Michael O. Johnston, Ph.D.

**RESEARCH STATEMENT**

My research spans the area of age and life-course; news media; organizations; sex and gender; small group dynamics; sport, leisure, and recreation; rural and urban studies; as well as work and family. More specifically, my research program is motivated by my understanding of rural and urban environment as a social system that shapes and is shaped by its social context. The goal of my research program is to improve our understanding of the role that society plays in transforming small group interaction and the subsequent role(s) that small groups play in the lives of individual participants. I achieve this goal by focusing on celebrations and festivals. At the macro level, I focus on the relationship between news media and its representation of celebrations and festivals in general. At the meso level, I focus on celebrations and festivals and the role they have in helping humans giving meaning to their social environments. At the micro level, I focus on the meaning that is being made among individuals who are participating in the celebration or festival that is under investigation.

**Identity, Meaning-Making, and Placemaking**

My first area of research interest is on the relationship between the construction of place and identity. My research in this area seeks to understand the process in which identity and place are constructed and reconstructed. I am interested in the social forces that influence the making of such identity and place. I am also interested in the meanings that people make about their everyday experiences in order to construct identity and place.

Scholars have documented the meaning that people make about their surroundings for a long time. My research advances this area of inquiry by expanding the spatial and temporal frames within which identity and place are analyzed. How do people in rural and urban spaces use celebrations and festivals to develop a sense of place? I approach this question through qualitative methods of research on Tug Fest, one of the only festivals that force the Mississippi River to close to barge, and other commercial, traffic for three hours. Using archival data, I found that community members and tourists have come together to create festivals as both enjoyable activities that stimulate economic growth for a region while also being parties that have become unmanageable for community leaders in rural areas. I document the themes that are reoccurring across local media sources about the experiences that tourists, business owners, city employees, and residents of the community have as they partake in Tug Fest. While rural and urban festivals are often described as uniform attempts to celebrate heritage and to stimulate economic growth for the community, in reality there is great diversity in the meaning(s) that people make through the experiences they have at celebrations and festivals. I show that experiences and meaning(s) that people make for them vary significantly across the roles that people carry out at celebrations and festival. These are findings that could help advance how scholars and planners understand the significance (or insignificance) of festivals in human life.

**Celebrations and Festivals during Unprecedented Times:**

Another key issue in the use of celebration and festival is the fate of the communities in which they occur. Many people responded to the industrial revolution by moving to urban centers for an economic opportunity and few people have moved back to rural areas after the post-industrial shift. The towns and residents who live here are disproportionately in need of developing a brand they can identify with desperately cling to in hopes of economic growth. Technological development in an internet and transportation age has made it possible for people to live further away from their workplace. This allows people to not have to move back to rural communities. People have remained near the city and tend to focus more time on the qualities of life that are afforded to them in the communities where they live.

Residents of rural areas tend to be more vulnerable to economic hardship and mental illness as a result of people and vital services moving to urban cities. The rebuilding of small towns as a desirable place to work, live, play, and raise a family is critical for the future of the United States of America. My research on Tug Fest found that the local news media (newspaper and video) represented the festival in a positive way. There were some people who shared that they were concerned about the event becoming too large for the small town. The planners saw a vision for the festival to be family oriented. Others saw the festival as either a sporting event or as one big party.

**The Role of Historic Preservation in Making Meaning and Placemaking:**

My last and emerging area of research is centered on the vulnerability of historic resources for celebrations and festivals that are intended to spark economic development in rural and urban areas. Heritage is a key contributor to communities remaining resilient and it is increasingly at-risk; besides being fundamental to a community’s sense of place, it is also an important driver of tourism and residents choosing a community to live in. Yet, there have been relatively few scholars conducting research on the role of heritage in creating meaning and place for rural and urban communities. Heritage tourism serves as a large source for economic growth, and it helps employ locals. The obstacle often faced by cities and towns when developing heritage tourism is providing an accurate portrayal of the communities’ history.

**Nexus Between Research, Service, and Teaching**

Throughout my career I have viewed my research, service, and teaching activities to be closely interrelated. My research trajectory allows me to work with students at all levels and teach them the fundamentals of research design, data collection, and analysis. The studies that I invest in always produce supplementary resources that I can use in the classroom to reinforce concepts and ideas. I routinely use findings from my research to inform classroom discussions and provide examples on how to complete course assignments. For example, I use my publication in *Gender Issues Journal* on social and class status of Tulip Queen Pageant for my SOCI 219 Sex and Gender in Society course. I also use the methods section of this publication when discussing research methods in SOCI 390 Sociology Practicum. Students in my courses frequently state that using my current research is a strength in the style of my instruction. I have also created assignments based on current research projects that I am working on, such as having students conduct analysis of written word and visual images *(see Teaching Statement)*.

Finally, my research has awarded me the opportunity to engage in service activities for the university, academy, and public. After conducting research about the Tulip Queen Pageant at Tulip Time Festival, for instance, I was invited by the host of *Untenured Tracks* to give a talk. My next research project on Tug Fest awarded me the opportunity to be invited by faculty to give talks in their courses at University of Indianapolis (via Zoom) and at Appalachian State University (via Zoom). I have also had the opportunity to speak about my research on an episode of *Down the Research Rabbit Hole* podcast.

**Research Impact**

I situate my research primarily in areas that are naturally interdisciplinary, which draws together a diverse audience of scholars from disciplines like anthropology, community planning, environmental sciences, human geography, leisure and festival studies, public administration, rural studies, urban development, and sociology. To contribute to these scholarly conversations, I have published my research findings in diverse venues. My articles have appeared in highly respected journals in cultural studies, community planning, gender studies, leisure and festival studies, sport and recreation, and urban studies. The journals I publish in have relatively high impact factors in the discipline and have generally good rankings in their respective subfields. The journal *Gender Issues* is ranked Q2 in gender studies and has a .32 SJR Ranking. My writing is exclusively published in journals that are ranked in the top tier and have a strong reputation, including journals like *Teaching Sociology* and *Symbolic Interactions Journal*.