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Conflicted: An Autoethnography on Researching the Minority Swimming Gap

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Abstract

In this research note, I use an autoethnographic method to undertake the task of *uncomfortable* reflexivity to address the intra-conflict of being a Black woman researching the minority swimming gap, who, like my research participants, struggles with hair maintenance to engage in swimming activities. My *uncomfortable* reflexivity moves from stages of confession, self-discovery, catharsis and a plan to incorporate deeper reflexivity in future research and other academic practices. Reflexivity in qualitative research is used as a methodological practice to give validation and legitimacy to a research study. Oftentimes, a qualitative researcher will do a bracketed interview to become aware of existing biases, fix problems with an interview schedule, or to temporarily feel what their subjects may experience during an interview. Sometimes reflexivity is merely done as a step in the research process, never progressing to the point of real interrogation of self, the body, and, ultimately, application. I have been guilty of going through the motions of comfortable reflexivity.

Keywords: reflexivity, black swimmers, black hair, minority swimming gap

Autoethnography is defined as "...a reflexive means by which the researcher-practitioner consciously embeds himself or herself amidst theory and practice, and by way of intimate autobiographic account, explicates a phenomenon under investigation or intervention" (McIlveen, 2008, p. 13). The following is not simply an autobiographical account of my research and habits as it relates to swimming, rather, it is "...critical inquiry that is embedded in theory and practice..." (McIlveen, 2008, p. 13).

The use of autoethnography in the current research note has a two-fold purpose. First, a cursory review of literature on the minority swimming gap reveals autoethnography as a methodological approach has either rarely been used or not at all. Second, I used the autoethnographical approach for this manuscript because, unlike other work on the minority swimming gap, I wanted to present to the reader an insider view of how such research (of mine) originates and develops out of the lived experiences of an African American researcher. Moreover, I would argue that offering an autoethnographic account of researching the minority swimming gap offers a better understanding of what it is like to research the topic through a gender (female), racial (African American) and cultural lens.

My Hair Story

I can remember back when my now-complete dissertation was simply an idea; a passing thought in my mind while watching a movie. It later found its way into a phone conversation I was having with a friend. We were catching up on the latest

in our love lives (or lack thereof), health, and hair.

Both of us are Black females and, at that time, had “gone natural”¹ within the past year. Going natural is not easy. About six months into the process, I had two different hair textures – coarse and coiled near the roots versus the remaining length which had been previously straightened with chemicals. I searched YouTube for “how to” videos to get ideas on hairstyling during that awkward stage. Sometimes I used a flatiron to straighten the natural parts of my hair so it would look like the chemically-straightened tresses. But when I did that, I knew I could not work out for the next three to four days. Why? When natural hair has been temporarily straightened, any type of moisture will cause it to revert to its course and/or coiled state. Let me also add that around this same time, I was in a “battle of the bulge.” I was desperately (well, not really) trying to lose weight through diet and exercise, but my hair issues always seemed to get in my way. My friend suggested I try a great full-body workout like swimming. I agreed, but soon shot that idea down because of my hair. She agreed with me, believe it or not. We began joking about how ridiculous it was that we were willing to forego the health benefits of swimming all because we were “trapped” by our hair. It led to a lengthy conversation on the history of Black hair and its subsequent trappings, especially in the workplace.

When Hair Becomes Political

As Owens Patton (2006) discusses the assimilation of Black women into Eurocentric standards of beauty, she touches upon the challenges of hairstyling in corporate America. She lends credence to the possibility that “when hair must be straightened for employment or for social mobility it can be seen as assimilationist – subscribing to dominant cultural standards of beauty” (p. 27). In addition to that, Owens Patton notes the observations of Orbe and Harris (2006) who believe that in an organization, a “...member must balance her identity” (p. 27).

This balancing act refers to finding ways to maintain one’s ethnicity while assimilating just enough to achieve upward mobility in the workplace. W.E.B. DuBois (1907) refers to this constant self-awareness as a “double consciousness.”

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 3)

While the constant awareness may be exhausting for Black women who often assimilate in the (White) workplace, it is frequently done (Dickens & Chavez, 2017). In the same vein of DuBois (1907), Dickens and Chavez (2017) refer to the aforementioned duality as “identity shifting” with Black women vacillating “...between the benefits and costs of identity shifting, altering their dialect and behavior to meet social norms” and to advance in the workplace (p. 1). “However, engaging in organizational social mobility does *not* mean that one will automatically assimilate or substitute her cultural, racial, and ethnic identity for that of the majority culture” (Owens Patton, 2006, p. 27). In fact, sometimes Black women push back against the normalization of long, straight hair in the workplace and may experience repercussions from the organization. Banks (2000) explains how Black hair is and has been political, from the age of the “Angela Davis Afro” to lawsuits being filed against companies, alleging discrimination against African Americans based on how they styled their hair.

