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Not a Hair Out of Place? Embracing Messy Positionality when Researching the Geographies of Hair in Greater Manchester

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Abstract

In this paper, we respond to Folke's (2022) call for moving beyond 'shopping list' positionality. Instead, we utilise 'kitchen table reflexivity' and in/visible tools to develop reflexive qualitative research. To do so, we use researcher diary excerpts from our research exploring the geographies of hair (on the head, face and body) in Greater Manchester, UK. In particular, we reflect on: motivations for pursuing the research topic; researcher voice; and building rapport with participants. By doing so, we provide meaningful engagement with positionality throughout different stages of a qualitative research project, avoiding static and hollow positionality statements.

Key words: Hair; Identity; Manchester; Place; Positionality

Introduction

For quite some time now, influenced by feminist researchers, geographers have been urged to examine their positionality reflexively (Kobayashi, 2003); that is, to analytically scrutinise one's positionality, and to actively acknowledge that this position has an impact on the research process and outcome (Berger, 2015). Folkes (2022) recently argued for researchers to move beyond 'shopping list' positionality, where a list of characteristics, for instance: gender, sexuality, age and ethnicity are typically stated in published research, and it is simply said whether or not the researcher shares these socio-demographic traits with participants (Reyes, 2020). Instead, Folkes (2022), developing the earlier work of Kohl and McCutcheon (2015), advocates for the use of 'kitchen table reflexivity' and in/visible tools to develop reflexive qualitative research. By this, Folkes (2022) refers to how talk allows researchers to outline shifts and adaptability in positionality as research progresses.

In this paper, we respond to Folke's (2022) call by reflecting on diary excerpts we kept when conducting research into the geographies of hair (on the head, face and body) in Greater Manchester, UK. Through doing so, we aim to bring to the fore how researcher positionality not only shapes research motivations, but situates the researcher and the 'researched', and impacts the creation and interpretation of data, thereby developing deeper discussions about the fluidity of positionality across the research process (Folkes, 2022).

This paper is structured as follows: first, we engage with literature on geographies of hair and identity. Following this, we cohere literature surrounding researcher positionality. We then bring together reflective researcher diary entries surrounding the following topics: deciding what to research; researcher voice; and building rapport. We draw the paper to a close by encouraging other qualitative researchers to provide candid accounts and reflect on their changing positionality, ensuring that these reflections are synthesised into their writing at all stages, be that theoretical, methodological and analytical.

Geographies of Hair and identity

Hair, be it on your head, face or body, is recognised as one of the most malleable aspects of self-presentation (Hirschman, 2002). Hair has a geographical and spatial significance, with different styles, cuts and presentations of hair being tied to specific cities and countries. For instance, when considering the city of Liverpool, UK, women with rollers in their hair is a well-

established visual (see Owen et al. 2020). In China, women's hair is often dark, straight and sleek. Whilst these may appear to be two obvious examples, they help to illustrate that hair can be geographical and that unique codes surrounding hair styling are found in different locales. Writing on the geographies of hair, Holton (2020) examines hair as a lens that reimagines the body's borders. He argues that hair is a fundamental agent in producing and representing the body, and that the presences and absences of hair influence, disturb, transform and transcend its margins. Holton (2020) posits that hair shapes corporeal understandings of appearance and can project identities and power beyond its physical limits.

Earlier writing by Synott (1987) contends that hair serves as an important cultural artefact, because it is both public (typically visible to everyone) and personal (biologically linked to the body). Hair is a signifier of beauty and is a feature of many female protagonists (one has only to look at Disney characters such as Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*). Further, children's fairy tales have also led to the positioning of hair as a rite of passage – take, for instance, Rapunzel who, through letting down her long hair, enables the prince to climb up to the tower she is in, and they fall in love. Moreover, hair has been presented as a source of power. For instance, it was told that biblical character Samson would lose his superhuman strength if his hair was cut.

Though the above stories are, arguably, mythical or fantastical, hair grooming practices do provide some evidence for these claims. For instance, styling practices (such as straightening hair, curling hair, or placing hair in different styles) enables people to exercise control over their self-images (see Rook, 1985). Hair styles may be deemed more or less appropriate for different situations. For instance, one may wear their hair up for a sophisticated formal event, whilst one may also wear their hair up, though in an informal style, for a sporting event. For the 'wearer', hair can be considered to have special, almost magical, transformative powers (Rook, 1985) – a person may receive comments on how 'different' they look when they change the colour or cut of their hairstyle. Drawing on research conducted in the North West of England, Holmes (2014) explores the changeable materiality of hair. She illuminates how hair's chameleon abilities are the foundation upon which the contemporary hair fashion industry resides. Holmes (2014) contends that the materiality of hair inhibits its conformity to certain fashions. Holmes (2014:95) coins the term the 'palimpsest of hair', as a means of understanding hair as an inimitable record of a person's life which documents layer upon layer of previous hair fashions.

