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# Dancing in the Margins

*Reflections on Social Justice and Researcher Identities*

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## Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to illustrate how the complexities, fluidity, and shifting nature of the multiple facets to our identities may shape the very construction of knowledge. Specifically, how researcher positionality and reflexivity influences an understanding of our personal identities related to leisure and social justice research using epiphany moments is examined. It is posited that our socially constructed identities (defined by race, age, gender, sexuality, able-bodied, class, etc.) can have a profound impact on the intersection of our research programs and our commitment to issues of social justice. Emphasis is also placed on understanding the cringe continuum, feelings of unease with research topics, the significance of social justice research in the classroom, and understanding the risks associated with this type of work.

**Keywords:** *leisure; marginalization; methodology; positionality; reflexivity; researcher; social justice*

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*I pull out the interview guide and information/consent form from my bag and turn on the audio recorder. Sitting at the kitchen table, I look at the stovetop with four pots of water coming to a slow boil. Tanisha asks if I would like a cup of tea. I graciously decline and thank her for the offer. "What are the pots for?" I ask. "Our gas and heat have been shut off for a couple of months. I have to boil the water so that the kids can have a warm bath. It was a tough weekend, reaching close to freezing. We were bundled up in jackets for most of the weekend trying to keep warm. Thank God summer is coming!"*

*My heart sinks and I feel a knot in my stomach. I am at a loss for words. My mind drifts to this past weekend and our camping trip. I remember shivering in the tent as I looked out at the snow falling on the lake. It was quite simply beautiful and breathtaking, but feelings of hypothermia made me question our sanity on that particular weekend. We had a campfire burning for the majority of the time just to keep warm and enjoy the occasional marshmallow and hot chocolate. I remember being annoyed that the weather had turned out to be such a disappointment.*

*My attention drifts back to the present. I had started my day with ill thoughts of the weekend and a dismal camping trip. In contrast, Tanisha had started her day thinking about how to keep her family warm and how she would give her children a bath. (Not to mention the additional labor associated with these tasks.) Although the distance between our respective homes was less than five kilometers apart, at that moment I felt the cold snow awaken my senses with guilt and shame. Tanisha and I had felt a chill in our bones that weekend, but our positionalities had framed our experiences in such vastly different ways.*

*I could not shake the feeling—how trivial and inconsequential my perceived problems were—and how I had overlooked my position of privilege and all the luxuries it afforded me. I had a reliable car that I could leave the city with. I had spent thousands of dollars in camping gear over the years. I did not have to face the difficulties of being a single mother of four children, nor was I hiding from my past as a victim of domestic violence. With this in mind, I look at my interview guide—shake my head with embarrassment—and toss it to the side. I begin, "Can you walk me through what a typical day looks like for you?"*

As this special issue was announced on the intersections between social and environmental justice and leisure research, I once again thought of this narrative that I encountered almost seven years ago. It is a powerful memory, one that drifts through my thoughts from time to time and was the genesis to understanding my hidden privileges and the impact they have on my research projects. The process of reflexivity and being aware of researcher positionality was critical to this journey and is essential to the development of healthy relationships and a more empathetic understanding towards our fellow citizens (Dustin, 2011).

Similar to Watson and Scraton (2001), I now recognize my intellectual autobiography as a white, heterosexual, and able-bodied woman who is a mother, and as a feminist, starts from a privileged position of power (academically and personally). I also recognize that with this privilege comes responsibility. Watson and Scraton argued, "Those who hold a central position in the dominant discourse have a *responsibility* to engage in critical, *reflexive* research to support both theoretical and political change" (emphasis in original, p. 275).

Reflexivity can be a way to manage our identities in research settings: how we present ourselves and how we are perceived when working with participants (Daley, 2007). Several leisure scholars such as Dupuis (1999) and Johnson (2009) have also pointed to the importance of re-

flexivity as an essential feature of qualitative inquiry that recognizes the researcher as a human being who embodies emotions and multiple identities. Reflexivity is used to understand the personal, social, and political aspects of the research process and on the kind of knowledge that is produced. It is argued to be an important tool to demonstrate the validity or trustworthiness of a research project (Charmaz, 2006; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Olesen, 2005); however, its inherent value is more than that. That is, reflexivity can be an important way to explore the "researcher-self amidst competing (and perhaps false) dichotomies of the personal/professional life and the scholar/activist" (Johnson, 2009, p. 483).

