Texas After Violence Project

During the summer of 2011 and into the fall I interned with the Texas After Violence Project. This was an enriching experience because it enabled me to attend and conduct interviews with informants of a specific cultural group, those affected by the death penalty. After introducing the organization I’ll discuss the ways in which they conduct their ethnographic research and provide a brief overview of my personal experiences.

Introduction to the organization

The Texas After Violence Project is a grassroots, non-profit organization founded in 2007 that focuses on gathering the oral histories of those who have personally, or have a loved one who has, experienced violence in the form of murder or the death penalty. Their mission statement, as is stated on their website, is:

“The Texas After Violence Project works to create a foundation for productive public dialogue on violence in Texas, especially murder and execution. We carefully listen to people affected by violence, including friends and family members of murdered and executed people, as well as police officers, first responders, prosecutors, defense attorneys, prison employees, victim and defendant advocates, and others involved in Texas’ criminal justice system. TAVP records their statements, archives them, makes them public with the narrators’ consent, and promotes conversations about the most effective, compassionate, and just ways to prevent and respond to violence.”

The organization is not an active participant in advocating for change in the judicial, prison, or legal systems in Texas. Its purpose is to document personal experiences with violence and use
them for educational purposes. Currently the interviews that have been conducted and released by the interviewed individual are posted on the organization’s website, www.texasafterviolence.org, and through the Human Rights Documentation Initiative with the University of Texas in Austin.

The Texas After Violence Project’s office is located on Congress Avenue, near its intersection with Riverside Drive in Austin, Texas. The office consists of a foyer and 2 rooms. It contains all of the trappings of any typical office: computers, printers, file cabinets, desks, and books, with the exception of several exercise balls. The calming-green painted walls and exercise balls, which often substitute as computer chairs, create an atmosphere that feels soothing and hospitable. This is especially important when interviews are conducted at the office. All of the data collected is saved on several large external hard drives. This includes all videos, interview transcriptions, and a master spreadsheet documenting the progress that has been made on every interview. The original videos, recorded with a video camera on small cassettes, are stored in a locked file cabinet, with older ones that have already been donated for public use moved into the organization’s safety deposit box.

The members of the organization are predominantly volunteers from the community and interns earning college credit, mostly from the University of Texas. There are few paid employees. During my time with the organization I worked most closely with Virginia Raymond, the previous director of the organization, and Maurice Chammah, a member of the “core team” from 2010 until September, 2011. Virginia has had years of experience in legal and cultural studies. They are both extremely knowledgeable on Texas laws involving capital punishment, as well as on current and past capital murder trials. In my time with the organization they have been in contact with individuals to identify potential interview candidates, and have performed many interviews. Although neither of these people are currently associated with the
organization in the capacity I came to know them, most of my daily interaction, training, and education on capital cases and laws can be credited to them.

**Narrator demographics**

The TAVP divides its narrators into several categories. First, there are family and friends of those executed or murdered. Then there are law enforcement officials, lawyers involved with capital murder trials (both defense and prosecutors), and activists.

The family and friends of those directly impacted by the death penalty reflect the demographic trends observable on death row. The majority of the people sentenced to death in Texas are racial minorities, and/or low income. The largest group on death row is African American males, then low-income white males, and then other minorities. The difference in our collection of narrators is that we have interviewed many women, mostly relatives of people executed or murdered. Relative to the amount of men on death row, there are very few women. The law enforcement officials and lawyers mostly consist of white, middle-aged, middle to upper class men.

The group of activists is broader as it encompasses ex-law enforcement, ex-lawyers, members of the clergy, media witnesses of executions, educators, and members of non-profit anti-death penalty organizations.

