Critical Friends, Dialogues of Discomfort, and Researcher Reflexivity in the Sociology of Sport

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In this special issue, which calls for a “more radical sociology of sport and physical culture,” the purpose of this paper is to address how practices of reflexivity might be mobilized among critical sport scholars toward navigating the intersectional, fragmented, and complex communities we inhabit inside and outside the academy. We begin by conducting a literature review of researcher reflexivity and positionality in Sociology of Sport Journal from 2000 to 2022. Utilizing Wanda Pillow’s “reflexivities of discomfort,” we interrogate our own research by engaging in a reflexive dialogue as “critical friends.” Through this work, we try to make sense of the potential of these dialogues for shaping our ethical, political, and personal approaches to research, writing, methodology, and knowledge production.

The purpose of this paper is to situate and reimagine the potential of reflexivity in the sociology of sport. In this special issue of the Sociology of Sport Journal (SSJ), which calls for a “more radical sociology of sport and physical culture,” we challenge ourselves to ask how practices of reflexivity might be mobilized among critical sport scholars toward navigating the intersectional, fragmented, and complex communities we inhabit within and outside the academy. The practice of reflexivity can be traced back to the 1970s, gaining prominence as a response to critiques aimed at the field of anthropology for its colonial methodological approaches that exploited and objectified research subjects (Pillow, 2003). It has since been widely taken up in the humanities and social sciences, particularly within ethnographic work, including in the sociology of sport whose scholars have utilized reflexivity as both a methodological and conceptual tool. In the 2000 SSJ Special Issue, “Imagining Sociological Narratives,” Laurel Richardson (2000) calls for new writing practices that “offer critical reflexivity about the writing-self in different contexts” (p. 11). Similar calls have been made by SSJ scholars to (a) challenge researchers to reflect on the limits of their identities in order to encourage the same from athletes and coaches in women’s sport (Markula, 2003), (b) use reflexivity to understand the workings of the gendered sporting body (Brown, 2006), (c) mobilize reflexive strategies toward addressing public health issues (Monaghan, 2008), and (d) consider reflexivity a necessary tenet of physical cultural studies (Giardina & Newman, 2011; Silk & Andrews, 2011).

In response to these calls, the objective of this article is to reimagine how reflexivity in the sociology of sport can be used not only as a method to highlight researcher positions and identities, but also how it might be used to critically engender a more nuanced relationship between scholars and the research they undertake. We address this objective through the following: First, we provide the theoretical underpinning for this paper, which follows Wanda Pillow’s (2003) watershed conceptual framework on reflexive strategies. Pillow’s framework provides a description and critique of the common uses of reflexivity in qualitative research and offers an alternative approach, reflexivities of discomfort, that privileges a messy and skeptical approach to reflexivity. Second, we use Pillow’s framework to review researcher reflexivity in SSJ from 2000 to 2022. Third, we present our methodological approach for engaging in reflexive dialogues regarding each other’s research using the “critical friends” approach (Costa & Kallick, 1993). Fourth, we blend Pillow’s messy reflexivity with the critical friend’s framework to engage in a critical dialogue with each other, using three personal research vignettes as our starting point for the discussion. Finally, we make sense of the potential of these dialogues for shaping our ethical, political, and personal approaches to research, writing, methodology, and knowledge production, and for the community-based potential use of reflexivity that advances emancipatory objectives in critical sport studies.

Through this work, we make four contributions to the sociology of sport literature. First, we illuminate the ways in which researcher reflexivity has been taken up, understood, and utilized within the contemporary SSJ literature, and in doing so present a snapshot of how the reflexive turn has influenced one of the leading journals on qualitative sport studies research. Second, we complement the existing sport studies literature that take up reflexivities of discomfort by using Pillow’s (2003) framework to inform our reflexive dialogue as “critical friends.” Through this framework, we present one possibility for reflexive practice among researchers from diverse theoretical and methodological approaches in the sociology of sport field. Third, by exploring the ways in which our racial identities and histories have shaped the ways in which we conduct our research, we make visible the relationship between race and reflexivity in our work (Boylorn, 2011). Finally, and as our reflexive dialogues focus on stories stemming from our doctoral research, and given that all three of us are currently on the tenure track, our analysis also contributes to the literature on early career researcher (ECR) subjectivities.

Theoretical Framework: Wanda Pillow’s Reflexive Practices

To build from the SSJ literature to date on research reflexivity and positionality, we take up Wanda Pillow’s (2003) call for a...
reflexivity of discomfort, which she posits in her widely cited article on the “uses of reflexivity.” While Pillow (2003) provides a genealogy of reflexivity, we attempt to summarize it as the self-acknowledgment and self-interrogation of the ways in which a researcher’s subjectivity, personal history, and experience shape their research and knowledge production. Pillow (2003) describes four “validated” practices of reflexivity common within qualitative research, which she argues are utilized to provide the researcher with a form of confession, catharsis, and cure for the “problem of doing representation” (p. 181). The first strategy, reflexivity as recognition of the self, acts as an anchor from which the other three strategies build. In this mode, self-reflexivity is an attempt by the researcher to account for their own impact on the research process under the assumption that the researcher can be honest about themselves “particularly in relation to another” (Pillow, 2003, p. 182). This practice has become more common for researchers working with and writing about marginalized communities who, by coming to terms with their privilege, might represent participants from these communities in a less ethnocentric, subjected way (Pillow, 2003, p. 182).

