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*Innovations in Research and Scholarship Feature*

# Researcher as Instrument: Understanding “Shifting” Findings in Constructivist Research

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*Two studies investigating the meaning and articulation of multiple identities among Black college students revealed shifts in the findings from the 2001 study to the 2005 study. This theoretical review explores the role of the researcher as instrument within the constructivist research paradigm as a possible explanation for some of these apparent differences. Implications and suggestions for researchers and graduate preparation are offered.*

Since 2001, I completed two research studies seeking to understand the ways in which samples of Black college students made sense of, negotiated, and articulated the multiple social and cultural facets that made up their identities (Stewart, 2001, 2009). These similar studies yielded different findings. These differences made me consider the influence of my role as the researcher, which is the central question I explore in this paper.

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I see intra-individual identity as a complex construct constituted by an array of relevant socially constructed identities (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, social class, sexuality, ability, and religion/faith). My undergraduate experiences as a Black woman attending a predominantly White college stoked my interest in identity issues and the intersections of identity. Through graduate preparation in higher education and student affairs and study to become a faculty member in the field, I found an opportunity to explore these issues empirically.

The two studies I review in this article produced two different sets of findings (discussed further below). Certainly other explanations exist for these “shifts,” as I am identifying them. For example, contextual differences between the institutional environments of the colleges the students attended could have influenced these “shifts.” Similarly, individual variation among the students could explain the differences. Although these may be equally valid explanations for the differences in my findings, I am persuaded by the philosophical doctrine of fallibilism to also explore as a strong contributing factor my growth and development as a researcher.

Fallibilism, most strongly associated with Charles Peirce (1955), acknowledges that empirical knowledge claims are informed by imperfect observations and therefore may turn out to be false and subject to correction (Rysiew, 2009). One of the avenues through which fallibility exists in empirical knowledge claims is via the researcher. The evolving knowledge and skill of the researcher can lead to refinements in interview questions, data analysis, and interpretations. This circumstance is especially important for researchers who choose constructivist epistemological frameworks for their methodology.

Constructivism considers the researcher as a central and vital instrument in the collection and interpretation of data. The growth and development of the researcher as instrument may be manifested in seemingly different findings in cross-sectional or case studies about the same topic conducted at separate points in a researcher’s career. Discerning the role of researcher development in skill and philosophical orientation in producing these differences is necessary. Careful examination of this development as a contributing factor has implications for how scholars situate themselves in their research, as well as for how future researchers and practitioners are educated.

## Summary of Previous Research and Literature

Three literature streams informed the context for my exploration in this article: student development research on multiple identities, the researcher’s role in constructivism, and the challenge of researching intersectionality and multiple identities. These three literature streams are summarized so the reader can understand the context in which I situate this discussion.

### Student Development Research on Multiple Identities

Reynolds and Pope (1991) presented the earliest illustration in student affairs research of the need and validity of addressing multiple, marginalized social identities in identity development. Since their publication, other researchers, drawing on the acknowledgement in feminist

theory that universal identity categories are inherently flawed, modeled the complex interplay of multiple social identity categories in individuals' meaning-making about self and identity (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Jones, 1997; Jones & McEwen, 2000).

The most recent advance in this research was the incorporation of intersectionality that produced more authentic understandings concerning the interplay of individuals' meaning-making with privilege and oppression in social contexts (see Jones, 2009). Intersectionality posits that the multiple facets of identity are mutually constitutive, non-unitary, and interdependent, presenting unique ontological and methodological challenges for researchers (Bowleg, 2008; McCall, 2005). These challenges are discussed below through a critique of the "shifts" in the findings within my research.

The data in the two studies I conducted were collected at two points in time, in 2001 and 2005, with different samples. My research follows other multiple identities scholarship, yet is distinguished from this lineage by my incorporation of a spiritual and faith development lens. This lens was introduced to understand and illustrate how students articulate and make meaning of their multiple and mutually constituted identities (Stewart, 2002, 2009). Four major differences in the findings were discovered when examining the two studies' reports (Stewart, 2002, 2008, 2009).