Reflexivity is also important for researchers to understand their social positioning and status characteristics (such as social class, sexual identity, gender, etc.); it may be particularly important for researchers who are interested in generating knowledge related to issues of social justice and action for change. As Daley (2007) citing Allen (2000) emphasized, "Reflexivity about our own social positioning is necessary as a means to invoke a critical reflection on the ways we bring to the research our own position of privilege, our vulnerabilities, and ideological commitments" (p. 201). This often includes an awakening of our consciousness and may be a difficult and challenging journey (Sharpe, 2011).

Although familiar debates about reflexivity, writing ourselves at risk, the role of emotions in our research endeavors, the insider-outside controversy, and locating our socialized selves in the research process (i.e., white, able-bodied, social class, gender) have been documented (e.g., Dupuis, 1999; Johnson, 2009; Macbeth, 2010; Trussell, 2010; Watson & Scraton, 2001), the changing nature of the multiple facets to our identities and how we may find ourselves rooted in the center or temporarily at the margins or simultaneously occupying both spaces, has not been well theorized in the literature. The construction of our identities is neither static nor singular. Rather, we are socialized subjects within a particular temporal-socio-cultural context.

As Young (1990) reminds us:

> While groups do not exist apart from individuals, they are socially prior to individuals, because people's identities are partly constituted by their group affinities. Social groups reflect ways that people identify themselves and others, which lead them to associate with some people more than others, and to treat others as different. (p. 9)

A social group is defined primarily by a sense of identity, and for every oppressed group there is a privileged group (Young, 1990). And yet, our identities are complex and we have multiple affinities with different social groups, in that the vast majority of people are neither entirely privileged nor entirely marginalized (Davis & Harrison, 2013). Moreover, "privilege is used in the context of social justice as a way of describing unearned rights, benefits, and immunities" (Davis & Harrison, 2013, p. 35) granted to someone based upon their advantageous position within a social group.

This paper posits that our socially constructed selves (defined by race, age, gender, sexuality, able-bodied, class, etc.) can have a profound impact on the intersection of our research programs and our commitment to issues of social justice. For example, as a woman, many of the inequities based upon biological sex as well as gender identity have largely influenced my research agenda. At the same time, upon reflection, I have also come to realize that our social position characteristics are often deeply embedded, taken for granted, and the systems of privilege related to social justice issues are often hidden in plain sight (Cachelin, 2011; Daley, 2007). As a White, heterosexual person I have rarely had to think about how race and sexual identity are socially constructed organizing principles. However, it is these deeply embedded systems of privilege

that social justice seeks to address (Cachelin, 2011), and self-reflexivity becomes critical for the researcher to understand their social position characteristics and how they may ultimately shape their research program.

Thus, the purpose of this essay is to illustrate how the complexities, fluidity, and shifting nature of our personal identities throughout our lives may shape the very construction of knowledge. Specifically, I examine how researcher positionality and reflexivity influences an understanding of our personal identities related to leisure and social justice research using "epiphany moments" (Daley, 2007, p. 206). Epiphany moments are when we become "acutely aware of our social positioning" within the context of our research programs and include "occasions when [I] felt vulnerability, power, awkwardness, affirmation, conflict, or an experience of clear self-awareness" (Daley, 2007, p. 206).

Critical self-reflexivity and personal experiences, including "confessional tales" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 740), may deepen our understanding of our social world, issues of social justice, and our personal identities related to research. Yet, at the same time, constructing and sharing these tales with the reader is a difficult process as it is easier to expose the vulnerability of the lives we study, particularly marginalized groups who may feel vulnerable every day, than it is to expose our own (Allen, 2001; Johnson, 2009). In turn, throughout this essay, I would like to invite and challenge the reader to actively reflect upon his or her own positionality. Rather than being a passive reader, critically consider how your identity has changed over the years. Consequently, how does it intersect and impact your epistemological lens, research interests and commitment to social justice issues? What has changed? What has remained the same? And how do they intersect?