The remaining reflexive strategies that build from this first practice include reflexivity as recognition of other, reflexivity as truth, and reflexivity as transcendence. Reflexivity as recognition of the other is meant to help the researcher grapple with the challenges of representation. This type of reflexivity can occur out of an “unequal power relationship and may perpetuate a colonial relationship while at the same time attempting to mask this power over the subject” (Pillow, 2003, p. 185). The use of reflexivity as a “truth-claim” strategy assumes that by engaging in the proper reflexive techniques, that the researcher’s conclusions are more valid. Finally, reflexivity as transcendence refers to the assumption that a researcher, once coming to “know” themselves and the other, is freed from their own subjectivity and cultural context (Pillow, 2003, p. 186). This reflexive strategy promises to release the researcher from their “discomfort with the problematics of representation through transcendent clarity” (Pillow, 2003, p. 187). Pillow (2003) describes these four interconnected reflexive approaches as strategies of comfortability that provide a means for researchers to “reflex toward the familiar” during the challenges of representation in their work. At the same time, she argues that such an approach “works against the critical impetus of reflexivity and thus masks continued reliance upon traditional notions of validity, truth, and essence in qualitative research” (Pillow, 2003, p. 180).

In place of these common reflexive strategies, Pillow suggests embracing a reflexivity of discomfort, which aligns with the feminist scholarship that has influenced the reflexive turn (Fine, 2014; Lather, 1993, 1995; Patai, 2014). To do so, she argues for using reflexivity not as a methodological marker of validity, but rather as a tool for helping scholars interrogate their research attempts, with the understanding that such a critique is ongoing and necessary alongside the cultural and political importance of our research (Pillow, 2003, p. 192). Pillow (2003) thus advocates for developing a reflexivity that “seeks to know” while it recognizes that “knowing is tenuous” and that works “within and against the parameters of comfortable research” (p. 188) as part of an ongoing attempt to grapple with the limits of possibility in knowledge production. Through this reflexivity of discomfort, Pillow re-orient reflexivity “not as clarity, honesty, or humility, but as practices of confounding disruptions” (2003, p. 192) that posit a necessary skepticism of our representational work while simultaneously acknowledging the importance of that work. We take up this definition of reflexivity toward the “unfamiliar” through challenging ourselves and each other to examine and unsettle our research interests, motives, and outcomes. In the interest of grappling with this discomfort and these parameters “out loud,” we forward a critical, collective reflection on some of our research experiences.

Literature Review: Researcher Reflexivity in the SSJ (2000–2022)

This literature review illuminates the ways in which SSJ contributors have represented their researcher reflexivity, which have been categorized based on the definition and strategies we describe in Pillow’s (2003) framework above, from 2000 to 2022. We constructed this literature review by first identifying whether and how keywords “reflect,” “reflex,” “bias,” “position,” and “positionality” were utilized within each journal article in the collection. We utilized the root words of “reflect” and “reflex” to ensure we captured all the variations of these words throughout the collection. Additionally, we reviewed the methods section of each journal article to identify whether, and how, the researchers accounted for themselves, their perspectives, and/or their impact on the research process, and we filtered out articles that used the keywords in ways that were unrelated to researcher reflexivity. We were most interested in articles where the authors attempted to engage (either implicitly or explicitly) in a form of reflexivity by implicating themselves within their study, and in papers where scholars were reflexively engaged about their research through critical dialogues. This scholarship was composed of the following articles: those where researchers acknowledge their positionality at least once within the article (n = 26), those where a call to action concerning reflexivity was made (n = 6), those focused on ethnographic research (n = 6), and those where scholars engaged in a critical dialogue with each other (n = 8).

Following this preliminary review, we utilized Pillow’s framework to interpret the pool of articles and categorized them into the following themes: (a) reflecting toward the familiar, which is split into reflexivity as recognition of self and reflexivity as recognition of other and (b) reflexivities of discomfort. While categorizing the rich scholarship that we reviewed in these ways was helpful to illustrating how reflexivity and researcher positionality is represented in SSJ, there are two important caveats to acknowledge. First, this approach to analyzing reflexivity is limited to only what appears in the reviewed literature, which likely skims the surface of the reflexive practices that the authors utilized in the research and writing process. As such, the objective of this review is meant to illuminate the limited parameters through which reflexivity appears in academic journals, and not to critique the authors of the collection. Second, we also acknowledge that this review is not meant to undermine the important conclusions drawn from each of these studies. Indeed, we believe that by stating their positionality or being reflexive, these scholars are advancing important research practices that others might consider in the future.

We also acknowledge the SSJ literature on participant reflexivity (n = 13), and autoethnographic reflexivity (n = 13), even though our focus remains on how researchers implicate themselves within their research and the politics of representation. These contributions include work on the intersection between gender and reflexivity, sexual minorities who participate in running clubs (Van Ingen, 2004), men sport enthusiasts (Pringle & Hickey, 2010), rugby players (Pringle & Markula, 2005), women snowboarders (Thorpe, 2009), sport journalists (Schoch & Ohl, 2011), skateboarding women (MacKay & Dallaire, 2013), and university students (Liiimakka, 2011), as well as on the experiences of youth cricketers (Nichol et al., 2021), aging cyclist enthusiasts (Sirna, 2016), sport
for development and peace (SDP) interns (Darnell, 2010), mindful fitness instructors (Markula, 2004), and track-and-field athletes (Butryn, 2003). Researcher reflexivity was identified in numerous autoethnographic works on injury recovery (Collinson, 2003; Dashper, 2013; Fisette, 2015; Hockey, 2005), cycling tourism (Lamont, 2020), the Little League World Series (King-White, 2013), horseracing (Butler, 2017), swimming (McMahon & McGannon, 2017), hip-hop and sport (Harrison & Coakley, 2020), outdoor recreation (Laurendeau, 2004, 2011, 2020), elite rowing (Tsang, 2000), teaching (Halas & Hanson, 2001), and disordered eating (Zanker & Gard, 2008).