## The Constructivist Researcher's Role

During the two studies, I was at different stages concerning understanding intersectionality, as well as different places in my methodological knowledge and skill. The first study was completed as a dissertation project (Stewart, 2001); the work of a novice researcher. The second study was completed four years into my career as a researcher and professor. Revisiting other research and writing on multiple identities (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000), intersectionality (Bowleg, 2008; Collins, 1991; McCall, 2005), and realist identity theories (Macdonald & Sánchez-Casal, 2009) extended my understanding and ability to analyze the collected data. Such evolution can influence a researcher's data analysis and interpretation of findings (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006).

As Patton (2002) succinctly stated, "In qualitative inquiry, *the researcher is the instrument*" (p. 14, emphasis in original). Therefore, the credibility of qualitative research findings relies to a great extent on the researcher's skill. Several strategies have been recommended by Patton and others to ensure the trustworthiness and authenticity of qualitative research findings. Yet, determining whether research findings should be labeled as "malconstruction[s]" (Schwandt, 1994, p. 129) can only be achieved by using the same procedures that produced the findings under investigation. As a result, findings produced by qualitative inquiry are always relative and context-bound.

Asserting relative, context-bound findings is supported by Schwandt's (1994) review of Guba and Lincoln's constructivist paradigm that situates truth as "sociohistorically relative" and "the findings or outcomes of an inquiry are themselves a literal creation or construction of the inquiry process" (p. 128). Truth is dependent on the consensus for a given construction at a particular

moment in time. Such ontology makes constructivism uniquely compatible with a fallibilist perspective; indeed it requires it.

The researcher as instrument has prompted scholars to promote reflexivity as a necessary tool for qualitative researchers (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006; Patton, 2002). Reflexivity acknowledges “the importance of self-awareness, political/cultural consciousness, and ownership of one’s perspective” (Patton, 2002, p. 64). Being reflexive then “is to undertake an ongoing examination of *what I know* and *how I know it*” (Patton, 2002, p. 64, emphasis in original). Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006) further clarified the topic, particularly regarding a researcher’s social identities: “How one responds to those involved in the study *and the topic itself* is probably the most elusive but important criterion of goodness or worthy research” (p. 112, emphasis added). I argue here that one’s response to the topic requires sophisticated understanding about the topic, including appropriate methodologies and procedures to investigate it.

I used these qualitative inquiry tenets within the constructivist paradigm for the discussion in this article. Transparency through reflexivity is necessary and useful for researchers, theorists, and practitioners. Rather than undermining the validity of research findings, such transparency educates research consumers, supports the production of more sophisticated knowledge, and leads to better practice and policies informed by such knowledge.

## Challenges of Conducting Research on Multiple Identities and Intersectionality

Some argue that research and models of multiple identities “fail to challenge effectively the traditional metaphysical understanding of identity as unity” (Fuss as cited by McCall, 2005, p. 1778). Others view identity in ways that support research of multiple social identities in student development. According to Macdonald and Sánchez-Casal (2009), a realist theory of identity understands socially constructed identities to be *real*, such that they do circumscribe and shape people’s experiences and the meaning they make of those experiences. Realist identity theory allows the epistemic salience of identity as well as the idea that individuals are members of multiple *communities of meaning*. These communities intersect to influence one’s constructions of self, others, and the social world Macdonald and Sánchez-Casal (2009). How one ought to approach this topic methodologically is not self-evident.

One’s orientation to categories of social identities heavily influences how one treats data regarding multiple and intersecting identities. “Language creates categorical reality rather than the other way around” (McCall, 2005, p. 1777). McCall (2005) presented three ways in which researchers can address the complexity of identity categories and their socially constructed yet experientially powerful nature: anticategorical complexity, intracategorical complexity, and intercategorical complexity. McCall advocated for the application of intercategorical complexity when engaging intersectionality within research topics and procedures. An intercategorical, or simply categorical, approach uses existing categories of social identity strategically to recognize and

document the inequality among social groups along multiple dimensions. This approach, combined with a realist theory of identity, is well suited to investigating individuals' constructions of the mutually constitutive and interdependent facets of their identities.

