Engaging & Educating: Examining Local Protests & Narratives of Environmental Challenges as Resident-Researchers in South Florida
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Abstract:
After the 2016 Presidential election in the United States, the co-authors (as resident-researchers) attended protests on environmental themes from the Everglades (south) to West Palm Beach (north). While both authors have previously focused on international research projects, concentrating on local protests provided opportunities to document and analyze events in our own communities while many researchers were focused on national high-attendance protest events. These opportunities provided a unique regional perspective as well as the unplanned benefit of a lower carbon footprint in terms of research travel to sites as well as presentations at two nearby conferences. As visual sociologists we photographed the varied signs carried by protesters at each of the events in an effort to record, read, and analyze the narratives "told" through the signs. Our examination included the overall protest narratives as well as the ways in which the protesters did the following: 1) identified what was most important to them (in terms of specific themes and topics of importance), 2) used visual methods to communicate their messages to a wider audience, and 3) attempted to educate (e.g. using humor, urgency, creativity, and science) observers on the environmental issues and challenges. Analyses of the frequency of keywords and visuals and other pieces of the narratives allowed us to consider which of these elements managed by protesters were most common and what the potential implications are for the study of these protests. Students were invited to join us as student-researchers and the data (in the form of sign photographs) were also used in our classrooms to bring these pressing environmental issues and protest narratives to the forefront for discussion. The data inspired discussions about contemporary social movements from sociological frameworks, bringing these contemporary social science topics to academic attention and examination in student-centric, visual, and thought-provoking ways.

From Belief to Practice:
“The educator has the duty of not being neutral.” – Paulo Freire
- Application of Freire’s ideas on engaged learning is necessary yet challenging
- Engaged research in our own backyard inspired us to inject our research into the classroom to stimulate conversation, analysis and address of controversial contemporary issues
- Practical examples of how to ‘do’ contemporary events and issues, student-driven critical analysis of them, and of (perceived) politicized subjects in the classroom are crucial

The Research:
-Post-2016 elections in U.S. we photographed protest signs at protests in South Florida (also our home)
-We often participated (after or concurrently with) photographing
-We kept notes and journals on our participant-observation
-Explicating protests narratives as told via signs, understanding role/power of the signs, & compare/contrast events, themes, and alliances

References:

Linking Research to Classroom:

Introduction to Sociology courses: discussed photos, signs and accessories & their often overlooked roles in social movements
In upper-level electives on ‘society and environment’ (during unit on science and technology) and in research methods classes, brought data into class to examine contemporary views of science through signs from “The March for Science” (Fort Lauderdale, Florida)
-Drove discussion to specific local events which most students were unaware of
-Discussion topics came directly from student analysis of signs/coding/keywords

- Led to discussions on: the definition/role of science, scientific ‘objectivity’, natural and social science framework differences, alliances’ and overlap in social protest, humor, facts, & science as challenge to authoritarism, bias in research analysis

Conclusions:
-‘Controversial’ issues are often perceived as uncomfortable in classroom; conversation starters are needed –and in the sciences raw data are a starting point since students view them as ‘objective’
- Focus on the data can jumpstart students out of self-consciousness and pre-conceived notions on ‘controversial’ subjects
- Discussion is stimulated through examination of data, images
- Allows movement beyond protecting own preconceived positions or safe positions & a perceived ‘safe’ neutrality