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An Autoethnographic Reflection of My Academic Privileges While Working with High School Interns

Eric Hogan

Georgia Southern University, ehogan@georgiasouthern.edu

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Abstract

In this article, I explore my academic privileges through using the autoethnographic method while working in an alternative school and with interns hired for an agricultural internship. Academic privilege is contextualized as those factors in an education setting that benefit some and not all; with consideration of various personal and social factors including, but not limited to, skin color, aspects of identity, economic disparity, resource availability, social relationships, social settings, etcetera. Data collection involved observations within the school and when working with the interns. There were also informal conversations. The observations and informal conversations were documented as field notes to use for personal audio recordings. The personal audio recordings were transcribed and thematically coded. The three themes were: (1) At the Alternative School, (2) Criminalization and Prejudice, and (3) Future Opportunities for The Interns. This article allows the reader to journey with me to a place of introspection, reflexivity, and contemplation.

Keywords

autoethnography, academics, privilege, alternative education

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An Autoethnographic Reflection of My Academic Privileges While Working with High School Interns

Eric Hogan

Georgia Southern University, Georgia, USA

In this article, I explore my academic privileges through using the autoethnographic method while working in an alternative school and with interns hired for an agricultural internship. Academic privilege is contextualized as those factors in an education setting that benefit some and not all; with consideration of various personal and social factors including, but not limited to, skin color, aspects of identity, economic disparity, resource availability, social relationships, social settings, etcetera. Data collection involved observations within the school and when working with the interns. There were also informal conversations. The observations and informal conversations were documented as field notes to use for personal audio recordings. The personal audio recordings were transcribed and thematically coded. The three themes were: (1) At the Alternative School, (2) Criminalization and Prejudice, and (3) Future Opportunities for The Interns. This article allows the reader to journey with me to a place of introspection, reflexivity, and contemplation.

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Introduction

Educational environments are always supportive. Everyone learns the necessary content while in school. Those in education only use language that uplifts rather than vilifies.

This is how I thought about schooling prior to working for Op Grows (pseudonym). Op Grows is an agricultural program that taught lessons on food systems at local schools, built school and community gardens, and hired high school interns to work in the various gardens. Though, my notions of education and academics were from a privileged perspective. Johnson said privilege exists when one group has something of value that is denied to others simply because of the groups they belong to, rather than because of anything they've done or failed to do (2013, p. 15). Hogan (2022) suggested privilege is not having to acknowledge one's own privilege. I see academic privilege, then, as those factors in an education setting that benefit some and not all; with consideration of various personal and social factors including, but not limited to, skin color, aspects of identity, economic disparity, resource availability, social relationships, social settings, etcetera. Thus, having academic privilege can create disparities in schooling and education and allows people to continue "living in their bubble."

The School and The Interns

Op Grows helped challenge my notions of academic privilege when working with students from an alternative school, the Carson Learning Center (pseudonym). Alternative education settings mostly serve students who are at risk of school failure or who are marginalized from the traditional school system (Carver & Lewis, 2010; Coles et al., 2009; Schwab et al., 2016). Caroleo (2014) mentioned alternative education is used as progressive

education, last chance education, and remedial instruction. Alternative education programs are designed to prevent students from dropping out (Lehr et al., 2008). Though, over half of alternative schools still have graduation rates lower than 50% (Bustamante, 2019).

The Carson Learning Center is an alternative school that houses approximately 50 – 80 individuals ranging from 6th to 12th grade. The school mostly encompasses students from the local middle and high school who have academic issues related to truancy or being below grade level in multiple subjects, as well as behavior issues such as fighting or drug use. Most students were male. The females that attended the school may have had academic or behavior issues, however some of the female students participated in the alternative school's new or expectant mother program.

Four students who were enrolled at the Carson Learning Center, Danny, Malik, Rodney, and Stanton (pseudonyms) were hired to work as paid interns to help manage day-to-day activities at the various school and community gardens such as maintaining crops, feeding chickens, etc. When first starting to work for Op Grows, Danny, Malik, and Rodney were juniors. Stanton was a sophomore. Malik, Rodney, and Stanton are all African American individuals. Danny is a Caucasian individual. Each had been in trouble in and/or outside of school, had fallen behind academically, and had considered dropping out of school. Danny was sent to the alternative school initially for damaging school property. Malik and Rodney were sent to the alternative school after separate altercations. Stanton had stolen someone's phone. In that, the interns were representative of the male population at the Carson Learning Center.

