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Digital Storytelling and Private Disclosure: From the Perspective of An Outsider Within

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In the fall of 2018, I assisted the organizers of a three-day digital storytelling workshop for women of color. As a data collection method, digital storytelling not only allows participants to promote social change through spoken word, it also provides a platform for dialogue to address collective issues in a social system (Freire, 2000). Based on my observations of the events that unfolded during the workshop, I concluded that the narratives that emerged from digital storytelling had the potential to induce collective and individual change. The potential for collective change was evident in the narratives because they gave voice to the lived experiences of the participants, producing a new perspective on group concerns. The potential for individual change was evident because the participants gained access to experiences that were similar to their own. Previous findings (e.g. Wallerstein & Duran, 2002) suggest that individuals who participate in digital storytelling workshops can gain new perspectives on their experiences through shared narratives.

While I was aware that the digital storytelling process would inspire participants to share private information and engage in self-disclosure, I wondered about the aspects of their life that might inform their stories. Therefore, as the date of the workshop drew near, I contemplated numerous questions: "What parts of their stories will participants consider worth telling? What will happen if participants become uncomfortable telling their stories in front of strangers? How will these women overcome barriers that might inhibit their willingness to tell their stories? How will and should I respond to their stories?" These questions were typical because self-disclosure can lead to feelings of embarrassment, discomfort,

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and vulnerability (Petronio, 2002). I assumed that the ability to overcome these feelings would enhance narrative richness.

I now realize that two factors influenced my questions. First, I was a novice in using digital storytelling as a qualitative data collection method. The workshop was my first experience with digital storytelling and its associated processes. Second, I lived in West Africa for twenty-eight years before migrating to the United States. My cultural perspective was distinct from the social and cultural norms guiding self-disclosure and privacy management in my host community. According to Hastings (2000), privacy management tends to occur on an individual basis. At the same time, the decision to disclose private information is culturally informed. Similarly, Lustig and Koester (2006) found differences in the perception and processes of disclosure and privacy management across cultures. In other words, expectations related to self-disclosure and the exchange of private information depend on learned cultural values (Petronio, 2002).

My concerns focused on how individuals negotiated the complex decision to disclose or withhold. According to Rosenfield (2000), some questions that people ask themselves before exchanging private information include "'How deeply do I need to disclose?' 'Do I need to disclose everything, or can I disclose part of what there is to say?' 'To what extent do I need to talk about related topics so as to provide context for what I choose to disclose?' and 'What are my alternatives if I chose not to disclose?'" (p. 4).

For the purpose of this reflective account and to interpret the interactions among workshop participants, I define disclosure as "granting others access to private and secret information" (Rosenfield, 2000, p 2). Analyzing the events at the workshop enabled me to address my questions about digital storytelling as a research method, and laid my apprehensions to rest about the depth and content of self-disclosure likely to occur during a three-day storytelling workshop. As a participant-observer, I analyzed narrative (Ellis, 2004) to explore the exchange of private information between workshop participants. I also used communication privacy management (CPM; Petronio, 2002) as a frame for analyzing the types and depth of self-disclosure as well as the exchange of private information throughout the workshop.

As a theory focused on the processes of self-disclosure between the discloser and the confidant, CPM is distinct in its broad emphasis on factors that influence the disclosure of private information, not the sharing of information in general. Petronio (2002) argued that other people are central to "discerning between being public and private" (p. 2). For instance, during private disclosure, the discloser and the confidant sometimes understand both the spoken and unspoken rules that guide the processing and management of shared information. Petronio (2002) stated that this shared understanding balances the "publicness or privacy of individuals" (p. 3). Using Jourard (1971) as a backdrop, I applied CPM (a) to focus on the content (i.e., depth and breadth) of private information, (b) to extend the

study of disclosure beyond the self to include communication within groups, and (c) to contribute to conversations about how people develop and execute privacy management. Previous findings about disclosure suggest that privacy management rules differ based on culture or cultural orientation (Altman, 1977), gender (Dindia & Allen, 1992), and motivation to disclose (Franzoi, 1987). These factors guided my analysis.

Day One: To Share or Not to Share?

