Tacoma and Health? An honors capstone project exploring the social stratification impacts on the health and well-being of Tacoma communities

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Abstract

Social stratification and its impacts on people and society isn’t a new concept for me. But due to the extractive methods of the higher education system, it has been a struggle in most of my classes to do Tacoma-based research rather than focusing on Bellingham. So throughout this quarter, I have been working to connect the broader themes I’ve learned about social stratification with Tacoma-specific research. This project is in the form of an illustrated book which explores the various effects of social stratification on the health and well-being of Tacoma communities. Throughout this paper, I will show some of the key information about my research, my process and methodology, some of the illustrated pages I’ve made, my sources and research done per page, and what I’ve learned from this experience overall.

Methodology

Preliminary Research: Informal Community Ethnography

The preliminary research done when proposing this research project was primarily resembling informal community ethnography. This is a qualitative research method where a researcher observes a social/community setting to analyze observations of a group or society. This research was the starting point of my project and largely used as the background for this project. And this helped me get started with each research portion.

For example, when I looked at anchor institutions, such as jails, cemeteries, and hospitals, and their locations, I could largely go from memory to begin my research. Then I reviewed literature and conducted qualitative and quantitative analyses. It took a while for me to condense all of the information to then be put into a 15 page book.

Literature Review

For the literature review, I looked at various sources. Such as from the Tacoma Historical Society, history collections at UWT, the Tacoma Public Library, US Census Data (Tacoma), the TPCHD site, and the city of Tacoma sites. I also looked at scholarly articles from my previous classes and some new ones.

Quantitative and Qualitative Data

For the quantitative (and qualitative data) I looked mainly at these equity maps from the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department and demographic maps and data. This was challenging to use since I wasn’t working with raw data, I could only get my hands on processed data. And while I can use statistics to find the data using these sources, the zones used on these maps won’t support my findings due to gerrymandering and other zoning that makes it difficult.

For example, in this equity map here, you can see that the marginalized areas I’m focusing on here (point) are some of the folks most impacted by poverty and also have some of the lowest levels of education. Yet due to gentrification and zoning, this data is skewed by these more affluent, white areas here.
Social Stratification impacts Health and Well-Being interconnectedly in nearly every aspect of life imaginable. So my focus areas are environmental impacts from workplace and home areas and duties, food insecurity and inaccessibility, violence, trauma, and intergenerational trauma. And I end my book with some of the potential solutions that I would suggest to change stratification processes and mainly to improve health and wellbeing for my fellow community members.

Challenges and Outcomes
What I learned from this especially is how hard it is to research marginalized communities. The data is hard to access, even as someone in higher education, and is especially hard for the average community member looking to better understand themselves and things impacting them.

This speaks to challenges for upward mobility due to inaccessibility to information. Members from communities like mine know best what’s going on in their communities, they experience it and they live it.

But due to inequitable literacy and opportunity deficits, it can sometimes be hard for them to be able to advocate for themselves in academic and political spaces since words are constantly being co-opted and changed to stall understanding, excluding the voices of underrepresented folks. Also, outsiders doing equity data and other research likely aren’t looking at this as critically as I do, as someone from the community. So my research has also shown me more of what I would like to do in my future with sociological data analysis for my community.

My Process
I’m a visual person, so my process throughout the project worked best when doing the illustrations first, and then the writing using research findings. So the main method that stuck with me was 1) creating outlines of pages, 2) illustrating them digitally, 3) connecting sources to each page, 3) doing the writing per page, and then 4) editing.

My Development
Here I will show some of the preliminary work that I did when beginning this project, including my initial ideas, illustrations, and outlines. This will put into perspective how far I’ve come from starting at nothing and my development over time.
Imagery (to go one of)

- pop-up shop
- (bath shop)
- pop-up of
- many not
- chocolates

- puppies

- orange thread
- Y’s hair
- showing top everyone
- & others picking up!

