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## If Not Now, When? Putting the “Me” in Research

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### 2013 ASHE PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

# If Not Now, When? Putting the “Me” in Research

*Lisa Wolf-Wendel*

**Errata:** This address should have been published in the pages of this issue and volume in the year following the Annual Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) Conference at which it was delivered. In 2022, the ASHE Ethics Committee conducted an investigation to understand why nine Presidential Addresses had yet to be printed in *The Review of Higher Education*. The ASHE Presidential Addresses missing were from C. Robert Pace (1977), Burton Clark (1980), Howard R. Bowen (1981), Joan S. Stark (1985), Sheila Slaughter (1996), Lisa Wolf-Wendel (2013), Scott Thomas (2016), Shaun R. Harper (2017), and Lori Patton Davis (2018).

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Dedication: This address is dedicated to my best friend and colleague Kelly Ward who left our lives too soon. She would have loved to have seen this in print. I miss her every day. She remains the inspiration for all I do and all I am.

The investigation findings indicated a reliance on tradition rather than the establishment of a clear process. One recommendation in this report was that the contract with *RHE* Editors be amended to include an explicit process and expectation of publication of ASHE presidential addresses; this was completed in February 2023 by way of a contract signed by the ASHE Executive Director and *RHE* editor/s and to be required from 2023 on. Another recommendation was to collect the missing presidential addresses for publication and make them available. ASHE took up the responsibility of publishing missing addresses by contacting the president, archives and/or estate; the addresses of Drs. Pace, Clark, Bowen, Stark, and Slaughter were sought but were no longer available, including this speech.

Drs. Wolf-Wendel, Thomas, Harper, and Patton Davis were asked by ASHE in April 2022 to submit their manuscripts to be published as an erratum. Past president Wolf-Wendel's address was submitted on July 12, 2022 to the ASHE Office. On April 5, 2024, the ASHE President and board asked the *RHE* editors to take up the missing addresses, and editors agreed. Immediately, the manuscript moved through the production process as outlined in the contract, "While the presidential address is not sent out for peer review, it will follow the regular copyediting process." After copy editing and proofs, this erratum presidential speech was posted on August 29, 2024.

For ASHE Presidential Addresses and available video recordings see the [ASHE Presidential Addresses](#) website. Text versions and the addresses can also be found in the online volumes of *The Review of Higher Education*.

**Abstract:** The article is my ASHE Presidential Address from 2013 – it has not been substantially revised or updated. It is a reflective piece on my journey in academia, with a particular focus on the role of personal identity in research. The piece begins by discussing my initial belief in the importance of maintaining objectivity in research by distancing personal identity from my work. This belief was rooted in the traditional academic notion that research should be "objective" and "distanced." My position, however, evolved as I came to realize that my positionality was not objective but was instead problematic. This realization was not immediate but was the result of years of reading, studying, and being influenced by other scholars. In this piece I share an "aha moment" that greatly influenced my professional and personal life. This moment led to a significant shift in my approach to research, making privilege and awareness central to my work. The essay includes not only my perspectives on this matter, but also those of my colleagues in the field in the form of data as well as vignettes. The paper concludes by encouraging other academics to acknowledge their personal identities and experiences as fundamental parts of academic discourse – to engage in me-search. This perspective challenges traditional notions of objectivity and distance in research, suggesting a more inclusive and self-aware approach to academia.

*Keywords:* research, objectivity, positionality, privilege

The inspiration for this address came to me when I was listening to Anna Neuman’s 2012 Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) Presidential address titled, *What We Should Know About Learning and Why?* (Neumann, 2014). While listening to her address at ASHE, I started to cry—big ugly tears. Chris Golde, who was sitting next to me, turned to me, and asked, “why are you crying?” I whispered to her that Anna’s talk was brilliant and that it was overwhelming to think that I would have to give a Presidential Address the following year. Admittedly, I was thrilled to be the incoming president of ASHE, but I noted that I would rather not have to give such an address. Though I often have a lot to say, I wasn’t sure what I had to offer in this format to all my brilliant colleagues. Chris, wise woman that she is, patted me on the shoulder, handed me a handkerchief, and said “You will be fine. Just be yourself.” To which I replied – “Be myself? What does being myself have to do with a Presidential Address? How are those two things connected?” I was left to ponder that question—How is who I am related to a Presidential Address at ASHE? The answer, it turns out, is everything.

Not surprisingly, who I am (and who you are) is deeply connected to the research that we each do. This connection is the focus of this address. While there are several inspirations for this talk—two quotes stand out. The first is a quote from Hillel that I remember seeing on Daryl Smith’s office wall when I would go to advising meetings. It read: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am not for others, what am I? And if not now, when?” (Hillel, as cited in Kornblut, 2019, p. 1. I was further inspired by a quote from W.E.B. Du Bois to his daughter: “The main thing is the YOU... the ability to do, the will to conquer, the determination to understand and know this great, wonderful, curious world” (as cited in Lawson, 2004, p. 112). While these words can mean many things in different contexts, to me they speak to the role that who we are as humans plays in the work that we do.

