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### Reflection Essay for Lang Prize

The COVID-19 pandemic upended almost all facets of our lives – from basic, mundane activities like going to the grocery store to self-indulgent activities like traveling to another city. Throughout the duration of the pandemic, older adults were highly vulnerable not only to COVID, but they also faced long periods of isolation from family and friends, on top of many age-related stressors like physical decline and chronic illnesses. Seeing how the pandemic disproportionately affected an older adult's ability to maintain social connections made me wonder what negative health consequences would arise from the lack of social ties. My curiosity led me to examine the protective roles social ties play and its influence in late life. I was able to explore my interest in HNR 195 with Dr. Huo during Fall 2021 and Winter 2022, using data collected from the Daily Experience and Well-Being Study conducted in Austin. While this dataset included various measures, I was specifically interested in how age-related physical changes could be mitigated through social ties.

From the start, I knew that this project was different from previous writing assignments in my human development and psychology courses. Instead of condensing the literature on a given topic to a five-page paper, I need to conduct a literature review and write a methods, results, and discussion section. Even though I have conducted literature reviews in my past psychology and human development courses, it never required me to venture past the first two search pages. I felt as if I was getting in over my head since a simple cursory search for social ties in late-life generated an extensive list with over thousands of articles on the library database.

This project required more active engagement in the research rather than passive summarization and synthesis of the literature.

I was feeling extremely overwhelmed by the abundance of articles related to social ties. However, I was more interested in understanding the role of peripheral ties and the overall relationship satisfaction associated with close and peripheral ties. My initial research question and search terms were not specific enough to generate a smaller pool of articles related to my research question. A series of email threads and Zoom meetings with Dr. Huo helped me narrow down a specific aspect of social ties I should focus on in late life. I ultimately decided on social integration, which refers to the structural diversity of social ties, and how this could moderate the association between functional limitations and depressive symptoms in late life. This process of refining and honing down my research question was integral as it significantly narrowed down the pool of articles that were relevant to my research question.

Now that I was making headway in gathering all my sources, I realized that I did not have an effective system to keep all my sources in one spot. That's when I remembered a tool introduced by a research librarian, Megan van Noord, at a seminar lecture. Sciwheel proved useful in helping me keep track of all the articles I could potentially use in my research project, allowing me to manage my time more effectively. I created multiple folders within the platform to organize the articles I cited and the articles that were relevant but did not make it into my research project. I included a short note for each article that provided more information about the methods and discussion section. In addition, Megan provided so many useful ways to search for articles through using Boolean phrases in the search bar of Google Scholar and Proquest. Tailoring my search phrases on Proquest and Google Scholar helped me find more relevant articles associated with my topic. Each database generated a list of articles that have cited the

specific article on hand. This was an extremely beneficial feature that allowed me to investigate how other researchers explored a similar topic and their analysis.

After having done a cursory literature review, I consulted Dr. Huo on the flow of a research article. We established a good system of checking in with one another after I finished one of the four major sections in the paper. After I sent Dr. Huo a draft of the section I had completed, she was able to give me extremely helpful feedback about the direction of the paper and if there are any sources that I should integrate into my paper to strengthen my argument. Admittedly it was a little disheartening to see so many edits on my first draft I submitted, but ultimately, I realized that feedback was necessary for my paper to be more holistic and comprehensive.

The methods, results, and discussion section came with slightly more ease than my introduction section. The literature review and introduction exposed me to what needed to be included in the subsequent sections and what I should focus on as I wrote the following sections. By the end of the research project, I was able to satisfy my curiosity about the importance and protective benefits social ties provide in late life.

One area I am continuously learning about is how to cite and format using APA guidelines. I have cited using APA in my past psychology courses. However, the citations often were centered on in-text citations and the reference page. For this paper, I needed to include a title page, abstract, tables, and figures which I was not accustomed to doing. To help me understand the citation rules I decided to refer to the APA 7<sup>th</sup> edition manual. I was able to request a copy from the library through the interlibrary loan and it arrived at Shields within a couple of weeks. I referred to the APA manual to help with the in-text citations, reference pages, and the appendix.

Throughout this process, the iterative rounds of reviews and comments helped me bolster my predictions and gave me the opportunity to revise and edit my paper. This paper has given me the opportunity to utilize research strategies that my psychology courses exposed me to, such as doing a literature review and writing an annotated bibliography. In addition, working on this paper has further solidified my interest in gerontology and piqued my interest in understanding other interventions to promote healthy aging across the lifespan. I hope that the results of my paper will make the readers reflect on their own social relationships and compel them to pass this knowledge on to family and friends that might benefit from this information.