## In the Midst of Change and Fluidity

I have always believed that each individual is unique and that our lived experiences shape who we are and give meaning to who we will become. Because of these different experiences, we each view the world through a unique lens. As our basic beliefs and values shape how we see the world and act within it, our paradigms and theoretical frameworks that we work within are formed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

I also believe that this is an ongoing process as we continually grow and change through time with new experiences. As a researcher, this requires *ongoing* reflection of our lived experiences, both personally and professionally, to develop an understanding of our respective ontological, epistemological, and methodological philosophies. As Dupuis (1999) noted, "Who I was as a person and my own life experiences influenced what I chose to study" (p. 46). Unknowingly (or knowingly), our particular lens and personal experiences at a specific moment in time may guide what research questions we ask, how we ask them, how we interpret the data, and how we communicate our research to the broader community (Dupuis, 1999). The personal is political. "*How* we know is bound with *what* we know, where we learned it, and what we have experienced" (emphasis in original, Lincoln & Denzin, 2005, p. 1059).

Critical reflection and introspection are required to truly understand how our fragmented perspectives are being constantly (re)constructed and (re)negotiated and the impact this may have on our research program. For example, drawing on the opening narrative, it was through moments like this that I began to understand a real disconnect from who I thought I was. My childhood was one of low socioeconomic means, and consequently, a sense of being firmly grounded in humble origins. My mother tells me of the early years when a single wood stove would heat our rental property that was falling into ruins. Although I have no memory of this, I

do remember the teasing (and occasional empathy) that I faced in the schoolyard with my obvious secondhand clothing and the absence of the latest pop culture icons.

As I grew, so did the socioeconomic resources of my family. Along with many first-generation post-secondary students, I was grateful for the opportunity to complete my undergraduate degree but faced additional challenges such as entering an unfamiliar environment that my family had never experienced (Cones et al., 1983 as cited by Frater, Howe, & Murray, 1997). Because of this life history, I believed that I would have some degree of insider status and be able to understand the ways of *being* of those living in poverty and on the margins.

Yet, I was wrong. The notion of how we know is bound with what we know and what we have experienced (Lincoln & Denzin, 2005) is in some ways too naïve … or the meaning I drew from it at the time. What I had not anticipated nor understood was that like the river carving its path in the banks, slowly and steadily over the years, my identity and lens by which I viewed the world had also shifted. Who I thought I was, I was no longer; as the banks eroded, a new altered way of being had formed. Thus, my hidden privileges of achieving post-secondary education and rising to the middle class had altered the lens in which I constructed the interview guide (as illustrated in the opening vignette), and consequently, the nature of the research questions I had brought to the project.

Moreover, I came to realize that North Americans are socialized to believe in the sanctity of individual rights and the values of individualism; fundamental to this process is the construction of identity and people's ability to negotiate cultural contexts and absorb cultural messages around them (Davis & Harrison, 2011). Taking the opportunity to be critically reflexive of the complexity of my multiple identities (i.e., originally from a lower socioeconomic status, yet many hidden privileges such as being White and able bodied), I now agree with Davis and Harrison that:

> Understanding identity as socially constructed interrupts the notion that individual hard work and character are the only forces at play in determining who succeeds and who doesn't, and who has access to vital resources and who has hurdles in the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness. (p. 33)

I am now acutely aware of how values of individualism further oppress and lay blame on those who find themselves on the margins, and it has enhanced my awareness of the multiplicity of our identities.

Further, I have come to understand how the fluidity and changing nature of our personal lives can also enrich our understanding of diverse social contexts and expand our respective research programs and interests. For example, after the birth of my first daughter, I experienced an identity crisis as I tried to renegotiate my life as not only a scholar but also a mother. My way of being had altered … it had to. This was coupled with the notion that an academic culture still exists where it is taboo to become a mother as one's career commitment can come under scrutiny (Armenti, 2004). It haunted my thoughts and was a storm cloud looming over me during the early months.