On the first day of the workshop, I arrived early to make sure everything was in place. As I stood in the room waiting for the women to arrive, I reflected on the anxieties I had about the depth and level of disclosure I might witness. I was most concerned about how the women might forge bonds with one another, bonds perhaps strong enough to eliminate the feelings of embarrassment, vulnerability, or discomfort that can discourage private disclosure and obstruct the exchange of private information. As I reflected on this idea, the first woman arrived: a young Black woman in her late twenties. The young woman wore a white shirt, a pleated A-line yellow skirt, and a matching sweater. At the time she walked in, I had just finished setting up the breakfast, so she offered to help me arrange the sign-up sheets and other materials that the organizer had prepared for participants. As we completed these tasks, the young woman appeared excited to be at the workshop. She talked about how great her relationship was with one of the anchors of the workshop, and how much she enjoyed being in the company of other Black women. One by one, older Black women, apparently in their early forties, walked in through different doors.

As I reminisce about my first encounter with these women, I cannot help but smile. A few of the women maintained a formal manner of greeting by accepting my hand as I offered it for a handshake. However, I could not hide my astonishment when most of them not only accepted the handshake, but also embraced me in a tight hug. At this point, I suspected that maintaining my administrative distance as a research assistant might prove impossible during the workshop. I also started thinking about how long I could pose as the outsider. Doing so proved difficult as I watched, in admiration, the participants sitting in small circles and sharing information about themselves before the anchor prompted them to do so. From their conversations, I deduced that at least one participant was a graduate student, and some others were working class professionals. Some of their conversations revealed their marital status, professions, and brief insights into their experience as Black female employees in predominantly male or white organizations. One of the women used the term "de-whitening" to describe her excitement about being in a space open only to Black women. The other women immediately adopted this term. I watched as their conversations transformed from basic small talk and introductions to in-depth disclosures of their experience as women of color born and living in the United States. From that moment, I was convinced

that the workshop would take a dynamic turn, although my initial reaction was to ask myself, "why are they telling each other their business like that?"

The dynamic turn occurred when the workshop facilitator, a Black female professor, started the workshop using a unique approach. As a standard practice, participants in digital storytelling workshops arrive the first day with a 250-word (i.e., short paragraph) draft of their stories (Gubrium, 2009). For this workshop, however, the facilitator asked participants to work in groups to identify salient themes in the stories they had heard and been exposed to about Black women, themes that would likely emerge in their own stories. Having lived in the United States for only two years, I felt unfamiliar with the culture, and wondered about the kinds of themes that would emerge as the women worked in their small groups. Although I identify as a Black woman, and a member of this minority group, I understood that our experiences, however much they might overlap, would not be identical.

Once this initial activity ended, I felt overwhelmed by the number of themes the women had generated from their stories. Collectively, the participants produced 64 themes. Some of the themes related to family stories (e.g., family ancestry, various manifestations of abuse, histories and experiences) and deep personal struggles (e.g., mental health, addiction, trauma, stolen childhood, mass incarceration) as women of color in the United States. Although the instructions were to generate salient themes that might drive their own stories, I saw and heard some of the women already sharing pieces of their personal stories as they worked. Other women in the groups listened silently, using minimal encouragers or nonverbal cues (e.g., nodding) to increase the sense of solidarity and togetherness that already existed in the room. Gradually, I observed privacy boundaries become more permeable.

Privacy boundaries are essential to privacy management. According to Petronio (2002), personal and collective boundaries exist around private information shared during interpersonal communication. Personal boundaries help regulate information about the self, while collective boundaries regulate information about the self and others. During the workshop, the permeability of information boundaries was evident in closing remarks about the activity, such as "I wanted to tell a different story, but now I am going to share a new one." Others, who preferred to maintain a collective boundary, revealed their desire to tell other people's stories: "I signed up for this workshop because I wanted to tell my mom's story, not mine." Although these statements reflect distinct privacy boundaries, the women made them permeable in their enthusiasm to tell their own stories.