The Texas After Violence project relies heavily on it’s employees, interns, and volunteers to identify potential narrators. Many of the people interviewed by the project have been word-of-mouth type interactions through other acquaintances. The categories of individuals interviewed reflect the varied interests and backgrounds of all the members of the organization. Each person working for the TAVP has their own specific interests and agenda for the types of interviews they’d like to conduct. For instance, one of the core group is mostly interested in minority and women’s human rights violations, another tends to focus on restorative justice issues, and
another’s goal is to retain complete neutrality by focusing all their attention on one case and attempting to interview as many people involved as possible, such as the families of both the victim and the offender, the defense attorney and prosecutor, and members of the jury if possible.

The Texas After Violence Project follows a very specific method of identifying, contacting, and interviewing their narrators. Some narrators are located through research on any particular case. The cases most researched and with the most interviews relating to it are those that were highly publicized or controversial. One in particular was the case of Napolean Beazley, who was under the age of 18 when he committed his crime, and was still executed in 2002. He was one of the last people in the country to be executed that had committed a crime as a minor. The TAVP has several interviews relating to his case, including several family members and an attorney. Some interviews lead to new potential interviewees. These are often the partners of attorneys being interviewed, or as in one situation I witnessed, the jury foreman from a case we had asked questions about.

After a potential narrator has been located, a member of the TAVP may write them a letter, send them an email, or call them on the phone to explain the organization and request an interview. During this initial request it is important that the person understands his or her words will not be released for public use until they have agreed we may do so. Any correspondence with a potential narrator is saved in a file in the office for theirs, and the organization’s safety. Once a person has agreed to be interviewed, the time and place of the interview is decided upon. The TAVP member conducting the interview must have one other person with them, the videographer. The narrator is asked to sign documents saying they consent to be interviewed.

After the interview is complete it is transcribed, then reviewed, then audited, and finally a copy is mailed to the narrator for approval. They also receive a copy of their interview video, and consent forms to be signed. These forms request permission for the TAVP to use their interview
publicly and online. Narrators have the option to allow their interviews to be made public after a specified date. This option has been used in instances where an ongoing case was discussed in the interview and the narrator wishes it be made public after the case is complete.

Once the TAVP has rights to use the interview publicly it is posted on the Human Rights Documentation Initiative’s (HRDI) website through the University of Texas. It is also often edited into short clips and these are posted on YouTube.

A smaller amount of quantitative research is also used, typically as a lead into further interviews and more in depth qualitative research. One example of this was a survey sent to the sheriff of every county in Texas (there are 254 of them) requesting information on their treatment of and policies regarding trans-gendered individuals in the prison system. Part of these surveys inquired whether that county felt they could benefit from further training or information about trans-gendered people. Several counties responded positively and requested training. This will eventually lead to more interviews and qualitative research on the experience of trans-gendered people in prison. This research was part of a collaborative project with allgo: a queer people of color organization and the Texas Jail Project that began after allgo hosted a movie night featuring the documentary *Cruel and Unusual* about trans-gendered inmates. Representatives from each of these organizations were present and inspired by the film to conduct research on the topic in Texas.

During my time with the organization I transcribed several interviews, acted as videographer for several interviews, conducted an interview, identified an interview candidate, attended a number of meetings, assisted in the distribution and then organization of surveys sent and received, and created a podcast.

The Interview
In the vein of current popular anthropological research techniques like those discussed by Alexander Ervin in his book, *Applied Anthropology: Tools and Perspectives for Contemporary Practice*, the Texas After Violence Project uses qualitative research methods in the form of “open-ended key-informant interviews” to collect personal narratives that together compile a very personalized view on violence and how it effects individuals, and in turn our culture (Ervin 2002;161). The Texas After Violence project doesn’t claim to directly model their interviewing methods after Ervin, but in my time with the organization I observed similarities that led me to conclude that they are conducting valuable cultural research that follows the standard procedures of cultural anthropological fieldwork.