Despite this ontological and epistemological orientation to multiple identities and intersectionality, appropriately reflecting these in one's research methods and procedures is still challenging. Bowleg (2008) presented an in-depth discussion of the methodological challenges of intersectionality research. Her suggestions and reflections were based on her experience with two separate research studies about how Black lesbian women dealt with stress and resilience. According to Bowleg, there is an inherent contradiction between the assumptions of qualitative and quantitative measurement and analysis and the basic premise of intersectionality. As opposed to what she described as the additive assumptions of qualitative and quantitative measurement and analysis, "interdependence, multi-dimensionality and mutually constitutive relationships form the core of intersectionality" (Bowleg, 2008, p. 317). In contrast, the additive approach sees social identities as "independent and uni-dimensional" (p. 312).

To overcome the default additive assumptions that render inauthentic understandings of participants' experiences with intersectionality, Bowleg (2008) suggested that researchers heed three cautions. The first exhortation was to be mindful that the "wording of questions shapes how participants respond to them" (p. 314). In other words, if the researcher asks participants to separate, rank, and/or identify salience among the multiple facets of their identities, they are likely to do so, their perceptions of identity intersectionality notwithstanding. The respondents may articulate the meaning of their identities in an additive fashion to the researcher, even though their internalized meanings may actually reflect an intersectional approach.

Second, Bowleg (2008) advised researchers to aggressively apply their philosophical paradigm to "both shape and constrain the meaning(s) of the evidence" (McGrath & Johnson, 2003 as quoted by Bowleg, 2008, p. 317). In other words, researchers should see the data through the lens of an intersectional paradigm. Bowleg continued, "researchers who employ an intersectionality perspective broaden their analytical scope beyond the collected data to become intimately acquainted . . . with the sociohistorical realities of historically oppressed groups" (2008, p. 318). In other words, researchers must situate respondents' biographies in the social, cultural, and historical contexts informed by in-depth knowledge of how structural oppression is manifested for the participants.

Third, Bowleg (2008) contended that intersectionality researchers must make the intersections among the multiple facets of an individual's social identity explicit, even if participants leave these intersections implicit. She concluded the following about intersectionality research:

Simply asking questions about demographic differences or comparing different social groups does not constitute intersectionality research. Rather it is the analysis and interpretation of research findings within the sociohistorical context of structural inequality for

groups positioned in social hierarchies of unequal power that best defines intersectionality research. (Bowleg, 2008, p. 323)

Bowleg's lessons from her research highlight the methodological growth researchers experience. Her work provides important guideposts pertaining to intersectionality research used to evaluate the differences in findings in my research under discussion here.

## Critiquing “Shifting” Findings

Given the considerations reviewed above, I now apply these to my research and findings regarding college students' constructions of multiple identities. This critique summarizes the methodological frameworks and methods employed in the two studies. A discussion of the ways I perceive my development as a researcher provides a means to identify its influence on my findings. A review of the substantive differences in the findings, including data exemplars illustrative of these shifts, indicates how these findings are different between the two studies reviewed here. Finally, a critical review of the ways I used intersectional frameworks provides one explanation for why these findings “shifted.”

## Methodological Frameworks and Methods Used to Study Multiple Identities and Intersectionality

I designed the 2001 and 2005 studies within the methodological framework of constructivism (see above). Multiple methodological approaches exist within constructivism but all share a common assumption about the mutual construction of knowledge and meaning, including phenomenology, hermeneutics, portraiture, and the specific tradition of social constructivism (Broido & Manning, 2002; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997; Patton, 2002). The study conducted in 2001 employed portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997) using semi-structured, staged interviews (Seidman, 1998) as data collection methods. The sample consisted of five Black students who were actively involved at their predominantly White, private, liberal arts college in the Midwest.