Moreover, participants demonstrated attributes that aligned with previous findings about the influence of gendered speech communities on self-disclosure patterns and boundary permeability. Although scholars disagree on whether gender is an adequate predictor of how people disclose private information (Dindia, 2000; Hill & Stull, 1987; Shapiro & Swensen, 1977), Dindia and Allen (1992), in

their meta-analysis of studies on self-disclosure, concluded that women are more likely to confide in other women than in men. Scholars do agree that reciprocity of self-disclosure encourages boundary permeability (Dindia & Allen, 1995). During the first workshop group activity, I observed that once some of the women began to describe the workshop as a "safe space," their enthusiasm to share more deeply personal stories increased. Jourard (1971) also found that self-disclosure during interpersonal interaction depended on reciprocity.

Watching the women walk out in groups and chat like long-time acquaintances as the first day ended answered two of my questions: "How will these women make a connection?" and "What might happen if the women become uncomfortable telling their stories in front of strangers?" One question that remained unanswered was "How will and should I respond to their stories?" Then another question occurred to me: "How will the participants remain motivated to tell their stories as the workshop continues tomorrow?"

Day Two: Digital Creation of Stories

Digital storytelling has, for some time, given voice to the stories and experiences of ordinary people. Burgess (2006) compared digital storytelling to an amplifier of the ordinary voice. The activity for the second day extended the task from day one and marked another phase of the digital storytelling process. The workshop began with some training by an expert to acquaint participants with the digital storytelling process. This stage is common during digital storytelling workshops because participants often lack advanced skills in creating and identifying a complete story (Gubrium, 2009). As suggested by Lambert (2006), the expert trained participants in some key elements of digital production, including emotional content, voice, and soundtrack (e.g., music).

Once the training ended, the women moved into a computer lab to begin creating media content for their stories. This stage of the workshop allows participants to become creative, write their own scripts, and develop interesting stories (Bernard, 2008). During this activity, I observed how creating a digital story can be stressful for a novice (Meadow, 2003). Many of the women were unfamiliar with the software and struggled with the logistics. Almost every woman in the room sought technical help from the facilitators. With the introduction of technology, the women interacted less with each other, but the camaraderie from day one remained intact. In the first few hours, focus on the needs of the self increased, in contrast to the sense of solidarity I had seen the day before. Their conversation had moved from personal disclosure to navigating the instructions for creating an interesting digital story. In the process of offering technical support to these women, I gained access to pieces of their stories, further drawing me into the "safe space" and arousing feelings of empathy. I was especially impacted by stories about finding purpose and living beyond expectations.

I also noticed that despite their frustrations, the women occasionally shared side jokes to relieve their stress and motivate one another. At other times, they put their stories together in silence. Their continuous camaraderie suggested an answer to my fifth question: "How will the participants remain motivated to tell their stories as the workshop continues tomorrow?" Although the tenacious effort of the women to make their stories perfect showed on their faces, their enthusiasm to share their stories was undiminished. Evidently, the bonds that had formed among these women derived from mutual liking and attraction. Liking and attraction are influential factors in both the decision to self-disclose and in the choice of audience (Petronio, 2002). In their review of previous studies on liking and self-disclosure, Collins and Miller (1994) found that (a) instant attraction facilitates disclosure and (b) liking results from initial self-disclosure. In different ways and at various times, the women affirmed that their connection to the other women helped sustained their motivation. Liking one another influenced the women to abandon some social norms and rules that determine the propriety of what is said and when. The women constantly referred to the workshop as a safe space in which to revel in their experiences and victories as women of color, especially with others like themselves.

By the end of the second day, my worries about the depth of disclosure and their stories had significantly subsided. The only question that remained was "How will and should I respond to their stories?" I looked forward to their presentations the next day.

Day Three: Stories Told

The third day marked the grand finale of the workshop. That morning, I recall telling myself, "This is it!" After having access to pieces of stories while offering assistance to the women the day before, I tried to prepare myself psychologically and emotionally for the impact that these stories would have on me. These mental preparations were important because the slightest emotional arousal can move me to tears. I cry over fictional stories in books and movies, so I knew a similar reaction was likely when I experienced their personal narratives. I hoped I would be able to keep my emotions under control.

The third day started with a less rigorous task. After breakfast, participants moved into the computer lab to perform final edits on their storyboards. With the aid of a digital story technology expert and workshop facilitators, participants transformed their experiences into tangible and concrete story lines. As the women worked on their stories, the silence was greater than the day before. Because the women spoke few words, I could not tell whether the thought of saying "goodbye" at the end of the day weighed down their spirits, or, if like me, they were conserving energy for the emotional and psychological responses they might have to each other's stories. After the women completed their edits late in the

afternoon, we shared a meal, and moved into a conference room to watch the stories together.

