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Inversed Research: A study about how psychology research impacts researchers themselves

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INVERSED RESEARCH

A study about how
psychology research
impacts the
researchers
themselves

FRIDAY, JUNE 2ND AT 9:00
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OLD MAIN 330A

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Inversed Research

As a psychology major at Western Washington University, my education has been largely dominated by western scientific methods and techniques. I wanted to use this honors capstone as an opportunity to combine traditional western research techniques with feminist research techniques that I have learned while being a women, gender, and sexuality studies minor. I appreciated the chance to use everything I have learned at this school in order to conduct my own academic project.

The reason I became interested in the impact that research has on researchers is because of my own personal experience. At the beginning of this academic year, I started working in the Eating and Body Image Lab that is directed by Dr. Anna Ciao. This lab really focuses on pushing back against standardized beauty ideals that we see in our society, and how we can learn to ignore these and form positive relationships with our own bodies. There are two main projects that the lab has focused on this year. The first project is called the EVERYbody project. This study ran intervention groups with college aged participants and facilitated conversations about how harmful beauty ideals are, body activism, and body compassion. This study was based on cognitive dissonance in order to create measurable change within the participants. The second project that we focused on was called the Shuksan Body Justice Project. Shuksan Middle School and our lab worked together to adapt the content from the EVERYbody project into curriculum suited for 7th and 8th graders. I (along with other research assistants) went to the middle school twice a week for a month to teach these students about beauty ideals, media, non-diet nutrition, and body autonomy. I have absolutely loved being a part of this lab and I have learned so much while being a research assistant there. I have been greatly impacted by this lab and I wanted to

know if other researchers were impacted by the research that they do as well. From here I decided to develop my research study.

In order to begin this study I first looked at the existing literature surrounding this topic. One journal was a mix of an ethnography and a study about how research impacts both participants and the researchers conducting the study. The author found that researchers and participants seemed to have a much more positive experience if the study was about something that they all had personal experience with. These shared experiences made connection and understanding much easier to achieve between participants and researchers (Haynes, 2006). Another article that I found focused on how to ethically do research with people that you are friends with (Brewis, 2014). This article talked about the importance of making that boundary between what you already know about that person and what details they disclose to you during the study. She also mentioned that it is important to be aware of the fact that people will share more information with people they are comfortable with. Due to this, the researcher needs to really put an emphasis on consent when it comes to sharing this information in your results. This paper was extremely helpful for me because I ended up interviewing other research assistants in my lab and I am friends with the people who ended up being my participants.

Since I knew that I wanted to conduct this study using more feminist techniques, I decided that I want to gather qualitative data. This type of data really allows for more personal experiences to be reflected in the finished results of studies. Qualitative data also does not reduce participants to numbers, and it helps to disrupt the zoological gaze that often comes along with western research techniques. I decided that the best way to collect this type of data would be

through an interview process. I came up with 5 overarching questions that I asked participants who were also working in the EBI lab. Since I was already taking a more feminist approach to this study, I decided that I wanted to include my own experience with the lab in this study as well. I answered each question that I asked to participants and I included my responses in the analysis as well.

Data Collection

Question 1: What was your first strong exposure to research in a classroom setting?

Overall, the responses were split in half. However $\frac{3}{4}$ of the participants found this initial introduction into research to be interesting and inspiring. This introduction influenced their decision to pursue research more in the future. $\frac{1}{2}$ of the participants were exposed to research in high school, and the other $\frac{1}{2}$ of participants began research in college. All participants found that research was much more interesting when the topic was something that they were personally invested in. However, too much of a personal connection to the topic can be triggering. While conducting a research project in class, one participant found it anxiety provoking and extremely hard to complete because of their own personal experience with that topic.

My first exposure to research in a classroom setting was at WWU as well. I had done very small research projects in my classes up until I took my first 300 level psychology class. I had to research and write my own literature review based on any topic that I found interesting. I decided to write a literature review about attachment styles developed early in life and the impact it had on physical health later in life. I enjoyed this process much more than I thought I would. I

found telling a story through preexisting literature surrounding a topic to be really powerful. This introduction into research definitely sparked my interest in further pursuing it.

Question 2: What was your first strong exposure to research outside of a classroom setting?