Consistent with portraiture, in the 2001 study I analyzed the interview transcripts by looking for repetitive refrains, resonant metaphors, cultural and institutional rituals, and triangulation to reveal patterns among seemingly discordant perspectives (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997) through the lenses of three different analytical frames (Stewart, 2001). The use of three analytical frames provided analytical triangulation (Patton, 2002). I achieved prolonged engagement with the participants by building rapport and relationship over the course of the interviews. I interviewed each participant four times over a three-month period.

The 2005 study employed a hermeneutical design using a tightly focused, semi-structured interview protocol to collect data at a single point in time with a sample of 13 Black students at three different institutions (a public, predominantly White university; a public, historically Black

university; and a private, historically Black college) (Stewart, 2009). Although prolonged engagement with the participants was not as deep as was achieved in the 2001 study, the sample was larger and spanned diverse institutional types. It was also a more diverse sample by social class, background, ideas, and faith. Data saturation (Patton, 2002) was achieved. Open, axial, and selective coding shaped the data analysis and produced rich findings (Stewart, 2009). Moreover, in the 2005 study, I engaged the participants as co-interpreters of the data, providing interpretive triangulation (Patton, 2002).

Upon comparing the findings from the 2001 and 2005 studies, I found differences in four areas: the language participants used to describe the multiple facets of their identities; how they negotiated identity; what participants identified as the animating essence of their personalities; and the participants' goals for identity development. Due to the similarity in the research questions and commonalities among both respondent groups, I set out to compare both sets of data to discern reasons for the differences. One of the questions posed during data analysis was, would development of the researcher as instrument constitute one explanation for the differences I found between how Black college students constructed the intersections of their multiple identities across the two studies? To address this question and provide further context for the reader, I trace the development of my thinking as a researcher regarding this topic.

## My Development as a Researcher

In the opening pages of my dissertation which summarized the 2001 study, I stated the following in my definition of terms: "Finally, *identity integration*, *identity intersection*, and *wholeness* represent three interchangeable terms for describing self-knowledge and identity patterns which belie interdependence and interconnection among the multiple sociocultural identities addressed in this study—race, gender, and class" (Stewart, 2001, p. 2, emphasis in original). Later in the introductory chapter, I made the following statement: "I have asserted that identity integration provides a way to transcend the societal tendency to compartmentalize everything including the self. . . (i.e., sociocultural identities)" (Stewart, 2001, p. 13). Finally, in the conclusion of my literature review, I quoted Smith and Watson (1992), "locations in gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality complicate one another, and not merely additively" (Stewart, 2001, p. 56). These statements illustrated my approach to identity categories as I conducted my research in 2001. Using McCall's (2005) typology, my orientation to identity categories paralleled intracategorical complexity. I acknowledged the durability of identity categories and the complexity of individuals' lives whose identities crossed singular identity groupings.

Despite coming from an approach of intracategorical complexity, which McCall (2005) recognized as the one that "inaugurated the study of intersectionality" (p. 1773), my interview protocol still used additive prompts (see below). I was committed to an identity narrative that located race in the center. I believed that race was the lens through which other facets of self were



understood. My use of Afrocentrism and Black racial identity theorists to situate the rationale for my study demonstrated this commitment.

When I designed the 2005 study, I still operated within intracategorical complexity. However, broader questions of environmental context and spirituality interested me. To probe these issues more deeply, I reviewed my 2001 interview protocol and transcripts to inform how I would construct the 2005 protocol. My continually evolving identity at this time also persuaded me to make changes in the interview protocol as well as data analysis and interpretation. I was beginning to de-center race as the dominant voice in my identity story. With that shift, I tried to construct an interview protocol through which participants had more freedom to name the critical facets of their identities and the relationships among them. This also led me to have greater openness to the unexpected in the participants' stories. This greater openness encouraged me to re-visit the 2001 stories to see whether my development as a researcher would open my eyes to view the data differently. I discuss those explorations below, using the original data. All participants' names are pseudonyms.