SSJ Literature That Reflexes Toward the Familiar

**Reflexivity as Recognition of Self and as a “Truth-Claim” Strategy**

The first use of reflexivity to act as a recognition of self was predominantly identified in the SSJ literature from those working as cultural “insiders” within research communities. Many acknowledged this status as an explanation for how they gained access to their communities (Atkinson, 2007; Caudwell., 2003; Crocket, 2015; Lang, 2015; May, 2009), built rapport and trust with the participants (Kidder, 2013; McDonald, 2009; McNarry et al., 2020; Pike & Maguire, 2003; Wedgwood, 2004), and glean more meaningful data (Bridel & Rail, 2007; Norman, 2010). This reflexive strategy was also represented as an act of witnessing or “being there” to form more authentic or meaningful understandings of the communities in which they were situated, which reflects a form of reflexivity as a methodological tool that ostensibly leads to a more accurate or meaningful representation of participants (Carlson, 2010; McGrath & Chananie-Hill, 2009; Robidoux, 2004; Wesely, 2001; Wood & Garn, 2016). One’s insider research status was also said to aid in eliciting deeper conversations with participants (Atkinson, 2007; Tagg, 2012) and functioned as an important supplement to participants’ stories (Fletcher, 2008; Lang, 2015).

One example of this kind of representation of reflexivity occurs when Brendon Tagg (2012) argues that his insider status as a men’s netballer player helped him reflect on the experiences of transgender netballers who participated in his study and speculated that the players would not have discussed those experiences in the same way had he been nonplaying researcher. Another includes Shelly A. McGrath and Ruth A. Chananie-Hill’s (2009) examination of the lived experience of female bodybuilders, wherein they state that their insider status allowed for closer bonds of trust and understanding with their interviewees, which “puts them at greater ease when discussing their own perceptions and experiences” (p. 240). This is certainly a well-established approach, though Pillow (2003) states that this use of reflexivity to position oneself as closer to the subject assumes that one can also write authoritatively about the subject, and in doing so may risk favoring a linear, essentialist, or positivist approach to representation. Gareth McNarry acknowledged this tension in his work where he negotiated his insider status in a study on pain in competitive swimming. This status afforded McNarry the ability to build rapport with participants, but also created challenges for him in maintaining a “critical distance” from which he could conduct research (McNarry et al., 2020).

**Reflexivity as Recognition of “Other”**

Pillow’s (2003) second use of reflexivity is in recognizing the limits of representing “the other,” where the focus rests upon highlighting the unequal relationship between researcher and subject. This type of reflexivity was most apparent in “outsider” scholars working in SDP (McSweeney, 2019; Seal & Sherry, 2018; Sherry et al., 2017), Indigenous sport (Giles, 2004), sport and homeless communities (Scherer et al., 2016), the Vancouver Olympics (Sykes, 2016), the Commonwealth Games (Pavlidis et al., 2020), team sport (Hardin & Whiteside, 2009; Norman, 2010; Pelak, 2005; Purdy & Jones, 2011), and football support groups (Palmer & Thompson, 2007). This reflexive strategy demonstrates how working through the problems of representation is often a privileged endeavor that may further entrench power relations between researchers and participant (Pillow, 2003, p. 185), a critique which was acknowledged and navigated in unique ways by these researchers.

Seeking to address this dynamic in their study on the South Pacific, for example, Sherry et al. (2017) acknowledged that while their study was guided by an inclusive and reflexive approach, their findings were produced exclusively by their research team without local members and participants’ input and stated their desire to do better by including those perspectives in the future. Seal and Sherry (2018) also stated their positionalities as white, women researchers from a high-income country, meant it was important to be self-reflexive throughout their sport-for-development (SFD) study on young women in Papua New Guinea. In her examination of race relations in South African women’s netball, Cynthia Fabrizio Pelak (2005) states that while the aim of her method “rests in my desire to draw valid conclusions, however partial, about women netballers” (p. 62), she acknowledges how her representational work are shaped by her own voice and experiences. And Mitchell McSweeney (2019) used vignettes of his SDP fieldwork in Swaziland to navigate his white privilege as an insider-outsider researcher and intern, and asks how his work might “further inscribe notions of people in the global South” while reproducing himself as the “authoritative, knowledgeable’ researcher?” (2019, p. 132). These scholars point to the limits of representation in their research while demonstrating the investment academics make in “knowing the other.” This tension echoes Pillow’s critique (Pillow, 2003) that acknowledging one’s subject position in the research does not make the privilege and power relations that result unproblematic.

Scholars have also demonstrated how they recognize and respond to the privileged positions they occupy in relation to their research communities through acts of reciprocation (Giles, 2004; Scherer et al., 2016; Sykes, 2016). In acknowledging that her writing on the Dene Games is influenced by middle class, Euro Canadian notions of gender equity, Audrey Giles (2004) changed her writing to acknowledge Indigenous narratives (p. 33). In their research on a public floor hockey program for homeless youth, Scherer et al. (2016) volunteered for the program, advocated on participants’ behalf, and helped secure further funding for the initiative, while acknowledging that these actions do not balance the unequal power relations between researchers and participants. And Heather Sykes (2016) explicitly acknowledges her positionality and colonial thinking in her work on Pride House at the Vancouver Winter Olympics, and utilized “self-reflexive” writing to contextualize her research within British settler colonialism (p. 56). While these examples may perpetuate the unequal power relationship by providing an opportunity for the researcher to demonstrate “humility and generosity toward the research subject” (Pillow, 2003, p. 185), they are nonetheless valuable acts of reciprocity. They also demonstrate what researchers can do within the context of the increasing demands to “publish or perish”; demands which constrain opportunities for researcher reflexivity.
**SSJ Literature That Practices a Reflexivity of Discomfort**

At the same time, and in contrast to the literature above that reflexes “toward the familiar,” other scholars embraced a reflexivity of discomfort that engages “in critical reflection about how it is that we do the reflexive work of subjectivity and representation” (Pillow, 2003, p. 188). This is exemplified in the dialogue between Carrington (2007a, 2007b) and Margaret Carlisle Duncan (2007) on cultural identity and sport politics. In this dialogue, Carrington and Carlisle demonstrated how reflexivity can be engaged with outside of the self and is about more than disclosing one’s subject position to demonstrate data validity or reliability. Thorpe et al. (2011) took this further in their “collaborative reflection” where they challenged each other to use feminist readings of Bourdieu to make sense of their lived experiences as women academics. Rebecca Olive and Holly Thorpe (2011) directly take up Pillow’s (2003) reflexivities of discomfort by understanding reflexivity as more than a methodological necessity, and using it instead to illuminate the discomfort, tensions, and disruptions of negotiating their multiple subject positions while working in the field.

