of several research methods enables the researcher to strengthen data, I will also engage in informal conversations with panhandlers as well as semi-formal interviews (Lofland et al. 2005). Formal interviews, set up with the consent of the interviewee, will consist of pre-determined questions to confirm observations. Additionally, the semi-formal structure will allow me to probe deeper into any matters having particular research value. The interviews will be

recorded so they can later be transcribed for analysis. The tapes will then be destroyed to protect the privacy of the subjects. Furthermore, no attempt will be made to hide my identity as a researcher or the purpose of the study; and consent to conduct research with human subjects will be secured from the IRB.

Analysis of the data will be done by the coding and analysis of field notes. Coding involves line-by-line categorization of specific notes. The goal is to find trends observed in the social setting. By breaking down the data based on patterns, common themes can be identified and pulled together into a coherent analytic description, or theory, of the social phenomena observed.

Final Products and Dissemination

The final product of this study will be an ethnographic account of panhandling in Puebla, Mexico. The investigation will contribute to the existing body of knowledge about homelessness and will perhaps give insight to the phenomenon of panhandling in the particular location. Results of this study will be translated into Spanish and submitted to Puebla city officials for their consideration. It may also provide insight into the stereotypes of panhandlers since the attitudes of the public—not only towards panhandling but towards homelessness in general—are often shaped by encounters with panhandlers.

The final results will be presented at the Celebration of Undergraduate Research and Creativity Ceremony at the University of Wisconsin—La Crosse and will also be submitted for publication in the *UWL Journal of Undergraduate Research*. Furthermore, I would stand ready, willing and able to share the results with as many people as possible. It is my sincere hope as a future sociologist that the results will serve as a catalyst for further research by me and others.

Thank you for taking the time to read this proposal.

Bibliography

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University of Wisconsin-La Crosse

International Undergraduate Research Grant Application Project Budget Summary - Spring

Project Title: Panhandling in Puebla: An Ethnographic Study

Student Researcher: Hollie Nyseth SS#: _____

Faculty Sponsor: Timothy Gongaware Department: Sociology

I. Honorarium..... \$ 500.00

Describe research duties and expected time commitment to project. If multiple investigators, explain how the \$800 honorarium is to be distributed among them:

The primary duties of the research will consist of traveling to Puebla, Mexico in order to conduct the study. Once in Mexico, 1-2 hours each day for 6 weeks will be spent observing panhandlers in the desired setting. An additional 2-3 hours will be spent coding notes. An approximated 6-8 hours each week will also be spent interviewing individuals and transcribing those interviews. Analyzing the data generated from these methods will aid in producing the final results of the ethnography, and countless hours will be spent on the final product.

II. Supplies & Services..... \$ 389.82

A. Consumable supplies (itemize) \$ 29.84

Cassette tapes: \$15.96 (2 packages of 6 at \$7.98 each)
Mini notebooks: \$ 9.90 (10 at \$0.99 each)
Pens: \$ 3.98 (2 packages of 6 at \$1.99 each)

B. Duplicating, postage, communications, etc. \$ 0.00

C. Other (describe and itemize) \$ 359.98

Health Insurance (\$30/month): \$45.00
Tape recorder (interviews): \$64.99
Transcriber (transcription of interviews): \$249.99

III. Travel..... \$ 1110.00

A. Transportation (describe arrangements) \$910.00

Round-trip flight from Minneapolis to Puebla, Mexico: \$662.21
Use of personal family car to make two round-trips from Neillsville, WI to Minneapolis Airport: \$248
290.68 miles x 2 trips= 581.36 miles x \$.425 per mile)

B. Lodging (describe arrangements) \$ 200.00

I will be staying with a host family while in Puebla.
According to OIE, the approximate cost of this stay is \$700,

IV. TOTAL FUNDING REQUESTED..... \$ 2000.00

