

Reflecting on My Experience as a RRRH Intern

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At our most recent Reproductive Rights and Reproductive Health internship meeting, program director Dr. Clare Daniel implored us to reflect on what we have learned personally and professionally during our time with the internship, among other things. As my fourth session as a RRRH intern comes to a close, I took this meeting to reflect on the series of events that brought me to this internship and how I have grown during my time in this position. For the past two years, I have worked as a

research assistant for Dr. Katherine Johnson and Dr. Alyssa Lederer in the departments of Sociology and Global Community Health and Behavioral Sciences, respectively. Since it was piloted in Fall 2018, we have been investigating the impacts of a curricular intervention titled “Sex, Power, and Culture” on the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of first-year students regarding sexuality, sexual health, and sexual violence.

Prior to becoming a research assistant and RRRH intern, I worked for one semester in a microbiology lab. I spent several hours a week preparing various samples for more experienced graduate research assistants to analyze. Each day was the same: pipette samples into a well, isolate the DNA, label and store the DNA in the fridge, rinse and repeat. By the end of the semester, I knew that this research was not fulfilling to me, so I thanked my principal investigator for the opportunity and began pursuing other opportunities. During that same semester, I had separately met with Dr. Johnson and Dr. Lederer to discuss the research they were conducting regarding breastfeeding and sexual transmitted infections, respectively. Several months later, Dr. Lederer sent me an email with a recruitment flyer attached for a research assistant for a new project she and Dr. Johnson were initiating together. She wrote, “Thought the attached may be of interest.”

Fast forward to today and I could not be more grateful for that opportunity. I was not fully aware of this at the time but being a research assistant for two feminist researchers meant so much more than simply assisting with research. In this role, Dr. Johnson and Dr. Lederer—as well as graduate research assistant Jessica Liddell, RRRH program director Dr. Clare Daniel, and all of the interns with the RRRH internship—have reminded me time and time again that my thoughts matter, my mental health matters, my time matters, and my growth matters. As a research assistant, I have learned to conduct literature reviews, conduct semi-structured interviews, analyze qualitative data using NVivo, create research posters, and write manuscript introductions for publication. But, I have also learned to listen and respond to my emotional needs, value my time and the time of others, speak up when I have thoughts even if I don’t believe myself to be an expert yet, and challenge myself by conducting my own research on perinatal loss. These are skills and values that I am not sure I would have learned in a hard science environment, and the RRRH internship experience is one that I do not believe most research assistants have the pleasure of experiencing.

We are now in the publication and dissemination phase of the study. Having completed the data collection and analysis, we are working on compiling the findings into manuscripts. Over the course of this summer, I have conducted the literature reviews for and written the introductions for two manuscripts. Additionally, we won an award! After submitting an abstract in the Public Health Education and Health Promotion student awards section at the American Public Health Association annual meeting 2020, we were selected to present a poster on our findings from our investigation of "Sex, Power, and Culture." If all goes well, I will be creating our poster in the next few months and then presenting our poster in October. Also, with any luck, by the end of the year we will have several manuscripts published. I am excited to share our findings with such a huge audience, for all of our work over the past two years to take the form of tangible publications, and to continue growing as a feminist researcher under the guidance of Dr. Johnson, Dr. Lederer, and Jessica.