Similar dialogues that took place across interdisciplinary lines illustrated how the reflexive process may lead to intellectual growth, emotional and affective responses, and less solidified disciplinary assumptions (Moola et al., 2014). Butryn et al. (2014) engaged in a similar project by reflecting on each others’ stories from sport psychology and the sociology of sport and identifying themes across those stories that demonstrates how the scholars navigate and negotiate disciplinary tensions. Norman et al. (2019) used reflexive vignettes and intersectional analyses to interrogate their experiences of digital public engagement and showed how their differential social positions served to constrain or enable this engagement.

**Methods: Practicing a Reflexivity of Discomfort With “Critical Friends”**

The methodological process we draw from is the practice of dialogues between “critical friends” (Appleton, 2011; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Schneider & Parker, 2013). A critical friend is a trusted friend and colleague who can ask complex questions in a way that both critiques and supports the work of a friend (Costa & Kallick, 1993). According to Schneider and Parker (2013), a critical friend “serves as a mirror and a lens, providing a conduit for blending research into practice” (p. 1) in which a consciousness is raised to how both research and practice can be applied. Moreover, a critical friend is often external from the entire research project (Foulger, 2010), but can have some knowledge of the research being discussed. Methodologically, and according to Costa and Kallick (1993), a critical friend can facilitate a dialogue by first presenting a practice that their colleagues provide feedback on in ways that improve and elevate the presenter’s work. As part of this process, critical friends should not only critique the practice, but also encourage the presenter to consider alternative perspectives than their own.

What drew us to this framework are our relationships as friends and colleagues who have supported each other through dissertation writing and the academic job market over the past 7 years. While we participate in different forms of research both in terms of topic areas and methodologies, we share the purpose of engaging in an ongoing questioning and dialogue about how and why we do research. As such, while we describe our methodological process below, at the same time we note that our “critical friends” dialogue was shaped by numerous, previous informal conversations where we reflexively engaged (and commiserated!) with one other about our research.

To begin this process, each of us wrote a short vignette about our dissertation research and shared the vignette with one another through a shared online document 3 days before engaging in a critical dialogue regarding each story. During this time, we agreed to review and take informal notes on each vignette, which would help guide the discussion. We met on Zoom at a previously agreed-on time and engaged in a 2-hr reflexive dialogue, using the vignettes as the basis for our discussion. We refrained from formalized speaking order, and instead jumped back and forth between each of our vignettes as we would in previous conversations about our research. This allowed us to remain as comfortable as possible given that this was our “data collection” phase. As we discussed our vignettes, we each took our own notes of the conversation, which we eventually shared to construct the written discussion.

In moving toward this objective, we believe it is important to first describe our subject positions to provide the reader with the context necessary to understand the vignettes and discussion. It is pertinent to acknowledge that while we come from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, we all identify as heterosexual, cis-gendered men, and; thus our stories, analysis, and the knowledge they produce should be understood as partial and limited based on these identitarian social positions. Our objective here is not to aim for a perfectly diverse set of perspectives, but rather to lay bare the imperfect ways in which we grapple with our research.

Adam is a cis-gendered, straight, mixed-race settler scholar whose father is a Pakistani immigrant and whose mother is a third-generation Canadian with Scottish and English roots. His research aims to reorient problematic assumptions, representations, and knowledge of Muslim communities, utilizing sport as his entry point to do so, while forwarding reimagined perspectives on the role of sport and physical activity within the Canadian landscape. Adam works at Western University in London, ON, Canada, which is located on the traditional lands of the Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee, Lánaa’kewak, and Chonnonton Nations. His department’s building is named after the Thames River that runs from the forks of London and empties into Lake St. Clair—and was originally named “Askumessipi”—or the “Antlered River”—by the neutrals—a band of the Chonnonton.

Mike is the second son of two Vietnamese refugee parents who resettled in San José, California, and his background informs his identity and his work in sport-related studies on Vietnam and the Vietnamese diaspora. Mike, through his scholarship and advocacy, aims to represent the Vietnamese community in means other than those trapped within frames of war, immigration, and turmoil. He recognizes that his work and livelihood are based on the native and Indigenous land that San José State University community recognizes. This land belongs to the present-day Muwekma Ohlone Tribe, with an enrolled Bureau of Indian Affairs documented membership of over 550, is comprised of all of the known surviving American Indian lineages Aboriginal to the San Francisco Bay region who trace their ancestry through the Missions Santa Clara, San José, and Dolores, during the advent of the Hispano-European empire into Alta California, and who are the successors and living members of the sovereign, historic, previously Federally Recognized Verona Band of Alameda County.

Tavis is a cis, straight, third-generation settler-Canadian whose great-grandparents immigrated to North America from Scotland. He grew up with two sisters in a small community on the outskirts of the Greater Toronto Area. In his work, he attempts...
to interrogate the possibility of, and advocate for, sport to promote a more just and responsible future. In recent times, this work has taken place on the traditional and unceded territory of the Abenaki People, the unceded traditional lands of the Secwépemc (Secwépemc’ulucw), and the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. His professional interests closely mirror his personal ones: outdoor and community sports, well-being, and the environment. Without a doubt, the privilege of growing up with access to all these things has shaped his perspective on their importance and the settler colonial politics that underpin them.