During the late 1960s and 70s, the Afro became synonymous with the Black Power Movement and the much-politicized Angela Davis. In an interview Davis explained:

While the most obvious evidence of their power was the part they played in structuring people’s opinion about me as a ‘fugitive’ and a political prisoner, their broader and more subtle effect was the way they served generic images of Black women who wore their hair “natural”. From the constant stream of stories I have heard over the last twenty-four years (and continue to hear), I infer that hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of Afro-wearing Black women were accosted, harassed, and arrested by police, FBI, and immigration agents during the two months I spent underground. (Banks, 2000, p. 15)

Black professional women were not exempt from the harassment. While conducting interviews, Banks (2000) talked to a 48-year-old accountant, Taylor, who recalled her own desire to wear an “Angela Davis Afro” during the early ‘70s. Taylor eventually grew an Afro, and much like Davis, believes “...it was her Afro and *assumed* gender that led to her detention during the early 1970s” (p. 15). Taylor said whenever she would wear her Afro she would get pulled over by the cops because she drove a “sleek car” and from the back of the head she had to be male (Banks, 2000). This was, in large part, due to the fact that the Afro was a unisex style.

According to Taylor, being detained was based on her Afro and mistaken gender identity (Banks, 2000). The Afro as militant and male-gendered

“...describes how race and gender merge(d) to stigmatize and repress Black women, a point that would surface almost twenty years later when Black women’s hair was at the center of legal battles” (Banks, 2000, p. 16). In the late 1980s, Black female employees of both Hyatt Hotels and American Airlines sued those companies citing they were discriminated against for wearing their hair in braids. Both companies created a defense centered on the basis of “appropriate” grooming practices, arguing braids violated this rule (Banks, 2000).

The Dread of Locs

Even as recent as 2016, the head hair of Blacks still finds itself woven into the U.S. justice system. Locs², or dreadlocks as they are commonly called, were at the center of an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission case filed by Chastity Jones, a Black woman with locs, who alleged her job offer at a company in Mobile, Alabama was rescinded due to her hair (Gutierrez-Morfin, 2016). Citing a violation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Jones asserted she was discriminated against when she was denied employment because she would not cut her locs (Greenwald, 2017). Under the premise that locs are loosely and unofficially correlated to race (since Blacks wear the style more than Whites) Jones’ legal team felt this case qualified as racial discrimination. The Courts disagreed citing “Under our precedent, banning dreadlocks in the workplace under a race-neutral grooming policy — without more — does not constitute intentional race-based discrimination” (Greenwald, 2017, para. 6).

My Hair Story Continues

Fast forward two years after that intense conversation with my friend. My hair is completely natural. I am standing in front of my dissertation panel along with a room of about 15 on-lookers there in support of my dissertation defense. I had cleverly, in my mind anyway, turned my aforementioned casual conversation with my friend about Black hair maintenance and Black female swim participation into a rigorous research endeavor, exploring the historical, social and cultural contexts in which that phenomenon exists. Needless to say, I passed my defense and was congratulated on how well I took something that was anecdotally common knowledge in the Black community and put an academic spin on it, shining a light on the broader issue of cultural constraints affecting the minority swimming gap.

Soon after, I was consumed with getting a job. I applied to both predominantly White institutions (PWI) and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU). While waiting to receive a call to interview for a position, I was mentally mapping out what I would do with my hair if one of the PWIs were to call. Having looked on the Web sites of the schools, I knew the racial make-up of the faculty – primarily White. I felt from the time I applied to the PWIs that my

usual day-to-day natural hairstyles may not go over well. Of course, I did not know this for sure; however, having done the research on how Black folks' hair becomes politicized, I did not want to take any chances. I spent countless nights in the mirror trying different styles I felt would be non-threatening and not "too ethnic". But, what was I really doing? Was I acting in a way that could very well be the subject of another bell hooks book? Was I, indeed, rejecting my blackness (hooks, 1994) by trying to appear non-threatening to a group of people I did not even know?! No! I was just "playing" within the boundaries of the racial game life dealt me as a Black woman trying to achieve success in a White world. But was I playing this game at the expense of my own identity?