## **Differences Between the Findings**

Although not explicitly informed by Bowleg's (2008) writing on the methodological challenges of intersectionality (as both my studies predate her writing cited here), I applied the concept of intersectionality to depict how I understood the interaction of multiple social identities in both studies. Despite this, a review of the interview transcripts, researcher logs, and reports of the studies revealed changes in four areas between 2001 and 2005 relevant to the students' apparent articulation of an intersectional perspective.

The first difference noted was in the language students used to describe the multiple facets of their identities. In 2001, the students used a language of fractured or additive identity. In 2005, the students used a language of synthesis and coherence. For example, in 2001 I asked the respondents this question, "If someone were to ask you, 'what is your identity,' what would you say?" Usually, participants asked for clarification and in doing so, I gave examples that used traditional social identity categories. Ophelia replied, "Well, I guess I would start with my name . . . and also start with my age . . . I always refer to my gender . . . then I would talk about my race." In 2005, I posed a similar question, but if a participant asked for clarification I just rephrased the question to ask them to finish this sentence: "I am. . . ." Marie answered, "I am. I would probably end up putting, 'I am somebody.' . . . I can be recognized just, I don't know, not by my presence, but by, maybe my aura, or something like that. I don't really know how else to explain that."

Students in the 2001 study spoke with great passion about wanting to make sense of and find coherence among their multiple identities, but doubted the feasibility of the enterprise. As Kashmir simply put it, "Yeah, I would like for them [her multiple racial identity facets] to weave together, but they won't ever though." Sage reflected on her multiple identities as well:

There are times when it's harder for me to get myself to believe it, just 'cause I think, it might seem just a little bit gloomy, but it's always there in the back of my mind, otherwise my existence is totally-arbitrary . . . and that's not something I can accept. Like, there has to be a purpose for everything.

In 2005, the students I interviewed were generally settled and at peace with their identities as interdependent and mutually constitutive. For example, Jasmine stated, "I just learned to accept myself for who I am. And this is me. And this is what I wanted to do, you know?" Paul discussed the ways his responsibilities as a son and student sometimes conflicted. But when it came to his identity facets, he said, "I mean, as far as in my head, no, not really." Paul was clear about who he was and how those social group identities were interdependent on each other for meaning, but also distinguished that interdependence from the role conflict that he sometimes experienced.

Second, the students in the 2001 and 2005 studies discussed negotiating identity in different ways. In 2001, students spoke about making or rejecting choices to embrace or abandon certain facets of their identities. This was particularly dependent on the peers with whom they interacted. For instance, Sage had multiple organizational commitments ranging from the volleyball team, international students association, the Black student organization, the Christian student group, and her multicultural women's sorority. Each group corresponded to one segment of her identity or one identity intersection (e.g., race and gender in the sorority). Despite her comfort with expressing identities in some settings, she was not comfortable asserting and articulating *all* the multiple facets of her identities in any of those settings. Instead, as Audre Lorde (1984) wrote, she felt required to "pluck out some aspect [of herself] . . . and present that as the meaningful whole" (p. 120).

In contrast to the 2001 findings, in 2005 the students asserted that they brought *all* of themselves into whatever space they happened to be. Notably, those spaces remained largely racially segregated for the Black students attending the predominantly White university. In 2005, the students were from three institutions, one predominantly White, the other two historically Black (see above). These students did share that how they performed their identities depended on the setting. The students chose performances that set others at ease, both Blacks and Whites, not out of personal ambivalence or confusion about their own identities. For instance, Paul was a theatre major and a member of a predominantly Black fraternity on campus. His college life was highly segregated: he was often the only Black person among his peers at theatre activities and there were rarely White students attending events sponsored by the Black Greek chapters on campus. "I gotta choose which I'm going to go to, which one I'm going to support, who I'm going to hang out with." Continuing, Paul stated, "[Black people] make fun of my attachment to hanging out with so many White people. But, you know, I don't care." In this way, students in 2005 appeared more concerned about role management and negotiating the multiple roles they performed in their friendship groups rather than on negotiating identities within those social contexts.