- Task 7
  - Food Sources
    - My
    - [Drawing of a person and a house]
Next I will showcase my finalized pages with implemented research!
The vast inequities in my community compared to other Tacoma communities were apparent to me from an early age. Some of my most influential experiences growing up were in the Eastside, north end, and south end neighborhoods where I lived. Tacoma is divided into two large cultural areas: the downtown area and the inner city. Downtown Tacoma is often referred to as the "business district" and is characterized by high-rise buildings, large office spaces, and a thriving arts and culture scene. However, my home was located in the Eastside, which is still a relatively low-income neighborhood. The two areas are connected by a major highway (I-5) that runs through the city. I went to high school in the Lincoln-Stark area, and I had to cross I-5 to get there. I would sometimes travel downtown and to more affluent areas of Tacoma for fun. But when we'd go home, the stark contrasts between the different areas were unavoidable. At the time, I could identify the more visible differences in our areas, such as the beauty of Tacoma only being acknowledged downtown rather than the beauties in my own backyard. But some of the less visible effects on health and well-being are less immediate. This is what made me curious about the topic of health disparities for change. I wanted to see change for my community, so I applied for college to help be a part of that change.

I attended WWU and quickly became entranced with sociology. Sociology studies the way society develops, is structured, and how it functions. This includes finding potential solutions to the social problems we study. I carry my community with me wherever I go, so in every class I have tried to take what I’ve learned and apply it to how it could help my community in Tacoma.

With the support and guidance from my advisor Dr. Melanie Bowers, and the honors program, I was able to do my senior honors capstone project about a topic that I care deeply about. This project is a compilation of my passions, ethnography, and what I’ve learned/researched throughout my time at Western. It is a thank you to Tacoma for everything it’s given me. And most importantly, it is a focused research project about some of the interconnected ways that stratification impacts the health and well-being of Tacoma communities. It is not often that so many aspects of life can be shown simultaneously, so my doctoral thesis helps to do that, and it will paint a full picture of the relationship between stratification and health/well-being with focus on Tacoma communities.

I think through this project, I have been able to bridge some of the questions I’ve been asking since childhood, and I feel like I’ve learned and what I’ve learned about Tacoma.

For the purpose of this book, it is essential to acknowledge that the city of Tacoma, and all its residents and visitors, are on the stolen homelands of the Puyallup Tribe. The Puyallup people have lived on and stewarded these lands since the beginning of time, and continue to do so today. Land acknowledgement practices, like this one, recognize native peoples and communities, their stewardship, forced removal, and continued fight to live on their ancestral lands. This practice is a commitment to the sovereignty of all Indigenous peoples and the recognition of the interconnected ways that stratification impacts the health and well-being of Tacoma residents. It is a thank you to Tacoma for everything it’s given me. And most importantly, it is a focused research project about some of the interconnected ways that stratification impacts the health and well-being of Tacoma communities.
communities. It is not often that so many aspects of life can be shown simultaneously, so this illustrative book helps to do that by painting a full picture.

I think throughout this project, I have been able to answer some of the questions I’ve been asking since childhood, and I can take what I’ve learned and share it with others.

Side B: Land Acknowledgement
And the land acknowledgement in my project reads:
“For the purpose of this book, it is essential to acknowledge that the city of Tacoma, and all its residents and visitors, are on the stolen homelands of the Puyallup Tribe. The Puyallup people have lived on and stewarded these lands since the beginning of time, and continue to do so today. Land acknowledgment practices, like this one, recognize native peoples and communities, their stewardship, forced removal, and continued fight to live on their ancestral lands. This practice is a commitment to the sovereignty of all inanimate and animate life on this land. We must recognize this land acknowledgment is one small step toward true allyship. I commit to uplift the voices, experiences, and histories of the Indigenous peoples of this land and beyond.”

Page 2: Introduction

Side A: Introduction to Tacoma
The city of Tacoma is a beautifully diverse place located in Washington State. Within the population of about 223,000 people, 57.6% is white with 43.4% being people of color. 2020 US Census) It’s a metropolitan area on the banks of the Puget Sound. The city is sectioned into eight neighborhoods, each with its own community and neighborhood council. Tacoma is known by several names - the City of Destiny, as it was the prime destination for travelers on the first railroads. The City of Paint, due to its incredible murals. And Grit City, pertaining to some more negative attributes of Tacoma. Each of these names encompasses what Tacoma is all about.
railroads. The City of Paint, due to its incredible murals. And Grit City, pertaining to some more negative attributes of Tacoma. Each of these names encompasses what Tacoma is all about.