Ervin states that his interviewees are reminded that “they are authentic experts in the topics that I am investigating”, and that “the interview should be largely a one-way conversation, in which the informant does most of the talking” (Ervin 2002; 171). The TAVP’s methods are similar in that the goal of each interview is to hear the interviewer’s voice as little as possible. The interviewer will offer brief prompts in the direction of desired information, but for the most part the interviewing process is a chance for the interviewee to share their story and experiences. This method of collecting a series of key-informant interviews creates a lengthy narrative about the effects of violence; thus, the TAVP refers to all interviewees as “narrators” to convey the message that this is their story, opinions, and experiences.

I had the opportunity to attend my first interview as videographer in June. Maurice Chammah conducted the interview. We heard the story of a defense attorney that worked a highly publicized case several years ago involving mental insanity. (Their name can’t be shared until they have signed consent forms and donated their interview to the public.) We spent a total of 3 hours in their office, and Maurice only spoke a few times. His typical remark was something like: “You mentioned _____, would you mind sharing more details on that?” The attorney knew
which case we were interested in hearing about, and provided us with a lot of detail about the case, and their relationship with the client. They have done much work in their career to spread awareness about women’s mental health issues, especially post partum depression, and were eager to discuss these things as some of the most relevant details about the case. They seemed to welcome our request for an interview for this reason. It was very much their story, rather than a question and answer style interview.

Another popular anthropologist that discusses interviewing methodology is Kathy Charmaz in her book *Constructing Grounded Theory: A practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. She, like Ervin, is not directly cited as an inspiration in methodology by the TAVP, but I use the TAVP’s and Charmaz’s methodological similarities to further prove that the TAVP is following standard procedures for good ethnographic fieldwork. The majority of some interviews, especially those of family members, involve personal anecdotes about the victim or defendant. They may talk about their own and their families experiences and feelings through out the trial period. These types of interviews elicit an emotional response and provide insight into the mental and emotional state of people directly affected by violence. In conducting the interview in the style of a directed conversation, as described by Charmaz, the person being interviewed feels that their perspective on their experience is validated while the interviewer actively listens and records their account (Charmaz 2006; 25). This is especially effective considering the often painful and stressful subject matters these informants are discussing. In many situations the families of people on death row are ostracized from their communities and associated with the crime that was committed. It is important for the interviewer to be sensitive to the circumstances of these people and emphasize that their experience is significant in order for the interview to be successful. There are many issues to consider in conducting a successful interview, such as how the interviewer is perceived by the narrator, the narrator’s emotional
vulnerabilities as a result of experiencing the trauma of a loved one on death row, executed, or murdered, and whether the narrator trusts the interviewer, sponsoring institution, and purpose of the research (Charmaz 2006; 27).

There are many complications involved with researching human subjects that the TAVP has gone out of their way to remain sensitive to. The gathering of legal and personal information revolving around a capital murder trial can involve ethical and legal dilemmas if the researchers aren’t extremely careful. There are many obstacles to overcome, and future complications to avoid. The organization avoids interviewing anyone personally connected to a person still in the trial or appeal process. They also will not interview a person in any way related to an executed person earlier than a year after they have been executed.

Many times the interviews are stressful and emotionally straining for the interviewer and videographer. People aren’t often confronted with such painful, and often graphic, information that compose our narrator’s lives. My personal experience with such emotional subject matter varied. There were some interviews previously recorded in which family members discussed witnessing their loved one’s execution. I found that I had to protect myself while watching or reading these interviews from empathizing too deeply with this person’s experience. In one interview for which I was present the narrator described in detail the crime that was committed, which involved children. This graphic explanation was difficult to listen to. For this reason the organization has taken precautionary steps to protect their staff and volunteers from harmful emotional effects. Everyone is encouraged to set aside time for self-reflection after attending or conducting an interview. This helps identify emotional boundaries and vulnerabilities, allows that person to recognize situations they should avoid, and forms them into more effective ethnographers. Contact information is provided to all staff and volunteers for counselors that will provide therapy sessions, paid by the organization, in the event that any member feels they need
to utilize this resource. I had the opportunity to meet one of these counselors during an ethics-
training meeting and learned that they specialize in therapy after trauma, whether emotional or
physical.