Purpose

When first working within the school, I had limited experience working with adolescents. I had even less experience working in schools that enrolled students who had academic and/or behavioral issues. To become a better practitioner, I needed to reflect critically about my academic privileges. Dewey (1933) suggested inquiry-based reflection can allow people to become informed on the various issues. A person must act upon and transform their world, especially if the world is not a static entity (Freire, 1970).

In this article, I reflect on my experiences while in the Carson Learning Center as well as working alongside the four interns Op Grows initially hired to work in the school and community gardens. I highlight various aspects that challenged my perspectives on education. I also discuss some of the interns' experiences to demonstrate the importance of reflection when working with people who have different lived experiences. The article specifically focuses on my shifting perspectives while adding to the literature on reflection by incorporating autoethnography.

Reflection through Autoethnography

Autoethnographies include those self-narratives or personal stories that also embrace the sociocultural contexts (Chang, 2008, p. 41). Autoethnography is composed of three interrelated components: "auto," "ethno," and "graphy." Thus, autoethnographic projects use selfhood, subjectivity, and personal experience to describe, interpret, and represent the beliefs, practices, and identities of a group or culture (Adams & Herrmann, 2020). Autoethnographers enter the research field with a familiar topic (self), while ethnographers begin their investigation with an unfamiliar topic (others; Chang, 2008, p. 50).

Autoethnographies draw on personal reflection to understand the self and culture (Adams et al., 2015). Autoethnography is a transformative research method because it changes time, requires vulnerability, fosters empathy, embodies creativity and innovation, eliminates boundaries, honors subjectivity, and provides therapeutic benefits (Custer, 2014). "Reflectivity

entails taking seriously the self's location(s) in culture and scholarship, circumspectly exploring our relationship to/in autoethnography to make research and cultural life *better and more meaningful*" (Berry, 2013, p. 212). The researcher uses deep and careful reflexivity to name and interrogate the intersections between the self and society, the particular and the general, and the personal and the political (Adams et al., 2015; Berry & Clair, 2011). Ellis, et al. (2011) suggested the autoethnographer retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity.

As McIlveen (2008) points out, "Reflexivity in research and practice offers more than a checking process; it is a process which in itself proffers new understandings and actions—transformation" (p. 17). Raab (2013) notes that the transpersonal relevance of an autoethnographical study encompasses the idea of fostering self-awareness and self-discovery, which may lead to transformation.

Transformation occurs dramatically for the individual who is courageous enough to reveal him or herself to the world and readily embarks on a fantastic journey. It also occurs for those that participate in the process of introspection, reflexivity, and contemplation with the autoethnographer. (i.e., the readership, audience, or other researchers; Custer, 2014)

To provide somewhat of my own narrative voice, I see autoethnography as a method that invites researchers and readers alike (in this case probably fellow practitioners and those engaging in qualitative research), to explore aspects about themselves. This exploration can be challenging and/or cathartic, but in doing so, a person can have a better understanding of other people, as well as their self in the context of others. An autoethnography also demonstrates how each person is complex with our own stories and experiences and that these stories and experiences continually help us make sense of the world.

Personal Background

In this article, I am nervously, yet eagerly diving headfirst to explore how my academic experience was not the same as everyone else's experiences. Before I explore my changing perspective, I must write about my past experiences with schooling to provide a foundation. I hope that those reading this autoethnography can journey with me through critical introspection, reflection, and contemplation.

For starters, I have always enjoyed school because most of it came naturally to me. I was the student that would bring home a report card with As and Bs, eventually making a list of "Who's Who in High School." I always felt that my teachers cared about me and strived to provide the necessary school resources (i.e., tutoring, mentorship, etc.). I played sports and even remember seeing my teachers at these events, wanting to support my endeavors in those various activities. School was largely a pleasant experience for me.

It was a forgone conclusion that I would attend college. My parents believed higher education would provide many opportunities for success and would make my life easier in the long run. Upon graduating from high school, I attended a community college and a four-year university. I maintained a 3.0 or above GPA. With my As and Bs in kindergarten through college, I always assumed I was one of the "smart kids." Having never received low grades in school, I failed to appreciate how school might not come naturally to others. I wondered how others could ever even consider dropping out...why not just study longer or ask teachers for extra help?

Even before I finished my bachelor's degree, I believed I would obtain further education. I would eventually get accepted into an Educational Psychology Ph.D. program, where I spent six years working towards my degree. Probably more so within this program than any previous time, I was encouraged to understand myself in the context of others. I started understanding myself as someone that checks a lot of boxes on privilege, such as being a white, middle class, able-bodied, cisgender individual to name a few. Further, I realized how my academic experiences were unlike most peoples' experiences. Thinking about privilege and wanting to find a methodological approach to reflecting, I became interested in autoethnography.

