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## Episode 18: URCAD '22 w/ Avnee Sharma, Jess Sellner, Elyssa Lou, & Joshua F. Gray

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**DI** **Dr. Ian Anson** 0:04

Hello and welcome to Retrieving the Social Sciences, a production of the Center for Social Science Scholarship. I'm your host, Ian Anson, Associate Professor of Political Science here at UMBC. On today's show, as always, we'll be hearing from UMBC faculty, students, visiting speakers, and community partners about the social science research they've been performing in recent times. Qualitative, quantitative, applied, empirical, normative. On Retrieving the Social Sciences we bring the best of UMBC's social science community to you.

**DI** **Dr. Ian Anson** 0:40

Each spring at UMBC a fantastic celebration of Undergraduate Research and Creative Achievement takes place. The name of the celebration is URCAD. We love acronyms and initialisms here at UMBC. And it's a long standing conference where undergraduates can show off all the hard work they've put into their big projects. In the social sciences, students from every discipline create posters, deliver talks about their research, and share their insights with

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[Download on Android, iOS](#)[Log in](#)**DI Dr. Ian Anson** 1:32

Today, I have the good fortune to interview four students who presented this year at URCAD: Avnee Sharma, Elyssa Lou, Jess Sellner, and Joshua Gray. I got a chance to sit down with each of these enterprising UMBC students to hear about their incredibly timely, unique, and interesting projects. First up is Avnee Sharma, a UMBC junior from Bowie, Maryland. Avnee is a cultural anthropology major with minors in biology and public humanities. Avnee is also pursuing a certificate in the social dimensions of health. The URCAD project advised by Dr. Bambi Chapin and Dr. Sarah Fouts is entitled "COVID-19's Effects on Elementary School Teaching." Wow. Let's hear about Avnee's URCAD project right now.

**DI Dr. Ian Anson** 2:22

Avnee Sharma, thank you so much for agreeing to come talk to us about your research today. I have a sort of an introductory question that is pretty straightforward. I really want to know, sort of what is the big research question that your study is trying to answer?

**AS Avnee Sharma** 2:39

Hi, first of all, thank you for asking me to join you today. So my main research questions and topics was, were how has COVID-19 impacted elementary school education? And specifically, have teachers been affected by the pandemic in their personal and professional lives?

**DI Dr. Ian Anson** 3:01

Yeah, there's perhaps no more topical question than this, right, especially as an educator, this is the kind of thing that I want to know about very, very badly. Because certainly, as a professor, you know, we felt a lot of impacts. And I can't imagine, right, what it's been like for teachers in the K-12 setting. So I want to I want to know, how did you actually go about conducting this research? Obviously, we can come up with a lot of anecdotes maybe about people that we encountered, you know, maybe I've got some teacher friends

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way that is empirically tractable?

**AS** **Avnee Sharma** 3:37

Yeah. So as an anthropology student, I focused on anthropological methods. So I focused on participant observation. I did two interviews with a third grade teacher and an elementary school principal. And then I also did a story circle with four teachers from one each from first to fourth grade. So basically, just to say what a story circle is. It's when people gather to share their own stories and experiences based on a common theme, with a goal of finding similarities and differences to understand each other's perspectives. So the prompt that I gave these four teachers were to share a story about teaching their during the pandemic that has been impactful and monumental. And then we basically had like, a 20-ish minute group discussion where they just kind of all talked it out. And then after that discussion, I had a reflection activity with them where I gave them all paper, and then various writing utensils, like colored pencils, Sharpies, cards, etc. And they all just basically drew their reflection of the conversation that they just had. And then my URCAD presentation focused on analyzing those drawings and reflections and matching that to the interviews that I had with the other educators and seeing what I could come up with that.

**DI** **Dr. Ian Anson** 5:06

Wow. So this sort of multimodal approach to gleaning this information from these teachers, so this, this really you think had an effect on your ability to draw sort of broader conclusions, you think?

**AS** **Avnee Sharma** 5:18

Yeah. I think it was, it was cool, because obviously, I knew that I was going to have interviews going into this, but the story circle was something that I could come up with on my own with the help of my mentor as well. And I really liked the visual aspect of it, because I personally felt that maybe teachers didn't have the opportunity to be able to do this before, either. So I feel like it could help me with having a perspective that maybe they never thought to share before. And yeah, I just thought that'd be really interesting.