Fast forward to my return to work. I found myself on a pre-conference tour in the Scottish highlands where we stopped for lunch at a pub. As became customary, I found myself gazing at a picture of my 7-month-old daughter and longing to be with her. Yet, instead of tears that had filled my eyes over the previous months, my thoughts started to go a mile a minute with excitement. It was at that moment that I began mapping out future research projects such as an interpretive study on couples and the transition to parenthood as well as an autoethnography on

navigating the tenure-motherhood-track and the competing ideologies of the ideal worker and the ideal mother.

Upon reflection and distance, I now believe that the combination role of work and family and my shifting identity, has enhanced the quality of my scholarship and opened up new research paths with diverse social contexts and methodological approaches.

## Embracing the Uncomfortable

And yet, sometimes our research may take our shifting identities in different directions than what is familiar. Sometimes it is necessary to embrace the uncomfortable and that which we have very little personal experience with, nor knowledge of.

For example, in 2011, I started a retrospective study examining family dynamics, leisure experiences, and the coming-out process for gay, lesbian, and/or bisexual youth. I struggled a great deal with this project as I reconciled difficulties related to questioning my own positionality in the research design and process. Indeed, others also questioned it, including senior administration, colleagues, students, and research participants.

"Why are YOU, a heterosexual woman, interested in this topic"? Indeed, there was a central reason why I started this project. After teaching a course several times on "Family, Gender, and Leisure," I realized that I was focusing on the traditional, yet mythical, Standard North American Family (a legally married heterosexual couple with an ideology rooted in an era of industrialization). The course materials were not reflective of the social landscape and diverse family forms (Shaw, 2010). In the field of leisure studies, there are a handful of scholars who have done some ground-breaking work with gay, lesbian, and transgender populations such as Johnston, Kivel, and Grossman to name a few, but I still felt that the family unit was missing in this discourse (Bialeschki & Pearce, 1997; research on lesbian mothers is a notable exception). As I had almost no personal insights to draw from, I hoped that a project in this area would help provide the opportunity to strengthen the knowledge base for this course.

When I decided to embark on this project, and throughout its duration at two academic institutions, some well-meaning colleagues warned me of the risks associated with this *type* of work. It was suggested that it would compromise my future in academia for a variety of reasons. Concerns were expressed such as the potential difficulty in publishing the research with the heterosexist orientation of the leisure field as a whole (Allison, 2000; Arai, 2011; Johnson, 2009). Further, did I want assumptions made about my own sexual orientation that might, in turn, move my position from the dominant center to the margins? Over the duration of this project, on a few occasions, I was explicitly told that I should redirect my research back to issues of poverty.

I can honestly say that I have never experienced a project that raised so many concerns and skeptism from those around me as well as within myself. Without the encouragement of graduate students and some of my fellow colleagues, I might have ended this project on several occasions, but their unwavering enthusiasm pushed me to move forward. Indeed, one of my current projects is largely inspired by this original inquiry, as I examine the intersection of gender and sexual identity in organized youth sport for families of same-sex parents.

By pursuing this research stream, I believe that the above-mentioned course now offers a more comprehensive curriculum and challenges students' assumptions related to the Standard North American Family, with an emphasis on issues related to social justice that focuses on identity dimensions of class, sexual orientation, and gender. Similar to Henderson (2000), I believe that "a myth exists that good researchers cannot be good teachers and vice versa … Teaching and

research must occur in tandem if our field is to grow in intellectual diversity, from the standpoint of students as well as professionals" (p. 51). From my perspective, teaching and research can, at times, be very complementary of one another rather than compete for one's time and resources. Moreover, as a researcher who is committed to praxis, I believe that the classroom has the greatest potential for transformatory practices and the development of a critical consciousness. Although there might be tension within the neoliberal institution of today, the university is still a space for activism.

## Reflexivity, Shifting Identities, and the Cringe Continuum

The importance of self-reflexivity in leisure research is not a new debate. However, as I have argued in the earlier sections of this essay, paying attention to our multiple and shifting identities as they are not static nor singular is something more attention should be given to, particularly when related to social justice research. Our taken for granted assumptions may require that we need to understand our positionality within a specific moment of time and "confront and alter our way of being" (Watson & Scraton, 2001, p. 237). At times, a dimension of our socialized identity might be rooted in the center, but other times our personal life may change and we find ourselves in the margins. As the opening vignette illustrated, we can also unknowingly and subtly move from the margins to the center (i.e., from a lower socioeconomic origins to that of the middle class). The shifting and fluid nature of the multiple dimensions of our identities can impact our epistemological lens and the awareness that others may be socially located in a different manner.

