Summer 2015 Fellow Reports:
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This summer, I conducted research at Columbia University under the guidance of Sociology professor Van C. Tran. As part of the larger research of the Amsterdam Avenue Project, which evaluated the effects of neighborhood change in various neighborhoods on the west side of Manhattan, my focus was in the neighborhood of Hamilton Heights in West Harlem. My research aimed to evaluate how the recent gentrification of the neighborhood has affected policing practices and perceptions of policing and surveillance by neighborhood residents of color. Very much in line with my internship last summer doing community policing work with Officer Jennifer Maddox of the Chicago Police Department, this summer was spent researching exactly what changes have taken place in this transitional time for New York City policing, and how these affect community-police relations.

My experience mattered to those residents in Hamilton Heights whom I interviewed, for it was an opportunity to share their views on the way in which their neighborhood is policed. My experience is also important as part of the large national dialogue currently occurring about the torn relationship between police and communities of color. It is also important for the academic community for which these conversations contribute to our knowledge and understandings of how state policy influences policing practices and ultimately affect citizens.

I felt very successful in terms of actually finding recurring themes, consistent with some of what we already know, but adding a unique lens in terms of the interplay of gentrification and policing, something very relevant with the current reinvestment in urban communities post-recession and the displacement of longtime residents. The challenges were in the practical nature of research and trying to compete with weather and ultimately trying to convince individuals that their time is well spent on an interview for which they will not receive any material compensation. I have learned a great deal about conducting field ethnography, about using systematic social observation instruments, and conducting ethical and balanced research. My solicitation skills could improve, as could some of my organization skills.
My experience has definitely expanded my knowledge of how policing functions as a tool of control and has very real effects for the individuals who are most affected by unwarranted interactions with law enforcement. I learned a great deal about what it means for individuals of color, across gender and age, to feel constantly surveyed, policed and watched especially with an influx of affluent whites. This is something I’ve known throughout my life but actually being in the field and finding out just what’s occurring at every level, and studying the history of police just in this one neighborhood expanded my understandings greatly. My experience as an academic researcher and my life as a fellow at Middlebury are very much tied as they both touch upon my interests as an academic, as an activist and as a person. However, I feel that the social entrepreneurship community has starkly different ideas for solutions to the problems I see than the academic community. Both, in my opinion, fail to get to the heart of the issue, which I believe starts from policy, training and shifting institutional values, norms and expectations. For more on this, watch the talk I recently gave at the Clifford Symposium!

The goals at the onset of my experience were to pay special attention to the experiences of immigrants of color, and how they may vary from native black residents. This proved to be a bit too heavy for the short time I had, and thus my focus became more general which proved to be very helpful in the long run. I don’t think I would do anything differently this summer, other than generalize my research topic earlier on and secure more interviews however I could, in order to have a larger set of data. 10 years from now, I want to look back and see this summer as the first step on my academic journey, and 10 years from now when I hold my Ph. D., complete my award-winning dissertation and am a radical academic at a fantastic program somewhere, I will know this is where it began. The whole experience has been incredible, especially being from New York and having experienced what so many of my interviewees talked about, and seeing this issue from so many angles has been very rewarding.