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Library Research Award Reflection Essay

“We advance intellectual discovery and enrich the quality of life by connecting people with knowledge” - Libraries Strategic Plan (printed on a poster in Odegaard Undergraduate Library)

My research was inspired by my past three years of work with incarcerated individuals. As I visited them in prison, I became increasingly convinced that Washington’s new early release mechanisms were having profound impacts on individuals’ lives - both in and outside of the carceral state. This realization prompted my research question: How does learning of the possibility of early release affect incarcerated individuals who previously did not expect to have a chance at release? I proposed this question as a thesis topic and was accepted to the Law, Societies, and Justice Honors program.

In the beginning of this school year, my research began by meeting weekly with my advisor, Dr. Katherine Beckett, and The Political Science Librarian, Emily Keller. While I knew exactly what I wanted to study, I had no idea how to start. In sharing this, Emily pointed me to *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences*, which taught me to frame my research before jumping into the databases. To do this, I drew a concept map in the form of a flower where the nodal point was my research question and the petals were every relevant topic or field I thought to explore (see picture below).

However, while my “bedraggled daisy” made me confident about what to look for, I struggled to find relevant sources (Luker 81). Frustrated, I turned to Emily Keller in late November, where I learned that searching and *effectively* searching are two very different things. My prior method of typing in the question I wanted answered (“How does learning of early release affect incarcerated individuals?”) was not conducive to populating results. Instead, utilizing keywords separated by quotations (“incarceration” + “life sentence” + “early release”) worked *with* the database, not against it.

My modified search strategy produced more results but posed a new problem: How should I choose which articles to include? The answer to my question came in the form of scoring articles on three criteria: credibility (peer-reviewed, legitimate publishing), relevancy (relation to one of my “petals”), and currency (date of publication, especially as the American carceral state has radically changed since the 1980s). Upon meeting each criteria, there was one more step in my search process: viewing who had cited the article. This strategy allowed me to not only find updated information, but strengthened my source pool altogether. Oftentimes, the first source I came across was theory-driven. However, articles that cited the original work provided practical applications, expansions of the theory, and/or critiques of it. As a result, my source pool became more holistic and I became more familiar with the literature in each field.

However, while I felt I had reached saturation in collecting sources on incarceration, life sentences, and the legal processes of early release, I could not seem to find any literature that married these ideas together. The longer I looked, the more defeated I felt. To ensure that I was not missing anything, I modified my search strategy again, using different keywords (“experience” + “good time release” + “prison”) in an advanced search. When that failed, I reached out to my advisor and a Ph.D. student at a top criminology program. They confirmed what I had found: the divorced nature of criminology, sociology, and psychology literature meant there were no studies or framework that explained how individuals experienced the possibility of early release when learning of it during a life sentence. My original frustration turned to excitement as I realized that my research could fill a gap in the current literature.

As I continued my search process, I also applied to the University’s Institutional Review Board and Human Subjects Division. Upon approval, I recruited eligible individuals and conducted 12 interviews. I then stripped all interviews of personal identifiers, transcribed them by hand, and uploaded them to a qualitative coding server, *AtlasTI*.

Coding - the process of systematically categorizing events to identify themes and patterns - was one of the most challenging processes to understand during this research. However, the UW Libraries research guide to Qualitative Analysis Software not only gave me access to, but taught me how to use *AtlasTI*. This resource gave me a platform to efficiently and ethically code raw data, the results of which guided my analysis.

Armed with my framework, a comprehensive pool of sources, and analyzed data, I wrote my thesis. The finished product went through three major revisions where the Odegaard Writing Center (OWRC) proved instrumental, especially in helping format legal citations in my bibliography.