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It is indeed really interesting. So I want to know, though, so, so what did you find, right? What were the results of these interviews, these story circles? What did teachers tell you about the COVID pandemic?

**AS** **Avnee Sharma** 6:06

Yeah, so my major takeaways from it all was that there was a lot of confusion and conflict while educating. But throughout all of that, it still fostered a greater sense of community, as there was a lot of empathy, encouragement, and understanding between teachers and teachers' relationships with their students and their students' families. Because everyone had a lot of different opinions and processes while getting through, but there was still similar interactions. Obviously, everyone had this shared experience of COVID. And that kind of brought everyone together through their own specific different experiences. And then a lot of the teachers' reasonings for doing what they do was centered around their students, which in my opinion, was was not a big surprise.

**DI** **Dr. Ian Anson** 6:57

Wow. So certainly a lot to learn from these teachers about the COVID pandemic. And certainly, some fantastic insights from this URCAD project. Avnee Sharma, thank you so much for sharing your insights with us today. We look forward to learning more about all the great social science research that you're gonna do in the future.

**AS** **Avnee Sharma** 7:16

Thank you.

**DI** **Dr. Ian Anson** 7:27

Next, we hear from Elyssa Lou, who expects to graduate with a BS in psychology in just a few weeks. Elyssa hails from Rockville, Maryland, and worked with Dr. Anne Brodsky on a project entitled "Examining Filipino American Mental Health Attitudes, Needs, and Barriers to Help-Seeking." Let's hear about it from Elyssa.

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All right, Elyssa Lou, I'm so grateful to have you on the podcast as well to talk a little bit about your URCAD project. And of course, I want to know, first of all, what is this project about? What is the research question that your project is seeking to answer?

**EL** **Elyssa Lou** 8:01

Yeah, thank you for having me. I was really excited to, to receive your invitation to come on to the podcast. This a little bit of a complicated question, I guess, because this project is really just kind of, I say, a baby step, but it's already, it covers a lot. But this specific project covers attitudes that Filipinos have towards mental health and mental health services. Where they kind of learn those attitudes or where or how those attitudes develop, and what purpose those attitudes serve in terms of acting as barriers or encouragers to seeking out mental health services when they need it. So that was the big research question for this topic. But overall, it's just like the first step, because what I really want to do is eventually conduct research in the Philippines and try to figure out interventions or programs to help Filipinos in the Philippines to have access to high quality mental health services. And yeah, this is just something that I'm super passionate about. Because I'm Filipino. I grew up in the Philippines and immigrated here to the United States. So it's very much a passion project. For me,

**DI** **Dr. Ian Anson** 9:27

A passion project indeed. That sounds like a fantastic long term goal to sort of have as a social scientist and as somebody with sort of an important vested interest in this question. So they might be baby steps at this point, or at least according to you they are, but it seems like you've already done quite a lot in service of this particular question. So on that note, I wanted to ask you sort of what was the sort of methodology that you used in this project, to sort of begin investigating the sort of contours of mental health and community mental health in the Philippines.

**EL** **Elyssa Lou** 10:03

Sure. So for this project, I interviewed 10 first generation Filipino immigrants

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consistency or standardization across the board. But these interviews were really mostly open ended. And I just asked the questions that I felt like flowed or, you know, the questions where I could really seek out the information that I was looking for in an organic manner. So yeah, it was those 10 interviews. And then I asked each of my participants to fill out a Qualtrics demographic questionnaire, so just picked up demographic questions from them. And some yes or no questions about, you know, their experience with mental health services or interest in mental health services. And then afterwards, I had the pleasure of transcribing each of those one-hour long interviews, verbatim. I fortunately had the help of transcription service otter.ai, so that did help. But I did still spend a lot of time many, many hours going over those transcripts, making sure that they were accurate to what the participants were saying, which was a little bit of a struggle, because sometimes the audio quality is compromised over Zoom, so I'm sitting there replaying the same audio clip, trying to figure out what this person is saying. So that was interesting. And then, once I had the transcripts, I had to scrub them of identifying information and code them. And so because this is qualitative research methodology, I had to come up with the coding framework myself, based on what I've read in previous literature, and just kind of what I felt like the most pertinent themes were that came up in these interviews. So it was it was constantly a changing framework that I had to make sense of, and for that, I had to use qualitative analysis software called NVivo. So that was, that was pretty helpful, because it, once you've coded your data, it will actually create, like a visual representation of everything you've coded to help you make sense of the relationships. So that's really the big picture stuff.

