

Ramsey Ash
Building Trust: The Role of Place-based Consciousness (PBC) in Vaccine Hesitancy
QSS Honors Thesis 2023-24

What I Did:

My senior thesis in QSS started out of a deep desire to further explore Katherine Cramer's theory of rural consciousness in the context of health seeking behaviors. I became interested in this topic after reading [Cramer's 2012 paper](#) in one of my social science classes for the QSS major: ANTH 55 with Professor Anne Sosin. For my thesis project, I designed and implemented a survey experiment which inquired about participants' place-based (meaning related to the place that they live) consciousness and their hesitancy towards various vaccines. I analyzed this survey using various quantitative methods including comparison of means T-tests, ordinal logistic regression, and OLS regression.

I was deeply inspired to pursue this research because it was a relationship that had not been considered in prior academic literature despite a great number of sources which motivated me towards this inquiry. Furthermore, I was supported by a team of three advisors and one second reader through the thesis process who held unique expertises in the topic or methods which I was studying/using.

What I Learned:

Ultimately, my thesis research was able to prove a statistically significant correlation between PBC and vaccine hesitancy which was modified by a participant's place-based identity (if they identified as a rural or an urban person). This meant that rurality significantly modified the relationship between PBC and vaccine hesitancy. This finding was very interesting to me as there have been no previous studies to consider the specific framework of PBC in this relationship. The results of my thesis study provide evidence for a place-based explanation of vaccine hesitancy which deepens prior understandings of vaccine hesitancy across the rural/urban divide and points to deeper histories of perceived rural neglect which can become resentment towards urban peoples, places, and possibly, vaccines.

In addition to the concrete results of my thesis, I learned so much about the research process and about pursuing an independently-motivated research agenda along the way. Firstly, I was able to finally spend nine months reading the prior literature on place-based studies and place-based behavior theory. This opportunity has greatly set me up for success in my future research pursuits, including graduate-level study. Furthermore, the opportunity to design, execute, and fund a national survey was an amazing research experience and such a privilege to have completed that project as an undergraduate, with the guidance of my advisors. Finally, the opportunity to produce a thesis document and subsequent research papers about a topic that I am deeply passionate about and that I feel has important implications for public health responses in the future has been such an invaluable experience. The thesis-writing process allowed me to conceptualize and test-run the experience of being an independent researcher and solidified my ambitions to pursue a PhD on a related topic in the future.

Why I Did It:

The primary reason that I chose to write a thesis was because I could not imagine NOT researching my chosen topic. By the time I had spent a year softly considering PBC and its potential as a framework for understanding vaccine hesitancy, I had grown a burning desire to test if there was a relationship at play. In the face of the opportunity to pursue this as a thesis topic, I simply couldn't imagine a senior year without this thesis. In addition to this, there were many secondary factors that inspired me to write a thesis. First, the opportunity to deepen relationships with my advisors and mentors through a topic we are mutually invested in was an ample opportunity to further those existing relationships and build new ones. Also, as I have mentioned before, the opportunity to test-run independent research and one aspect of the life of a researcher (grad student or beyond) was important for me during a senior year in which many questions about my future plans were still unanswered. Finally, I feel that it is a great privilege to have access to the support resources to complete a thesis including: UGAR and Rockefeller Center grant money, departmental support and recognition, and institutional recognition and promotion of research. It was my hope that through this process I would be able to explore all of these resources and more!

Advice:

1. Finalize your study design and data ASAP!!

One area where I wish I had done a lot more work junior summer and/or senior fall would have been in securing data or designing a study to secure data. Admittedly, I likely could have done a version of this project with previously collected open-source data, but I ended up in crunch time too fast and decided to pursue a survey design (which was awesome in the end), but the turmoil of the unknown was challenging. Especially if you are considering conducting your own study or paying for access to data, there are further processes to complete to access funding, so give this some thought as early as possible!

2. Find an advisor or team of advisors who believe in your research & will support it unconditionally!

One of the greatest motivating forces behind my thesis was that my team of advisors was admittedly stacked. I was so lucky to get to work with such motivated and supportive researchers. Keep in mind that you will also have to meet weekly with your primary advisor, so communication styles, meeting preferences, and even personalities are fair and important considerations – this can be make or break!

3. Form a community around thesis writing & enlist friends to check your work!

I was so lucky that my 3 roommates were also writing theses (in English, Biochemistry, and Biology) and that I found similar camaraderie amongst the QSS thesis cohort in many cases! It is always helpful to have people with shared experiences especially in the thick of literature review, study

design, write-up, etc. Further, for those friends who are not thesis writing, enlist them to test your survey, read your drafts, or brainstorm with you – all input is valuable on such a fast timeline!

4. Consider taking an “easier” term at some point (likely spring) to focus time and energy on your thesis.

I had planned for at least 2 years for my senior spring to be “easy” but I can’t emphasize enough how helpful this became when I needed to devote many of those newly free hours to thesis writing. I personally chose to only do 2 academic courses this term, but this could also include taking independent research for credit (towards your thesis) if that is more appealing! Having this additional time to devote to your thesis is so extremely helpful!

5. Use Zotero or another citation management system for your literature review!

I learned how to use Zotero exclusively for the thesis process, and now I can’t get enough of it! It is very worth taking time in summer or fall to finalize how you are going to methodically conduct your literature review. My final thesis document had somewhere between 80-100 sources, so it is extremely important to keep these organized especially when compiling the literature review and later using them in the discussion or in your defense presentation!

6. Choose a topic that you care about so deeply that you want to think about it every day for 9 months.

I hope that this came through in this document, but I was so interested in PBC and vaccine hesitancy that I was (mostly) happy to spend long hours thinking about this thesis project for nine consecutive months. With the flexibility that a QSS thesis offers, you truly have the ability to construct a research question that piques your interest and advances your understanding of a topic you’re passionate about! Commit to yourself enough to pursue this kind of motivated research!

Do feel free to reach out to me with any questions, especially if you are interested in pursuing a thesis project about rurality or cultural anthropology (my QSS major focus) at ramseyash03@gmail.com or 304-360-8708.