**Results: Vignettes and Critical Friends Discussion**

**Defense Mechanisms: Adam’s Story**

I am at my dissertation defense in September 2019 at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario, Canada. My dissertation examined the rise of “radicalization” discourse in Canada as it relates to terrorism and sport, and the broader impacts of the turn to deradicalization strategies for the Middle East, Muslim diasporic communities, and the ongoing global War on Terror (see Ali, 2019). During my defense, one of my committee members aptly pointed to the tone of my writing, and in particular the “certainty” of my analysis—even though I claimed to be taking a post-structural approach to this project. So certain, at times, that my analysis left very little room for the interpretations and conclusions of others, while neglecting to illustrate the agentic capacity among the subjects of those texts. In doing so, the committee member reminded me, there is a risk that I reproduce the Orientalist representations of those individuals, the very thing that I was attempting to critique. Instead of “going for the jugular,” my committee member very eloquently said “I’m not sure if it’s appropriate to ask you this question, but why do you think, given your experience, that you may come across as so certain?” Afterward, as I completed my revisions, I realized that there were passages of my dissertation where my critiques of how Muslim athletes are represented as “risky” come across as dogmatic. These arguments left little room for the expression of agency among these athletes, which would help unsettle these universalized constructions, and thus made for a stronger analysis.

I am a mixed-race person who has a Pakistani and Muslim father who immigrated in his youth, and a third-generation Canadian mother who has Scottish and English roots. One of the major reasons for pursuing this project is the personal connection that I have to my Pakistani side; a connection that for many years was made solely through my relationship with Dad. I looked up to him and, like many father-son relationships, who I connected with most brightly through sport. He ended up coaching me at competitive level of field hockey—all the way up to the national ranks at one point. During my teenage years, we drove to many tournaments together. This was our ritual; he drove we would practice together. This was our ritual; he drove we would practice together. This was our ritual; he drove we would practice together. This was our ritual; he drove we would practice together. This was our ritual; he driven we would practice. This story—which is one of many I could tell—is implicated, as am I, in the ways that I write about the oppression of Muslim-Canadians.

**Critical Friends Dialogue #1**

In our discussions following this story, Adam began by elaborating on some of the feelings he had when it came to writing his dissertation, and about Muslim communities more broadly. He explained that while there is not necessarily a direct relationship between his father and he getting carded and his polemic critique of Orientalist representations of Muslims, that underneath the surface lies a personal (and political) grievance again the ways in which this supposedly welcoming nation (Canada) questioned the humanity of his father. These feelings of fear, sadness, anger, and vengeance manifest in an absolute determination to reveal injustice and racism through Adam’s analyses. He also explained that his predominantly textual forms of analysis allow Adam to write about a community to which he feels a closeness to but does not feel like he truly belongs within because of his mixed-race and culturally ambiguous identity.

Mike’s intervention in the discussion was regarding Adam’s polemic arguments, to which he responded that perhaps Adam’s arguments were so strong because he felt like “that could have been you.” Mike posited that Adam saw himself in the representations of the Muslim athletes “as a threat,” the same way he, his Dad, and family members have been made to feel on several occasions in their everyday lives. One of the ways to address this would be to engage with Muslim and South Asian communities directly through ethnographic research, such that their voices can be centered in a more explicit way (Ratna, 2011, 2016; Szto, 2020). This suggestion sparked discomfort in Adam, who alluded to his feeling a lack of belonging within a community that he is ostensibly a part of, and as a result does not feel like they are "qualified" to conduct research within. Feeling like an impostor within his own community has led Adam to feel more comfortable with textual-based and media analysis, where he can write as an ambivalent insider-outsider community member without having to be vulnerable to rejection from members of that community. Here, Adam is referring to a type of racial impostor syndrome (Lacey, 2022) that characterizes his tenuous, malleable, and yet deeply meaningful connection to the Muslim community. This navigation is further complicated by the liminal space he and his sister occupy in the family as “familiar strangers” who share the same space as their Muslim family members but do not belong to it because of their “failed” cultural qualifications (nonpracticing and non-Urdu speaking).

Tavis challenged Adam to further explore the implications of his decision to write about injustices toward the Muslim community “from afar,” instead of working directly with the community. Adam responded by explaining that because of his racialized ambivalence within the community and his family, he felt more insulated (and comfortable) sticking to discourse and media analyses where he did not have to directly confront this dilemma. He also admitted to feeling like this type of research is more “ethical” than engaging with the Muslim community directly, because of his assumption that those within the community would question his motives for doing research with them once he is “found out” as an impostor. His friends, however, pushed Adam to acknowledge that there is a certain level of privilege in being able to write about Muslim sporting communities and athletes, while at the same time, not necessarily including their voices in the research he does.

Furthermore, Adam’s impostor-like feelings within his Muslim family must be contextualized within the anti-Islamic racism,
Islamophobia, and xenophobia toward Muslim communities in sport (Ali & King, 2021) and in North America broadly (Zine, 2022). Adam’s racial ambiguity has, no doubt, allowed him to “pass” at points throughout his life, and, as such, he has at times escaped racist vitriol that his father and relatives have faced. We should state that we are not attempting to create a hierarchy of research methods through our dialogue about Adam’s vignette, nor are we stating that certain forms of knowledge production are “closer to truth” than others. We are, instead, interrogating the ways in which Adam’s decisions about his research are shaped by the emotional forces of his personal life, forces which have significant racial implications for the subjects he writes about.

