

Jordan Brown transcript

R: So I just completed my honours in commerce at Monash University and prior to that I did a double degree in arts and business. So I definitely think that that influenced my honours project, but it just happened that I fell in to the Commerce Department and loved every minute of it. So I'm still around.

I1: And what was the specific topic that you did.

R: So I actually studied authentic self-expression in the workplace. I was looking at the effect of authentic self-expression and psychological capital, and how that then impacted our work outcomes. So specifically organizational commitment, work engagement, and turnover intention.

I2: What got you interested in that subject?

R: I actually worked with two other organizations and one of them was my workplace. So practically speaking I am actually a youth worker, so that's completely different to what I studied yet again and so I went into the honours program with a very clear idea that I wanted to work with the organization that I was already involved in, and I have been involved with them since I was a young person, so I came through their programs and experienced their workshops and as an organization they've recently restructured, so that they have a social enterprise model that's happening in the not-for-profit sector...yeah, more and more often. And so they now have business partners in the corporate sector so they're running the same workshops that I experienced as a young person in the business sector. So I just became very interested in that process and wanting to be involved and saw the honours project as an opportunity to give back and to work with people that I have gotten a lot out of in my experience as well.

I2: That's great. For readers of our book who may not be familiar with the honours process, could you tell us a bit about what the requirements are in terms of the project and the length of the thesis, that kind of thing.

R: Yeah. So it's two semesters or it's eight months. The expectation is that you don't really get holidays necessarily, but all your classes are within like a two-semester structure, and the course work as well—people are really surprised when you say, Oh yeah I have exams and assignments, and I have to write a thesis, and then that was actually 20000, more or less. So yeah so that's kind of like the end product that all your coursework is designed to support you to get to the 20,000. So that was really helpful. But yeah that's kind of, like, the end goal and accomplishment.

I: And that's a supervised thesis?

R: yeah, so I had two supervisors which was really helpful. So they really helped me, particularly at the beginning, to understand, like, all sorts of academic processes, how to apply ethics, even how to approach organizations, how do you work collaboratively. Yeah like, what should I be reading and what I haven't read yet...Yeah, everything from the actual logistics of getting research done to like the theoretical and conceptualization processes as well.

I: And what was this specific research question that you wanted to answer?

R: So it's interesting because that was a process in itself but I got there I think at the end my research question was, How does psychological capital become developed in the workplace? And so even though I was...my independent variable was authentic self-expression, and that was probably the construct that I was most interested in in terms of the theoretical contribution that was missing the literature, it was that link between authentic self-expression, and psychological capital, so that became the overarching research question that really framed the scope of my argument of

my thesis.

I: It sounds like the question developed or was clarified throughout the project. How did that happen, what was the process?

R: And it was an interesting process because I'm the type of person that kind of goes into a project being like, I know exactly what I want to do and this is how I think it's going to go. And they warn you that, like, it's actually a process, it's going to take some time, you're going to have to think through, course work is designed to challenge your thinking and to offer different perspectives. And so I knew that I wanted to be doing quantitative research so I knew that I wanted to be evaluating these workshops and getting measurements, and then it was about like going back to the organization and looking at the run sheet of the workshop understanding what the essence of what they were trying to achieve was, and came to authentic self-expression, and then just diving into all the research that had been done previously, and starting to see what had been done before, what hadn't been done before, what was my contribution going to be, which took me a long time to kind of figure out, like, why can't I just do this one thing, even though it's been done before. Like it's you know interesting to me but I guess starting to realize that the whole purpose of research is doing something that hasn't been done before, so that you can provide new information for other people to use. And so yeah it became, rather than focusing on authentic self-expression realizing that what we didn't know yet about psychological capital was how it was developed. So we knew that particular individuals and like personality traits, things like age and gender impacted levels of psychological capital. But we know how it could be developed. We knew it could be but we didn't know how. And so that really became my research question, the crux of what I felt like I was giving back.

I2: And the concept of authentic self-expression...

R: Yeah

I2: Was that something that you found in the literature? How did you discover those ideas?