This address, however, is not just going to be about me. After receiving Human Subjects Approval, I sent an email survey to 60 ASHE members. The survey asked lots of open-ended questions—which I know breaks rules about survey construction as well as qualitative methods. In it, I asked these ASHE members to reflect on the role that their background and identities played in their research. I asked these questions and many of you responded. In fact, I got a 62% response rate—if that happened every time I sent out a survey, think where I might be today! I am thankful to those who took the time to complete the survey, and honored that so many of you heeded my call. I also want to note that you all gave me very thoughtful responses to my questions, answers that I am going to build into this address. The other thing I provide in this talk are the transcripts of some video clips that I asked a few key members of ASHE to send to me. You will see these vignettes featured within this address.

I promise, this is not just a talk about me. It is also about you—the members of ASHE. Taking Chris Golde’s advice to “be myself” in this address, I am going to talk about my own path while amplifying the stories of other ASHE members in a journey exploring the ins and outs of me-search.

- “as a white cis-gender woman”
- “a low income, first generation multiracial Asian American”
- “someone who grew up half a step from poverty”
- “someone who benefited from financial aid”
- “a Native American father of young boys who grew up with many villages”
- “a Black man”
- “someone trained in engineering and business who is also Hispanic”
- “a 1.5 generation immigrant”
- “a French Canadian Catholic”
- “someone who was told I would never succeed”
- “someone who lived on the margin”
- “an administrator”
- “a faculty member”
- “a daughter of a professor”
- “a mother”
- “a non-traditional student”
- “a privileged person who has had countless second chances”
- “someone so economically poor that I was hungry after school most of the time, and so poor that I dreamed of having school clothes for the first day of school and pink ballerina slippers and colorful beads.”

This is how your colleagues describe themselves. All these people represented above and within this talk are members of ASHE. My guess is that many of you don’t know these things about one another. These aren’t things that we necessarily talk or write about—except for maybe in a positional-ity statement in our methods sections or in deep conversations among our friends. However, these are fundamental parts of people’s lives and these pieces of identity affect the work that we do in higher education in so many ways.

#### VIGNETTE 1:

The New York City Black and Latino Male High School Achievement Study is a collective example of me-research or dare I say, we-research. The study brought together 13 Black and Latino male scholars who traveled to New York City to find young men of color like ourselves: bright, ambitious, academically focused, and resilient. We learned much from the students we interviewed about what it takes to succeed in high school and to successfully navigate their ways to, and through higher education. In turn, we also learned a lot about ourselves as Black and Latino male researchers who are firmly committed to increasing access equity and success for young men like ourselves. (Shaun Harper)

**ABOUT MY JOURNEY: FROM RESEARCH TO ME-SEARCH.**

Let me tell you about me. I was born in Baltimore, Maryland, but I grew up in Anchorage, Alaska. My parents, both from back east, moved to Anchorage in 1966 when my father was drafted into the Air Force. He was granted an “overseas assignment”—which turned to be in Anchorage (not Europe as they had hoped). My father loved Alaska—so after his military assignment was completed, he decided to stay and continue to work there as a psychiatrist. When I was 8 years old, my mother realized that that she didn’t feel fulfilled and she couldn’t find local opportunities in Alaska to satisfy her needs. She had just read Betty Friedan’s (2010) *Feminine Mystique* and it inspired her to pursue an advanced degree, which she quickly realized would mean leaving home. After much thought, my mom left Anchorage and moved to Northern California where she got a Rockefeller Fellowship to study museum curation. She left us (my brother was 10 and my sister was 5) with my father who was starting a psychiatry practice. He was also president of the local school board. He was a busy person but when she went away to school, he committed himself to taking care of us. After 18 months, my mom earned her degree and then she came back home to all of us. She got hired as the Curator of Education for the Anchorage Museum of History and Art—and she ended up being the museum’s director and working there for 35 years. Both of my parents influence how I think about life, about education, about gendered roles, and about who I am, and who I want to be. I note that my mother heard me give this address in St. Louis in 2013 but has since passed away from breast cancer. She would have liked to see this talk in print.

