Reflective Essay

The research project that I am submitting to the Undergraduate Library Research Award review panel was originally assigned by Dr. Anna Muraco in a Spring 2014 Sociology Seminar course called Gender and the Life Course. Our assignment consisted of designing and conducting an original research project that utilized the research methods, data analysis skills, and presentation abilities we have become accustomed to throughout our years at Loyola Marymount University. We were required to include 15 sources, 12 of which were academic, in a final research paper that was 20 to 25 pages long.

Throughout my four years at Loyola Marymount University, I have been writing research papers on topics relating to the prison system. However, I had never specifically researched the intersecting oppressions associated with mass incarceration and had never had access to a population of former inmates. I was inspired to research former male prisoners’ social and economic opportunities over the life course after becoming an intern at the Francisco Homes in the South Central region of Los Angeles. The Francisco Homes is the first transitional housing program in California that is available to men who have been sentenced to life in prison (“lifers”) but who have been recently granted parole and are in the process of reintegrating back into society. I assist lifers with such tasks as developing resumes, adhering to parole regulations and conditions, applying for jobs, and ultimately transitioning back into the community in a successful and healthy manner. I had chosen to intern at the Francisco Homes after attending several events at the university’s Bellarmine Forum, which emphasized the theme of “Restoring Justice,” and after hearing about Dr. Rothchild’s Punishment and Mercy Theology course. After committing myself to a year of legal service in Mobile, Alabama as a Jesuit Volunteer for the
2014-2015 year and after realizing that I would ultimately be pursuing a career that was devoted to prison reform and restorative justice policy implementation, I was inspired to use a population of lifers as the sample for my senior research project. I used purposive sampling to conduct an in-depth examination of formerly incarcerated men who were currently residing in or working at the transitional housing program. Nine of the recruited participants were currently residing in a Catholic-based transitional housing program and one had been recruited to work at the transitional housing program after completing a different reentry program.

Prior to beginning my research process, I was required to complete four research modules outlined on the “Lion's Guide to Research & the Library” webpage. The following topics were addressed in these modules: starting your assignment, types of information, finding and evaluating information, and using information ethically. These modules, along with the online research databases provided by our university, served as the most invaluable resources throughout my research process.

I had known that I would write about former male prisoners and had briefly researched the impact of mass incarceration on minority populations, but was not knowledgeable about current controversial issues relating to prison reform. I therefore went on the LMU library website and searched through several databases in the fields of Social Sciences, Sociology, and Psychology. I had always found EBSCOhost, PsycInfo, and SAGE journals to be particularly informative in my research, so I consulted those for most of my sources. I specifically used EBSCOhost because of its advanced search features. I began searching terms such as prison reform and mass incarceration, but noticed that these topics were far too broad and basic for a research project about intersecting oppressions. I then researched terms and phrases that were associated with inequalities within the prison system. I found a number of articles that
highlighted the social and economic instabilities associated with prisoners prior to imprisonment, while imprisoned, and upon release from prison. I also came across an article about a new policy known as AB 109, or Realignment, and researched the topic to gain a better understanding of the non-lifer population. After collecting several articles that seemed appropriate for my project, I began assembling a literature review. I found it difficult to narrow down my collection of articles, since each article seemed interesting. I read the references section of several articles, which lead me to more articles and books that were centered around intersecting oppressions, the prison system, and male opportunity more generally. After highlighting and writing down notes for each article and going through several books at the library, I organized my sources into main categories based on whether they identified intersecting oppressions prior to incarceration, while in prison, and/or after being released from prison. Most sources that I had read labeled incarceration as representing a life course stage in which young adults’ educational, family life, and work trajectories were significantly disrupted and/or delayed. However, I found very few articles and books that specifically highlighted the experiences of lifer populations. This frustrated me at first and I felt that the research databases were unhelpful sources of information sharing because they were neglecting a very important and controversial study topic. However, as I continued searching for lifer reentry studies via a range of additional online databases, I found that there was an actual gap in the research and that this gap existed primarily because lifer reentry was a relatively new phenomenon. I felt as though I needed to focus my attention on ridding of that research gap, and, using past literature sources and newly introduced controversies, I was able construct an interview schedule that was based around four specific categories: *Personal Life History and Social Contexts Prior to Imprisonment, Economic and*
After submitting a research project proposal, finishing my literature review, and constructing a 16-item interview schedule, I pilot tested my interview on lifers from the Francisco Homes. Since I was sampling a small population that was fairly difficult to reach and since I had chosen to use a qualitative interview design rather than a survey design, I was only required to complete a few interviews as long as they were in-depth and thorough. I ended up with responses from 10 lifers, and immediately began transcribing the results. I used quotes and general attitudes from the lifers to identify overarching themes for my results section. I revised my literature review section after completing my results section.

Throughout the research process, I learned that finding and evaluating information that associates intersecting oppressions such as gender, race, and socioeconomic status with mass incarceration and male opportunity over the life course is fairly easy as long as students have access to a range of research databases and to a particular group of former male prisoners. Students must be able to think of a range of search terms and phrases that relate to their main research topics if they want to find helpful scholarly sources. They also must become knowledgeable about the topic that they are researching prior to constructing research questions and thesis statements so that they can effectively research a topic that has not previously been addressed. It is important for researchers to dissect all aspects of their topics and to look at a range of perspectives that form a holistic view of the literature prior to conducting and analyzing their research.