



June 1, 2011

James B. Duke Professor of Sociology Linda M. Burton

Linda M. Burton studies Americans “who don’t have a voice, who are under the radar of our society.”

A sociology graduate of the University of Southern California and a member of the Duke Population Research Institute faculty, Burton identifies herself as an ethnographer. “Ethnographic methods are used across many different disciplines, and each individual style and approach incorporates varied theoretical perspectives,” Burton says. “The style of a lone-wolf ethnographer – going native, living and communing within the group you’re studying, writing up your field notes (which nobody else gets to see), publishing your findings and conclusions – that was my approach in my early days in the field.

“But the world is bigger, the problems are more complex, and team ethnography is to my mind- the best approach for dealing with the complexity. The capacity to use technology to take notes, to transmit them to people who can read them and give you feedback, to monitor ethnographic activities being conducted in a variety of different places by people from different disciplines – all of that enables you to find consistency and patterns to a degree that wasn’t possible before.”



Burton directed the ethnographic component of the monumental *Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three-City Study*, managing a team of 215 research scientists, ethnographers, data analysts, and staff. Funded by nearly 20 public and private organizations, including the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the National Science Foundation, and the Social Security Administration, the study looked at the day-to-day lives of low-income African Americans, Latinos, Hispanics, and non-Hispanic whites in neighborhoods of Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio.

“There is intellectual strength, vibrancy, and validity in such numbers,” Burton says. “It fortifies your story line when people from different backgrounds can look at an issue from different perspectives and reach the same conclusions. That made this dataset so much stronger. There’s no question that this approach is labor-intensive; it requires a lot of time to direct such a study and makes you reach down deep inside to find your administrative and leadership skills, as well as your skills as a clinical psychologist. Just as the respondents have different personalities and issues to deal with, so do ethnographers. And it’s expensive – \$4 million. But in the end I can celebrate the information and insight that we gathered.”

Communications and coordination were paramount concerns. “With a team this big, people couldn’t go off to their various locales and not talk to each other religiously if we were to stay on target,” Burton says. “We had thought-provoking conference calls among ethnographers to talk about what they were experiencing in the field. So an ethnographer in Chicago could hear the experiences of a colleague in Boston.”

“The other communications issue was how to communicate with the survey members of the team, who are used to thinking about ethnographic research as a source for a couple of quotes. We had to educate and help our colleagues understand that what ethnographers do is look at people’s behavior and listen to what they say and compare the two, looking for consistency. That’s what ethnography does best. People can tell you anything they want to, but you have to watch what they do and look for consistency over time.”

Given the changes in the U.S. economy since the study was completed in 2006, has it remained relevant?

“When we were designing the study,” Burton says, “my colleagues, who had a more macro perspective and hadn’t done as much on-the-ground research, anticipated that we’d be looking at the direct impact of welfare reform on women and children. I kept saying, ‘No, we’re not. What we’re going to look at is another perturbation of poverty.’”

“Policy changes and shifts in the economy have little impact on the lives of people who’ve been in poverty for generations,” Burton continues. “If you’re poor, the so-called welfare reform isn’t reform at all; it’s just another perturbation of the ups and downs that you experience at the hands of policy makers who believe themselves to be revising a situation. What we saw is how poor people develop strategies for dealing with changes in the law, access to resources, and so on.”

Burton is also the principal investigator of *The Family Life Project* ethnography which examined family processes and child development in six rural counties, three in Pennsylvania and three in North Carolina. This study follows on work in rural ghettos that is presented in the book *Communities, Neighborhoods, and Health: Expanding the Boundaries of Place* (Springer 2011), which Burton coauthored. In the book, the authors write that “it is our responsibility as social, behavioral, and biomedical scientists to explore” the dramatic changes in rural environments. Asked responsibility to whom, Burton replies: “We’re giving voice to populations that are living under the radar in American society. This is especially true of rural populations, which are changing dramatically. With the decline in farming and mining, there’s been a shift to low-wage service jobs like Wal-Mart and McDonald’s. There’s been a growth of prisons and rehab centers in rural environments. The number of minorities and recent migrants from Central America and Mexico and of urban African Americans in search of cheaper housing has changed the landscape, a change that many existing white populations in these environments are not ready for and are struggling with. Gender relations in rural areas have also changed. There are more women employed as their husbands or partners lose jobs, which changes gender roles, contributes to increases in divorce and to growing numbers of what we call multipartner-fertility families- that is, men and women having children by different partners. There’s no one telling these people’s stories.”

Burton and her colleagues from Boston College and Tufts University were recently awarded a \$900,000 grant from the MacArthur Foundation to study the role that housing plays in children’s development, primarily analyzing data from the Three-City Study. Burton was also awarded a grant from the National Science Foundation to study changes in norms and expectations in intimate unions among African-American, Latino, and White families in both the Three-City Study and the Family Life Project ethnographies.

Burton was raised in Compton, California, a city near Los Angeles famous for rap groups like N.W.A. and gangs like the Crips and the Bloods. Did her background make her a better ethnographer?

“Absolutely,” Burton says. “It gave me a way of looking at the world – my mother calls it vigilance – that makes me aware of what’s going on in my environment all the time. Growing up in Compton taught me to read situations very quickly and to figure out what I needed to do to move through it. It also gave me a sense of flexibility that enables me to enter different environments with relative ease. I don’t have the hang-ups or the inhibitions that make me timid about engaging with people from all walks of life.

“People have multiple angles operating in their daily lives. If you’re evaluating them, you have to look at all those angles to see how the good and the bad in their lives fit together. That’s something I learned growing up in Compton.”