Further, hairstyles can be used to effect or signal a change in the inner self (see McAlexander and Schouten, 1989). Indeed, French fashion designer Coco Chanel famously stated: “a woman who cuts her hair is about to change her life”. For example, one may change the colour or cut of their hair after a relationship break up to signify a ‘new me’, or even before a special event to be the ‘best version of me’. Hair can also be seen as a tool of power. Both women and men can seek power through both resisting and accommodating mainstream norms for hair (Weitz, 2001), including certain hairstyles and dyeing practices. For instance, certain schools and colleges may promote only ‘natural’ hair colours, and someone who has their hair brightly coloured may be seen to ‘rebel’ against the social norms established by dominant culture. Not only this, but hair can be seen as a social signifier: it may define the self on a religious, political, economic, social and sexual spectrum (Synnott, 1987).

With a specific focus on hair on the face and, more specifically, eyebrows, elsewhere we have challenged the negative commentary on the Scousebrow¹ in the press and social media by engaging people in discussions surrounding the personal significance of eyebrow shaping and styling (see Wilkinson et al., 2019). We argue that the everyday (little c) creative practice of eyebrow grooming is not only an important part of crafting and performing identity, particularly for Scouse women, but also an example of bottom-up placemaking in the city of Liverpool, UK.

Hair is central aspect of appearance and self-image for many people, along with a form of place-making, understandably therefore hair loss can have a negative impact on self-esteem, body image and confidence. We have thus previously argued for an advancement of qualitative research to focus on the absence, as well as the presence, of hair (Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2019). Having brought together literature on the geographies of hair and identity, we now engage with literature relating to researcher positionality.

Researcher Positionality

As Hurd (1998) notes, being self-reflexive is beneficial for facilitating more complex and layered understandings. However, we claim that a consideration of positionality must go beyond unmasking the key, ‘categorical’ frames of social subjectivities: that is, class, gender, race and ethnicity (Noble, 2009), if it wishes to grapple adequately with the messiness of positionality.

¹ A style of eyebrow, commonly seen in Liverpool, UK, where the thickness of the brow is exaggerated with a very dark pencil.

Folkes (2022) recently argued for researchers to move beyond ‘shopping list’ positionality, instead using what Kohl and McCutcheon (2015) call ‘kitchen table reflexivity’. Both Folkes (2022) and Kohl and McCutcheon (2015) encourage researchers to explore their positionality and its relationship to their research through formal and informal conversations with other researchers and participants, respectively. Kohl and McCutcheon (2015) contend that everyday talk with others furthered their understandings of their fluid identities in relation to their participants. Through having such conversations, one is able to more critically interrogate their identity, instead of simply reducing it to a ‘laundry list’ of perceived similarities and differences between a researcher and their participants (Kohl and McCutcheon, 2015). Folkes (2022) maintains that researcher positionality not only shapes research motivations, but it also situates the researcher and the researched, thereby impacting on data production and analysis.

The ways in which the appearance of the researcher, beyond relatively fixed attributes, such as race and gender, shapes research encounters have been largely neglected in the literature. There are certain exceptions. Throsby and Evans (2013:339), as “women whose bodies would in some circumstances be identified as fat/overweight/obese” reflect on moments where they, as part of the research encounter, found themselves as both complicit actors in fat-phobic contexts and the objects of anti-fat sentiment. Further, Jansson (2010), conducting research with a Southern nationalist movement, argues that his “straight appearance” helped make participants feel comfortable with him. The author speculates that if his appearance had given participants reason to suspect he was gay, he would have been received differently. Additionally, Spanger (2012), conducting research into female Thai migrants selling sexual services in Denmark, investigates how looks and bodily practices become important when conducting research. Spanger (2012) writes how, aware of how the intersection of the categories of race and gender could position her as a sex worker from the male customers’ gaze, she decided not to wear ‘sexy’ or ‘provocative’ clothing during her visits to bars at night. Instead, in order to perform ‘another’ femininity, she opted to wear jeans and a jumper, with a polo neck.

