

A SOCIOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF COMMUNITY ON
UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES: AN EVALUATION OF THE
STUDENT UNION AS A SOCIAL SPACE

by

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INTRODUCTION

What is community? Is it an abstract idea or a social construct that varies depending on the circumstances? Is the idea of 'community' simply a perception? Can community be measured? Is the idea of community connected to human emotion or an individual's experience? Are these questions an overstatement and is community just another word, another definition?

This thesis will address: the creation of community on college campuses, which includes examining the role that space plays in the formation of community. According to prominent social theorists such as Henri Lefebvre and Pierre Bourdieu, space and its use are intricately connected to power and the construction of public spaces. Universities are such places and this research examines one of the central communal features of the American university, the student union.

An understanding of community can be found by in the work of several prominent sociologists. This study will focus on three viewpoints regarding community using the works of Emile Durkheim, Pierre Bourdieu, and Kai Erikson. Two points of Durkheim's regarding community are the thoughts of human interaction and social ties. Durkheim believed in collective consciousness. In other words, he believed that humans were inherently connected to the culture around them and that interaction was the base of any societal formation (Merton, 1934). This is intimately connected with the social ties that humans create and maintain. Durkheim believed in social solidarity and the act of group cohesion, which should be considered an important thought when looking at community.

A second sociological perspective on space comes from Pierre Bourdieu. This theorist saw interaction and association with others to be a key factor in social development. One of his concepts, habitus, illustrates the sub-consciousness, the physical, and the routine aspects of everyday life. It is the habits that people find themselves following. Habitus is not a conscious thought, but rather a sub-conscious notion (Lehmann, 2009). Another of Bourdieu's focus was the idea of social and cultural capital. This is where the idea of power within community begins to come into play. He had different categories of 'capital' which he used to explain class differences. Those with the most capital were members of a higher class. This thought plays a key role when looking at the development of community (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

Finally, Kai Erikson held the belief that social space held the core values of society. It was the essential aspect of the societal system; drawing out certain behaviors and create ideas. Members in the same social space held similar beliefs (Erikson, 1962). Again, we see the aspect of cohesion and community as a social phenomenon.

With these three theorists in mind, it is necessary to revisit the question: what is community? Maybe community takes the form of coffee shop where friends flock to interact with one another? This space could be a bar that patrons find comfort and companionship. It is possible to start to see community as an actual physical space.

With this in mind, this study looks at the collegiate environment; particularly the student union. Present on a majority of collegiate campuses, the union layout varies depending on the campus, but the idea remains constant. It may have administrative offices, student activities, dining facilities, or even a bowling alley. Generally, most colleges strive to create a sense of community. The numerous college brochures that litter

high schools are enough to make the argument that colleges are trying to sell the idea of a community to perspective students. The perceived collegiate experience and how an institution will assist in the creation of that experience are two things that play a factor in where students choose to attend college. Therefore, a study of a student union's role in a student's experience is vital to understand because how students perceive and respond to various types of built and natural spaces can lead to institutions catering to those needs.

If an institution of higher education has the goal of promoting community, the impressions of the population must be considered. This study seeks to connect observations of the student union and determine a correlation between observations and the sociological theories regarding community and space. To do this, it is necessary to have a sociological perspective of space.

THEORETICALFRAMEWORK

A sociological view of space can be found in the work of Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre focused on space an entity with varying aspects and categories. Lefebvre saw space as something that was, in a way, alive and an intimate part of the human experience. In Lefebvre's modern philosophic work, he proposed a "unitary theory of space that ties together the physical, the mental, and the social" (Gottdiener, 1993, p. 131).

The main idea of his work is that space comes in three parts: perceived, conceived, and lived. Perceived space is defined as spatial practices and relates to the "production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation" (Watkins, 2005, p. 209). Conceived spaced is known as representations of space. This looks at the idea that space can be abstract in its overall

meaning and its meaning is, in fact, derived from various constructions and representations of space. The third aspect, lived space, is referred to as spaces of representation. Lefebvre's thought was that space is something that is connected to an actual lived experience (Watkins, 2005). It is a part of memory. This is vital when looking at community because community is linked to human emotion and experience.