In relationship to higher education, one of the things my parents told me was that I had to go to college—it wasn’t an option for me to do something else. To them, going to college meant going back east because that was what they were familiar with. My father had attended Dartmouth College, one of only a handful of Jewish men admitted due to quotas. My mom initially attended Chatham College, a women’s college, but then, when she married my father, she transferred to and graduated from Johns Hopkins University. She was in the first class of women admitted to Johns Hopkins and she graduated from there before they even considered themselves to be coed. I see my parents as academic trailblazers. I applied to and got into Brown University. I was a good student, but I also suspect they were after geographic diversity in their freshman class. I didn’t fit in there as well as I would have liked. I may have been the most New York Jewish person in Anchorage, Alaska, but I was not the most New York Jewish person at Brown. “My people” at Brown didn’t recognize me as part of them. I loved the academics at Brown and I rowed on the crew team. I did my best to fit in—but I just never found my people. As a result, I transferred. I am a transfer student. Specifically, I transferred to Stanford [University]—which is not a typical move. Once at Stanford,

I found my home. I loved Stanford. It was there that I was introduced to residential education and the power of student affairs. I became a Resident Advisor (RA). When I graduated, I knew that I wanted to work on a college campus and to work with college students, helping them to find their people and to make the most of their academic and extracurricular experiences.

Without much guidance, I applied to graduate school—because that was what I thought you were supposed to do. I got into several programs and decided to go to the Claremont Graduate University to study higher education so that I could one day be a Dean of Students. My faculty, Daryl Smith and Jack Schuster, told me I was “too young” and that I needed to get more job experience in the field before I graduated. They impressed upon me how important it was to have life experience to be a good researcher, as well as to help students. So, I did my best to oblige. I held multiple jobs in graduate school—including as a Residence Life Coordinator at Scripps College, an Intern with the Vice Provost of the Claremont University Center, a position with endowment, as well as GTA (statistics) and GRA positions with multiple professors. Those positions opened many doors for me, but they also inspired me to think about my own future research and what it was that I wanted to study.

It should be noted that I didn’t set out to study myself. I didn’t think there was much of a need to study Jewish girls from Alaska who didn’t fit in at an Ivy league college, so transferred to an equally fancy school on the West Coast. It’s not a big demographic and I didn’t think my story was all that generalizable. Plus, I had been told that research ought to be “objective” and “distanced,” so my early work was more related to observations or experiences than it was to my identities.

My first study that I conducted was about women’s colleges (Smith et al., 1995). I remember feeling proud of myself about that study. I worked at Scripps College, a women’s college. I remember thinking, “Well, I work at a women’s college, but I never went to one, so I have some objectivity when I study them.” I remember believing that people were going to recognize that objectivity in my work and find it to be an asset. There was this purposeful distancing that I engaged in. Eventually, however, I came to realize that my privileged position apropos of my research was not objective, rather it was problematic. This notion of privilege and awareness of it later became a centerpiece of my work. I note this realization took me years and was the result of continued reading, studying, and influencing by scholars in our discipline.

Later in my career, I had an interesting “aha moment” that greatly influenced my professional and personal life. My dearest friend and colleague Kelly Ward and I were at a conference session. One of us probably had an infant with us at that time. The conference session was about how difficult it is for academics to also be parents. The whole tenor of the talk was about

how impossible it was to be an academic and a parent. We heard the panelists say, “Don’t do it.” “Don’t try it.” “This is the worst profession ever to be a parent.” Kelly and I walked out of that session and said to each other, “Did that resonate with you?” What those academic were saying didn’t make sense, given our own experiences. To be honest, I love my life as an academic. I love being a professor. I love being a parent. This dissonance led us to conclude that maybe there’s a part of a story that isn’t being told, and maybe that’s an important part to tell. I don’t think we set out to do me-search. I think that our own experiences as tenure track women with children made us recognize that a part of the story was missing, and we felt the need to try and fill in the hole and see if there were other voices that might sound more familiar to us.

This realization launched us into our longitudinal study of tenure track women with young children (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). The outcome was powerful—for us and for other academic parents. My observation is that people connect to what we say, in part, because they know we have been there. At the same time, other people might dismiss our work for the same reason—because we have been there. It’s interesting to think how your work is perceived by others in that light. There is a certain level of satisfaction in knowing that your research resonates with others and that it tells a story that has yet to be told, even more powerful is when your research influences practice. It is important to note that as a cis-gender White woman, there are certain structural privileges at play that likely make it easier for me to engage in me-search than it might be for others with more marginalized positionalities. I explore this in a bit more depth later in this address.

VIGNETTE 2:

I identify as a feminist scholar and I also am woman identified. I’m also a faculty member and those three aspects of my identity absolutely inform my notion of research. I primarily study faculty and feminism and gender in the academy so those aspects of my identity are fundamental to the way I think about what it is I’m interested in. Who I am brings to mind questions and the research I look at to inform my work as well as informing my theoretical foundations. (Jeni Hart)

## THE ME-SEARCH CONTINUUM

A word of admonition here: please don’t stop reading this if you do quantitative work. I believe, and my survey results bear testament to the idea that regardless of methodology, each of us is connected in some way to the research that we do. Some are more aware or comfortable with this idea than others and sometimes it is difficult to tease out how we are related to what we study. As a colleague explained: “Some may be under the illusion of being separate from what they study, how they study it, or how they interpret



their feelings—but they are likely deluding themselves.” If we choose to be self-aware, we are likely somehow implicated and intertwined in what we study. As another ASHE member explained:

“I truly believe that quantitative results, for example, parameter estimates, gammas, betas, coefficients of determination—you name the statistic—tell so many wonderful stories of our students. And I hear student voices in my findings because so many times I’ve relied on those voices and many times those voices have been my own.”