Third, there was a difference in what these students identified as the animating essence of their personalities. The students in 2001 saw the intersection of their race and gender identities as the driving force that explained their personalities. Poke described himself in this way in response to my question about the significance of being a Black male: "It's impossible to hide that I am a young Black male and as I grow older, the young may change, but I will always be a Black male." At another point in the interview, he said, "I just know that being a Black male is the most difficult [pause] most wonderful thing I could ever ask for." Poke continually spoke of his race and gender identities as inseparable. When I asked Sage what it meant to be a Black woman she responded,

It means that I see myself as strong, because I almost expect to have to face things, yeah, because not only am I dealing with a predominantly White society, but I'm also dealing with the predominantly male society. And then, both of which have a certain amount of power over what I can do, and the result of that is I get stronger because I have to learn how to deal with that.

Sage saw the social stratifications of racism and sexism as mutually shaping her experiences. Being both Black and female were central components of how she functioned in the world.

The students who participated in the 2005 study identified a non-material, non-unitary spiritual core as the animating essence that informed their personality development. This core provided coherence for the other aspects of their identity, including social identities such as race, gender, and sexual orientation. Because this group of students typically spoke of their social identity categories in interconnected ways without my prompting, there was no need for me to ask them to consider the intersections of their race and gender. As Regina expressed,

The starting point is my spirituality. Everything else does connect. Highly connects sometimes. You know in certain situations, my ethnicity may play first and then the gender and then the sexual orientation, then this, then that. Do they all connect? Absolutely. They all connect back to the one thing [her spirit].

Finally, the fourth distinction between the 2001 and 2005 findings was in the way the students conceptualized the goal of identity development. Students in 2001 used metaphors such as "ladder," "jigsaw puzzle," or "well" to describe their identities when asked for an identity metaphor. These metaphors suggest that identity was something to be found and definitively understood. Ophelia, for example, stated "I have about two years to, you know, figure out the secrets to the universe. . . . Yeah that's what I'll do, figure out that whole race question, figure out this gender thing, and stop getting so infuriated at everything." In 2005, however, the same question evoked very different metaphors, many involving water and other symbolisms depicting dynamism and evolution. David and Carol described themselves as chameleons; Angela and Duane both used water as their metaphors; Christian saw himself as a butterfly. The use of these metaphors suggested change, evolution, and a dynamic process of identity development that continually unfolds over time and within context.

## Changes in the Researcher as Instrument: A Critical Explanation

Of the four shifts reviewed above, only two, how students described their multiple identities and what constituted the animating essence of their personalities, are principally rooted in changes in my development as a researcher. For the other two shifts, how they perceived their identity negotiations and their articulations of the goal of identity development, I could not identify any changes in how I asked questions or interpreted the interview data that would have led to those two differences in my findings. Other factors may be more relevant for these two issues, including institutional context and climate. For instance, an environmental press toward considering intersectional approaches to the articulation of identity may be more present at historically Black institutions, which half the students in the 2005 study attended (see Stewart, 2010). Individual differences among the students may also explain these shifts. Perceiving and making meaning of psychosocial complexity, for example, intersectionality, requires a robust cognitive complexity (Baxter Magolda, 2001). A student's self-construction of intersectionality could be hindered if this level of complexity is underdeveloped or lacking.

Changes in how I asked questions and interpreted the data seem more clearly connected to the shifts regarding language and animating essence. Bowleg (2008), in discussing methodological challenges posed by intersectionality research, highlighted the ways in which researchers can evoke inauthentic, additive articulations of identity from participants. The three lessons Bowleg offered to researchers are explored here to see how they may be reflected in my research.

**Asking additive questions.** In her discussion of measuring intersectionality, Bowleg (2008) wrote, "It is so obvious as to not even warrant mention: the wording of questions shapes how participants respond to them" (p. 314). She later explained that the issue entails "how to ask questions about experiences that are intersecting, interdependent, and mutually constitutive, without resorting, even inadvertently, to an additive approach" (p. 314). An additive approach assumes identity facets are independent and unrelated. I posed questions in the 2001 interviews that implied that the students' identities could be ranked or prioritized. For instance, I asked students to identify the most central aspects of their identities. In accordance, the students responded as they were asked—they identified singular social identity categories and prioritized them as Ophelia's quote above demonstrated.