So I began, I said, like talking to the people at work about what it is that they were trying to achieve with this particular workshop reading through the run sheet, and going through organizational documents and understanding their principles and essence, and then going to the literature and finding like the equivalent constructs. So I very much felt like I was breaching two worlds and translating from one to the other. And so I ended up reading a lot about authentic leadership so my supervisors were and are studying leadership. So they very much influence that. And then it became about distinguishing, Well we're specifically looking at authentic leadership. We're looking at it at the individual level and so that's when we're starting to talk about authentic self-expression at the individual level rather than looking specifically at leaders. So once again it's like reading across multiple areas of research and being really selective in what you're constructing what your actual study is.

I2: Yeah it's really interesting. And in terms of your reading of the literature, what was the process how did you do that?

R: It was honestly very messy. So now I am continuing to do research and I realized that academics actually have Excel like spreadsheets where they're summarizing all the articles, you know, that are available and putting the definitions for each article...it is quite a logical process whereas I was like all over the place sounds interesting and would go down rabbit holes that were fascinating but weren't related to what I was actually studying, like the theory of the happy worker. So I think what I did was very messy I think starting at Google Scholar is really great because you get an overview of what is actually available, and can see how researchers influence each other's work. because it is quite a logical process as people are building upon other people's work. But I think I went back and read the same articles multiple times and probably got very lost within the

first couple of months, with so many different interesting fascinating things that in my mind were interrelated but theoretically weren't. So yeah, if I could go back and write a literature review again I would definitely be more structured in it; that would be a handy hint. Even just like writing a literature review, it's a constant process as well. So yeah.

I2: Did you have any light bulb moments any kind of moments when you were reading things that you really thought, Oh that that makes sense or that's what I want to do?

R: Yeah I did. It feels like the best way to describe it is when it all starts to click and you understand, just feels like magic, it's just like Aaah. Like they are the areas that explain what I'm interested in studying, and it's not just things that I'm picking at, like there's actual explanations for, I guess, the relationships between my variables that provide a structure that make writing a thesis and defending your argument a lot easier. But yeah I think it just part it was just like a really steep learning curve like most things. I think you kind of, in honors just, get chucked in, Oh yeah, twenty thousand words, you'll be fine, everyone's done it before, and then yeah in the process you go, Oh okay like you know, like...

I: Yeah.

R: Sounds like you can understand.

I: I can still remember doing fourth year honours, a long time ago but I remember it very well. So say your method, you said used to quantitative approach. How did you go about choosing your research method?

R: So I ended up doing a correlational field studies survey, and I think that was largely to do with the amount of time available on this project. So my original research proposal was very ambitious. There was going to be mixed methods, there's going to be qualitative interviews, we were definitely going to do the survey, and then there was going to be an experiment. So like my supervisors were totally on board I was like, yeah I can totally achieve this. And then it really just became a matter of pragmatics. You've got eight months, you're learning so much, you have exams and assessments. And in my case I was working with two other organizations, which was quite stressful. So it became essentially a matter of convenience where it took eight minutes to complete the survey and I had 515 people do it and it was designed to be longitudinal, so they are going to be three time points, but I only got cross-sectional. And so yeah it was just, so it is quite easy to administer, you sent it out via e-mail, yeah they're not intrusive any way. And I think it's easier for other organizations to understand. They send out their own surveys all the time, rather than having to do an experiment and getting people to come to the university and all those sorts of things. So I think that was the main reasons

I: So it sounds like you started off with a sort of methodologically strong but completely impractical design, and ended up trying to find something doable rather than perfect methodologically.

R: Yeah I think that's exactly, it always comes back to compromise on what's actually achievable in the short time that you have. Eight months is actually not that long considering...

I2: It goes quickly. In terms of your sample and the empirical data that you collected, how did you go about identifying people for the survey?

R: So because I was working with my workplace I knew that they had a partnership so they provide training to this particular organization and to all of the graduate employees. So it was 515 of them. And they do it, even though it's a national organization, they provide this training in two places in Melbourne and Sydney, and so I knew that this was happening before going on this program knew that it would be a really good sample because it's large enough, and so the reason why I got 515 surveys was because time was set aside during the workshop and so they were given a paper and

pencil survey and that was more effective than the online and email type survey. So yeah I think going into that honours project I had just had a very clear idea of what my sample would be. It was more just figuring it out in terms of what I would actually be studying and how I would go about that. Yeah.

I2: So you had a 100 percent response rate?

R: Yeah yeah.

I2: That's really unusual.

R: Yeah.

I2: In terms of negotiating that you were going to do, who in the organization gave you the authority and how did you negotiate?