Other interviews contain more objective information on the judicial system. While every
interview contains some human, emotional elements, those of law enforcement officials and
members of the judicial system are much more revealing of methods, flaws, and inadequacies in
the legal system than they are of the ways in which humans cope with grief. There are many
subtleties in the trial process that mostly go unnoticed to the average man or woman, but that
have a strong influence on the outcome of a case. These subtleties are often reflections of the
political activity among attorneys, judges, and jurors, or of the different ways in which laws are
interpreted and facts manipulated. An example of this came in an interview with Walter Long,
the attorney of the previously mentioned Napoleon Beazley. He discussed overlooked juror
racial biases in the case. This incident involved two white, blatantly racist jury members in the
trial of a young African American man. The jurors were allowed to participate in this case in
spite of evidence of their hostile opinions towards non-whites. Some of this evidence included a
confederate flag hanging daily from one individual’s front porch and a direct quote from the
other jury member after Napoleon had been convicted of murder and sentenced to death: “The
nigger got what he deserved”. Long described a comparative case that occurred soon after
Beazley’s conviction. The crime was similar, but the races of the actors involved were reversed.
The crime was committed against an elderly black man by two young white men. Neither of
these men received the death penalty. The comparison of these two cases show how deeply
racism pervades many ideologies of Texans, specifically east Texans in this example.

Even the TAVP’s method of identifying new narrators follows the patterns described by
other anthropologists. As I discussed earlier, some interviews uncover new potential
interviewees. Ervin calls this the “result of a ‘snowballing’ effect, whereby informants identify other likely informants” (Ervin 2002; 170).

**Personal experience**

In my first week with the Texas After Violence Project I felt that I dove in head first, for better or for worse. Falling into my position as intern in this haphazard fashion gave me a better taste of the way the organization works than I would have gained through a slow initiation, though. Both the other volunteers and the paid employees are deeply involved in and passionate about their work. They all seemed to be working on several projects simultaneously, and constantly thinking of and beginning new endeavors.

My tasks while working for the organization were diverse. I transcribed an interview with the leader of an organization fighting to abolish the death penalty, prepared and mailed surveys to the sheriff of every county in Texas regarding the treatment and placement of trans-gendered individuals in the Texas prison system, discussed possible interview candidates with other team members, researched several death penalty cases of different interest to the organization, met with the director of the Human Rights Documentation Initiative and discussed their possible interest in some possessions of David Powell, a man executed in 2010, that were donated to TAVP, attended staff meetings for the purpose of reinforcing some administrative and organizational consistency in work practices, discussed a previous interview with a D.A. associated with several capital offense cases and scheduled a follow up for a future date, and finally suggested and began working on creating a podcast for the organization for the purpose of making their interviews more easily accessible.

Currently the research and interviews the project has conducted that are released by the narrator to the public are somewhat buried in UT’s Human Rights Documentation Initiative resource page. Most of these interviews are over an hour long, making it unlikely that many
people will hear or watch the entire thing. The organization is constantly trying to find useful methods of broadcasting the stories they have gained with a larger general audience for educational purposes, and I believe a weekly updated podcast could provide a valuable outlet for releasing information by sorting out significant clips from these interviews. I scoured past interviews for related topics of particular interest, such as cases involving mental illness, juveniles, mistrials, etc… compiled audio clips from these, and created web broadcasts to be posted on the TAVP blog and on iTunes. My hope is that this will create an accessible, organized method for publicizing the research and interviews we’ve gathered.

