Methodology

CSRE Research: The Challenges and Rewards of Developing a Methodology

By Jennifer Lee

Does race matter? How does ethnicity influence the way people behave? To what extent do cultural differences account for the way society is organized? Timely questions like these inspire Stanford undergraduates to major in Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity. The program spans several fields, allowing students to combine relevant courses from the Departments of Political Science, Religious Studies, and Sociology, among many others. Considering the diverse kaleidoscope of cultures that coexist in present-day America, it comes as no surprise that CSRE is one of the fastest growing majors on campus. Having received unanimous approval from the Faculty Senate in 1996, the department had already attracted more than 100 majors and minors by its second year of operation.

Doing research in such a new interdisciplinary department is difficult, but Stanford seniors Kiyomi Burchill, Chris Vaughan, and Helen Kim have stepped up to the challenge. While Kiyomi, Helen, and Chris are all CSRE majors, their diverse research projects attest to the flexibility and independence that CSRE affords to each individual researcher. According to Helen, “CSRE majors have to be creative in how [they] come up with [their] methodologies and chart a method of studying that might be new to many people.” As a result, each CSRE research project has a unique methodology that draws from a distinctive combination of academic fields.

Kiyomi Burchill: "Post-Census: The Changing Politics of the Multiracial Movement"

For the past three years, Kiyomi has researched mixed race politics, garnering support from faculty in both the Political Science and English departments in addition to the program in CSRE and the Undergraduate Research Programs Office. Inspired by classes on racial identity and literature on mixed race people, Kiyomi decided to address the absence of published scholarly research on mixed-race politics since 1998. In 1997, the U.S. Census changed from providing one stand-alone multiracial category to providing ‘mark one or more’ racial categories, in response to the activism of national mixed race advocacy organizations. Kiyomi sought to answer the question of what current mixed race advocacy organizations were doing, given the completion of the Census campaign.

In-depth analysis of a subject with no recent scholarly research required a hands-on methodology, which Kiyomi constructed with guidance from English professor Michele Elam and Political Science professor Luis Fraaga. Having received a Chappell-Lougee scholarship, Kiyomi spent the summer after her sophomore year traveling all over the United States to interview leaders and members of various national mixed-race organizations. Kiyomi found two of the organizations particularly provocative. Both formed after the 1997 Census change, the MAVIN Foundation and Swirl, Inc. have had “a leading presence within the multiracial movement and have yet to be identified in scholarly literature” (Burchill xi). While the MAVIN Foundation works to eliminate disparities in health care for mixed-race patients, Swirl, Inc. focuses more on grassroots community-building. To present the activism of these organizations, Kiyomi integrated three types of primary sources: in-depth interviews with the organizations’ participants and leaders, organizational documents produced by the group, and news media accounts of the group’s activities.

After having thoroughly integrated information on post-Census change in multiracial organizations, Kiyomi wanted to examine the change itself at a federal level. As a junior, Kiyomi successfully applied for an Undergraduate Research Programs Major Grant and traveled to Washington, D.C. to interview federal policymakers on the 1997 Census change. Kiyomi’s interviews revealed that these policymakers were “more interested in the mixed race organizations in anticipation for what they might do than [for] past policy decisions” that they had affected. Al-
though Kiyomi did not find the exact information she had sought in Washington, her efforts paid off: she was awarded the Dean's Award for Academic Accomplishment for her research, which she shared with professors at Harvard this May.

Even with all these honors, Kiyomi believes that the greatest reward for her in CSRE has been the process of doing multidisciplinary research. Because “every discipline has its own approach to research,” multidisciplinary researchers must “present knowledge in an accessible and yet academically rigorous manner.” Pursuing research in CSRE has taught Kiyomi how to intelligibly and intelligently communicate her knowledge, making the experience meaningful not only for her, but also for multi-race investigators around the nation.

Chris Vaughan:

Like Kiyomi’s research, Chris’s project originated from his desire to fill a gap in scholarly literature. In the winter of 2005, Chris took a student-initiated course entitled “Jobs with Justice,” and Chris noticed a lack of discussion on the history of labor at Stanford. After class, Chris approached the course’s faculty sponsor, Dr. Michael Kahan, and found out that no one had ever written a notable history of labor at Stanford. Thus, a project was born: Chris viewed this scholarly gap as a calling to research Stanford’s labor history.