R: So I know the social enterprise manager so I went to her and said, I have this opportunity I would be interested to work with you. She said yes that's great. I write every search proposal, so I did that with my supervisors, and so she was essentially the mediator between me and the other organization. So then, yeah it was quite difficult communicating a research project to, A, someone who doesn't necessarily understand research but then is trying to relay that information to another organization, but that's essentially what happened so she went to them, they were on board, she came back to me and it was definitely my responsibility to kind of organize that and put ethics below the time, the waiting on that process and yes that's how it kind of came to be.

I2: Could you tell us a bit about the ethics side of that process. What did you have to do there?

R: So there's official ethics approval process, so it's all online at Monash, so you just, there's a form, you just have to fill it out and so they ask you questions about what your survey, measures, the skills that you're going to use just making sure that it's all above board that in the process of doing the research projects and particularly working with people, that none of their rights are ever going to be breached, and things like confidentiality are upheld and making sure that you've taken all the necessary steps in the process so to ensure that everything's all aboveboard

I2: And when you actually did the survey, was there anything that you had to explain to people before they actually took part.

R: Yes so there is an explanatory statement that has to be written so that's also submitted to ethics for their approval. And so I handed out the explanatory statement and then also did a short spiel that this is who I am, this is what the research is about, this is why it's important and they went into a lottery draw, if they did all the three time points. So there's an incentive, so explaining that, so they understand what they're getting involved in, and also highlighting the fact that my contact details are available if they have any questions and that is completely voluntary to participate in.

I2: Great, and the lottery draw sounds interesting. Were you able to give them some sort of incentive there then?

R: Yeah, part of the program you get a five hundred dollar budget so that's another aspect. It's your responsibility to manage that, and so my budget went into the lottery draw, so essentially I gave an iPad and that was for whoever finished the time three survey, they went into the drawer. It's completely random as like an extra incentive to get involved.

I: And can you tell us about your data analysis. How did you actually analyse the survey data?

R: So I spent like a week actually entering all my data from the paper survey so that took a long

time. I didn't think I would take that long but it did— and then used SPSS to analyse the data and particularly use Process. So that's part of the reason why the coursework is so important is because you get taken step by step: this is how you screen your data; this is how you clean your data; this is how you assess missing data; these are the decisions that you can make. Yeah. And kind of walk you through the programs that are available.

I: And what statistical analysis to use. Once you've inputted the data, you'd clean the outliers, all that kind of stuff. What were the analytical steps?

R: So my model is a moderated mediation survey. This is taking me back. So a correlation matrix so that and looking at, you know your mean, your standard deviations. So that essentially gives you an overview of the relationships between your variables, whether they've got a strong relationship, and which direction that is, so that kind of provides preliminary evidence for your hypotheses that you've already written previously, and gives you a sense of where you're heading. And then I put it in process, so that's you get to choose the model, and you put in all the variables, and so that spits out all these numbers, and through the coursework it was how do you interpret these numbers? What are the confidence intervals and levels of significance? How do you interpret these numbers and what does that actually mean. How do you write it up?

I: Well just like you just mentioned writing up—what was the process of writing your dissertation your 20,000 words?

R: It was...I took it step by step, so ...It's really great it's broken down into chapters, so I tried to get everything up until my methodology, excluding the abstract and introduction, by the time I collected my data, because at that stage you should have a very clear idea of a way which area of research your research sits, what are the articles that have influenced your understanding, and then because you've chosen a methodology writing that up; and then as the coursework took me step by step in how to analyse, you just kind of go back and start to write what it is that you actually did and your interpretations. But it was really interesting because throughout the whole program a lot of academics talk about what's the story you tried to tell with the narrative. And at the time that's a really abstract question like I know that I would love to tell the story but I don't really know what that means at this stage. And I got to a point where I was writing my first draft and I just was really enjoying writing it all up and going through and doing redrafts because I knew what the story was, I knew what the data was saying and then interpreted it and so it was exciting and I felt like it was very much a creative process. It's like okay now you know the results, how am I going to go back through that abstract interaction and even rewriting the literature review to really highlight what it is that has been found and the importance of it. And so yeah I knew what the story was, so it kind of clicked, it was one of those moments, just feel like, throughout, the whole as you just... Oh that's what people were talking about, like, that makes sense. You don't know what you don't know, people can tell you but until you figure it out for yourself you're just...