**DI Dr. Ian Anson** 13:03

Yeah, I think that one of the common themes to emerge in the Retrieving the Social Sciences podcast, especially when we interview professional researchers, is just how difficult it is to really perform data collection at scale. And so I think that your your sort of story about how to do this project is definitely something that we've heard before on the on the podcast, and certainly as you can consider a career in research going forward, something that you're now well and familiar with. So definitely a hard road to get that data, but certainly something that paid off at the end of the day with this



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transcription, and survey methodology, this sort of mixed method method approach, ultimately, lead you to understand about mental health service seeking as the sort of attitudes towards mental health among Filipinos?

**EL** **Elyssa Lou** 13:59

Yeah, this was actually the hardest part of my project is making sense of it all because the content of these interviews were so rich, and there were so many different directions that I could take this analysis into. So for my URCAD project, I really just focused and narrowed it down on what attitudes Filipinos had towards mental health and mental health services. And what I found was a lot of Filipinos express that they hadn't really thought about mental health, especially not before the pandemic. It wasn't until COVID-19 happened that they really started thinking about how their mental health was impacted because they were feeling that extra strain from, you know, everything going on with the pandemic. And so, before that it wasn't really talked about and it still isn't really talked about among Filipino families, which was another common thing. Like Filipinos, the Filipinos that I interviewed, shared that this wasn't really a topic that they spoke about with their parents, you know, their parents don't really bring it up. And so many of these people have learned to either turn to other individuals like their friends or their peers, to talk about their mental health or the opposite, which is just to try to deal with you know their stressors on their own and cope individually. And towards mental health services, almost everyone said they were open to receiving mental health services in the future should the need arise. But most people said that at the moment, they feel like they have their own ways to, to cope with the stressors in their life. You know, they have their hobbies, prayer, other people, their friends that they like to talk to. So they definitely have their own garden variety of things that they like to do to keep their mental health in check. So those are the major findings I found there. And I guess, in terms of what I found with the barriers and encouraging factors to seeking mental health services, the biggest barrier still remains the cultural stigma around mental health. And obviously, this isn't just pertaining to Filipinos, it's, it's happening everywhere. Mental health is really being talked about more these days. But still, there are people who aren't that open, or they just feel like it's a very

taboo subject. And there are some people who think, you know, mental health



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In terms of encouraging factors, I found that I think the Western influence and the culture of being more open to discussing mental health and having the resources available here in the United States, is encouraging people to at least be open to the idea knowing that they have the resources available to them for the most part, and that they know that there are places they can go to to find those resources. So I think that was the biggest takeaway in terms of encouraging factors. That and having support from their family members to to pursue the help that they need, when they need it.

**DI** **Dr. Ian Anson** 17:58

Elyssa Lou, thank you so much for sharing so many details of this incredibly rich project, and best wishes to you as you continue to work on this topic in the future. Hopefully, there's a lot more in store in terms of your social science research that you might be performing in the future.

**EL** **Elyssa Lou** 18:15

Yeah, thank you. I'm really excited to share obviously, there's, there's so much more that I could be saying, but I'm actually writing an honors thesis about this, so I'll be able to go into a lot more depth about my research there.

**DI** **Dr. Ian Anson** 18:32

Third, up in our series is Jess Aaron Sellner, an anthropology major with a minor in Cinematic Arts who expects to graduate this spring, Jess, who came to UMBC from Baltimore, worked with Dr. Camee Maddox-Wingfield on a project entitled, "Motivations for the Pursuit of Ancestral Knowledge." Intriguing title, and as we'll soon hear an even more intriguing project. Let's listen in.

**DI** **Dr. Ian Anson** 19:06

Jest Sellner, thank you so much for agreeing to talk to me today. I'm really interested to hear a little bit about this URCAD project that you recently presented. And my first question for you is really just to tell me a bit about the topic of this research and what research question you're really seeking to

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**JS** **Jess Sellner** 19:25

Sure, thank you for having me. My research topic is "Motivations for the Pursuit of Ancestral Knowledge," why people are seeking that in our contemporary society. I use the terms ancestral knowledge to encompass kind of a wide variety of practices and ways of being that allow people to kind of live in alignment with their personal and ancestral values, so that can refer to practicing plant-based medicine, practicing ritual magic, engaging in social justice and environmental activism, tracing and working with ancestral stories, and so on and so on.