Almost all participants were first exposed to research outside of a classroom setting in the EBL lab. All participants agreed that working in the lab gave them the opportunity to explore which aspects of research they like. The one participant who was not first exposed to research in this lab was originally doing research at their job before attending western. However, all participants enjoyed working with the topics we studied in the EBI lab. In particular, two participants mentioned that working in Dr. Ciao's lab was very healing for their own body image issues and behaviors related to that. Additionally, 1/2 of participants learned from working in this lab that they wanted to pursue psychology research later in life. The other 1/2 of the participants learned that they wanted to pursue a more applied research position within psychology. An interesting response that all participants noted was that the psychology classes at Western left them feeling underprepared to conduct research outside of the classroom.

My first exposure to research outside of a classroom setting was in the EBL lab as well. Once I realized that I would need to start getting some type of lab experience for graduate school, I quickly found a lab that sounded interesting to me to apply to. I started out doing adherence and competence ratings of videos from the EVERYbody project. I was then trained to be a facilitator for the EVERYbody project and I was trained to teach curriculum to the students at Shuksan Middle School. Working in the lab has been really informative for me. I have learned so much about what aspects of research I like and how I want to shape my future.

Question 3: What aspects of research do you love and hate?

Each response to this question was really individualized. There were a wide range of things that participants loved and hated about research. Some of the things they loved about research are meeting other research assistants, working with participants, literature reviews, qualitative data, and statistical analysis. Some of the things participants hated about research are statistical analysis, data entry, disorganization, and the valid/invalid binary seen in western research. Many of these aspects of research would not have been experienced by these participants if they did not get the opportunity to conduct real research outside of the classroom.

In my experience with research, I really like working with participants. I love to see how positively people have been impacted by the work I am doing, even if it is not statistically significant. Having the option to work with people really does make me feel like I am doing necessary and important work. I do not like statistical analysis when it comes to research. While I know that this aspect of research is incredibly important, I definitely have a much bigger passion for applied research.

Question 4: What do you personally gain from conducting research?

Participants stated that they gained many things from conducting research. Some of these responses include learning to set boundaries, developing communication skills, real world experiences, and having the opportunity to further heal their own trauma. Participants also said that conducting research allowed them to narrow down what subjects or topics they want to pursue in the future.

I have definitely gained all of these things and more from my experience with conducting research. Working in the EBI lab has given me the opportunity to heal my relationship with my body. While I know that our programs are based on cognitive dissonance, I did not realize that I would be getting a dose of that as well. By teaching people about body acceptance, I have really internalized that message. I do not think my healing journey would have progressed this fast if I had not joined the lab at the start of this academic school year.

Question 5: How has your experience with research shaped your career path?

Overall, all of the participants were able to shape their career path based on their experiences with research. Conducting research even drastically changed what careers some participants wanted. Three participants decided that after working in the lab they wanted to pursue a PHD in psychology and become a researcher and a therapist. One participant decided that they wanted to pursue a masters in psychology and become a therapist since they really liked directly working with participants and applying research to help others.

I am so thankful that I have had the experience of conducting research because it has heavily influenced what I want to do with my future. When I first began working in the lab, I was set on getting a PHD in psychology directly after completing my undergraduate degree. As time went on, I decided that I needed to take at least one year off once I graduated so I could get some more real life experience. Towards the end of my time working in the lab, I realized that I should really consider getting a masters in psychology after I have gained some more experience. I loved working with participants and feeling like I was making a difference. Statistical analysis is not nearly as exciting for me. Since this was the case, I realized that getting my PHD right away

may just be a waste of time and resources for me if I could get my masters and be just as satisfied with that. I have decided to still take a break and work, and then I will get my masters. If this still does not feel like enough for me, then I can decide if I want to get a PHD in psychology as well.

I have also learned what populations of people that I would like to work with. Working with kids was fun but also challenging. I preferred to work with college aged participants because I felt like I was able to relate to them better and I was overall more suited for that demographic. I now know that I want to work with young adults who are actively going through crisis.

Conclusions

After analyzing the data I collected, I do not think it is possible for a researcher to not be impacted by the research they conduct. Complete objectivity is impossible to achieve, and I think properly contextualizing subjectivity will lead to a more open and accepting culture around western psychological research. I think it is a good thing that researchers are impacted by their research. This means that we can better connect with participants and get more meaningful data. Being impacted by your own research can also act as a kind of moral and ethical compass. If certain research feels too intense for the person conducting it, imagine how the participants must feel. Western society should lean into subjectivity when it comes to research because we should always be evaluating and incorporating our positionality into our work. This would lead to better contextualization around psychology data that is published.

Works Cited

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