**Post ethnographic Feelings: Mike’s Story**

It’s been 5 years since I finished my participatory framed ethnographic research project based in Vietnam. When I reminisce about the year I lived in Vietnam for this project, most of the memories are good. Most. Memories of the research bring me back to a time where I was able to do something with people that had an actionable outcome. We did that. We (myself and Football for All in Vietnam staff) worked together for a year to conduct a participatory evaluation and through that I conducted interviews with government officials, headmasters of schools, primary and secondary school teachers, community members, and FFAV staff. This opportunity allowed me to interact with hundreds of people. So, I think about this—I was given this amazing opportunity—but what does this mean, broadly speaking? And 5 years later, I still think “what was I doing” and “what am I doing?” I write this knowing that my time in Vietnam represented only a small piece of my participants’ lives, which they continued after I concluded my research. In fact, I’d reason that most people in Vietnam did not care too much for my presence. So, why do I care so much that I was there for one year? The memories are mostly good. Now, they are mostly good because there is a shadow of pure guilt. Don’t tell me it’s all good! The guilt is real. Nobody teaches you how to feel about research. They’ll teach you how you can do the research, you know, the steps, the way to take notes or approach people. But nobody will tell you how you’ll feel. The actual emotions that turn your stomach.

So, I mostly feel good. I mostly have good memories. But I do not feel amazed that my success is based on research I did with others. The tenure-track position, the publications, the comments from my peers in that field. And, the people who granted me this opportunity early in the morning, working with the trail crew from about 6 am until 2:30 pm, and then driving home. At the time, I thought of that as he got closer to the end date of his dissertation fieldwork, he had strong feelings that in doing participatory work with community members the only way to make it work and be committed is to stay, which resulted in significant internal conflict for him. In addition to the familiar pressure to finish his doctoral work, Mike was also stuck between the strong emotional commitment he felt to the community he worked with and his own family. He acknowledged that staying in Vietnam and not returning to Canada to finish his dissertation would have eventually resulted in heartache for his parents, who are Vietnamese refugees and for whom Mike’s and his brother’s education was of utmost importance. Mike stated that when he told his parents his idea of conducting research in Vietnam, his father’s response was, “It’s funny you want to return to Vietnam, as many people left years ago.” Mike’s parents’ expectations surrounding his education are common within refugee and immigrant communities (Langenkamp, 2019), and shape his work as a SFD researcher in ways that are unique from many of his peers in that field.

Adam asked Mike to further interrogate his feelings of guilt, asking “Is it about the fact that you didn’t stay in Vietnam? Do you feel you have benefitted too much from what the research has provided you with?” Mike first responded by stating there may be a myriad of reasons for this feeling, one being that academia is a precarious field. He adds that “SFD is now such a widely researched field that I feel I don’t belong. Maybe it’s the impostor syndrome I battle with every day.” Adam continued this by pointing out that the impostor syndrome omnipresent within academia is oftentimes particularly powerful for racialized folks (Ahmed, 2012; Murray et al., 2022). Murray et al. (2022) argue that impostor feelings are a “form of unevenly distributed emotional work,” which are required to survive and thrive within structurally unequal universities (p. 2).

This extends to the SFD research field, where Mike tends to find himself surrounded by mostly white colleagues. He exemplifies this by pointing to a participatory-action research panel held at the 2022 North American Society for the Sociology of Sport (NASSS) Conference in Montreal, where he was the only panelist of color. Mike responded by confronting his feelings surrounding doing this kind of research and the associated struggles with being a scholar of color in SFD, a field that continues to reckon with its whiteness (Darnell, 2012). This includes the desire to do work that is “good and right” by his community, the difficulties in writing about his Vietnam-focused research, and the guilt of reaping the benefits his scholarship and research afford him. He constantly grapples with the necessity of publishing while navigating why and how, as a scholar of color in SFD, he can do so while staying true to Vietnam and his research communities.

**Thoughts on the Trail: Tavis’s Story**

In 2018 and 2019, I was welcomed onto a trail-building crew based in, and working on, a First Nation reserve, as part of my PhD fieldwork. My project was initially conceived of as a larger examination of an SFD-type project operating in British Columbia, with this crew being a small, if significant, “legacy” of such interventions. After a few days, or maybe a week, of working with this crew in 2018, I made the decision that rather than visit as many communities as possible who had worked with this sport-for-development program, I could focus my fieldwork on the much smaller scale that I was living day-to-day: heading to the community early in the morning, working with the trail crew from about 6 am until 2:30 pm, and then driving home. At the time, I thought of
it as a practical dilemma. How was I going to be able to best answer my research questions? How would I be able to gather more data? How much driving am I going to have to do in either scenario? Can I afford the gas? In the back of my mind, though, I couldn’t shake the feeling that the ethnographic aspects of my project came with some responsibilities. My trail-building crew mates, I thought, barely cared (if at all) about my research. It seemed to me that they were much happier to have an extra pair of hands on the crew. Honestly, I’m also ambivalent, at times, about the process of knowledge production. I think it’s exciting, important, and I might even be good at my role in all of it, but the decision to dedicate more time than initially planned to work on a very small trail crew was heavily influenced by my preference for working on the trails versus doing participant observation in places with people that I wasn’t really getting to know.

The truth is that I didn’t agonize over this decision for too long. I felt both methodologically and personally that my time was better spent getting to know and work alongside this small crew of trail-builders than it would be visiting a new community and “observing” what was going on in each place. I still did some of that, but even those visits occurred at a slower pace, and with more programmatic involvement, than I’d initially conceived of in designing the project. I’m glad I made this choice, even though I might have had an easier time “answering” my research questions if I’d done it another way. What I’m left with, though, is what feels like an impossible complexity of trying to sort through the ethics, the politics, and the logics of this decision in the process of producing knowledge, and I feel less sure about what any of it means than when I started.