The multiplicity and complexity of our professional selves can also impact the very construction of knowledge. For example, at times, my identity as a heterosexual woman has me rooted firmly in the center and dominant discourse. And yet, the difficulties, discomfort, and warnings I experienced in pursuing a path of research with the queer community and their families (re)emphasizes: "research, as a form of knowledge production, does not reflect social life, it *constitutes* social life" (emphasis, in original Trussell, Sharpe & Mair, 2011, p. 92). Thus, at times I felt lost without a secure footing in the center nor the margins, and I was filled with the uncertainty of where my research endeavors should be directed.

At the same time, engaging in this research heightened my awareness of the unspoken privileges that I am afforded within heteronormative and middle-class institutional discourse. Similar to Johnson (2009), I believe that my

> epistemological and ontological beliefs, which have brought me to where I speak, encourage my full participation not in the creation of an objective truth but in a contribution toward understanding the nature of social construction not only to [gender and social class] but increasingly in the context of [sexual orientation]. … I have done these things as an agent for social justice related to my place on the margins. But what about my place at the center? (p. 487)

By engaging with critical self-reflection and confronting my changing personal life, professional discomfort, and at times the "imposter feeling," I recognize we can all be multiple insiders and outsiders who move between the center and the margins or can occupy both positions simultaneously. As Scott, Hinton-Smith, Härmä, and Broome (2012) argued, "the self-awareness and humility this engenders may paradoxically enable us better to perform our research-selves to those with whom we work. It can create an openness to unexpected findings that suggest new directions for research" (p. 731). Indeed, for me it has. Yet, engaging in this level of reflexivity to

understand differences (Watson & Scraton, 2001) also produces what Scott et al. (2012) referred to as the "cringe continuum," in that, "various research activities occup[y] different positions … according to the extent to which they evok[e] self-conscious emotions of shame, embarrassment, or shyness" (p. 721-722).

On reflection, I can see that when I was feeling the most discomfort (along the cringe continuum) was when I found myself navigating unfamiliar territory while deepening my understanding of the social phenomenon under investigation. I had limited awareness of this at the time, but with distance can see that these moments of uneasiness were embedded in personal and academic discomfort with issues related to heteronormative and social class privileges—two areas of study that at the turn of the century Allison (2000) argued were systematically ignored within leisure research efforts. I would contend that Allison's argument remains to be relatively status quo 14 years later with only a few notable scholars in these areas.

But how we see the world and the nature of reality is not static; rather it is a fluid process that transforms as time passes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Similar to the meandering river, the gradual erosion on the outside corners can lead to new paths—or sometimes a flood of crashing water can bring the edges tumbling down in a single instance. My researcher identity as a master's student, as a doctoral student, and now as a professor alters based upon my personal life as well as the research projects that have had a profound impact on my way of being (see Trussell, 2010). In turn, this has diversified and expanded those that I have the pleasure to work with (particularly social groups who have a history of being "othered") as well as the methodological ways that I choose to understand the nature of their lives as well as my own.

## The Construction of Knowledge, Understanding the Risks, and a Politics of Hope

As Harding (1991) argued, "there are no women or men in the world, but only women, men, and gender constructed through particular historical struggles over just which race, classes, sexualities, cultures, religious groups, and so forth, will have access to resources and power" (p. 151). The struggle for power and resources will inherently transpire into the oppression for some, for the domination of others (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). This notion is apparent in the creation of knowledge and the inherent social values that are formed, where dominant perspectives can have the power within academic institutions. For example, decisions made by funding bodies, journal reviewers, and tenure committees can affect the very construction of knowledge.