Side B: Map of Tacoma
The right side of this page shows a map of Tacoma that can be referred to throughout the rest of the book. Looking at a plain map would not be very significant, so I styled it like a pop-up map with the important features and anchor institutions talked about throughout this book. Starting of course with the different sectioned neighborhoods of Tacoma. Then I included the waterfront, port of Tacoma, and the Puyallup Reservation lands which intersect with the city of Tacoma. I also included the Downtown Tacoma District and the Hilltop District. I added where the only higher education institutions are, the hospitals and correctional facilities. The Tacoma landfill, public cemeteries, mall, police stations, freeways, and railroads. I also included where the main fast food locations are as well. All of these anchor institutions relate to the social stratification of Tacoma and their impacts on health and wellbeing for Tacoma communities, and more specified focus areas, discussed throughout this book.

Page 3: Stratification
*No Illustrations Available, not enough time to create the illustrations for these pages*

Side A: Socioeconomic Stratification

Social stratification is the process of organizing groups according to hierarchical ranking based on power dynamics. This is done socially, structurally, and culturally. Over time, the systemic stratification of these power dynamics creates racial, economic, and other disparities and barriers that affect many aspects of life. For example, inadequate food source options, environmental disparities, and increased violence leading to trauma.

The historic stratification of Tacoma is similar to what has happened in many urban areas in the US. And in Tacoma, settler colonialism set the stage for more racialized and socio-economic ($) stratification of communities.

Tacoma was once a thriving city dominated by lumber, railroad, and fishery industries; but, starting in the Great Depression disinvestment and deindustrialization produced economic decline. While Tacoma has reinvested in the downtown and waterfront areas over the last 30 years, in an effort to bring more wealth into the city from affluent out-of-towners, its efforts have also pushed low-income communities of color further into inequity, injustice, and marginalization. (Cookson 1992) (UW Tacoma Libraries)

Due to this unfair distribution of wealth and power, these communities, Central, South End, South Tacoma, and Eastside Tacoma communities, are more disadvantaged and have harsher barriers than their white, affluent counterparts/areas. This book explains how these stratification processes impact the health and well-being of the Tacoma communities most severely affected. This collective area in particular has the lowest incomes of Tacoma, with the
highest poverty rates, (T-PCHD 2019a) and some of the highest percentages of people of color. (Civil Rights and Labor History Consortium / University of Washington 2020)

Poverty is multidimensional, relational, and normalized as invisible in wider society. While poverty is often thought of strictly as relating to income levels, poverty is better understood as multidimensional; associated with adversity through multiple dimensions such as material, social, physical, psychological, and institutional. Thinking of poverty through a multidimensional lens shifts attention from blaming the individual for circumstances beyond their control, to blaming racist and classist structures and cultural norms that work interconnectedly to limit equity and increase barriers for impoverished people. (Desmond 2016)

Side B: Racial Stratification

According to Weber (1921) socioeconomic systems stratify societies which exploit some to privilege others, relating to the root causes of food insecurity in relation to racial and monetary disparities and unequal power distribution, this results in low income communities of color being the most impacted by food insecurity. Social institutions are constructed based on the system of capitalism in the United States. Through each institution comes power structures, cultural prestige or lack thereof, and classes exhibiting privilege or disadvantage. Over time, these systems of oppression are ingrained in society and often take different forms of the same exploitation and discrimination. Low income communities of color are also highly impacted by poverty, including those communities within Tacoma.

According to the Washington Racial Justice Initiative (2018) “Many equity & justice advocates and organizations, particularly within the civil legal aid community (those who provide free legal assistance in non-criminal matters to those who cannot otherwise afford legal help) have always engaged in anti-poverty work. Yet, because the racialized history within Washington State has generated cumulative damaging effects on the abilities of communities of color to gain economic prosperity, anti-poverty work necessitates an understanding of the connection between how poverty and racism intersect and fuel one another. For instance, one of the most lasting forms of structural racism in Washington—and so many other communities operates through housing, where redlining practices and racial covenants on house deeds kept people of color out of white communities well into the 20th Century, creating communities that continue to be racially segregated and unequally resourced today. The lasting impact of racially unjust policies and practices can be seen across matters involving housing, consumer law, family relations, education, health care, and more and even affects whether communities can fairly access the justice system and legal services.
Marginalization is a condition and process which prevents people from being able to participate politically, economically, and socially for upward mobility. I want to address that marginalized is a word with many connotations. In my community, we often don’t like being labeled as marginalized, for valid reasons (such as reducing diverse experiences and identities into a single story). Yet due to this academic setting, the literal meaning of marginalization, and encompassing the various groups discussed today in a short presentation, that is the word I will use throughout today.