Hooks (1994) suggests (and warns) "One of the tragic ironies of contemporary black life is that individuals succeed in acquiring material privilege often by sacrificing their positive connection to black culture and black experience" (p. 19). It turns out that I did not need to worry about it because I never did get a call from a PWI. I got calls from two HBCUs. While I was conscious of how I styled my hair, I was a lot more comfortable with my styling because I felt, with the majority of the faculty being Black, there would be a shared understanding and acceptance of my natural hair. I eventually landed a job at an HBCU and rarely ever worried about my hair. I venture to say the HBCU setting all but *de*-politicized my hair because so many people – students, faculty and staff alike – wore their hair in various natural styles.

During my first year in the professorate, I made sure to publish and present on the minority swimming gap. After about the third presentation, a little bit of my fire was gone; something did not quite feel right. Suddenly it hit me – I am advocating closing the minority swimming gap, all the while I could count on one hand the number of times I had gone swimming in that past year – less than five. In the spirit of transparency, there were no traditional leisure constraints keeping me from swimming (Jackson, 1993). The one constraint that does have a hold on me, much like most of the subjects in my dissertation, is the cultural constraint of Black female hair maintenance (Norwood, 2010). My line of research has placed me in a precarious, Gemini position of well-informed, credentialed researcher and advocate for minority swimming participation and, at the same time, possessing thoughts, experiences and leisure swimming patterns that almost mirror that of those researched with a self-reported low swimming ability who cite issues of hair maintenance as a major deterrent to swimming participation (Norwood, 2010).

Reflexivity

A review of literature reveals a myriad of definitions or explanations of reflexivity may exist. This is, in part, due to the suggestion that "Reflexivity is not a single or

universal entity but a process...” (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 274). Mason (1996) also agrees that “The researcher should constantly take stock of their actions and their role in the research process and subject these to the same critical scrutiny as the rest of their data” (p. 6).

Key questions Etherington (2004) suggested asking oneself in doing reflexivity were:

- (1) How has my personal history led to my interest in this topic?
- (2) What are my presuppositions about knowledge in this field?
- (3) How am I positioned in relation to this knowledge?
- (4) How does my gender/social class/ethnicity/culture influence my positioning in relation to this topic/my informants?

The Strength of Reflexivity in Qualitative Research

The legitimacy and rigor of qualitative research has long been called into question by scholars favoring quantitative approaches to acquiring knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Leininger, 1994; Morse, 1991). Mays & Pope (1995) note some of the common criticisms of qualitative research are that it is “...merely an assembly of anecdotal and personal impressions, strongly subject to research bias...the research is so personal to the researcher that there is no guarantee that a different researcher would not come to radically different conclusions...” (p.109).

Though there is some truth to those assertions, it does not warrant completely discounting an entire research paradigm and the valuable research produced from it. Instead, the insertion of reflexivity into qualitative research over the years has shined a light on researcher subjectivity or a sort of “coming clean” for the researcher. While Patai (1994) would probably denounce this “coming clean” as nothing more than narcissistic self-absorption, any journey of self-discovery in the research process has a certain level of value to it. However, Pillow (2003) wants qualitative researchers to use reflexivity as more than a purging mechanism and catharsis for bias, but to accept the discomfort it can bring. “Practicing uncomfortable reflexivity interrupts uses of reflexivity as a methodological tool to get better data while fore fronting the complexities of doing engaged qualitative research” (p.175).

Comfortable Uncomfortable Embodied Reflexivity

Academia often teaches novice qualitative researchers to separate themselves from their research in order to lend credence to and protect the integrity of their research; that it is the participant’s story being told and the researcher is simply the transmitter of said story. As I have progressed as a researcher, I have found myself

moving away a little bit from my early teachings and ways of thinking about my “self” as an isolated entity from the “other” whom I research. As a constructivist, I am more apt to embrace the idea that my “self” is the origin for the research of the “other” that I research. Merleau-Panty (1962) posits “the body is the vehicle for being in the world” and for understanding the world (p. 82). “It is through our own embodied consciousness that we gain an understanding of the other” (Finlay, 2005, p. 3).

Building on Merleau-Panty’s (1962) ideas on embodiment, Finlay (2005) introduces the concept of reflexive embodied research that advocates for “a research process that involves engaging, reflexively, with the participant’s lived body, our own body and our embodied intersubjective relationship with the participant” (p. 3-4). That is to say, instead of treating the self and other as mutually exclusive entities, researchers should move toward embracing the intersectionality of their lived experiences and that of their participant. The empathetic researcher then allows the self to not simply listen to the participant but to be an active participant in the interviewer/interviewee relationship. “The researcher needs awareness of how the bodily relationship between participant and researcher is mutually constitutive. The researcher’s capacity to understand can be enhanced through this *reflexive* awareness” (Finlay, 2006, p.11).