Perhaps me-search exists on a continuum. I recently read a research article (Erasmus, 2020) about the womb as a nexus between theory and practice. The article, written from the perspective of a woman’s womb, stands out as an example of what one might consider “extreme me-search.”

One might find autoethnography on one end of that continuum, studying a topic related to who you are as the next rung, studying a topic related to an experience that you might have had as the next rung, and studying something that you think is unrelated to who you are as the last end of the continuum. But, even with this last case, how one carries out the study would be different from how someone else would carry it out; we cannot divorce ourselves from who we are. Similarly, I argue that the questions we ask, the methods we choose, the ways we design our studies, how we interpret our data, how we write up our findings, and even the theories we use are driven by who we are. After this presidential address, a group of ASHE colleagues and I published an article about me-search (Gardner et al., 2017). As one of the respondents to my survey noted:

“I can only study what I do, because the unique set of circumstances that provide the path that I’m currently on. If I had attended another college or enrolled in a different graduate program, or accepted another job, I would not be studying what I am now. That process continues as I make decisions each day about how to spend my time and make commitments to the work that I find important. It is a process one, one that will continue for an entire career.”

The takeaway here is that me-search isn’t only about studying yourself, it can encompass a wider array of research approaches. In this address, I am using the broadest of definitions of me-search rather than focusing only on one end of the continuum.

#### VIGNETTE 3:

Do I think that our experiences and our identities shape the kind of research that we do? Absolutely. My father happened to be a faculty member, and he also happened to be my primary parent. Growing up, my mom took the primary role with my three older sisters, but by the time I came along, seven years later, she’d gone back to work and my dad had tenure. He was the one who came

home early to take care of me. He drove carpool, he fixed my lunch, he made us dinner. I grew up thinking that was the way most families operated and that universities should create space for faculty members to take care of their children. As a person who studies academic parenthood, I clearly brought that lens to my own work and the work that I will continue to do. (Margaret Sallee)

**SURVEY OF ASHE MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE AT THE ADDRESS**

At the Presidential Address, I asked attendees several questions using Poll Everywhere. The questions focused on the extent to which the audience engaged in me-search (or not) and the extent to which they were advised and advised others to engage in me-search. The results of this poll can be found in Table 1. The take-away here is that the vast majority of those present (89%) indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that their research was related to who they are. At the same time, 33% of those in attendance agreed or strongly agreed that they had been told not to study topics that were connected to who they were. Further, 24% indicated that they always advise others to do research related to their background, while an additional 43% noted that they frequently give this advice. Based on this on-the-spot data, I conclude that there is widespread agreement in the field that there is a benefit to engaging in some level of me-search, but also some hesitancy.

**TABLE 1.  
SURVEY OF ASHE MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE AT ADDRESS.**

My background is related to topics I study	45% Strongly Agree	44% Agree	6% Disagree	5% Strongly Disagree
I have been advised not to study topics related to who I am	17% Strongly Agree	16% Agree	33% Disagree	34% Strongly Disagree
I advise others to study topics related to who they are.	24% Always	43% Frequently	27% Sometimes	6% Never

VIGNETTE 4:

I would say that the motivation for my research agenda comes from my own experiences as a student athlete, as an African American woman in society, and as a professor who teaches about issues of diversity, access, and inclusion. My research is well-connected to my experiences in all these capacities. For example, my experience as a student athlete at a small, liberal arts, Division II institution was nothing like what I witnessed when I attended graduate school at a large Division I institution. I became intrigued by what I saw and

experienced working as a Graduate Assistant with this population. This was the spark that motivated my early research. Today, I am still very motivated by my personal experiences, but I'm also motivated by the findings from my research. My graduate students motivate me. And, the literature motivates me to ask new and interesting questions. (Joy Gaston Gayles)

### **MOTIVATIONS TO DO THE WORK WE DO: IT'S PERSONAL**

In the survey, I asked colleagues to tell me what motivates them. I got three different types of answers. The first set of answers centers around research being a means to an end. For example, some people noted that they did research to graduate, to get a job, to get promoted, or for recognition. For example, some noted the following:

"It was less about wanting to make a difference and more about getting publications—churn and burn."

"During my doctoral program, 'doing' research was just something doctoral students did. It was a means to an end."