Lefebvre then looked at categories of space: abstract space and social space. Abstract space refers to the ideas of control and power. The thought of abstract space can be construed as the "hierarchical space that is pertinent to those who wish to control social organization" (Gottdiener, 1993, p. 131). This harkens back to Bourdieu and the notion of social and cultural capital. The sociological understandings of both community and space complement one another. Social space is the opposite of sorts because it focuses on the everyday members of society. Social space focuses on the actions by these members. This is the space that is "externalized and materialized through action by all members of society" (Gottdiener, 1993, p. 131). Part of Lefebvre's work included the idea that the individuals coming from the thought of abstract space constantly control social space.

Applying Lefebvre

Therefore, it is possible that a student union is in fact an abstract space that is meant to be a social space. In other words, the powers at be on a given collegiate campus design and modify the student union as they see fit. The purpose of the traditional student union may be to act as a social center for students. However, administrators have the ability to create the space with their vision in mind and without regard to students.

The importance of space is also stressed within the literature stemming from Lefebvre's philosophy. Watkins emphasizes this with the statement, "space becomes re-described not as a dead, inert thing or object, but as organic and fluid and alive; it has a pulse, it palpitates, it flows and collides with other spaces" (2005, p. 211). Additionally, space becomes fundamental to a person's overall experience of a given place. It is "a medium of social relations and a material product that can affect social relations" (Gottdiener, 1993, p. 132).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Currently, there is a dearth of research on the use of student unions at institutions of higher education; more specifically, on the relationship between a student union and the sense of community or interaction. However, there are several studies that can provide insight regarding the present research. First, an examination of the Manderson and Turner (2006) study focuses on how social space can morph our identities. Next, a study will be discussed that highlights working-class students and their experiences within the university setting (Lehmann, 2009). A third article will be discussed that centers on inhabitants of a city and their attachment to that city (Michalska-Żyła, 2008). Another study illustrates student satisfaction in part-time students (Moro-Egido & Panades, 2010). A final piece of research explains how a group of researchers developed a measure for the quality of college life (Sirgy et al., 2010).

Daily Practices

Manderson and Turner (2006), drawing from the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1990) and Judith Butler (1993), studied social space created by law students. They argued that involvement changed both student identities and overall academic goals. Their qualitative

study was on the 'Coffee House' on a Canadian campus. The Coffee House was a university sponsored formal event that occurred weekly during the term.

This work utilized Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural capital, which "tries to tell us exactly how our daily practices and dispositions within those spaces provide us with a way of being in the world" (Manderson & Turner, 2006, p. 653). Manderson and Turner stated that "the experience of a particular space actively constructs not only our ideas but our desires, and thus leads us to become the kind of subject who wants to fulfill a particular social role (Manderson & Turner, 2006, p. 663). This work also discussed Bourdieu's theory of habitus, or how daily practices affect our identity without conscious thought (1990).

Expectation of University

Lehmann (2009) conducted a qualitative study that interviewed working-class students at a Canadian university. His study analyzed the various ways in which the students responded when discussing both their reasons for attending and their expectations for university. Lehmann (2009) also draws from Bourdieu's work, specifically on the concept of habitus to illustrate the subconscious, the physical, and the routine aspects of everyday life (Manderson & Turner, 2006).

Lehmann's work addresses the fact that the sampling process limited the ability for random sampling. He adds that the study "relied on a carefully constructed judgment sample meant to be as representative as possible" (Lehmann, 2009, p. 140).

Social and academic integration were key factors in university retention and completion. Also, Lehmann examines social class differences among students and found that the social environment can lead a working-class student to approach university with

a negative attitude. With greater levels of alienation, working class students felt like the university was an avenue for increased social mobility. Additionally, the study also found that working class students has a weaker sense of attachment to the university than other students (Lehmann, 2009).

Working Class Students

Moro-Egido and Panades (2010) also looked at social class differences among students in terms of their sense of community. Their work was conducted at a public Spanish university from 2001 to 2004. They examined commuter science majors who held a part-time job while studying.