**DI** **Dr. Ian Anson** 20:10

Wow. So certainly I've noticed out there, you know, talking to students and seeing, you know, various websites and people sort of starting these conversations online that, yeah, this idea of ancestral knowledge is becoming such an important part of many different people's sort of approach to life. And I think you're absolutely right, that this is a growing movement, I think in America, though, perhaps maybe this has been going on for a very long time in other parts of the world, right. But I want to know a little bit about how you sort of did this study, right. What what did you actually do to to evaluate this like a social scientist?

**JS** **Jess Sellner** 20:47

Sure. My methodology began with participant observation in two local groups, one which practices ecstatic ritual magic, with an emphasis on activism and one, much less formal group, which practices plant-based and community medicine, which in itself, is a form of activism. I also employed one-on-one open-ended interviews and a bit of visual anthropology where participants were asked to caption pictures of events. I take all the information that I gather and code it for emergent themes. And I take those themes and kind of compare them to existing literature for further analysis.

**DI** **Dr. Ian Anson** 21:35

Wow, that sounds like an incredibly detailed sort of methodology to capture

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up a little bit on that, to think about these two different groups that you're contacting and researching in this project. So what were some of the the differences and similarities maybe that emerged in your analysis of these different groups practices?

**JS** **Jess Sellner** 22:05

Well, certainly, the first group is much more formal in their approach, but their variety of practices within the group and also as individuals are quite varied. Where as with the second group, we mostly just focused on plant-based medicine, foraging and things like that. And yeah, and there is some overlap in in the membership of both of these groups, as you might imagine.

**DI** **Dr. Ian Anson** 22:32

Oh, interesting. Yeah. So you were able to sort of identify a couple people who were sort of in involved in both groups. Did they mention that they were involved in any additional things outside of the two groups that you had studied? Or was that mostly where they were limited to this, this, these practices?

**JS** **Jess Sellner** 22:49

For sure. Some of them were involved in groups in the greater region, like going down to the DC area. And there's also just a lot of individual and family practices involved.

**DI** **Dr. Ian Anson** 23:03

Interesting, yes, this may not just be, you know, an individual person sort of making these these decisions to make this part of their daily lives. It's actually whole families maybe that are participating together. That's fascinating. So what's the big takeaway here? What are some of the broad themes that we that emerged from this study that that you'd like our audience to know about?

**JS** **Jess Sellner** 23:23

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connection, and desire can fall broadly under three main themes. That would be community, identity, and nature. Those themes kind of interact and overlap with each other and can be broken down into various sub themes. But right now, I'm particularly looking at how these desires for connection are emphasized by late stage capitalism, because it's such a disruptor of both knowledge transmission and a sense of connectedness,

**DI** **Dr. Ian Anson** 24:07

Interconnectedness, community - fleeting things in this contemporary environment, aren't they? And I'm so interested to hear that this research has been able to sort of put those ideas into belief. Jess Sellner thank you so much for bringing this topical and interesting project to our awareness and we really wish you the very best as you continue to pursue the social science research in the future.

**JS** **Jess Sellner** 24:33

Thank you.

**DI** **Dr. Ian Anson** 24:45

Last but not least in our series is Joshua Forlotta Gray, a Dance and Media Communication Studies double major with a Public Administration and Policy minor. Joshua, who came to UMBC from nearby Hyattsville, Maryland, also anticipates graduating this May. Working with Dr. Anne Sophie Clemmensen and Dr. Liz Patton, Joshua recently completed a study entitled "Exploring Stories of Political Activism and Ideological Perpetuation in Black Religious Institutions." I'm so glad I was able to catch up with Joshua in between his many on campus responsibilities, including serving as the president of the Student Government Association, and the Vice Chair of the University Steering Committee. Let's hear from Joshua about his fascinating URCAD project.

**DI** **Dr. Ian Anson** 25:29

All right, Joshua Gray, we are so grateful to have you on the podcast to talk a

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that you're trying to answer in this research.