In 2005, I dropped the additive assumption in my question. My use of the prompt "I am . . ." and the open-ended question, "How would you describe your identity?" made room for the students to discuss their multiple identities from an intersectional perspective. Because I offered no further guidance to their questions for clarification, I refrained from leading them to an additive response. It was no surprise that the students in 2005 responded very differently than had the students in 2001. My growth as a researcher led me to recognize the importance of not asking leading questions, even under the guise of providing requested clarification.

**Using additive assumptions.** Bowleg (2008) emphasized how philosophical paradigms and epistemological assumptions of the researcher shape data collection and interpretation. Although offered as her second lesson, this is a fundamental approach to resolving the challenges of conducting intersectionality research. Several assumptions shaped my data collection and analysis. In addition to the tenets of the constructivist paradigm, I made assumptions from existing studies about college students who were negotiating multiple identities. These shaped the relevant assumptions I made entering the study, particularly in 2001. I used these assumptions to interpret the meaning of the data in subsequent reports (Stewart, 2002, 2009). Particularly influential were the work of Susan Robb Jones (Jones, 1997; Jones & McEwen, 2000), Elisa Abes (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007), and William Cross (1991), particularly his revision of the Black racial identity model. A key finding shared by the studies that shaped my assumptions was that, at certain times in their lives, students identified certain aspects of their identities as more salient than others. This concept of salience is an additive construction. It rests on the assumption that the facets of identity can be separated, are independent of one another, and are uni-dimensional. Salience contradicts definitions of intersectionality offered by Bowleg (2008), McCall (2005), and others.

In both 2001 and 2005, I asked the students in my samples to complete a questionnaire that asked them demographic and campus involvement information. The final section of the questionnaire asked, "Which of the following aspects of your identity do you consider to be the most important or relevant to how you see yourself as a person? Please check all that apply." Given that this questionnaire was completed before the interviews began, the students approached the interviews with the understanding that I was interested predominately in how they separated and prioritized their identities. Despite that direction, the students in the 2005 cohort answered the items in the questionnaire as written, but rejected the implied suggestion to prioritize the aspects of their identities during the interviews. Their non-compliance resulted in the findings concerning intersectionality noted earlier. The interview question wording, different from the questionnaire, opened the way for students to voice identity perspectives based in intersectionality. The change in approach made room for these responses. An approach to their multiple identities that implied *synergy* (an inherently intersectional concept), not *symbiosis* (inherently additive) was more visible in 2005 than in 2001. Symbiosis, implying a mutually beneficial relationship between two or more discrete and independent components, was the stated goal of the students in 2001. As Kashmir stated, "I would like for them to weave together." Also K.B. responded, "Because it's tiring, it's tiring that's why, that's why you don't want to be fragmented."

The students in 2005 used synergy, where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, to describe the goal of identity development as well as make meaning of their identities. In the interviews, the students echoed interdependence and collaborative energy as the essence of their identity by using a non-unitary, spiritual core as the meaning for the character of their identities. Synergy presumes interdependence and suggests that the facets are mutually constitutive, a principal aspect of intersectionality (Bowleg, 2008).

**Making additive interpretations.** Finally, Bowleg (2008) reminded researchers of their responsibility to place respondent data in a historical, social, and cultural context. In this context, race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, ability, and other identities work together in interdependent fashion. “Simply put, intersectionality researchers are charged with the responsibility of making the intersections between ethnicity, sex/gender, sexual orientation . . . and the social inequality related to these identities, explicit” (p. 322). Bowleg also asserted that such research has meaning only when researchers ground the analysis and interpretations in the socio-historical realities of the group they are studying. In both studies, race guided my participant selection, not race *and* gender or race, gender, *and* sexuality. In other words, intersectionality, using *intercategorical* complexity as recommended by McCall (2005), did not inform my research. Because I did not do this in either study, I could not focus on the inequalities “among already constituted social groups . . . and take those relationships as the center of analysis” (McCall, 2005, p. 1785). Moreover, neither the 2001 or 2005 data were analyzed in light of larger sociohistorical perspectives.