Data Collection and Analysis

As I shift and describe how I collected and analyzed data, I want to remind the readers that an autoethnography is not simply a reflection, but a method where the autoethnographer is considered a participant in the study. Ellis et al. (2011), suggested the autoethnographer retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity then will analyze those experiences.

Despite the personal nature of an autoethnography, others' experiences are still reported. Thus, IRB approval was obtained at the onset of the study. Further, parental consent and student assent were obtained from each intern. To understand myself in the context of others, I conducted observations within the Carson Learning Center and while working in the gardens with the interns. I also would have informal conversations with the interns.

Using a field notebook, I took notes on anything I saw or discussed. Within the school, I took notes on things such as the appearance and upkeep of the school, the interns' interactions with teachers or staff, etcetera. When talking with the interns, I took notes on anything regarding academics or schooling. For instance, if we had conversations about their school day, I could take notes on what was discussed. The field notes were shorthand versions of the observations and conversations. Though, as Emerson et al. (2011, p. 167) wrote, those writing field notes need to be mindful of how people and events are described.

The notes I took in my field notebook were then used as primers for personal audio reflections. I recorded these audio reflections after any time in the school or any interaction with the interns to make sure my shorthand notes were not forgotten when I was away from my data. These personal audio reflections also allowed me to ponder the similar and dissimilar experiences between myself and the interns. Through this method, I could purposefully engage how working in the school and with the interns challenged my assumptions.

Each audio recording was transcribed into separate Word documents. I initially read each transcription to remind me what transpired. While reading the documents a second time, I began creating initial codes using open coding to see what stood out. I then reread the transcriptions of my personal audio recordings to produce themes using Braun and Clark's (2006) method of thematic analysis as a guide. Codes were then grouped into one of three themes (1) At the Alternative School, (2) Criminalization and Prejudice, and (3) Future Opportunities for The Interns.

Findings

It is difficult, if not impossible, to separate "doing" autoethnography from "writing" autoethnography (Adams et al., 2015, p. 87). When researchers write autoethnographies, they seek to produce aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience (Ellis et al., 2011). A thick description involved describing an event in sufficient

detail so one can begin to evaluate the extent to which the conclusions drawn are potentially meaningful in other contexts (Geertz, 1973; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

I want to provide a thick description of my time working within the Carson Learning Center and with the interns and show how those experiences encouraged me to grow as a practitioner. During that time, I was confronted with my own privilege after realizing that, despite my extended time as a student, I lacked experience. This was the first time I struggled in a school setting. My personal history made me blissfully unaware of my own biases, actions, and language use. During this time, I saw within myself how easy it is to dismiss someone else's beliefs and lifestyles because they were different than my own.

At the Alternative School

The first theme details my observations at the alternative school. I found that the Carson Learning Center is not listed on the school district's website. Further, the Carson Learning Center is the only alternative school in the district, while also being the oldest and most in need of renovation. This is especially relevant when the school district approved a new/expensive scoreboard for the football team at the high school but did not maintain basic upkeep of the grounds at the alternative school. For instance, there were hanging telephone wires and a rusted fence where the school garden was being constructed.

Recall that the alternative school mostly encompasses students from the local middle and high school who have academic issues related to truancy or being below grade level in multiple subjects, as well as behavior issues such as fighting or drug use. At the alternative school, the students are not allowed to talk in the lunchroom, nor in the hallway when changing classes. The students get awarded a degree from the high school if they graduate but are still not allowed to do things such as attend prom if they were at the alternative school for disciplinary reasons. There is a camera in each classroom where the students are constantly being watched for "misbehavior." When talking with the interns away from the school, each intern expressed how the school felt like a prison. To them, school was not a supportive environment. This runs contrary to my experience where I had teachers supporting me by doing things such as attending sporting events.

A quote that really caught my attention was from a former district official. This person suggested, "Those at the high school get the Cadillac version for their education while those at the alternative school get the Volkswagen version." I recognize I am quoting someone in a position of power, and this might seem odd in a paper about privilege, but to me it encapsulates a dismissive mindset of students who attend the alternative school. Though, dismissive might not be a strong enough word. Those students at the alternative school almost feel "invisible;" brushed aside instead of cared for. I never realize how even school districts can actively choose to support some students' learning and not others.