They found a correlation between working part-time and perceptions of community. Those students who worked felt a lack of access to facilities or resources and participated less in the community and had a more negative attitude toward the university. Also, they concluded that students who work more were more likely to express less satisfaction with their collegiate experiences (Moro-Egido & Panades, 2010). The level of satisfaction has implications for attitudes toward institutions after graduation and participation in alumni activities. Without a sense of community it is unlikely that students will become active in alumni association activities or will participate in donations to the university.

Territorial Bonds

Michalska-Żyła's study focuses on the "territorial attitude of social bonds and the social solidarity" (2008, p. 95). He interviewed inhabitants of Lodz and then determined whether there was a bond between the inhabitants and this Polish city. He conceptualized bond as "the entirety of relationships sustaining the individual in the city" (Michalska-

Żyła, 2008, p. 98). He also used the term, community attachment, to describe the bond between the individual and the city in which he/she resides. Michalska-Żyła theorized that social bond was the basis for shaping social identity and concluded that territory plays a significant role in shaping social ties (2008). This sense of social bonds and the connection to social identity mirrors Durkheim's view.

Collegiate Satisfaction

Sirgy et al. (2010) adapted the quality of life measurements to college students. They conducted extensive research to validate their quality of college life (QCL) measure. This study included two parts. The first was a replication study that involved surveys given to ten different colleges in various countries. The second part of the study was an extension study of three different college campuses in different countries.

The QCL measure was based on the thought that a student's overall satisfaction with college life comes from their satisfaction with the academic and social aspects of the universities. Additionally, academic and social satisfaction was dependent upon a student's satisfaction with university facilities and services.

The extension study focused on how satisfaction can act as a hierarchy and that overall satisfaction is dependent on other areas of satisfaction. This survey was similar to the previous one, with the added aspect of inquiring about overall life, specifically, collegiate satisfaction. The results from both studies confirmed a correlation between satisfaction of the facilities, social aspects, and academics with the overall satisfaction of the collegiate experience (Sirgy et al., 2010).

The goal of the present study is to observe four university student unions and apply sociological theories of community and space to those observations. Additionally,

the definition of community provided by Goodsell et al. (2011) will incorporate the three aspects of community within this study. The theory of Lefebvre's work in regards to the production of space will be a major component of this research as well. If there is a greater understanding of the student experience in regards to student unions, perhaps universities can begin to cater a union's uses to enhance those experiences.

METHOD

Procedure

This study used a qualitative design and included the observation of four universities in three different states. The observation time for each student union was between four and six hours. This research employed a purposive sampling to allow for the examination of student unions of different sizes and geographical locations. Universities included in the sample were selected based on size (small, medium, and large populations), public and private institutional status, and geographic location (urban, suburban). University names used are pseudonyms in an effort to keep the universities anonymous. This study is not meant to be a critique on a certain union, but rather an overall evaluation of the social space. See Table 1 for a summary of university characteristics.

Each observation took place during the afternoon/early evening in October 2012 and February 2013. This was purposeful due to class times and evening activities. The goal was to observe students during times when there would be more socialization. The site visits also took place on weekdays to allow for the opportunity to observe the natural campus environment (for all students, commuter and on-campus residents). Due to cost

and geographic distance between universities, it was only possible to dedicate one day of observation per school.

All observations occurred in public spaces and there was no direct interaction with individuals in the context while observing. In the role of ‘observer as participant’, covert participate observation was conducted. Gold explains this role as one where the researcher or observer has only minimal involvement in the social setting being studied. The observer has the ability to leave the field almost at will. There is some connection, but the observer is not naturally and normally part of the social setting (Gold, 1958).

On each site visit, observation began with a comprehensive description of the student union’s surroundings, including campus location and outdoor activities. From this point, each area of the union was observed for a lengthy period of time. Extensive field notes and audio recordings taken during each site visit led to a more comprehensive understanding of interactions between students as well as the overall use of each space. Prior to each visitation, an observation of both the university’s and the union’s website took place. This allowed for a greater knowledge of extraneous events occurring in the union during the periods of observation, as well as various services that each union offered to students.

There are several limitations regarding this study. Primarily, the observation of only four universities may limit the validity of the conclusions drawn. While these four institutions serve as good examples and range both in size and geographic location, there are hundreds of institutions in the higher education system. Observing the space on multiple occasions may have led to greater level of student activity. Additionally, due to

travel, observations could only be made on one occasion. Having site visits occur on a weekday for several hours allowed for consistency, but it could be that on different occasions there is a variation of usage of the student union on these campuses. These factors do not allow for a great level of generalizability.