So, instead of working to position myself as a separate being from my research, I am now engaging more in the reflexivity process; exploring how reflexively acknowledging and flushing out the subjective relationship between the “self” and the “other” can be beneficial to the overall data analysis of research. What is clear is that while at times reflexivity can be uncomfortable, I am comfortable with undertaking the task of continuously exploring my subjectivity. This does not mean that all knowledge and practice of producing sound, trustworthy qualitative research is then abandoned for research that is completely subjective in nature; rather, it is about rethinking how qualitative researchers have traditionally thought about, shied away from and/or worked especially hard to distance themselves from that which is under investigation.

Re-examining my reflexivity in aquatics research. Through various experiences in growing my line of aquatics research, what has become clear is there is no clear-cut separation from the self (the body producing the research) and the active bodies (the research participants) under investigation in my research. As such, Newman (2011) purports “...the researcher is using the body to at once create representation (of the self and others), regulation (of the researcher body in moving about space), and resistance (to the structures of oppression operating within those spaces)” (p. 552). That being said, as I reflect and re-examine my “self” in regard to my research, I comfortably (yet uncomfortably) admit having a level of cognitive

dissonance with regard to my advocacy for minorities in aquatics while, at the same time, embodying some of the same resistance to swimming as with many of the people I have researched.

The emotional dissonance felt is not uncommon nor unnatural (Downs et al., 2006). But again, the angst I have been feeling is partially a function of being taught to be a stoic researcher and expected to be emotionally disengaged from that being researched (Emerson & Pollner, 2001). As a human being, with human emotions, this is virtually impossible. Downs et al. (2006) sums things up perfectly by purporting that "...there are no easy ways to escape the ambiguities and tensions inherent in ethnographic fieldwork. The only way forward is to recognize the situation and reflect on it, and somehow 'dissipate' the tensions so that work can proceed" (p. 9). This is exactly what I intend to do going forward with my aquatics research.

An advocate no more? Geertz (1973) espoused "All ethnography is part philosophy and a good deal of the rest is confession" (p. 346). Indeed the current article has served as an autoethnographic confession of sorts for me as I re-examined my position in aquatics research; however, in re-examining my previous work, I can see where my entire body of work has been, at least, a partial confession of my own hesitancy and aversion to swimming participation as a Black woman; the words of my participants could have been (and probably have been) my own words at some point. To round out my circle of confession, I plainly confess that I not only relate to my research subjects, I *was* my research subjects, and to a certain extent, still am.

While my confessions may prove cathartic for me, at the same time, they present a sort of anxiety. The question that plays over and over in my head is "How will my colleagues and others alike now view my research in light of my confessions?" Though I admit to my struggle between being the researcher and that which is researched, I also see the benefits of confessional reflexivity as two-fold: 1) Self-servingly, it frees me of a researcher's guilty conscious and 2) it makes me more aware of my biases as a researcher and in my teaching practices. In short, I am not trying to present myself as anything other than authentic; that authenticity includes a profound respect for sound and trustworthy research, admitted biases, flashes of brilliance, value for the human experience and a continuous quest for improvement as a researcher and educator. Nonetheless, the cathartic expression of reflexivity in my research does not negate my continued belief in, and advocacy for, the increase in minority participation in swimming. The fact still remains that Black females have the lowest self-reported swimming ability and Black kids ages 5-18 having the highest drowning rates of all racial groups (Gilchrist & Parker, 2014; Irwin, Irwin, Ryan & Drayer, 2009; Norwood, 2010).

Knowing better; doing better. Just because reflexivity in one's line of research reveals a certain level of discomfort or subjectivity does not mean s/he must discontinue that line of research and set out on a quest for a new research line. On the contrary, the researcher should continue on, but being ever-aware of and active in the reflexivity process. That being said, what I now know is my self-described angst as an aquatics researcher with some of the same inhibitions to swimming as the participants in my research is okay; however, I will try to practice what I preach, finding ways to navigate the cultural constraint of Black hair maintenance. Beginning fall 2018, I will be taking a beginners swimming course at my local YMCA to brush up on my swimming skills that I have not used in quite some time.

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Endnotes

¹ Commonly used in the Black community; refers to the cessation of chemical manipulation to the hair, allowing its natural texture to grow in from the roots.

² Commonly used in the Black community due to the negative, historical connotation of “dreadlocks.” It is/was believed, anecdotally, hair that is grown out and allowed to knot and clump together is “dreadful” and “undesirable;” a sentiment mostly directed toward Black Americans.