Recognising this the dearth of attention in the positionality literature to researcher appearance, Wilkinson (2016) has urged researchers to pay attention to the appearance of the researcher beyond key meta-categories such as age, class, gender and ethnicity, to include what she term ‘embellishments’; for instance: make-up, hair extensions, fake nails and false eyelashes. She considered how these functioned as signifiers of her personality to the young participants in her study, resulting in building rapport with participants and eliciting rich data. Having engaged with literature on researcher positionality which moves beyond ‘shopping list’ positionality

(Folkes, 2022), we now reflect on our positionality in relation to three key topics: motivations for pursuing the research topic; researcher voice; and building rapport.

Motivations for Researching the Geographies of Hair in Greater Manchester

When discussing positionality in qualitative research, it is important to be candid about how the researcher came to their research area, which is often driven by personal experiences (our in/visible tools) and motivation (Folkes, 2022). Whilst often not the case, we argue, in line with Folkes (2022), that consideration of positionality should be woven in from the very beginning of the research process:

I came to this research topic from my own lived experience of living with alopecia (hair loss) from the age of 7. Throughout my life, I have felt the importance of hair to identity through the experience of losing my hair, and seeing the impact hair loss has on confidence, and self-esteem. Yet, for me, wigs were a very important way that I could change my appearance, and ‘become’ someone different. I could choose the length / colour of my wig to reflect how I wanted to feel and be perceived. I felt I had a control over my appearance which I had lost from my hair falling out. My mum had also previously experienced hair loss from undergoing chemotherapy. As such, I had a desire to find out about the embodied, emotional and affective experience of not only having natural hair, but also of experiencing hair loss, and wig wearing. Greater Manchester was an important area to research for me, having lived here for the last 14 years and seeing many changing hair trends and styles in that time (SW)²

My interest in the research topic of hair stemmed from my degree on Fashion Brand Management and my general interest in fashion and identity. Over the years, and particularly in my 20s, I took a keen interest in my own hair, and dyed it a range of colours including blonde, brown, red, black and pink. I also styled it in a range of ways including straight, curly and plaited, and regularly attended the hairdressers. Now, in my 30s my relationship with my hair has changed. I am much more interested in preserving its health and strength, and have it coloured professionally a few times a year. I now consider visiting the hairdressers as self-care and enjoy the experience of having my hair cut and coloured almost more so than the end product. Regarding the setting of Manchester, I lived in North Manchester (Middleton) for a couple of years, and have frequented various other parts of Manchester for days and nights out over the last decade, though I consider myself a visitor to the city as opposed to a Mancunian, even whilst I was living there (CW).

From the above excerpts, it could be said that we were undertaking a ‘backyard ethnography’ - a phrase used to refer to researchers who are studying a world with which they are already familiar (Heley, 2011:219). As Loughran and Mannay (2018) argue, all researchers have stories to tell about why they chose to research particular topics, with there often being a direct, uncomplicated link between personal experience and research agenda. Though researchers may

² Letters in the brackets denote the researcher’s initials

feel vulnerable about telling their own stories, it should be recognised that such stories are not peripheral to the research; indeed, our research is embedded in our selves (Loughran and Mannay, 2018). It is worth remembering that the research topic is often what keeps a researcher motivated to continue when they may be facing hurdles and barriers during the research process (Loughran and Mannay, 2018), and why we often advise our dissertation students to choose a topic they are passionate about. By being explicit about how our positionality shaped our desires to research the geographies of hair in Greater Manchester, we hope to lead to a shift in the conceptualisation of the researcher as solely “an unfortunate necessity for the production of research” to the “beating heart” of research (Loughran and Mannay, 2018:1).

When conducting qualitative research, it is important not to overlook geographical elements of positionality and the opportunities and/or challenges this brings (Heley, 2011). We are both originally from the South West of England, and as such one of the visible (or rather audible) tools from our ethnographic toolkits was our accents (see Reyes, 2020). This was notably distinct from the majority of participants’ accents who were Mancunian. As soon as we spoke with a South-West English accent, we were actively positioned or, in the case of Catherine below, positioned ourselves, as ‘not-Mancunian’ and therefore ‘other’:

Today I had one participant state that they could tell I was not ‘from around here’. A few other participants said that I sounded ‘posh’, perhaps reflective of an imaginary North-South divide, where people from the South of England are perceived as more privileged than their northern counterparts (SW).

I was born in Devon, living in Sidmouth, a small residential town. I lived there until I was eighteen, after which my family moved to Rutland, East Midlands. Consequently, I possess a neutral southern accent and hold a different dialect to many people who I come across in Manchester (despite of course being a diverse city). Some phrases I have heard people use such as ‘brew’ (cup of tea), ‘ginnel’ (alley way), set me apart from others and are words I don’t feel comfortable incorporating into my own dialect as I don’t feel like using them would ‘suit me’ (CW).

