

Public Abstract

First Name:David

Middle Name:Lucas

Last Name:Overfelt

Adviser's First Name:David

Adviser's Last Name:Brunsmma

Co-Adviser's First Name:Wayne

Co-Adviser's Last Name:Brekhus

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In this dissertation I counter the sociological tendency to focus only on the study of large metropolises or remote urban areas by using multiple methods to study the past, present, and future of Columbia, Missouri, an Ordinary City. To understand the history of the community I analyzed relevant documents to key moments, to understand the life of present day community members I used photo journals to let respondents tell their own story, and I served as a participant observer in a visioning process in order to assess how community members portray and shape the future. I found that there are very interesting differences and similarities across all cities, making this approach a novel way to learn about communities and a practical way to work toward greater political participation. For communities, this means making more room for citizens to decide and for sociologists this means taking on new approaches to understanding all places.