Admittedly, I might have best characterized my early work as being related to this agenda. Initially, the goal was to get published, because that was what I had been taught to do (or that is how I interpreted what I was taught). I learned to think about research from a positivistic lens—that one should be connected to one's research enough that you could "get it" but not so much that you were entangled in it. There was a value in being distant and "objective." I was also trained to find the "hole in the literature" and to find a problem that was important. I was deluding myself into thinking that my research was objective because I was distanced from it. I know now that who we are and what we do are implicated in our research, no matter how distant we think we are from what we are studying. Distance is not objectivity; it is delusion. It took me a while to get to this perspective, but now that I am here, I believe it strongly.

A second motivation noted through the survey was that the goal of doing research was grounded in the personal. The goal was to hear a voice, debunk myths, and expand the story into new domains that don't yet exist and often the motivation was personal. As eloquently stated by my colleagues:

"My original motivation was a desire to see the experiences of people of color, namely African Americans reflected in research and literature. I'd gone through most of my education without having my voice or voices I connected to represented in textbooks and research. This made me feel as if the voices and experiences weren't considered important or relevant, despite my own lived experience. I want to contribute to bringing voices to research in a way that hadn't really been done. That passion comes from within."

“My personal experience and the experiences of my family members, neighbors, classmates who lived alongside me in an urban community that was criminalized, racialized and marginalized; challenging these meta narratives of urban communities and highlighting the value of urban communities and their residents within higher education institutions is what has been, and will continue to be my motivation.”

“Over time, I have wanted to study things that people think that they already understand and turn them on their heads a bit—offer a new perspective.”

VIGNETTE 5:

I’m recording this from my flat here in Cape Town, South Africa, where I’m spending the year as a Fulbright scholar. How does my identity shape the work that I do? I identify as a 1.5 generation Korean American. Spending most of my life feeling neither truly Korean nor truly “American” has led to my current line of work in understanding the educational experiences and migratory patterns and experiences of internationals. I have looked at this topic in the US, in Mexico, in South Korea, and now here in South Africa. My goal is to understand what it drives international students to study in this country. How does who they are shape the way they perceive themselves, their aspirations, and their experiences? And, more importantly, I want to know what role does the host country and its institutions play in furthering the educational pathways and learning experiences of these students. (Jenny Lee)

A third motivation that ASHE members wrote about was the motivation to do research that brought about changes in people’s lives or that affected policy or changed higher education. I remember as an Assistant Professor getting a call from my advisor, Daryl Smith. She asked me: “Are you doing your research?” I mentioned something about going to auctions and getting to know Kansas and adapting to my new job and she said to me “Lisa, it’s not just for you to get tenure. It’s not just for you. Your research is important. Your research could make a difference. You need to get it out. If your motivation isn’t for yourself, then you need to think about the policy implications and how you get your research out there to change higher education.” She reminded me “That’s why you got into this in the first place.” That advice has stuck with me throughout my career. My experiences in wanting to influence policy are not unique. Other colleagues shared similar motivations:

“As I learned about my own power and privilege and about structural inequalities, I also became increasingly compelled to be an activist scholar and to try to influence change within the academy, through my own scholarship and outreach.”

“My motivation in how I do research today stems from my need to do research that addresses the biggest problems we face in our country. And it’s incredibly labor intensive work and very frustrating at times. On some occasions I say to myself, ‘I just want to go back to doing normal research’: but I press on.”

“I view my work as if people’s very lives are at stake. Of course, their lives are not at stake in a crisis sort of way—but race, gender, class, and other identities impact people’s life chances.”

VIGNETTE 6:

Undoubtedly, I’m an acquired taste. If you spend extended time with me, you’ll likely understand why you like, or more often than not, dislike me. Who I am influences my research. This notion of acquiring a taste of the other based on my own personal experiences has influenced my research through extended field work. I find nuances about participants, including insights about their identities and subculture affiliations, through extended field work, also enriches self understanding. My life experiences have influenced the way I inquire and more importantly, how I live. (Peter Magolda, in memoriam)

### **BENEFITS OF ME-SEARCH**

Clearly there are benefits to engaging in me-search, broadly defined. Below is an enumeration of how I and other ASHE members characterized the ways that their identity influenced their work and the benefits of doing so.

#### **Who We Are Can Serve as a Starting Place for our Work**

It can shape the way we identify problems, priorities, motivation, and the audiences for whom we write.

“I hope it makes me clue into what actually happens on the ground and what might work in terms of translating the findings of my research into practical strategies that might facilitate change. I hope it helps me write better questions and be more focused on finding the story. It helps me identify where the ‘problem’ may be.”

“Growing up gay, I had to learn how to assess environments, how to listen for how people said what they said and how to hear what was unsaid. My observation skills were formed by those experience, as well as my ability to understand how to ask questions of answers that other people might not probe.”

