

Petra Richer  
Life Paths Research Program, Sewanee, TN  
May 16, 2014-July 3, 2014

During the past summer I had the opportunity to complete an internship with the Life Paths Research Program, which was co-founded by Dr. Sherry Hamby from the University of the South, Dr. John Grych from Marquette University, and Dr. Victoria Banyard from the University of New Hampshire. The program is focused on how individuals in the surrounding rural area build personal character strengths and cope with difficult situations in their lives, while it also assesses the effect of participation in the Laws of Life Essay Program on an individual's psychological resilience. My responsibilities at the Life Paths Research Program included: assisting in both qualitative and quantitative data collection, synthesis, assembly, and analysis of data, along with working on an article and poster.

Through conducting data collection, I was able to learn valuable communication and interpersonal skills. As an intern, I was given the opportunity to conduct personal interviews with the participants, which was definitely a high point of the internship. The interviews allowed me to ask questions about the high and low points of their lives, as well as how they were able to overcome difficult, and often devastating moments. During the interviews, there were several shocking, but also uplifting stories, and it was enthralling to learn about the life stories of others. The experience of conducting interviews enabled me to practice accurate empathy and fully commit to listening and allowing the participant to provide as much detail about personal events as possible. Several participants remarked that the experience of talking about difficult life events was much like therapy for them and I hope that by attentively listening to their stories I

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was able to give a positive outlet for their emotions about the events they lived through, whether it was good or bad. Moreover, the interview experience gave me the opportunity to better understand what a clinical psychology setting would be like. Furthermore, through listening to the stories of the participants, I also gained a unique insight into the surrounding rural communities and its differences from life in Sewanee.

The internship provided me with the chance to work with a large data set. After the data collection was complete, there were a total of about 3000 quantitative surveys and 200 qualitative personal interviews. I assisted with the transcription and coding of the personal interviews, while I also got a chance to work with the quantitative data set. My research partner and I examined the differences in how men and women find meaning in their lives. This required us to conduct various statistical tests, and I became acquainted with using SPSS, software used for statistical analysis. The program enabled us to examine a large data set and to see the differences in the data between the men and women of the sample. Dr. Hamby gave us the opportunity to present our work on meaning making on PsychologyToday.com, which allowed me to co-write an article about gender differences on a major platform for psychology research. I am also currently working on an academic poster about the same subject in more detail to hopefully present at a conference in the future.

During my time at the Life Paths Research Program this summer, I was able to develop a variety of skills that will be valuable to me in the future. Getting the chance to conduct numerous interviews made it possible for me to practice communication in a professional setting. This will be particularly important to me, since I hope to go into

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research in neuroscience and qualitative data collection would require me to interact with participants of a study, or patients, in a way that makes them feel comfortable with opening up and accurately describing their experiences and feelings. Additionally, the data analysis skills that I was able to acquire this summer will further help me in a career in research, since the proficient use of programs such as SPSS are vital in being able to interpret data and its significance. I am thankful for the opportunity to develop these skills while working with the Life Paths Research Program this summer.