I: You basically had eight months to produce the dissertation for when you started. When did you actually start writing?

R: I think it was around the end of May that my literature review was due, so you submitted it to your supervisors and they provide feedback. I actually submit my literature review to supervisors until later because I didn't want the feedback. I know it's like not where I wanted to be but at that stage I collected data quite early so I was focusing on that aspect as well. And particularly in quantitative research the structure is how to write up your methodology and is very much, well it's very structured, so it's very much the same, so I knew what I was doing. Yes so I definitely did a lot more writing towards the end, but I think as I was saying before once I knew the results that was a lot more motivating for actually going back and writing all the different jobs as well.

I2: So Jordan what did you find difficult about doing a research project?

R: I think in my case because I was working with two other organizations I felt a lot of pressure, because they were calling me. There was a lag time of about a month when they were ready to go. Their legal team was waiting for their ethics approval, and I was still having meetings with my supervisors and other academics getting feedback. Part of that honors program is presenting to the whole faculty as well. I was still going through that process, as well as waiting—and you can't submit an ethics application until you have very clear idea of what your research project is actually going to look like. So yeah that was stressful having like an organization calling me being like, we're just waiting for you, like okay. I'm still trying to work with different departments within organization, so I think that was the part that I found most frustrating and challenging and I think it's a very steep learning curve for the first couple of months because everything is you don't actually know what you're doing but you're treated as if you do; and the people that you're surrounded by have been doing this for a really really long time which is great as they provide you with a lot of their knowledge and their experience but you have to learn it for yourself. So yeah it's just taking on that challenge but yeah towards the end of my thesis, it became a lot...I felt a lot calmer, and I felt very confident towards the end as I was stressed out. I've heard horror stories where people have done all-nighter and the last week has been atrociously awful. But that didn't happen to me, and so yeah it was more its start, beginning.

I: So why didn't that happen to you? How did you manage the process? Because it's pretty intense for eight months or so.

R: To be honest I don't know, because I was prepared for the all-nighters and the last week to be absolutely insane. So I submitted my draft...I think I just hit the deadlines, like I was really strict with the deadlines. They do provide essentially deadlines for different chapters but with your supervisors you can renegotiate that they chose not to. So it actually took a lot longer to rewrite my draft than I expected it to. For whatever reason I assumed, well I've already written and read most of it, I was only going to be grammatical changes, but it was actually rewriting a lot of different chapters. But because I did that thoroughly and took it seriously, it meant that the second draft that came back to me required very minimal changes, so yes, essentially my second draft came back with the comment of, you've done really well. Just push through for the next couple of days and you'll be fine. So that was just like a good result...I've worked really hard for a really long time and it means that I don't have to push myself to the limit towards the end.

I2: That's great. And what did you enjoy apart from that wonderful feeling and when you feel it's coming together. Is there anything else that you remember as enjoyable?

R: To be honest I didn't really know much about academia before I started doing the honours project; and so my supervisors have been really great in that they haven't just been focusing on what I'm doing now, but looking at and asking me questions about what I want to be doing in the future, and have really taken personal interest in my potential career as an academic; so I've been invited to a lot of different seminars I've been able to talk to PhD students, we did one of our classes in the Art Gallery at Monash and really challenged our thinking about how do you look at your particular topic and how can different aspects of life kind of influence your understanding. And so this year has been amazing and full on it because the opportunities that have been given to me not just focusing on my honours project but in terms of becoming a research assistant, to introduce me to different people and yeah journal editors that have come from the U.S. and other sorts of things. So it's been a really wholesome experience overall.

I: And are you going to go on to more postgrad study?

I2: I'm taking my time with it. I definitely think it's something that I'm interested in pursuing. So I am currently working at Monash at the moment, and as a research assistant and tutor—I'm really

excited about tutoring, —and so I will say I would love to but I'm also aware of like how, like, eight months is huge, three years is a huge amount of time as well, so there's as a lot of things that I want to consider.

I2: And in terms of your relationships with the organizations where you collected your data, is there anything that you've been able to do in terms of feeding back the results and having a conversation about their meaning?

R: Yes so I have submitted a summary report to them, that's useful. So it's very much condensed from the 20,000 words that I submitted, just taking the parts that, yeah, will help them out. And so hopefully in the coming weeks we'll have a meeting we can have a further discussion.