#### **Who We Are Provides a Lens that We Cannot Avoid**

Try as we might, we cannot escape who we are and the perspective that brings. As such, we bring who we are into our scholarship and into our work.

“It’s just a lens that I can’t avoid. Here is who I am. I don’t know if it’s a benefit or not. It is just who I am and it is a part of me.”

### **Who We Are Provides a Credible Connection to Who and What It Is We Study and Can Provide Us with a Sense of Authenticity Relative to our Subject**

“I’ve lived and experienced firsthand many of the struggle of marginalized groups in and outside of the US, and therefore as a researcher, I feel that I may be trusted by participants in diverse areas within higher education. There are certain factors of higher education access that the literature doesn’t cover since most researchers don’t come from (or understand firsthand) my multi-layered personal background and my unique struggles with access.”

“My background, as someone who has advantages, enables me to be a more legitimate observer and commentator on how advantage operates.”

### **Who We Are Can Lead to Self-awareness as We Conduct our Research**

“Over the past few decades, my research has provided me invaluable opportunities to reassess my privilege, recognizing my privilege has enhanced the quality of my work.”

### **Who We Are Can Build Bridges Between Groups**

“We all conduct me-search to some extent, although sometimes it can be more difficult to tease out how we are involved in what it is that we are studying. My background and identities as White, female, straight, American, and upper-middle income are intimately connected to the work that I do. I view that work as helping to build bridges between and across groups.”

### **Engaging in “Me-search” Can Provide a Sense of Passion**

“Academic work is not always easy and having a motivation that drives us and a desire that is personal can get us through those times when we are stuck, when an article is rejected, or whatever it is that seems to be blocking our path. Working on a topic that is related to who we are can give us that extra lift and motivation to keep going.”

### **As our Field Becomes Increasingly More Diverse, it Brings More Perspectives and New Answers to Questions that We might have Never Asked**

“Research issues really are puzzles, and all this research fills in pieces. I think the early work of student success that framed the issue of deficits and people and cultures, if it weren’t for scholars critiquing this, I would not as readily have been able to focus on institutions and to think about how research had

been designed, where there was sameness, the only answer was a problem with the people.”

#### VIGNETTE 7:

I have been asked multiple times why I have an interest in studying African American women and how I came to be interested in that. I assume, like everybody else, that we all come to our research by studying that which we are. In my case, I do share gender with the women with whom I work. However, obviously we have a different racial classification. I self-identify as White. It is my job in this work, as a white woman doing work across racial groups, to be vulnerable, to put myself out there as vulnerable, and, in this case, to make a video on why I use race and gender in my work and why I work so much with African American women. I really think that this vulnerability on my part allows me to be more authentic and allows me to build trust with the women with whom I work. I really see this work, as a white woman doing this work, as building bridges. My hope is that through this work, I can build bridges within and across racial groups. I don't see myself as alone in this. I really see my participants and the women who enter my studies as collaborators in that process of building bridges. (Rachelle Winkle-Wagner)

### LIMITATIONS OF ME-SEARCH

Clearly there are limitations to me-search. I think it is important they be enumerated as well.

#### **While Doing Me-search Provides Insight, it May also Come with Hidden Biases**

Studying ourselves or topics related to our own experiences can lead to concerns about objectivity and about projecting our own experiences onto others it can also lead to our overlooking the experiences of others who are not like us. One has to be careful to not generalize one's own experiences onto others.

“I'm not blind [masked] to gender, but work like yours [referring to my scholarship] has forced me to think more deeply about men and women in complicated ways and to recognize my maleness as something that must be considered....It's a cold tub of water to wake up and realize that I've engaged in behavior that isn't helpful in all the ways I thought it would be. So now I'm paying more attention to gender and focused on boys still, but not in opposition to girls, but with some sense of the connections and disconnections between experiences.”

“The more you explore your own background and standpoint, the more you realize that your personal experiences are not necessarily generalizable to others, even those in your own group.”

### **Studying Something That is Related to Who You Are Can Be Exhausting and Draining**

It can be challenging to feel that you have no break from your life—your life is your work and your work is your life. While some people can walk away from their work and leave it behind and not content with it on a personal level, others do not have that luxury.

“You have to live it all the time and you don’t get to walk away from it.”

### **Your Background Might Influence your Relationship with Your Subjects**

It can be hard to set boundaries between you and your subjects if you are similar, and it can make navigating relationships between researcher and participants tricky. It can also put up barriers between you and those you are researching.

“Being similar complicates the relationship because we are not simply participant and researcher.”

“It is possible that our background might discourage people who have a different background than us from participating in our study.”

“I have a body, and that body has certain physical characteristics that lead people to see me in certain ways. My body leads me to experience the world in particular ways, including how I interact with those in my study.”