Table 1

University Profiles

<u>University</u>	<u>Type of Institution</u>	<u>Student Population</u>	<u>City Population</u>	<u>Suburban/Urban</u>
Small City Private University	Private	15,000	124,000	Suburban
Flagship Public University	Public	30,000	130,000	Urban
Urban Private University	Private	9,000	755,000	Urban
Large Public University	Public	40,000	181,000	Urban

DISCUSSION**Observations****Small City Private University**

Built Use and Location. This union is at the center of the university's campus. The basement level of the union was home to a bowling alley and billiards room. On the ground level, there was an open area outside of a dining location. Along the wings of the first floor, there were small rooms that look like formal living rooms. In almost every one, there was a small group of students that were quietly studying. Also on the first floor, pieces of state history cluttered the walls. In the center of the first floor, there was a

large ballroom with hallways lining each side. In these hallways, there were dated couches. On the second floor, there were many administrative offices.

Comfort/Usability Level. This union had an intense formal atmosphere. There was a feeling of expected quietness throughout the building. The expectation was to find the most students in the basement area of the union. Surprisingly, not a single student, besides the lone student worker, was present in this space. Notably, the use of this space, particularly to bowl, costs money. Outside of the union there was more activity.

Activity Level. Walking into the Small City Private University's union, it was immediately apparent that not many students were present. During the site visit, the audio recordings were mostly quiet. There is no audible dialogue on any of the recordings. The only conversation that took place during the observation period was a young woman that answered her phone, only to leave the building to continuing her phone call. She resumed studying when she came back, no longer on the phone. Despite it being business hours, there were not many administrators visible. There were small study tables set up in the main lobby. Students were studying at three of these tables.

The most student interaction occurred on the ground level floor. Small groups ranging from three to six students sat conversing and seemingly enjoying the experience. A note worthy observation was that musical selections from the 1970s and 1980s could be overheard from the space's sound system. There were a few computers on the outside of the space, but no students were utilizing them.

Extraneous Factors. The weather on the day of observation could have altered the activity level outside of the union. A large group of students were playing Frisbee on a lawn across the street. Immediately outside the union, several groups of students had

congregated at the outside tables. Two individuals had set up hammocks from the trees. More students used the natural environment, rather than the build space of the student union. This activity level could be the direct result of the 'good weather' that day.

Flagship Public University

Built Use and Location. The Flagship Public University is a large urban university built into the city. The student center is set in the center of campus, surrounded by residence halls. This union was not surrounded by any natural or green space. The ground level had a bistro, as well as a university bookstore. On the first floor, there were several seating options for individuals. There was no open space without furniture. Along the wall, there were comfortable booths built for two, of which, all were occupied. The second floor was the location of conference rooms. Outside of the hallway containing these rooms, there was a large open space with comfortable couches. Several posters advertising events in the student union line the hallways in the form of bulletin boards and sign stands.

Comfort/Usability Level. The setup of the furniture throughout the building was much like that of a living room. Students in this area were quietly exchanging dialog, but appeared much more focused on their studies than individuals on the first floor. There was an open area to the second floor where a person can observe the activity of the first floor. This open space allows for the noise from the floor to travel upwards. There was still a lively feeling to the second floor because the first floor could still be heard.

Activity Level. There were a large group of students going in and out of the union. In the bookstore, there was seating amongst the merchandise, all of which were full. Most students seen sitting in the common space were studying or eating. All were

visibly expressive and the space was quite loud. Audio recordings from this site visit are quite the opposite from the Small City Private University.

Extraneous Factors. There was a main street that had three student groups promoting their events to individuals walking by. There were two additional promotion tables on the first floor. One of which was handing out pizza and donuts to students that have voted for student government elections. There was quite a bit of intentionality with this particular organization. Not a single person walked by without being spoken to by representatives of this group. The other appears to be a local business looking for employees. This was the only site visit in which a non-student group was active in the union.