Critical Friends Dialogue #3

Adam and Mike both pushed Tavis to grapple with the implications of his choices in the field, and how they might be related to the analysis that he did down the road. This led Tavis to consider some feelings of shame, which he called a “let-down,” and how it affected the rest of the project. For Tavis, the decision to work with the small group instead of collecting more data was a practical one, but he also felt that it aligned with his personal principles,—especially the importance of committing relationally and interpersonally to his colleagues in the community. It was hard to predict but leaving the field for the final time in August 2019 was much more permanent than he expected. COVID, a new job, limited funds, shifting family priorities all meant that he still hasn’t been back to the community. So much for principles. For all of us, it’s hard to imagine that this disappointment or shame doesn’t influence the qualitative analysis at some point.

Adam further pushed Tavis to consider the source of this let-down/shame/guilt. He asked, “Do you think those feelings are about some form of white guilt?” Tavis considered and answered that he did not think so and felt that while he had failed to keep those principles in line, it was not related to whiteness. Pushed again, Tavis reconsidered whether part of the shame or guilt over not returning to the community since 2019 is tied to an inability, or unwillingness, to leverage his privilege to keep that community-oriented research decision consistent. It’s difficult to make sense of the notion of privilege, especially “reflexively.” To do so, Tavis reflected on a moment, when he was on his way home, that one of his crewmates sent him a picture of the new trail, which they had named “Smith’s Pick.”

The name refers to Tavis, but also to the moment in his first week when he hit a buried rock with a pick and the flat part of the head broke off. The trail crew thought it was hilarious, which it was. But the decision to give the trail that name means that Tavis’s privileges—the embodied privilege of the University, whiteness, and generations of access to land and capital among them—are literally etched into the ground in the community. Cooke (2017) refers to her experience of working as a laborer on a nearby ski resort as a process of “inscribing settler privilege” on the land, which Tavis connects to this reflection through the ways he inscribed his own privilege on the trail. At the same time, Tavis is also wary of what Go (2016) refers to as the repression of subaltern agency, which could occur if he were only to consider the naming of the trail through his settler lens. In other words, he does not think of this privilege in absolute terms, and instead tries to accurately represent this story as one about white guilt, settler privilege, and participant agency. As such, the fact that his crewmates chose this name as a funny reminder of his broken pick is an important part of this story.

This does mean, however, that these privileges literally cannot be separated from the research space, his relationships with the participants, or the data. So, in a process of knowledge production, sitting with the discomfort and uncertainty of the implications of these privileges is the least we can do. For Tavis, moving forward, this means (in part) recognizing the discomfort produced by a misalignment between what he understands as a principled research practice, and the pressure(s) of other duties and responsibilities. There are implications here for knowledge production, settler colonial privilege, and the politics that underpin both.

Discussion

In the vignettes and our critical friends dialogue outlined above, we demonstrate one possibility for engaging in a form of reflexivity between colleagues that, rather than providing a “cure” for knowledge production and representation, is nonlinear, uncomfortable, and reveals the complex tensions between the co-authors and our research. These “messy” reflexive dialogues require us to recognize “how we think we know what we know is neither transparent nor is it innocent” (Visweswaran, 1994, p. 80). We do so by interrogating the very knowledge that we are attempting to produce (Chaudhry, 1997; Minh-ha, 1989), making sense of our “folded subjectivities” (St. Pierre, 1997), and recognizing that we are, at times, similar and dissimilar from research participants and other researchers in the field. Engaging in reflexivities of discomfort forced us to examine “whether we can be accountable to people’s struggles for self-representation and self-determination” (Visweswaran, 1994, p. 32) while at the same time actively participating in the production of new, but partial, knowledge.

In doing so, our approach in this paper complements the past work in SSJ that similarly champions Pillow’s (2003) call for uncomfortable forms of reflexivity (Oliver & Thorpe, 2011; Thorpe et al., 2011). Oliver and Thorpe (2011), for example, illuminate the discomfort, tensions, and disruptions of negotiating their multiple subject positions while working in the field by using Bourdieu’s concept of regulated liberties. In doing so, they demonstrate how they navigate dynamic ethnographic and gendered contexts of snowboarding and surfing as feminist researchers, and how they leverage shifting relations of power within those contexts to resist and contest these male-dominated environments. Thorpe et al. (2011) shared autoethnographic vignettes and then engaged in a critical dialogue to consider how their social positions influenced their research conclusions and interpretations. By engaging in a collaborative reflection, these scholars explored the potential of
researchers develop their re-belief that such an approach also has purchase for helping the consideration of new perspectives in their work. As such, we believe that engaging in cultural ethnography, helped us demonstrate the importance of our careers. These critical dialogues regarding our research, which are (critical) friends who encourage from our own helped us deepen and enrich the necessary skepticism within similar fields (Olive & Thorpe, 2011; Thorpe et al., 2011), or have occurred through reflections on a shared project (Book et al., 2023), our dialogue shows how researchers who focus on different topics and utilize different methodologies can meaningfully interrogate one another’s reflexive stances. Moreover, the critical friends approach has its roots in education (Appleton, 2011; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Schneider & Parker, 2013) but, in our opinion, requires further flushing out in the sociology of sport. Previous sport scholars have utilized the critical friends framework as a methodological tool related to data analysis (Gale et al., 2019), nuanced discussion of data derived from reflexive notes (Quinn & Misener, 2023), and theoretical rigor (Allison & Pope, 2021). We believe that such an approach also has purchase for helping researchers develop their reflexive capacity.

Indeed, we illuminated how sharing a meaningful research story among trusted colleagues who engage in research different from our own helped us deepen and enrich the necessary skepticism we have of the research we conduct and the knowledge we produce. The fact is that we are (critical) friends who encourage each other to be better researchers through conversations such as the one highlighted above. Whether it be at the annual NASSS conference or our bi-monthly Zoom sessions, a topic of conversation that always arises is how we feel about our research and careers. These critical dialogues regarding our research, which range from discursive analyses to participatory-action research and cultural ethnography, helped us demonstrate the importance of our continued efforts to represent the communities that we work with, belong to, and write about. As such, we believe that engaging in such dialogues between critical sport scholars with differing epistemological and methodological approaches can help facilitate the consideration of new perspectives in their work.