The way racial and socioeconomic stratification has historically and continually been spatially arranged in Tacoma is through prime, transitional, and marginal spaces. (Duncan 1978) Prime spaces are exclusionary community spaces used for private and somewhat public use, often higher income hangout spots and living spaces. The prime areas of Tacoma include the North End, West End, and New Tacoma communities; according to the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department (2020), these prime spaces have some of the most affluent neighborhoods, the lowest percentages of those living in poverty, highest median incomes, highest life expectancies, and the highest percentages of white residents. If you were strolling through these areas, you would see the beautiful waterfront, high-income apartment complexes, exclusionary recreation and hangout spots (like private marinas), and high-end restaurants and organic food markets. Marginal spaces are largely considered as undesirable for prime use and are less visible to the public. For instance, the residential and community areas in Tacoma that are majority low income communities of color. The marginal areas of Tacoma are the South Tacoma, South End, and Eastside communities; these areas have the highest percentages of people living below the poverty level (T-PCHD 2019a), the lowest median incomes (T-PCHD 2019b), lowest life expectancies (T-PCHD 2019a), and extremely high percentages of age-weighted years of
potential life lost (T-PCHD 2019e). Transitional spaces are classified as spaces falling between prime and marginal with shifting economic, social, and environmental elements. These spaces are a mixture of some of the highest and lowest income neighborhoods due to gentrification and settler colonialism. Transitional spaces are also frequent targets of interest for economic development, reclamation, and gentrification. (DeVerteuil et. al 2001) Gentrification is the process of changing the character of an area/neighborhood due to the influx of affluent outsiders, often created through economic redevelopment that repurposes marginal spaces for profit to increase benefits to the larger/public community as a whole, taking away precious spaces from marginalized communities. This is the cause of mass displacement in the historically rooted Tacoma communities. For instance, Hilltop is historically home to a very racially diverse community, predominantly the Black community of Tacoma, yet is now being gentrified as it is in close proximity to Downtown Tacoma. And both Hilltop and Downtown Tacoma are districts within Central Tacoma. The Northeast Tacoma community is also a transitional space because while it is located on stolen native land, both part of the Puyallup reservation and the City of Tacoma, it also has a large percentage of white residents and commercial businesses, and real estate owners wanting to take advantage of commerce coming from the Port of Tacoma, marinas, and the waterfront areas. Much of what we see today is the result of settler colonialism and treaties/regulation, such as the “Puyallup Tribe of Indians VS The Port of Tacoma” that infringe on native lands and exploit native peoples perpetually.

Side B: Social Determinants of Health

Health and Well-being describes the physical, mental, emotional, and social aspects of a person’s overall wellness and conditional state.

Through my pages, I used the social determinants of health to frame my health and well-being content of my project. I focused on these elements specifically: Economic Stability, Social and Community Context, and Neighborhood and Built Environment.
Side A: Environmental Impacts of Jobs and Schools
People that work low-income jobs have high-exposure and high-risk in the workplace which negatively impacts their health and well-being.

Weber’s theory of legitimacy (1958) explains that inequitable systems of oppression negatively affect low-status workers and people. A large percentage of the secondary labor market are low income people of color, again exemplifying the intersection between class and culture. A conflict arises when people do not have the legitimate means to meet their legitimate needs, such as folks not being able to afford their needs due to inequitable power structures, and they must deviate from social norms to find illegitimate means instead. This leads to the criminalization of low income communities of color and them being subject to harsher consequences for showing “deviant” behavior despite having less legitimate opportunities and resources to meet their food and other basic needs. For example, food support programs, extralegal resources, and lower-quality food sources that people may go to, which are often looked down upon socially. This stigma can also act as an oppressor to people of color and comes from the stratification of race and class. And since gentrification and economic redevelopment increases visibility of marginal and transitional spaces, the visibility is seen as a threat to the broader public, contributing to increased police surveillance and the criminalizing stigma of homeless and other low income folks in the area (Duncan 1978).

Side B: Environmental Impacts on Residential Areas/Homes
Then these same people go home and face the same issues because low-income communities of color are most impacted by negative environmental pollutants also harming their health and wellbeing. For example, these Tacoma communities are located next to the only landfill, cemeteries, the correctional facilities, and hospitals in Tacoma. Also the railroad tracks and the freeways contribute to noise and exhaust pollution. And all of these environmental factors are proven to increase bodily and mental stress. It's always concerned me that so many of our community members are industrial workers, yet our streets and sidewalks still have the most cracks.