This stage of a digital storytelling workshop is important because it allows the participants to acknowledge and celebrate their commitment and effort in creating and sharing stories (Lambert, 2007). Gubrium (2009) noted that watching these stories with individuals who participated in the creative process, specifically excluding family and friends from the screening, sustains the sense that a digital storytelling workshop is a "safe space." While the facilitators set up the stories for viewing, I witnessed the women offer praise and social support to each other through verbal and nonverbal cues. The women complimented each other's effort for a job well done, shared hugs, held hands, and leaned on one another as we settled down to watch.

The themes in many of these stories were breathtaking. Some of these themes included exceeding expectations and resisting limitations, finding oneself, and grieving and coping. The stories that stood out to me the most focused on self-confidence, self-esteem, and resisting stereotypes. The narratives of Andrea and Nadia exemplified these salient themes.

Andrea's Narrative

Andrea's narrative stood out to me because she carried herself with so much grace and poise that I was stunned to discover she was legally blind. The young woman moved around without a walking stick or a service dog. Andrea, twenty-eight years-old at the time of the workshop, produced a digital story titled *_enABLED*. In the introductory section of her story, she stated that she had been diagnosed with a retinal disease at the age of five. Due to this invisible disability, she was told at an early age that she would wear glasses all her life, would never drive, and would never graduate from college. In her narrative, Andrea revealed that her teenage years marked a decline in her self-esteem. At that point in her life, she began to acknowledge her disability:

> *I think I started second guessing myself somewhere around thirteen. I didn't develop like the other girls in my class, I was an unapologetic nerd, and boys were not exactly lining up at my locker. I had the vocabulary of a fifty-year-old seasoned professor by fifth grade. I was often misunderstood, to say the least. Truth is, I just wanted to be me without anyone questioning that.*

Transitioning into the main content of her story, Andrea opened up her world as an adult with a disability. She noted, "with age, the carefree attitude disappeared." Although she lost her carefree attitude, she gained confidence. The beauty in this part of her story resulted from how she opened with an affirmative self-introduction:

> *My name is Andrea Lasheia Dobynes. I am 28 years young. I have never driven a car. I have never owned a driver's license; I never read my own fortune cookie. . . . I can't read alone with your standard bible at church. I suck at anything past eighth-grade math because I was too ashamed to let my high school teachers know that even though I was seated closest to the board, I still couldn't see whatever was on it. I don't read brail; I do not have a cane nor a seeing-eye dog. . . . I am legally blind and before someone asks, it is not reversible. There is no cure or magical surgery transplant. . . .*

Andrea concluded this section with a confession of the discomfort and embarrassment she felt in sharing her story, even in the "safe space" of the workshop, and with an audience who cared to listen (Petronio, 2000). She stated that the embarrassment and discomfort resulted from "hurtful and downright ignorant" comments from some of her family members. As I listened to this part of Andrea's story, I wondered whether she felt overwhelming emotional pain. As Kundrat and Nussbaum (2003) noted, individuals with an invisible disability are less likely to disclose it without a dire need to do so. In Andrea's case, she established herself as an able-bodied person to the group before revealing her disability, a common way to resist or dispel stereotypes (Braithwaite, 1990).

In her narrative, Andrea revealed an intention to persist in resisting negative perceptions and stereotypes attached to vision impairment. She emphasized her decision not to let the cards life handed her define the woman she was becoming: *"I may not be able see or know what the average person knows. . . . I don't wanna be average anyway."* For instance, although her disability had forced her to abandon her childhood dream to be a pediatrician, she held on to her dream of becoming a lawyer:

> *I still want to be a lawyer because you cannot outtalk me. . . . I know law school is way more than talking, but I know if I can't do anything else, I can do those things. And I don't need perfect vision for that. I can be an attorney even if I go totally blind.*

I admired how Andrea's story captured her dream at the end of her narrative. In addition to the personal benefit Andrea might have enjoyed from telling her story, such as gaining new way of looking at her reality (Wallerstein & Duran, 2002), her story has the potential to motivate women of color living with invisible disabilities. In addition, her story might help them understand and eventually resist the stereotypes and negative perceptions associated with their identity as people of color living with a disability.