Whilst the significance of accent in developing research relationships has largely gone unnoticed in the literature, Hall (2014), based on research conducted into geographies of families and intimate relations, remarks how she was positioned as an outsider, due to her regional (Yorkshire) accent, marked by her ‘flat vowels’. Indeed, Boland (2010:17) contends that “sound is an important, if not defining element in the constitution of identity. Those who

possess the appropriate accent/dialect are deemed to rightfully belong while those exhibiting a vocal deemed out of place are consequently sonically excluded”. Researchers often aim to be insiders in the culture of their participants, perceiving that minimal social distance offers the basis for rapport (Duncombe and Jessop, 2008). We contend that being perceived as slightly ‘different’ from our participants (for instance, in terms of our accents, and where we were brought up) was beneficial. Being viewed as somewhat quirky and exotic, participants were intrigued by us and what we did, which we argue motivated some of them to take part in our research. In some instances then, difference, rather than sameness, facilitated productive research relationships. This was something Loftus (2009) found when undertaking research with Northshire police officers, although not in relation to voice. The author contends that being a female, and a health-conscious vegetarian, she did not blend in easily with the male dominated police force that ate various takeaways. However, for Loftus (2009), this ‘quirkiness’ facilitated access.

Building Rapport with Participants

Folkes (2022) contends that invisible characteristics such as sharing personal stories with participants can work to alleviate power differences between researcher and participant, as rapport can be established. We reflect on this in the below ‘kitchen table’ discussion of our researcher positionality (Kohl and McCutcheon, 2015):

SW: We have a prospective participant who would like to discuss her experience of hair loss, but she questioned whether she would be eligible to take part in the study due to not having hair. I told her about my own experiences with hair loss and that absolutely she would be included in the study, and we would love to hear her perspectives.

CW: Yes, that’s great. Would be fantastic to have her involved. I think it would be great if you could interview her, as you would be able to relate more to her story.

SW: Actually, I think it may be better for you to interview her, as I might take some things she said for granted, whereas you may ask more curious questions.

In the above exchange, we reflect on how we were able to strategically utilise our visible ethnographic toolkit (see Reyes, 2020), to draw upon our appearance, particularly our hair, or

lack of, as a tool to connect with participants and build rapport. Samantha, living with hair loss, highlights that she was able to draw on this element of her positionality to connect with participants who may have experienced hair loss, enabling them to be recruited to the study. Alopecia is emotionally charged, and the individual experiencing it may feel emotions such as grief, loss and pain (Bhargava et al., 2015). Papadopolous and Bor (1999) argue that mourning for one's 'normal' appearance may be part of the coping process for those with alopecia. It is thus important that if a researcher has lived experience that they can share their experiences with participants and make their positionality explicit. In addition to visible tools, such as the presence or absence of hair, throughout the research process we found it pivotal to utilise 'invisible tools' (Reyes, 2010), such as sharing personal stories, in order for participants to be able to relate to us (Folkes, 2022). In our research, it would have been easy to position Samantha as an 'insider' to any participants experiencing hair loss, and Catherine as an 'outsider'. However, as Folkes (2022) discusses, it is important to move beyond simplistic binaries of insider and outsider status. As can be seen through the above exchange, we decided it would be more fruitful for Catherine to interview this participant. Due to Catherine not having lived experience of hair loss, it was felt that she may naturally ask more curious questions, as she would not take any responses for granted, whereas Samantha felt that she, as an 'insider', might be guilty of this.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have responded to Folkes' (2022) recent call for researchers to move beyond 'shopping list' positionality, instead using kitchen table reflexivity and in/visible tools to develop reflexive qualitative research (Kohl and McCutcheon, 2015; Reyes, 2010). We did so by: making explicit how our positionalities shaped our desires to research the geographies of hair in greater Manchester; bringing to the fore the importance of researcher voice; and discussing how our positionalities facilitated us in building rapport with participants.

Through doing so, we have demonstrated, following Folkes (2022), that much can be learned from paying attention to the transient nature of the influence of researcher positionality on the research process. Echoing Folkes (2022), we conclude by encouraging other qualitative researchers to provide candid accounts about the messiness of positionality in the research process, and to reflect on their changing positionalities, ensuring that these reflections are synthesised into their writing at all stages, be that theoretical, methodological and analytical.

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