**JG** **Joshua Gray** 25:43

Yeah, and I'm excited to be here. So the title of my presentation was "Exploring Stories of Political Activism and Ideological Perpetuation of Black Religious Institutions." And at the surface, my question really was, how are political messagings and how our embodied blackness interconnected, right, so how does political ideology show up in the black church? And also how are those experiences stored in our body? And is it stored in our body in a way that we can tap into to reveal those truths, right, and to, to hear the stories and to feel the essence of that environment, even though we may not physically be in it. So in my research, I tried to really replicate that environment, both through the focus group that I did, as well as the choreographic means that I participated in.

**DI** **Dr. Ian Anson** 26:33

Wow. So I got to admit, as a political scientist, you got me very excited to think about this notion of ideology, but then going further to sort of explore these sort of nuanced ideas within, within the black church and within sort of these religious practices. So you mentioned a focus group, tell me a little bit more about these research methods that you employed to analyze the the topic that you did?

**JG** **Joshua Gray** 26:55

Yeah, I like to describe myself as an ethnographic researcher and I tried to avoid isolationary means of research production as much as possible. And so the focus group was really a way for me to do that. So I worked with one church in particular, but in the focus group, four different churches were represented. And it was all members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which is a denomination of Christianity and predominantly is black, because it's religious practices and teachings are out of the African diaspora. So that that was the setting. And I had a number of participants from these different churches and I asked a number of different questions out of different domains about their personal identity, I asked questions about their political

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space. And so that was really the focus group. It was an hour long session. And the participants were incentivized through gift cards, and really through the partnership that I had with the church and the great relationship that I was able to develop with the pastor who was helping me to organize the entire thing. So I also think that that speaks to the need for like institutional buy in when we're doing ethnographic research, right? Like you have to be true partners with the other entity in order for that relationship to be fruitful to the research.

**DI** **Dr. Ian Anson** 28:24

I totally agree with that. That's something that we've heard time and time again, on this podcast, interviewing professional researchers. I think that's a, an awareness that's becoming more and more sort of clear in in fields across the social sciences. So I'm really excited to hear that these focus groups and this methodology was successful. But what did it really show us? I want to know a little bit about some of the big takeaways of this research.

**JG** **Joshua Gray** 28:49

Yeah, I think that the big takeaways really are twofold. So one is connected to my choreographic methods of research, and then the other is the ethnographic method. So from the choreographic methods, I found that these experiences, like experiences in the black church or any other institution, as well as the political experiences that we have are truly bound within our physicality, right? Like, I think that there's something very unique about the body as a means of storage. And I found that like, as I was navigating the choreographic methods, I was able to tap into the experiences of my dancers, as well as my own experience being raised in the black church and having all these political messaging around me at all moments. So that was one major takeaway. And the second major takeaway is that the quote unquote black church is not as monolithic as we may think, right. So even though we see these projected messages about what the black church is, it's so much more multifaceted than that. I found that people had a large array of experiences and a large array of political ideologies themselves that they hold as individuals as well as the institutions project different things, right. All from

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experience. But the things on top of that, the stacks and layers on top of that very foundational idea of Christianity is to help people. That that surprised me because it didn't realize that it was going to be so nuanced, and that I was going to be able to learn so much from the experiences of the people who participated in the focus group.

**DI** **Dr. Ian Anson** 30:37

Layers upon layers of nuance. I'm so grateful that you're able to share this incredible research with us. Joshua Gray, thank you so much for your time and and we really hope that you are able to continue in the near future to explore some of these really salient and interesting topics.

**JG** **Joshua Gray** 30:56

Thank you so much.

**DI** **Dr. Ian Anson** 31:05

Okay, I know I already tried to explain that UMBC undergraduates are a cut above. And hopefully these four interviews have you fully convinced. But let's not forget that at URCAD, these social science presentations joined dozens more across the disciplines that were just as insightful, timely, and well crafted. So be sure to mark your calendars for next year's URCAD. Take it from Joshua, Avnee, Jess, and Elyssa: if you manage to attend, you're going to learn a lot.

**DI** **Dr. Ian Anson** 31:34

That's it for today's episode of Retrieving the Social Sciences. Until next time, keep questioning. Retrieving the Social Sciences is a production of the UMBC Center for Social Science Scholarship. Our director is Dr. Christine Mallinson, our Associate Director is Dr. Felipe Filomeno. And our production intern is Sophia Possidente. Our theme music was composed and recorded by D'Juan Moreland, find out more about CS3 at [socialscience.umbc.edu](https://socialscience.umbc.edu) and make sure to follow us on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, where you can



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