Nadia's Narrative

Although Andrea's story aroused my emotions, Nadia's narrative moved me to tears. Her digital story, *Who Am I?*, focused on moving beyond the stories, myths, and beliefs that prevent women of color from living life to the fullest. In her introduction, Nadia asked the question *"Who are you?"* To underscore the abstract, arbitrary, and ambiguous nature of the question, she encouraged the audience not to believe that who they are is a function of their academic, professional, or marital status. This introduction resonated with me because the same questions have oc-

casionally surfaced in my mind. Just before I had recovered from Nadia's mesmerizing question, she further drew me into her story with a second one: *"What lies have you believed in your life that prevent you from living your life to the fullest?"*

At this point, I could no longer maintain the role of a distant observer that I had carefully tried to preserve. Pieces of her story were too similar to mine. For instance, Nadia stated, *"What has the world told me about being Black and a woman? For starters, the world rarely told me what I could do, but often told me what I could not do."* Her lived experience, captured in this statement, summarizes the narrative of many ambitious women who were born and raised in Africa, including me. I remember the responses of close family members and friends to my decision to travel alone to the United States to earn a graduate degree. At the time, I had been married to my husband for fewer than two years, and my son was 22 months old. The negative comments always ended with the statement, "You shouldn't be doing this. What will happen to your family?" For the first year, I constantly defended my decision with the rhetorical question, "Why do I have to choose between a degree and a family?" Although Nadia and I, along with every other woman in the room that evening, were up against different barriers, our experiences overlapped because we are Black women.

The last section of Nadia's narrative focused on her depression. I felt a greater connection to Nadia's story when she talked about how Black women dealing with depression are disenfranchised of the right to seek social support and professional medical support. Nadia's sentiment was captured in the dismissive and false idea that "Black women don't get depressed," as if depression were an ailment that only affected a specific race. I remember a similar response from my sister the first time we talked about my depression in 2016, the last time I ever talked about my depression to anyone. Once Nadia's narrative ended, I burst into tears. I was sitting in the midst of a group of women I barely knew, and my body and lips were shaking uncontrollably. I could no longer stop myself from disclosing my depression, information that I could not share with close family members and friends. The women responded with support and an embrace, affirming me and my story. My connection to Nadia's story generated a new question: "Is it possible to maintain the role of outsider when observing this type of workshop?"

My Experience and Cultural Orientation

My primary takeaways from this observation experience are how I constantly negotiated my role during the workshop, and how I responded to the exchange of private information among strangers. I have identified two factors that influenced these behaviors.

As I watched the experiences of the women take shape in their narratives, the answer to the question "How will and should I respond to their stories?" became clear. I realized that this question was not entirely influenced by my cultural background. The question also reflected an innate concern about my new role as

confidant in an unfamiliar space, and my lack of experience with the norms surrounding self-disclosure. On the first day of the workshop, I could not conceal my amazement at how the participants divulged private information so quickly. My reaction confirmed findings from Petronio (2002) that cultural perceptions informed individual perceptions of "appropriate social behavior that controls boundary accessibility" (p. 40). Given the influence of culture on how we evaluate private information, the way we respond to the exchange of private information might be subject to the same influence.

My initial reaction and response to the depth of disclosure that occurred during the workshop was largely influenced by my cultural orientation. Every culture has expectations for how we control other people's access to our private information. This expectation, in turn, determines appropriate social behavior during an exchange of private information (Petronio, 2002). At the beginning of the workshop, my cultural orientation was my lens for observing the communicative behavior of the participants. Similarly, DeCew (1997) noted that people are socialized into norms that define what kind of information is private. My behavior exhibited the definition of culture offered by Keesing (1974) as either spoken or unspoken standards for measuring one's behavior and interpreting the behavior of others. In other words, learned cultural orientations tend to shape the content of the information we share or withhold when interacting with strangers and acquaintances.