Urban Private University

Built Use and Location. The third institution's student union was located on the edge of campus. It was situated between a grouping of residence halls and an athletic field. The building was u-shaped with a concrete area which opened up to a large lawn surrounded by other buildings. On the first floor level, there was a sports grill with an outdoor patio. On the opposite side of the first floor, there was a closed area with offices, two small meeting rooms, and a number of computers. On the second floor, there was a dining hall that was closed off and administrative offices on the other side. The third floor was full of conference rooms, with a few small sections of furniture that were all empty. Also on the third floor was the University's ballroom. Along the wall, there were small sections of orderly furniture that would accommodate less than eight students. As with the Flagship Public University, there were several posters throughout the building advertising the events of various student groups.

Comfort/Usability Level. Couches with built-in power and USB outlets lined three walls of the coffee shop on the first floor. This furniture was inviting because it was geared toward student needs. Students had plugged in their laptops into the built-in outlets. In the open part of this area, there were several small tables, all with four lounge-like chairs. The furniture on the third floor was the opposite from the furniture at the coffee shop. It was not comfortable and looked quite formal.

Activity Level. The main area of activity was the coffee shop, located on the ground level. Nearly every seat was full and students were in groups of people. With music in the background, these groups were conversing loudly. Despite the numerous amount of furniture on the third floor, there were only three people in this area of the union. The three students were all studying and two were together. As with the Small City University, the audio recording is nearly silent in this part of the union.

There were several students walking between buildings and sitting outside. The number of students observed using the outdoor space was comparable to those seen at the Small City Private University. However, unlike the Small City Private University, there were several students inside this student union. Both inside and outside, several students were sitting at tables, conversing with one another.

Extraneous Factors. There were no extraneous factors that influenced the observations at the Urban Private University.

Large Public University

Built Use and Location. Also on the edge of the university's campus, the Large Public University's student union was the oldest of those visited. This building contained a bowling alley similar to the Small City Private University. Across from the bowling

alley, there was a university apparel store, as well as a dining location. The dining location was a chain restaurant and quite busy.

Due to a similar layout as the Urban Private University, the two sections of the union created a quad-like area where several student groups were advertising various on-campus events, or sitting at the available outdoor tables. On the second and third floor of the building, there were several administrative departments, each requiring a multitude of office space. In between the different university offices, there were a number of small conference rooms that were labeled for different student group meetings as well as university officials.

Comfort/Usability Level. There were small groupings of furniture on the ends of the hallways and in the center space. The lack of furniture would not allow for a large number of students to congregate. Throughout the union, there was not a large, open space for groups to interact in a non-conference room setting.

Activity Level. There were quite a number of individuals that were using this outdoor space as a gathering place. As with the Small City Private University, there were no students observed using the bowling alley on the ground level. This activity would cost students money as well. . Of the different sections of dated couches, there was one student studying.

Extraneous Factors. As with the Small City Private University, a greater number of students were outside, in the natural space, rather than in the building. The weather during this observation was quite favorable and may have led a greater number of students outside than usual.

Theoretical Application

By observing these four unions, Lefebvre's theories come to life. There is a clear set of three aspects of space: perceived, conceived, and lived as well as two categories of space: abstract space and social space. Abstract can be seen in that when architects, high level administrators, and boards conceive of the space—they do so with their minds and their notions of what that space will be. They determine the needs of the students. There is power in the creation of this social space. Students do not have control over the creation of this social space.

Overall, each union is perceived by the public to be a place to build community where students can gather, relax, and enjoy one another's company. Two out of the four unions studied are located near the center of campus. By placing the union in the center of campus, the building draws students to it and it acts as the main orienting point on campus. Also, it allows for convenient access for all students.

The concept of a student union is that it is a place for students to gather and the sense of community to be fostered. The union can have different meanings for different individuals. There can be many different functions for the union: a meeting place, dining facility, or living room. The authenticity of the space as one that is meant for students depends on the university. The Flagship Public University had the most students present and, in turn, the highest sense of community within that building. Throughout the union, there was interaction and a feeling of an uplifting environment. In the open coffee shop area of the Urban Private University, the setting was similar. In every union, there was a quiet space, a space in which students were studying, sometimes sleeping. There was place for quiet conversation with nothing very audible and a focused atmosphere.