### **Studying Something Related to Who You Are Can Make You Feel Vulnerable**

When we do research that is intimately connected to who we are, we may feel overexposed or vulnerable to internal and external critique. This is especially the case because our scholarship is subject to peer critique and review, adding an extra layer of vulnerability. As one colleague explained, “I have to prove myself over and over again.”

“If you study something related to yourself, it makes you think that because my race and gender are always there and it’s my job to work with, outside of, and within them. My own identities leave my credibility constantly vulnerable. This vulnerability is important to my work. It makes me work harder. It makes me more authentic in my interactions and it encourages me to embrace humility in what I can and what I cannot do.”

### **What Group You Are in Matters in Relationship to Me-search**

Even if we all engage in some type of me-search, it isn’t experienced in the same way for everyone. Not all me-search is treated equally. There is, no



doubt, a privilege that comes from being a member of the dominant group when it comes to me-search and scholarship. As a cis-gender, White woman writing about academic motherhood, my research may be easier to find an audience than would be the case for people with other identities. Some forms of difference, for example, are invisible unless one chooses to disclose how one is connected to a topic. For example, people know I am an academic mother because I tell them that—that is not something that is clearly visible. As such, I get to choose whether or not or how I disclose my connection to my topics of study. That is clearly not the case for people of color and for those with other more visible identities.

“Due to systematic marginalization, studying these populations could also mean that a large portion of the field doesn’t understand the value of their work, which can lead to challenges in publishing, barriers in landing a job, and experiences of being devalued or feeling a decreased sense of belonging in the field.”

### **Me-search is Connected to Qualitative Research But Not Recognized in Quantitative Work**

Me-search is perceived to be a concern for those who do qualitative research but is seen as irrelevant to those who engage in quantitative studies. We ask qualitative scholars to write positionality statements and come out with their connections to their research but we do not ask the same of quantitative scholars. This makes research from the latter seem somehow more objective.

“We ought to ask everyone to write positionality statements for their studies.”

### **Sometimes There is Pressure to Study Your Own Group Even if You Don’t Want To**

There seems to be a particularly intense pressure and expectations put on people from minoritized backgrounds to engage in diversity related research. This can put people in an awkward situation if they choose not to study things related to their own identities.

“You are damned if you do and damned if you don’t.”

“If you don’t do research about your group, then others may question your authenticity. At the same time, if you do research related to who you are and you’re a person of color, then people think that your research is biased and you have to contend with that pressure. This pressure can come from external sources, but it can also be internal.”

### **Me-search Can Be Negatively Perceived by Others as “Navel Gazing” and It Can Be Dismissed or Trivialized**

There is little doubt that for some folks, particularly those with a strong positivistic lens, there is a belief that me-search isn't as valuable as other forms of inquiry and that it is perceived as lacking objectivity. This can lead to people devaluing your research because you are studying something directly related to who you are.

“The academy sometimes thinks that the research that I do is good because of who I am. Sometimes it fetishizes my work and me and sometimes it dismisses it and me....”

### **Me-search May Have a Limited Audience and Sometimes There Can Be Anticipatory Negativity on the Part of the Researcher**

A colleague explained it best by noting that he was discouraged from studying topics related to his identity, which led him to avoid the topics about which he was most passionate.

“Upon starting my doctoral program, it was my mission to think broader, to think beyond issues of race. I was under the impression that issues of race were marginalized topics in higher education, in academic journals, in classrooms, et cetera. I believed that people who did this work on race were marginalized. So, despite my passion to better understand myself as a black male, my community, and my ancestors, I tried to find other topics to do research. During that period, I hated doing research. My mentors eventually helped me understand that my research, even though marginal to some people, will be helpful for many, especially those whose voices have historically been unheard.”

#### **VIGNETTE 8:**

I was raised in a Jewish community. I'm Jewish and the social justice imperative was there from the very beginning. I was always very interested in the issues of diversity and pluralism in interfaith communities. What is it that divides us? What is it that brings us together? I continued that work in college. As I saw discrimination issues everywhere, I turned to my research in social psychology and higher education as a means to formalize that passion. My interest has always been about institutional change. How do we create institutions in which diverse group of people thrive? My own research is about creating the conditions under which diversity works. Rather than being framed by my own identity, I would say that my identities have been informed through my research. (Daryl Smith)

## ADVICE

If I have convinced you to embrace me-search proudly, there is likely advice that might help you as you progress in your own journey. To be honest, it is good advice even if you decide to eschew me-search. The following advice is from me as well as from other ASHE members.

### Follow Your Passion

Have an emotional connection to your work as doing so will help you get through the tough times associated with the process and will help you to persevere.

“Pursue topics that get you energized, joyful, angry, or whatever. Strong emotion can carry you through that process.”