Thus, I would be remiss if I did not touch on the risks associated with leisure and social justice work and the decisions we make in our research programs; this is particularly salient for graduate students as well as untenured faculty. As Stokowski (1999) argued, the

> process of writing articles for publication is a right of passage whereby newer or younger colleagues and graduate students are socialized into the normative order of research topics, methods, hierarchies of positions, as well as the 'proper way of doing things.' (p. 190)

This is compounded by what Pedlar (1999) termed *efficiency,* where we are most likely to cite specialists who work in similar areas of investigation. To go outside our comfortable bodies of literature, into other areas of research, and familiarize ourselves with new bodies of work may slow down or impede our quest for publications or what Stokowski (1999) referred to as *trophies*. Indeed, graduate students and young faculty are often "socialized to conform or eliminat[e] the

risk" (Johnson, 2009, p. 485) with heeded warnings not to jeopardize their chances for a junior faculty position and/or the "subtle use of power by others" (p. 487) to maintain conformity until after promotion and tenure.

Today, I reflect upon some of the heeded warnings and elements of risk that I have confronted throughout the years—particularly with the research projects related to issues of social justice. But I believe that some element of risk is important to ensure that our research agendas, methodologies, and practices are responsive to the ongoing changes to our social landscape, while enhancing the quality of community and social life (Shaw, 2000; Trussell, Sharpe & Mair, 2011). I even extend this into our academic culture and identities that may be seen as disadvantaged within a system of ivory-tower privilege. Before I gave a critical research presentation at a leisure conference entitled "Pinstripes and breast pumps: Navigating the tenure-motherhood-track" (Trussell, 2013), my husband shook his head and asked with exasperation, "Are you crazy? Can this not wait until AFTER you have tenure? We have a mortgage to pay!" With a sly grin on my face and fire in my belly, I told him, "No, it cannot wait; it is something that needs to be said now."

As Lincoln and Denzin (2005) suggested, "What was center is now decentered; what was margin and border is now taking center stage" (p. 1063). However, for researchers who want to engage in action and social justice related research, an understanding of the ways in which we are positioned in society and how it shapes and alters our subsequent identity development is essential (Davis & Harrison, 2013). If our aim is to engage in social justice research and educational practices, we need to be conscious "that others will be socially located in a different manner" (p. 36) and we must bring openness and humility to our professional and personal identities.

Moreover, similar to Young (1990), upon reflection I believe that:

> as a White, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied, not old woman, I cannot claim to speak for radical movements of Blacks, Latinos, American Indians, poor people, lesbians, old people, or the disabled. But the political commitment to social justice which motivates my philosophical reflections tells me that I also cannot speak without them. (p. 14)

That is, through critical reflection and the desire to understand the oppression and marginalization of those lives that are not well understood (yet ultimately related to all citizens), we can provide a more complete understanding of our collective and complex social world. Although I may never have the lived-knowledge of the participants I work with I believe that I must keep *listening to* and *honoring* their experiences. I believe that with my privileged position within academia, comes the social responsibility to commit my talent and skills to help provide a meaningful life for all community members who come from diverse social contexts.

For me, it also goes beyond documenting how power, oppression, and inequality are experienced in everyday life. It is looking at the world through the lens of a politics of hope and believing that empowerment and social change can occur through understanding and making that which was once invisible, visible through our research practices. A politics of hope criticizes the status quo and imagines how things could be different (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000). I believe that knowledge becomes the vehicle for action that is "found especially in the form of empowerment; emancipation anticipated and hoped for; social transformation, particularly toward more equity and justice" (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 198). This is the essence of social justice as not only a goal, but also as a process, whereby action can re-construct a more just and equitable society through full and equal participation of all groups.

When we dance in the margins and push the boundaries, this is where the most potential might lie for growth and development within the field of leisure studies. When we find that which makes us the most uncomfortable, we need to critically examine why we feel this way. Indeed, feelings of unease in our research topics, our positionality within them, and the methodologies that we employ, can bring a more holistic understanding of the complexities of our social world and issues of social justice.

I would like to close with this thought. I have been very fortunate with many wonderful mentors throughout my life. But there was one in particular that asked a very difficult question of me … a question that took over a year of meeting regularly for coffees to figure out. It was quite simple. "What's your story? Five years from now, what do you want your narrative to be, and what do you need to do to get there?" I ask this of you now, no matter if you find yourself in the field as a practitioner or in academia. As an agent of social justice, what will be your story? A simple question—a not so simple answer.

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