Bowleg’s (2008) considerations, learned after the 2001 study and used for the data interpretation in 2005, significantly shaped how I approached the topic of Black students’ meaning-making and articulations of identity intersectionality. This knowledge and the assumptions contained within this concept probably influenced two of the four shifts in findings noted above. My neglect to use a sociohistorical perspective, attuned to the ways students’ multiple identities intersected and shaped their experiences, contributed to continued inattention to intersectionality in the data. Despite this, the findings from 2005 are a fuller, more meaningful expression of the ways students construct their multiple identities using an intersectional lens.

## Implications for Research and Teaching

This article illustrates the ways that attending to the continued development of the researcher as instrument, including perspectives, assumptions, and research skills, directly shapes data collection and interpretation. This difference in development is demonstrated in shifts I found in the findings of two studies conducted four years apart. Changes in my development as a researcher can illuminate the different questions I asked and assumptions I made for each study. This examination raises several considerations for researchers and faculty preparing future researchers and practitioners.

### Implications for Research

First, I encourage researchers to revisit previous findings and interpretations continually as their research skills mature and develop. This is particularly the case after the dissertation, perhaps the student’s first large-scale research project. As the analysis described in this article revealed, the researcher as instrument evolves over time. Researchers must recognize their development and evolution as well as examine earlier findings. This examination can expose how the assumptions from the paradigms, theories, and personal perspectives may have influenced what counted as

relevant data as well as how those data were shaped and interpreted. Research reports and findings are living documents. The same data can yield different findings when viewed from a different perspective, similar to images in a photo negative that can be developed differently depending on the reactive agents the photographer uses.

Second, I encourage researchers to be transparent regarding their understanding of key concepts at play in their work. Transparency can help them stretch beyond the student development literature to other disciplines. The incorporation of literature from other fields can enhance and challenge their understanding. This effort best honors the interdisciplinary roots of the student affairs field. Doing so can enhance student affairs research for policymakers and grantors who may be more familiar with non-student affairs disciplinary approaches.

Third, I encourage consideration of ways to enhance authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Lincoln and Guba's (1986) authenticity criteria speak to the process and outcome of the researcher's current study. Lincoln and Guba name *fairness* as one of their authenticity criteria, through which researchers acknowledge and record their perspectives, values, and beliefs. Yet, this practice may fail to document growth in the researcher's perspectives. An ongoing research journal, reviewed at the start of each new study, may be better able to track growth than beginning a new journal with each project. Journaling can provide a wonderful opportunity to practice reflexivity and document how one is being influenced by different ideas and considerations over time.

## Implications for Educating Future Professionals

Faculty in graduate preparation programs can emphasize research and assessment skill development as a way to teach future professionals to be informed consumers of research (Parker, 1977; Strange & King, 1990). Through more sophisticated and informed approaches to research consumption, future professionals can resist making "cookie-cutter" applications of research findings to practice. Students can practice their interpretive and analytical skills across the student affairs curriculum, not just in research classes, as a way to review research reports critically as well as digest and apply the findings reported therein.

Doctoral programs can also teach researcher reflexivity (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). Discussions of reflexivity can include deep engagement with fallibilism as an epistemological approach to research in higher education and student affairs. As reflective scholars, students can be trained to view research findings as iterative, developmental, and open to revision. Such an awareness of how their development as a researcher can influence their work is necessary for both novice and senior scholars alike.

## Conclusion

This article reviewed differences in findings from studies in 2001 and 2005 investigating the same topic: how Black students understood and articulated their identities. This examination revealed important considerations regarding the central role of the researcher as instrument. In light



of these explanations, it is evident that scholars and practitioners must view research findings as living documents that are fallible and open to correction and revision.

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