

Reflections on my research experience and some challenges I've faced along the way.

A year ago, I knew nothing about the Laidlaw scholarship. But I did already know that I was keen to pursue academic philosophy beyond my undergraduate degree. With many of my friends applying for summer internships, I was concerned by how hard it was to get 'work experience' as an academic, let alone as a philosopher. The Laidlaw scholarship has proven a fantastic opportunity to experience the processes of academic research for myself and introduced me to 'Leadership' as a discipline.



I am now more than halfway through my first summer project and I can honestly say that I have learnt a lot from the experience, both in my research area and most importantly in the process of conducting a research project. In what follows I will outline two challenges I've had to overcome and the lessons that I hope to carry forward.

The first of these lessons has been the value of keeping a professional distance between my personal interests, current events, and the content of my research. This lesson requires a little context. My research looks at the political engagement of oppressed minorities, the construction of these groups' political identities and whether/how political disengagement can be reconciled with notions of good citizenship. My project coincided with a long-awaited surge in momentum behind the BLM campaign after the murder of George Floyd. It goes without saying that this tragic event and the subsequent mass mobilisation behind this cause highlights the importance of research in the topic I have chosen. It is a matter of justice that oppressed identities are more deeply understood to create an inclusive politics.

Of course, this series of events and the related conversations that it sparked are closely linked to the content of my work. This made it very tempting to focus my research time on them. However, my research aims to take a level of philosophical abstraction, it's not about the oppression of Black Americans nor any specific ethnic minority. My focus is on the influence of identity 'misrecognition' which is experienced by minorities, including minority ethnic groups. It would therefore have been inappropriate for my work to solely focus on current events. This element of the research experience has therefore shown me a value in keeping some professional distance between my work and my personal life even when these seem to coincide.

As I write this I think: 'maybe there are situations where it would be more appropriate to merge my interests?' I think that this is likely true, but I stand by my decision in this case. Perhaps a future piece of work could use the insights and knowledge I've developed in this project for a philosophical analysis of these current events.

The second lesson I'll mention here refers to a key challenge I've found in the research process: how do I know what to read? There's seems to be a degree of circularity involved in needing to gather

data (in my case reading) in order to reach a point when I can structure my thoughts and make conclusions, whilst simultaneously needing that structure and those conclusions to guide my reading and navigate the literature! Overcoming this challenge has really highlighted my need to develop efficient methods for this kind of literature-based research. This is something that I'll need to continue to work on but thanks to this experience I'm certainly in a better position than I was before.

It's been a surprise to learn from this experience of self-directed research that my normal working methods are not the most efficient in this context. Initially my approach involved taking comprehensive notes on everything that I read but this soon resulted in an unmanageable amount of 'data'. The difficulty I had here might be quite personal; reflective of my affinity for using 'logical' and 'systematic' methods identified by my DISC profile at the Laidlaw Leadership weekend. Whilst I must say I am somewhat sceptical of the degree of confirmation bias involved in behavioural profiling, in my normal university work I often try to survey literature comprehensively to ensure my thoughts are fully informed before I start writing. This project has been a new and challenging experience where this simply isn't possible. The literature is too wide, in fact with a constantly evolving research question it really has no limit.

It's difficult to know what exactly to do differently in the future but reflecting on this challenge I've noted three things to myself. First, and most obviously, this difficulty is proportional to the time constraints on this summer project. With more time I might not find the pressure to make conclusions, whilst still coming to understand the research area, so challenging. Second, and more practically, I should allow myself to take less complete notes in the initial research stage whilst I familiarise myself with a topic. Whilst this might require re-reading some texts at a later stage, being able to structure my thoughts and conduct guided reading is vital for efficiency in a project on this scale. Lastly, and most importantly, I need to embrace the flexibility involved in the research process. This might be a real challenge for me, I like to be efficient and methodical in my work, but the way my project has evolved over just a few weeks has shown me how important it will be to develop this skill and have confidence in my intuitions.

Reflecting on these challenges and sharing the lessons from my experience of research I hope to have developed as a researcher and leader. For this I am extremely grateful to the Laidlaw Foundation, the St Andrew's Laidlaw team, my supervisor Dr Ben Sachs and of course to Lord Laidlaw for his sponsorship.