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Reflective Report, Summer 1, 2023 Laidlaw Cohort

Conducting my research project this summer has left a lasting impact on my perspective. In this reflective paper I will discuss my experiences organized into three themes: methodological, emotional, and further questions. In the methodological section I will describe the challenges I faced in setting up my project and how these shaped my view on research in the social sciences. From there, I will delve into a reflection on my emotional reaction to the various stages of my research and how these have changed my perspective. Lastly, in the further questions paragraph, I will share my thoughts on how my project may be expanded in the future as well as other queries that have struck me during this process.

Over the course of my research project, I learned a great deal about the complexity of working with human participants, the nuances of qualitative research, and the importance of adaptability and awareness when engaging in sociological research. One of the most challenging components of my project was gaining ethics approval from Trinity's Department of Education as well as finding an organization through which to contact potential participants. Prior to this experience, I was unaware of the complexity of ethics standards required when attempting to conduct interviews with what researchers refer to as 'vulnerable groups.' Though I disagree with this use of language, finding it belittling and overly generalized, I understand the ethical concerns surrounding interviews that delve into personal and sensitive topics, particularly those with links to other mental health concerns or past traumatic experiences. Because my research project fell under this category, I was required to receive Garda Clearance and fill out extensive ethics forms detailing my measures to protect personal information, account for participant comfortability, and ensure all interviewees could provide informed consent. The process of receiving Garda Clearance was more difficult than I had previously expected, given that I also had to present a background check from the United States. Luckily, my family in the United States was incredibly helpful in speaking to the local police department and mailing my background check to Ireland. However, there was a miscommunication with the Academic Registry at Trinity. This led to extensive delays in receiving my Garda Clearance, without which I was unable to submit my application for ethics approval. Consequently, I grew frustrated and concerned when trying to start my project and had to grapple with a heightened feeling of inadequacy. I feared I was not working quickly

enough. From this experience, I learned to question my perfectionist mindset and acknowledge the complexity associated with working with people in research. I gained a heightened appreciation for academia as I realised all of the 'behind the scenes' work that drives research. Most importantly, I was pushed to develop a sense of trust in myself. Having felt as though the progress on my project was inhibited during this waiting period, I was forced to accept the unexpected and learned how to remain positive and focused, despite the many setbacks. My advisor, Professor Shevlin, was incredibly helpful during this period, and my meetings with Joel provided me with new insights in to how I could adapt my project and schedule to feel empowered in my work. I now understand the time and effort that goes into research and have a growing respect for research projects involving interviews, surveys, and other forms of contact with human participants. Furthermore, during the waiting period between my ethics application and clearance, I improved my ability to adapt. Prior to my work this summer, I tended to be inflexible, preferring to develop a plan and follow it, rigidly, often becoming highly stressed when I would face setbacks that threatened my goal timeline. I am particularly grateful for my one-on-one meeting with Joel, during which Joel pushed me to consider a contingency plan, in case my ethics application failed to be processed. Through this dialogue, I decided to begin reading memoirs of late diagnosed autistic women, with the idea that I could conduct a thematic analysis on the texts if I was unable to carry out interviews. Though it was challenging to engage with these works, given their heavy subject matter at times, I ultimately found that by reading them, I was able to develop a more specific, informed interview guide, rooted in common themes from this literature review. In that way, what initially began as a contingency plan ended up improving the quality of my project. From this experience, I learned the importance of flexibility and adaptability, and in particular, how previously unconsidered approaches can end up benefiting a project.

Secondly, as I reflect on this summer, I am particularly struck by the personal development, at times arduous and others rewarding, that emerged over the course of the research period. I applied for the Laidlaw Scholarship Program knowing I was passionate about highlighting the stories of women with autism, a relatively underrepresented group in research. I felt a strong urge, almost an obligation, to utilize my position of privilege as a Trinity Student to promote dignity, respect, and the central role humanitarianism ought to play in social science research. In this sense, I began the project with an idealistic mindset, perhaps