Chris describes his research as a “project of a million avenues,” with a fluid methodology that led him in many different but relevant directions. In late February and March of 2005, he completed a directed reading on American labor history with Mark Mancall, an emeritus professor in the history department. When Chris described his research interest, Mancall helped him obtain a URP grant and directed him toward several experts, including Maggie Kimball, a Stanford archivist. With initial assistance from Kimball, Chris spent the summer of 2005 doing research at Green Library – a task that involved laborious searches for articles in the card catalog and on microfilm about various labor movements at Stanford.

Wanting more direct evidence of historical labor movements, Chris also interviewed workers, union activists, San Mateo County health inspectors and university administrators. To find out more about farm-worker issues specifically, Chris examined archived files of the San Mateo County Environmental Health Division. Chris zeroed in on San Mateo County farm-workers because of the controversy surrounding Webb Ranch, a University-owned parcel of land in Menlo Park with underpaid Mexican farm-workers. The chapter on Webb Ranch in Chris’s thesis is the longest and most relevant to CSRE research. Attesting to the significance of a CSRE perspective for Stanford’s labor history, Chris believes “you can’t study labor in California without also studying race and ethnicity in California.”

Aware of his project’s relevance to the history of Chicanos and Latinos at Stanford, Chris has been discussing his research with students and instructors of a related course in the School of Education and the Institute for Diversity in the Arts. Chris also plans to give back to the Stanford Labor Action Coalition, his initial source of inspiration, by presenting his research and distributing historical booklets to fellow SLAC members.

Helen Kim:
“The Asian-American Movement and an Asian-American Liberation Theology”

While Kiyomi and Chris embarked on their research mainly for academic interests, Helen Kim’s CSRE research idea stemmed from a more personal experience. During her freshman year, Helen went on the Asian-American Identity Alternative Spring Break trip, during which the group picketed against unjust workers’ wages in front of a Los Angeles Korean supermarket. To her dismay, Helen noticed that many Korean-Americans were driving by the supermarket demonstration with disinterested attitudes. Notably, this supermarket also held worship services on Sundays for its workers. Even though this Korean-American community apparently valued Christian worship, they had little regard for social justice – a disconnect that “chillingly disheartened” Helen and intrigued her to further examine the cross-section between radical protest and religion in a research project of her own.

Helen has approached her research with a flexible methodology, using a variety of primary and secondary sources. Helen planted the seeds of her research thesis in a short paper for a class entitled “Asian-American Politics,” taught by Carolyn Wong. Passionate about the relationship between religion and social activism, Helen conducted an in-depth interview with a Chinese-American pastor who was also the leader of a faith-based non-profit organization. Having worked with students at Berkeley and San Francisco State University, the pastor readily
connected with Helen, telling her about his involvement with affordable housing projects in Chinatown. Professor Wong enthusiastically assisted Helen throughout the writing of her paper and ultimately became her adviser – an outcome that Helen describes as “serendipitous.” “Sometimes,” Helen said, “it seemed as though she was even more interested in my research topic than I was.”

Helen discovered another fruitful resource at the Berkeley Graduate Theological Union’s Pacific Asian American Center for Theologies and Strategies archive. When she visited the archive for herself, she felt as though she had landed on a gold mine – she had to return at least five times to extract all that she could from the archive. She focused on four important figures – all theologians and pastors who had written in the 1960s and 1970s. Because they had written so recently, Helen could interview them in-person to find out what they did to eliminate racism within the church, and hear their views on contextualizing theology to suit the Asian-American community. Helen had always held a personal interest in theology that extended beyond her research purposes; from her interviewers with theologians, she came away with meaningful principles of ethnic and religious consciousness.

Like Kiyomi and Chris, Helen found value in doing multidisciplinary research because of the methodological liberty it afforded her. Since she is also majoring in English literature, Helen was accustomed to research with an emphasis on literary analysis and initially hesitated to pursue the dynamic, changing methodologies of CSRE research. But now, she thoroughly appreciates the multidisciplinary nature of CSRE research. “We have to be creative with our research methodologies,” she says, “but it is also really rewarding and freeing because we can express our individuality in our projects.”

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