Lefebvre's third aspect of space is that it is lived; meaning to say that space is truly connected to a person's experience. The space promotes or is intimately related to memories and overall experience. With the student union, that space allows for connections and memories to be made by the student body. It is more than a just a building, or it has the potential to be. The idea of a union's function comes from how

With the Flagship Public University, the students promoting events outside of the union were using the space to further their connection not only to fellow students, but also to the space itself. That interaction was cemented in that location and location. This space allows events to be remembered and it is a part of student life at this particular institution.

The lack of students' presence in the union during the site visit to the Small City Private University demonstrates a lack of connection between the student union and the student experience. A limited number of students utilized the union during the observational period, but it does not seem that a great majority of the students regular use the space. Taking Lefebvre's theory into account in this situation, the lived aspect does not line up with the conceived. The objective of the student union, to foster community and a sense of interaction, is not being met in this scenario.

By looking at the Large Public University's student union, several aspects of student life become apparent. Outside, there were multiple individuals both promoting organizations and using the space for social interaction. The observations at both the Small City Private University and the Large Public University were similar in the way in which the students utilized the space. The main difference in the two site visits was the

larger number of students in the natural environment at the Large Public University. It is necessary to take into account that the Large Public University has 30,000 more students.

Lefebvre's theory also states that there are two categories of space: abstract space and social space. An analysis of the observations can be made using this model. Each institution had a different atmosphere regarding the use of the student union. The furthest deviation of the two categories was the Small City Private University. In this instance, the abstract space is not a social space as well. In other words, those in power, administrators, built this space to fit certain parameters. It is a much more formal, regulated setting than the other sites. There is not a sense of lived space within this union. Members of the target population, students, do not use the space.

There is a merger of the two categories when observing the Flagship Public University's student union. Although built by administration, students use the space heavily and community has developed within it. Within the middle of the scale would be the two other institutions. The category of social space is not nearly as strong, but it is also not as weak as in the case of the Small City Private University.

CONCLUSION

Comparing Lefebvre's theoretical framework to student unions allows individuals to see how his theory is put into practice. By looking at these four institutions, it is clear that Lefebvre's thoughts regarding both aspects of space and categories of space is accurate. This comparative analysis is an application of those theories and one that allows for continuous observations in different areas of space on university campuses.

Each university had a different constellation of traits and capacities for the development of community. While there were similarities, all four universities' unions

were designed differently and the use of space differed accordingly. With the Small City Private University, the union had a more formal interior and a dated design that seemed to lead students outdoors. Charging students for activities within the union did not create a sense of ownership by the students of the space. The space did not belong to students, as they had to pay to use it. If the students' do not believe that the space belongs to them, there will be a hesitation of not only ownership of the space, but a lack of community as well.

The Flagship Public University had an opposite environment. The atmosphere of this student union was jovial and full of student life. This is not only to be attributed to the fact that this university is larger in size, but also to the design of the building. The Large Public University is larger in size, but failed to have the student interaction with the space like the Flagship Public University. There was truly a connection between abstract and social space.

The Urban Private University, as well as the Large Public University, was a combination of both effective and ineffective social space to create community. In each student union, there was a specific space that students gathered. At the Urban Private University, students tended to migrate to the coffee shop area. With the Small City Private University and the Large Public University, students could be more readily observed outdoors. The greatest number of students could be found on the first floor of the union of the Flagship Public University, although there were large numbers throughout the building.

Future Research

A continuation of this type of research or observation would well serve university administration. By observing the social spaces that students utilize, administrators can gain a better understanding of the overall student experience. As Lefebvre's theory points out, the social space is integrated with memory and experience that there is a clear connection with the social spaces that students utilize and their overall student experience.

This application is not limited to the student union, but can be used in other areas of student life as well. Similar observation and analysis would be useful in residence halls as well. If the goal of an administrator is to promote a sense of community, than the sociological theory of Lefebvre has the ability to serve as a useful tool to better understand both space and how individuals react and relate to it.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis will address: the creation of community on college campuses, which includes examining the role that space plays in the formation of community. According to prominent social theorists such as Henri Lefebvre and Pierre Bourdieu, space and its use are intricately connected to power and the construction of public spaces. Universities are such places and this research examines one of the central communal features of the American university, the student union.