overestimating or even self-aggrandizing my role as a young researcher. My concerted effort to do everything, 'the right way,' was swiftly met by intense growing pains related to my own journey of accepting and being proud of my autism diagnosis. I'm an avid journal keeper, and last year, when I was struggling, I explained my perspective on my mental health challenges with a metaphor of a painter, trying to depict a landscape with a column obstructing their line of sight. I described feeling disconnected, whether due to ASD or mental illness, as a painter might feel when they cannot see the entirety of the beautiful scene they are trying to conceptualise and the longing they feel to peer beyond the column, to understand the full picture. Thus, I represented my view of a potential diagnosis and other challenges as a hindrance, an inconvenience, something restraining my attempts to live fruitfully with appreciation for the complexities of everyday experiences. Simultaneously, I felt conflicted about my diagnosis, given that its possibility had never previously been addressed, and I had managed, barely, to force myself through difficult situations. Interestingly, a similar theme emerged across my interviews, where participants described their view of autism shifting as they grew to understand themselves and the way they present with autism. Oftentimes, whether it be a family member or classmate, participants recounted having held a more stereotypical and sometimes pathological view of ASD. This perspective frequently drove their sense of imposter syndrome upon diagnosis because they compared themselves to the way they saw others' ASD presentation in their lives. While I cannot speak on how they grappled with this feeling, I know for myself that it was one of the loneliest periods of my life, with my outdated perspective on ASD as something that sets people aside or casts them into a smaller community only compounding this sense of isolation. Thus, I went into this process in a great deal of emotional pain, with a lack of self-acceptance, the extent of which I had not understood until I read personal memoirs of autistic women and their families. However, as I continued on and conducted interviews, I felt more connected than I ever have. Through speaking with women, I witnessed, firsthand, the power of community in allowing for moments of shared experience, shared struggles, and shared triumphs. Finally feeling understood, after a lifetime of feeling misunderstood, has been one of the most empowering and moving experiences I have ever had. And for that reason, I fear I will never be able to adequately express my gratitude for having been involved in the Laidlaw Program and the opportunity to pursue this research.

Lastly, I would like to address further questions and potential research avenues, whether philosophical or sociological, that I am interested in exploring in the future. Both in interviews and the personal memoirs, a common theme arose: defining the autistic (and neurodiverse) experience relative to the non-autistic (neurotypical) experience. This theme is best explained in the context of Simone de Beauvoir's argument in her book, *The Second Sex*. De Beauvoir posits that women's identities and the concept of femininity have been contextualized in relation to men's identity, in a way that prioritizes masculinity as the 'default.' As a result, the feminine identity is characterised as a negation of masculine identity and as such, rather than frame women's experiences in a unique way, society continuously depicts womanhood as a lack of that which is masculine, thereby devaluing women and belittling their opportunities to self-actualize authentically. Though de Beauvoir is writing with gender in mind, her theory relates to much of the literature I have read surrounding autism. Even in texts that seek to empower autistic people, there remain constant comparisons to the neurotypical experience. Accordingly, what's defined as the autistic experience is largely a distinction from the neurotypical experience. While in some cases, explaining the differences in neurotypical and neurodiverse frameworks can promote empathy and shared understanding, in literature by and for autistic people, I believe that an overemphasis on these differences is a disservice to the autistic community at large. I attempted to avoid leaning into this dichotomy in my interviews, by questioning participants about their personal experiences, and specifically asking, 'What does it mean to be autistic?' My goal in asking this question was to gain insight into how the autistic identity might be explicated, outside the bounds of a neurotypical context, in which a lack of neurodiversity is considered 'default.' Interestingly, participants still largely reported their perception of autism as a type of 'difference,' which, though understandable, points to an internalised bias with roots in the dominant neurotypical perspective. Notably, I recognise there is a fine line between garnering a group identity and failing to recognize the diversity of experience within a group. Even still, to truly respect the autonomy and dignity of a historically marginalised group, in my opinion, requires acknowledging that group's lived experiences independently from the confines of majority assumptions and expectations. Thus, after reflecting on my project, I would like to pursue further inquiry into the process by which groups are categorized, understood, and, as a result, treated, both from the perspective of those within the community and the views of those outside of it. Essentially, my research has ignited my newfound passion for deconstructing the

role of internal and external understandings of identity. I hope to explore this theme in later projects and analyses of autistic literature. Another component of my research that I would like to improve on in future projects and associated work is inclusivity. My project focused on the experiences of late-diagnosed autistic women, and I worked with Trinity's Disability Service to source participants. I struggled to establish connections with other organizations to contact participants and admit that my sample group represents a small portion of autistic women, in particular, verbal autistic women with the privilege to pursue higher education. Moving forward, I would like to work with a wider range of autistic women, from different socio-economic groups and backgrounds. Similarly, I would like to include the perspectives of gender minorities in future projects, which was also recommended to me by a respondent. By examining the role of identity and prioritizing inclusivity, I believe I can engage with increasingly nuanced research and outreach in the future.

Through this report, I have revealed three key areas that prompted reflection and growth during and after my research this summer. Whether methodological, emotional, or philosophical, this project has induced many questions and periods of contemplation for me. I have been pushed to reflect critically on my own views and academic practices. As stated previously, I am beyond grateful for having had the opportunity to participate in the Laidlaw program this summer, and I believe I will carry the lessons I learned for many years to come.

De Beauvoir, S. (2011). *The second sex*. Vintage Books.