

Reflection on Research Experience - SOCL 345: Social Research and Program Evaluation

1.

Through my independent research with Dr. Pederson, as well as through the program evaluation research that I did with my research methods class, I have gained a foundational understanding of the sociological research process and I've developed important research skills relating to data collection and analysis. I am now very comfortable searching for and analyzing potentially relevant existing research, synthesizing existing information in a literature review, designing qualitative and quantitative elements for a survey questionnaire, creating an interview guide and conducting semi-structured ethnographic interviews, transcribing and coding qualitative and quantitative data by hand, creating visual elements for bivariate analyses, summarizing findings in an APA paper, and presenting findings in PowerPoint format for a mixed-audience.

Prior to this semester, however, I had only a fraction of the research experience I now possess. My understanding of the order in which each step of the research process occurs (as well as *why* each step occurs in a fixed order), and how it feels to work through each step was much less comprehensive. I also used to be very intimidated by the prospect of reviewing a large body of existing research and then synthesizing it, which caused me to go about the lit review process in an inefficient and disorganized way; that changed this semester because of the academic confidence I gained during my research experiences. Being able to practice conducting two sociological research projects with different subjects and methods this past year has familiarized me with the formal research process in a hands-on, in-depth way.

2.

When evaluating and selecting sources for my research assignments, I used our university library's database the most frequently because I appreciated being able to have confidence that all of the sources were reliable. When I couldn't find what I was looking for there, I used Google Scholar. I always made sure to double-check that any articles I found on Google Scholar were from reputable, peer-reviewed academic journals. Additionally, after securing the sources I needed to complete the theory section of my literature review (some of which were from the 80's and 90's), I tried to limit my sources to at least 2015 or newer, focusing the most on relevant sources from 2020 onwards. I understand that theories, findings, trends, and patterns in research are dynamic, so I wanted to make sure that I was keeping up with the newest information to ensure that I would have an accurate understanding of both of my topics: family involvement and social solidarity.

In my research methods class, I added a few sources for my final assignment after submitting the first draft of my literature review, because as our data collection progressed and the study began to take a more defined shape, I realized that I was missing some crucial background information on the connection between family involvement and race. I added information and sources on the racial achievement gap to add depth to our study's findings that people of color are just as involved, if not *more* involved, in their children's education in HeadStart programs than are the parents of white students. I reported that according to our results, the racial achievement gap must be tied to factors beyond a lack of family involvement for children of color, at least in terms of the Head Start program. By including information on the racial achievement gap, I was able to transform my paper into one that attempts to dismantle a racist stereotype held by some white people in America: that families of color do not care about their child(ren)'s education(s).

3.

When completing the research process for my methods class, I struggled in the beginning with feeling overwhelmed by how much existing research I needed to review, understand, and synthesize in order to provide context to our class's study. To overcome this challenge, I was very intentional about managing my time to ensure that my literature review would not be rushed. I spent many long hours trying to ensure that I had all my methodological and theoretical bases covered. I also went to my professor's office hours and asked her to review my work and offer any constructive criticism that she had. Thanks to those efforts, and to my professor's patience, I received an A+ on my literature review.

Additionally, I ran into the challenge of realizing—a week from the final paper's deadline—that my literature review was no longer entirely representative of the focus of my paper: the relationship between race and family involvement. My initial reaction when I realized this was anxiety, but I was able to calm down and start thinking critically about what information I needed to include in order to make the paper consistent, informative, and specific. I took a step back from my computer and used the knowledge I'd gained from other sociology classes to think about what I knew about the relationship between race and public education in America. I then began to consider the racial achievement gap, and I found a way to incorporate it into my paper so that it would enhance my project's overall focus.

4.

I can confidently say that my attitudes and perceptions about doing research have changed significantly over the course of the semester. As I mentioned above, I feel much more confident now about being able to design and conduct sociological research. I can design a focused, interesting research question, I can think critically about how to assess social problems

quantitatively and qualitatively, and I know that I can overcome hurdles such as stress and having to refocus a project. I am proud of the progress I've made this semester, and I can clearly see the connection between the research skills I've developed so far at Longwood and the research skills that are required to operate in professional settings.

5.

I believe that "Thinking Like a Researcher" is, in many ways, very similar to what C. Wright Mills describes in his famous work, *The Sociological Imagination*. In order to think like a sociologist, nothing can be taken for granted as "normal" or "true" in society—nothing about the social world can be assumed. As a result, all good sociologists constantly ask, "Why?" when thinking about the human patterns and life processes that surround us every day. In the same way, all good researchers need to enter their projects with open, unbiased minds—no presumptions can be brought into the research process if research is to be conducted ethically and accurately. Good researchers also ask "Why?", along with "How?", "When?", and "Where?" in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of all of the elements that create the condition that leads to a specific reaction or result. Also, like sociologists, researchers must always keep the health and safety of their subjects in mind. Ethics are the most important part of any sociological study and/or research process. Lastly, researchers must organize their processes and findings in a way that promotes understanding from their readers, whether those readers are fellow researchers or not. I believe that comprehensibility is a part of "Thinking Like a Researcher" that is often neglected or taken for granted in academia.