Criminalization and Prejudice

The first and second theme play off each other. Within the school, I often examined how the interns and the rest of the students were treated as criminals. Admittedly, I also had these notions when first meeting many of the students, especially the interns we hired. When I was asked by my advisor why the interns were sent at the alternative school, I, with unchecked confidence, said each intern had done something stupid. By suggesting it was the fault of the intern, I failed to acknowledge many of the systemic challenges that may have impacted those individuals.

Malik, Rodney, and Stanton, all Black students, expressed how they have dealt with some form of racial prejudice while in school. Malik told me a story where he believed his

former principal never thought he could perform well in school because of his skin color. Rodney mentioned that after he previously got in trouble, he was pegged as a disruptive Black student by teachers and administrators even when he had not done anything wrong. A staff member at the alternative school called Stanton “sneaky” because he thought Stanton would be one to cause trouble but had a difficult time catching him in the act. Danny is a white individual and did not mention any prejudice like this.

This was something I had never experienced as a white individual. Privilege is not having to acknowledge one’s own privilege (Hogan, 2022). Tatum (2003) suggested, “There is a lot of silence about race in white communities, and as a consequence whites tend to think of racial identity as something that other people have, not something that is salient for them” (p. 94). Potter (2015) echoes this statement when suggesting that being white is a part of one’s identity. I am a white individual. Thus, with an acknowledgment of skin color as part of my identity, I also must acknowledge aspect of privileges that come with that. In that, I am not fighting racism daily, especially while in school. I also do not have to speak for every person who has a similar skin color. Various systemic factors such as being immediately criminalized based on how I look were not something I experience in school or elsewhere. Despite not experiencing these racial prejudices, I have a responsibility to see people holistically and attempt to understand their different lived experiences.

Future Opportunities for the Interns

In conversations with the interns, Danny, Malik, and Rodney mentioned how they felt burnt out from any school setting. When the teachers and administrators did try to offer support for future resources for college, these were often ignored or dismissed. For example, Danny declared how he would struggle in college after he struggled to find motivation to do work in high school. The negative experiences Danny, Malik, and Rodney had in school discouraged them from even considering future schooling. Again, recall how school was a forgone conclusion for me. College is a privilege and my privilege stems from having positive experiences associated with school.

Only Stanton wanted to attend college. This was in part because his older brother and sister encouraged him to further his education. In that, Stanton made me realize how social support in my life also afforded me opportunities beyond high school. I too have an older brother and sister who paved the way for me so I could better know how to find success in college and beyond. My mom and dad knew how to navigate the financial aid platforms and were willing to take the time and make sure I understood what I was getting myself into from an economic perspective. I was privileged to have others know about various resources such as FAFSA to help make college a reality. Further, my parents started saving money for me to attend college when I had not yet started grade school. If there is no support on these kinds of things, just the application alone can be a daunting task, let alone the financial or social aspects. I must be mindful of how others might not have access to these kinds of resources.

Conclusions and Future Research

It is rare that someone with privilege acknowledges its existence. In this article, I documented differences between my experiences and others to show how I was privileged in various aspects related to education. I did this using selfhood, subjectivity, and personal experience to describe, interpret, and represent beliefs, practices, and identities of a group or culture. (Adams & Herrmann, 2020). It was my hope that the readership, audience, and/or other researchers journeyed with me to a place of introspection, reflexivity, and contemplation. Having better reflective inquiry (Dewey, 1933) may allow us to better serve the various

populations we work with. This would be especially relevant in a school setting where educators are working with students with different backgrounds, beliefs, lifestyles, etcetera.

We as practitioners must acknowledge our blind spots. If I or anybody else is going to do work with anybody that looks different or has different beliefs, we first must check our biases and beliefs. Then we can attempt to understand different perspectives and have positive change. I encourage others to look in the mirror and reflect. You might have unchecked privileges related to academics. Though academics aren't the only thing that establishes privilege. For instance, you might also check boxes of privilege like be white, male, cisgender, etc. Or you could live in a place that affords you resources others don't have such as access to healthy food, bigger hospitals, etcetera.

As I conclude this article, I need to mention that this article needs to be considered in the context and time it was written. Growth is never complete, and I have an obligation as a practitioner to continue reflecting. This process would lend itself to future autoethnographies or even collaborative autoethnographies where I evaluate my growth next to someone else's. I will remain optimistic that growth is possible. Thank you for journeying with me in this cathartic endeavor. I encourage you, the reader, to think about yourself in the context of others.

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Author Note

Dr. Eric Hogan is an Assistant Professor in Educational Psychology at Georgia Southern University. He teaches courses on learning, motivation, development, and culturally responsive assessment. Please direct correspondence to ehogan@georgiasouthern.edu.

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