“My advice would be something like have a passion, a hunger for knowledge in an area that wakes you up in the morning confident that you have found your research calling. However, because of the primacy of ‘isms facing our reality as researchers—capitalism, patriarchy, racism, etc. you have to know our discipline well to learn how it functions in order to critique it while living in it.”

“Personal investment and passion for your topic are vital to sustaining a long term research agenda...but only if you strive to generalize your personal experiences and recognize that your experience is not, in fact, generalizable. I don't think my autobiography makes good theory, at least in terms of the topic I currently study, but my advice is to find something you are interested in knowing more about, make sure you have the career space to pursue it, and be willing to sell your ideas or convince others that what you're doing is, in fact, interesting and important.”

### The Rigor of Your Work Matters

It matters a lot. If you do good work, it will speak for itself.

“Always worked towards high levels of rigor, validation, and thoughtfulness. It is particularly important to do this when we are studying something that is who/what we are. If we do this work badly, or allow subpar work to stand, we hurt ourselves, our scholarly field and ultimately the community we are trying to support. But, in the end, if we study something that is deeply related to who we are, we are allowing ourselves, our groups, our identities to be heard. We are finding our voices, even if those voices were once silenced. There is perhaps no greater contribution.”

### The Methodology You Chose Matters

When I asked my colleagues to give advice related to me-search, I didn't expect people to talk about methodology, but to my surprise, many people

did. They noted that if you want to study something related to who you are, you should be conversant in multiple methodologies and theoretical frameworks. The question you ask should drive the method. So, if you aren't up-to-date in multiple methodologies, then collaborate with someone who is or else ask a different question.

“I was told to start with the questions and the desire to know. Start with the idea and then find out how to best get information on that idea. Be creative, so that you are not just reinforcing what we already know. The creativity piece might mean that we sometimes need to venture beyond our methodological boundaries.”

### **Do Something Important and Ask Yourself “So What?”**

Our work needs to address important questions that need answers.

“It is totally okay that choices stem from your own experiences, but it cannot stop there. In other words, it's not enough to study Black people in higher education because you're Black, nor is it sufficient to study college access because you are a first generation college student. There has to be a larger goal behind the research. There has to be a desire to make an impact, to make a difference. There has to be a greater reason for the research aside from your personal experience. Personal experience can be the spark, but the underlying purpose and significance of the research needs to extend beyond oneself to the larger community. You have to be able to answer the question, why should I care?”

“I would definitely encourage a young scholar to study issues related to their own experience. But I would say this: make sure you're doing the most important research for the academy over your career. Sometimes that may be related to your experience and sometimes not...it is often easy to think our experience is the most important one, because it is the closest one. If no one's studied it, fantastic. But if you're the 60th scholar to ask the same question, maybe it's time to go to another question.”

### **Find Support Through Mentors and Collaborators**

This is hard work, so it is better to not try to do it alone. Find colleagues and others to support you along the way and, while you are at it, provide support to those who need it from you. Relationships matter; nurture them when possible. I have found amazing people to work with and support me over the years and they have kept me strong and kept me on a good path. I owe them a debt of gratitude.

“I would encourage young scholars to find allies who can support them through their entire research career, with those allies ranging from people who do similar research to people who respectfully challenge and critique the work.”

### **Be Prepared for Surprises in Your Findings**

This is important, as the reason we are asking research questions is to find answers to questions for which we don't yet know the answer. As such, it important to be open to hearing new things from our data.

“Sometimes when we study something that's related to who we are, we might think we know what the answer will be in our research. But research is nothing if not surprising. There are likely to be findings that one might not expect or even findings that conflict with who one is. These conflicts can be personally enlightening and contribute to the field, if we allow them. My advice is to let these conflicts out, allow the surprises to happen and report them.”

### **Don't Get Caught Up in Your Hype or Anyone Else's**

Engage in your research with ethics, honesty, and humility. This one speaks for itself.

### **Me-Search is Not One Size Fits All**

As I noted earlier, there are different types of me-search and different ways that it shows up in the work that we do. How we navigate the ins and outs of me-search can be dependent on who we are and how we are perceived by others. Given my own identities, I am cautious in the advice I would give to others because I know that I have unearned privileges that make how I navigate these choices and how my choices are perceived different from others. As such, I turn to one of my wise colleagues in relationship to this topic. There are clearly systemic issues that continue to need to be addressed in our field.

“If the person is from an historically marginalized and underserved community, I would give them information about the positives and negatives of studying their own identity group and communities. I think young scholars should understand that studying marginalized populations is a powerful way to challenge and advance our field and to make a contribution and to carve out a niche. But they should also be aware that there are limitations involved. I think too many young scholars grapple with these issues while there is not enough dialogue about them across higher education.”

### **Be Yourself**

My last piece of advice, to be yourself, really comes from my heart. Do work that is indispensable to someone other than yourself. Focus on doing right rather than being right and the rest of it takes care of itself.

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