The categorization of culture by Hofstede (1991) as individualist or collectivist remains relevant for comparative studies of self-disclosure patterns across cultures. Although researchers interested in comparison studies about self-disclosure in individualist and collectivist cultures have paid little attention to Africa, they typically categorize developing countries as collectivist (Eaton & Louw, 2000). Withholding private information is uncommon in individualist societies due to a lower emphasis on interdependence. Hamid (1994) observed that social exchange in the United States features an average level of self-disclosure, whereas the personal dispositions of individuals in collectivist societies are monitored and controlled by stringent cultural norms. Collectivist societies tend to place more value on privacy disclosures to in-group members than individualist societies. Triandis (1988) noted that individuals in collectivist societies tend to share a strong feeling of emotional attachment with in-group members. Perhaps this factor influences how individuals in collectivist societies show greater concern for maintaining in-group solidarity. Therefore, privacy boundaries tend to be impermeable, at least initially, during interaction with out-group members. Although few scholars have addressed the influence of culture on how people respond to self-disclosure, the characteristics of a confidant presented in Petronio (2002) help explain the tension I experienced during my involvement in the digital storytelling workshop.

To Be or Not to Be the Confidant

When people share private information, the listener voluntarily or involuntarily takes on the role of confidant. Using the willingness to access private information as a criterion, Petronio (2002) grouped confidants into three categories: deliberate, reluctant, and inferential. In these roles, confidants respond distinctly to the private information of a discloser. For instance, a deliberate confidant will intentionally seek out private information. Petronio noted that deliberate confidants sometimes negotiate boundary permeability with the discloser. In the context of digital storytelling workshops, moderators instantaneously take on this role. As deliberate confidants, digital storytelling moderators sometimes encourage the participants to share only private information about a specific experience; in other cases, participants can choose an area of focus for their stories (Gubrium, Lancaster, & Roe, 2009). Given the responsibility that deliberate confidants willingly take on, digital storytelling moderators perhaps are least likely to think about how they should respond to the content of disclosure.

During the workshop, my role as an assistant positioned me not as a deliberate confidant, but as an inferential confidant. Inferential confidants do not intentionally seek out disclosure, but are aware that it might occur (Petronio, 2002). As Gubrium, Lancaster and Roe (2009) stated, workshop facilitators commonly feel drawn into the narratives of participants, thereby taking on the role of social supporter (e.g., offering a shoulder to lean on). This accidental involvement explains why I gave and eventually received social support during the workshop.

The third day of the workshop brought out the potential to be an inferential confidant with everyone at the workshop. We all received social support from one another. As much as I wanted to hold the hands of these women and offer my shoulder to lean, I initially wished I had an opportunity to withdraw. My desire to withdraw was born out of my fear of telling my own story. I constantly attempted to convince myself that the best way to avoid being drawn into the stories of the workshop participants was to assume the role of distant observer. I thought that maintaining this role might allow me to remain emotionally distant from the disclosure that occurred. Although I was not held in the room against my will, I could not summon the resolve to leave. Every part of me wanted to share and remain in that safe space. Overall, my decision to stay and remain a confidant to these women was rewarding because being in that space allowed me to take a step closer to telling part of my story when the opportunity arose.

Conclusion

The conclusion of the workshop left me with new questions to consider. *"Did the absolute uniformity in race contribute to the strong sense of solidarity among the participants, and the depth of disclosure in which they engaged? Would my experience have been different if*

women of various minority races in the United States had shared the "safe space" of the digital storytelling workshop?"

While I don't have a definitive answer to those questions, I do have some takeaways from the digital storytelling workshop. First, I realized that one of the benefits of digital storytelling is the authenticity of the narratives. The research participants selected which experiences to share, and then shared them in their own words. From the moment the participants first thought about their stories to their final edits, each stage of the process unveiled a deeper layer of private disclosure. Second, the workshop provided first-hand exposure to the process of self-disclosure in a culture different from my own. Although the United States is often culturally categorized as an individualist society where self-interest overrides group concerns, the Black women in the workshop displayed a strong sense of collectivism.

In this study, I used a reflective approach to detail my experience as an international graduate student and administrative assistant during a digital storytelling workshop for women of color. Although my narrative represents the experience of an individual, I hope it inspires other researchers to see the benefit of digital storytelling as a method of data collection. The digital storytelling workshop was one of my best research experiences since my migration to the United States. It holds strong in my memory.

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