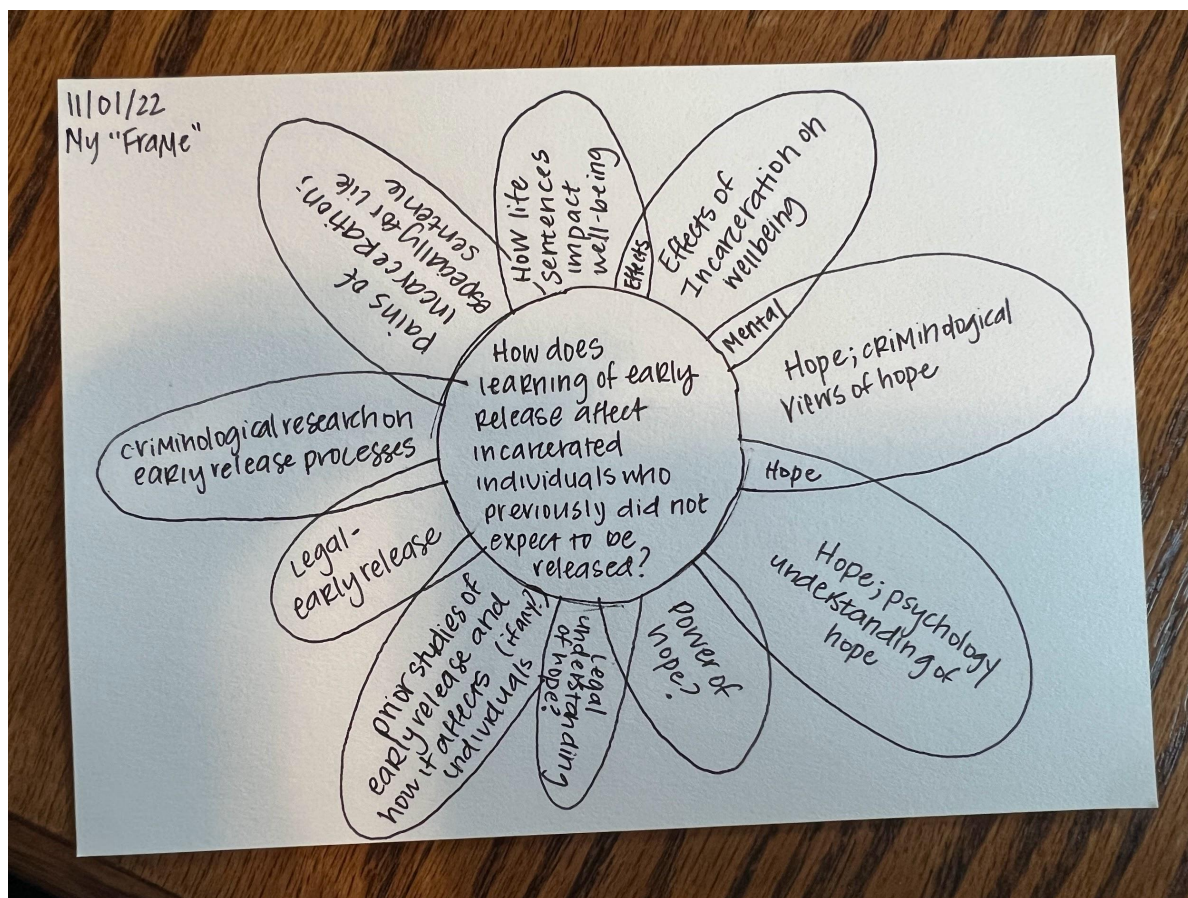
While my research was completed in early April, UW Library resources have continued to be helpful. My finished research was accepted for presentation at a Department of Justice Research Conference. However, unsure of how to format a research poster, I turned to the UW Libraries Design Help Desk. This resource has taught me how to curate research posters, how to meaningfully display qualitative findings, and how to print and travel across the country with an eight-foot poster.

Throughout this process, I have learned that research is incredibly complex. However, I have also learned numerous tips to navigate this complexity: concept maps are an incredible way to ground and frame research, diverse search strategies yield more holistic results, and utilizing library resources proves incredibly valuable. Perhaps most importantly, I have learned that search processes and familiarity with the field’s research is key to producing robust interviews and

relevant analysis, a lesson I am sure to take with me as I pursue a Ph.D. inspired by this project. So, whether it be soliciting advice from Librarians, using the UW Libraries database, learning from the Library's guide to qualitative research, attending OWRC and Design Help Desk appointments, or even getting a jolt of motivation from the poster printed outside of Odegaard's entrance (quote above), I can confidently and gratefully say that the UW Libraries has not only supported this project, but supported my journey as a researcher.

Word Count: 999

My "Bedraggled Daisy":



Bibliography

Luker, Kristin. *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences*. Harvard University Press, 2008. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1kmj7x0>.