In my second week with the project I completed transcribing an interview performed back in 2009, and prepared consent forms to mail to the individual. The consent forms are meant to allow our organization to use any part of the interviews online in the University of Texas’s research archive, the Human Rights Documentation Initiative. I also spent a significant amount of time reviewing past interviews in order to compile audio clips for the podcast I planned on posting for the organization. Throughout this process I have learned a lot about the laws involving capital murder cases, specifically regarding minors and the law of parties. The majority of my time was spent researching the case of Napoleon Beazley. Napoleon’s case was controversial because he was a minor, aged 17, at the time of his crime. At that time several states had passed legislation banning anyone under the age of 18 from being sentenced to death, but Texas had not passed this legislation yet. The laws were changed shortly after Napoleon’s case, however, making him one of the last people to be sentenced to death that was a minor at the time of his crime. I learned about the law of parties through research on the case of Joseph Nichols. He and one other individual, Willie Williams, performed an armed robbery of a convenience store. They both fired rounds at the person working, but initially neither of them hit the man. Nichols exited the store, but Williams remained and fired the fatal shot. Nichols was
sentenced to death under the law of parties because he was considered a party to the crime. Many people found this sentencing controversial because the fatal shot was fired by Williams acting independently because Nichols had already exited the store. I watched interviews previously conducted with Jamaal Beazley, Napoleon Beazley’s brother, and Lee Greenwood, Joseph Nichols’ mother. These different perspectives were examples of the ways in which the practice of the death penalty affects many different people, and turns the families of the individual executed into secondary victims of every capital crime.

I was able to identify an individual for an interview through family connections near Huntsville. Their ties to death row are through an organization that hosts families of those being executed. They offer a place for the loved ones to come together as they mourn their loss, and have some community outreach programs as well. The interview provided many stories about the experiences of families of those convicted of capital murder from an un-biased (not directly involved with any case) perspective. The narrator had no personal opinions they wished to share on the death penalty, but made it abundantly clear that the families of those incarcerated are suffering and lack supportive resources. They are often treated as pariahs in their community, and this narrator has made it their mission to provide support and a comfortable environment for them to visit their loved ones.

I had the chance to conduct an interview at the beginning of July with Walter Long, the founder of the TAVP. He hadn’t been interviewed previously, and practiced as a defense attorney for many years before joining the organization. He represented Napoleon Beazley, whose case I was featuring in a podcast, and I felt that there were some legal issues that needed clarification from the trial and appeal process. His legal explanations were a very informative supplement to the materials I have already gathered. Another controversy in Napoleon’s case was that the victim of his crime was the father of one of the justices of the 4th circuit court of
appeals, who had personal relationships with several justices on the Supreme Court. Based on Napoleon’s status as a minor at the time of his crime, and the overlooked racial biases of two of the jury members in his original conviction and sentencing, Walter Long tried to take the case for appeal in the Supreme Court. The case was never seen in the Supreme Court because three of the justices recused themselves from the case based on their personal relationship with Michael Luttig, the son of John Luttig, the victim of the crime. Three of the other six justices denied taking the case, while the other three said they would. This tie resulted in Napoleon’s first stay of execution, but the controversial issues were never reviewed in court and he was eventually executed. We had a brief conversation previous to beginning the interview to gain an understanding about what specific issues I’d like explained, such as the three-way tie in the Supreme Court and the issues of racial bias. After we began recording I only spoke three times during the hour long interview. Long’s explanations were extremely helpful because they not only helped explain the legal matters, but also provided the emotional impact that such a complex and stressful case can have on its legal representation. Long developed a close relationship with Napoleon and his family throughout the course of this case, and until the time of our interview, had not spoken about it extensively in a public setting because of the emotional strain it caused him.

In addition to invaluable experience and training in ethnographic research and key informant interviewing, I attended several training sessions for software programs and ethical issues with gathering oral histories with the rest of the organization’s staff and volunteers. I gained valuable knowledge on the software program used to upload and edit video and audio recordings of our interviews.

**Conclusion:**
My time with the TAVP was a great experience. I can’t imagine many other situations, other than extended international study, in which an anthropology student working on their bachelor’s degree can gain applied experience with cultural anthropological methodology and ethnography. I feel extremely lucky to have worked with the highly intelligent people that I did, and to now have them as connections after I graduate and either begin looking for a job or pursue a master’s degree.
Bibliography