Reflexivity, Race, and Research

Such capacities can also be enriched through a consideration of the relationship between race and reflexivity, which we explore through our vignettes and discussion. In doing so, we follow Robin Boylorn’s (2011) assertion that our racial identities are inextricable from our researcher identities, and that reflexivity “can be used to inform how our everyday experiences of race inform our ethnographic investigations” (p. 180). This was realized in all three of our discussions. Adam attempted to navigate the ways in which his writing about Muslim communities was informed by his mixed-race status with unstable and dynamic forms of privilege and experiences with his Pakistani family and father. The ensuring dialogue demonstrates the ways in which race and reflexivity are significantly implicated in nonethnographic research and unsettles feelings of comfort that may have previously soothed scholars like Adam. Mike explored the tension of being a researcher of color within the SDP field. Whereas previous SDP researchers acknowledge how their awareness of their whiteness influences their work (Giles, 2004; McSweeney, 2019), Mike’s navigation involves resolving his privileged researcher status alongside his racialized and diasporic identity and commitments to a community to which he belongs. Finally, following Tavis’s vignette on his work with a trail-building crew on a First Nations reserve, Adam and Mike, both scholars of color, encouraged Tavis to reconsider race as part of his reflexive process in their critical dialogues. By interrogating the naming of the trail as “Smith’s Pick” through lenses of whiteness and settler colonialism, Tavis answers Boylorn’s (2011) call for white researchers to investigate the role of race in their research.

Reflexivity and ECR Subjectivities

A further question is how, as ECRs, we practice reflexivity while traversing a neoliberal academic landscape that often leaves little room for such critical self-interrogative practices. This overarching landscape and its accompanied impact on university retention, tenure, and promotion processes do not neatly align with the need for public-facing research in the sociology of sport (Cooky, 2017). In other words, having to balance the demands of the academic “publish or perish” culture while attempting to conduct research in a way that might engender social change is difficult, to say the least, for sport sociologists. This is particularly true for ECRs who must discern departmental politics, develop new courses, build collegial relationships, and recruit and supervise graduate students, all while developing their research identity and maintaining a robust publication record. Enright and Facer (2017) state that ECRs are often faced with internal conversations underpinned by this overarching landscape that influences and informs their research and scholarship. Given these cultural pressures, ECRs engaging in reflexivity might do so at their own risk, given that such a task involves questioning and scrutinizing their own research processes (Callagher et al., 2021). ECRs may thus be more invested (either consciously or unconsciously) in constructing themselves as a legitimate, competent, and reflexive researcher (Bishop & Shepherd, 2011, p. 1286).

Through our critical dialogues, we attempt to resist such a construction by instead laying bare and embracing what it means for sociology of sport ECRs to live with a reflexivity of discomfort (Pillow, 2003, p. 192). By focusing our discussion on vignettes that describe moments of conflict in our dissertation research and revealing the affective responses we literally could not help but feel in response to those moments, we illuminate the often unspoken, but challenging and tenuous tensions familiar to ECRs, including those from communities that have been historically excluded by the academy. In doing so, we demonstrate how reflexivity might be taken up to help ECRs understand how their conditions give rise to their research and knowledge production (Bishop & Shepherd, 2011). At the same time, and given the cultural pressures identified above, we acknowledge the many challenges ECRs face to do so, considering that a reflexivity of discomfort forces us to slow down and question, rather than accelerate and produce.

Conclusion

This paper sought to reimagine reflexivity as a critical practice through which scholars might complicate their research processes, conclusions, and their contributions to knowledge advancement in the sociology of sport. We did so by using Pillow’s description of reflexive strategies to identify how researcher reflexivity has been
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taken up in SSJ from 2000 to 2022. Moreover, our approach highlights the impact reflexivity has had on us as researchers. We operationalized Pillow’s (2003) “reflexivities of discomfort” through the critical friends’ approach (Costa & Kallick, 1993) to engage in a collaborative dialogue regarding a research story shared by each of the co-authors. The vignettes and discussion they sparked among the co-authors helped demonstrate how collaborative forms of reflexivity can be mobilized toward the interrogation of researcher subjectivity, the research process, and knowledge production. By making public this dialogue, while being vulnerable and opening ourselves up to scrutiny, we aspire toward helping nurture a critical sociology of sport that is, in part, anchored to the practice of reflexivity. We also demonstrate the ways in which race can be implicated and interrogated through collaborative, reflexive dialogues, and illuminate how these practices may be useful for ECRs navigating the demands of the academy.

We believe that those reading our work might find these reflexive practices useful for understanding the complexity of our lived experiences, shaping our research activities and writing processes and reinforcing our knowledge production as important and necessary, but also partial. Furthermore, and given that reflexivity tended to be represented most within the methods of the reviewed articles, we also believe there is an opportunity for scholars to write about reflexivity within the analysis and discussion section of research papers to both center this partiality and further contextualize their findings. Given the often-strict parameters around publishing, such an endeavor would require championing from journal editors and encouragement from peer reviewers for submissions that centralize reflexivity as more than a methodological tool. Finally, we also believe that reflexivity, often written about retroactively, might also be beneficial for helping scholars assess whether, and how, they plan and carry out future research. Indeed, some of the problematics of strategies that reflex toward the familiar which Pillow (2003) outlines may be more ethically navigated before the research begins, rather than in retrospect. Our overall hope is that the rich and diverse group of emerging scholars in the sociology of sport might see themselves, in whole, or in part, through our dialogues, and that this may help promote future “critical friendships” which advance a reflexive and empathetic agenda in the examination of sport and physical culture.

References


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