



America's Forgotten Epidemic: Poor Posture and the Twentieth-Century Promise of Health and Beauty
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I was a research assistant to my mentor who is writing a book about the scandalized and quickly buried “epidemic” of poor posture in 20th century America, a medical obsession that resulted in mandatory nude posture photographs of all incoming freshmen at the country’s most elite colleges.

Myriad social factors played into the posture fixation, but it was my job to specifically glean an understanding of whether race played a role in pathologizing posture. In other words: How were racialized stereotypes and assumptions—especially of African Americans—implied in discussions of “correct” or “faulty” posture? In order to uncover an answer, I studied the discourse surrounding posture as it related to race in popular culture, medicine, and anthropology, scouring popular African American newspapers and magazines, medical journals, and anthropology journals.

I entered the PURM program with only a rudimentary set of historical research skills. But by the end of the summer, I was proficient in navigating Penn's databases, online catalogs, and library system, as well as in searching through other institutions' archives for finding aids and other leads on archival material. I learned how to be an effective research assistant by carefully citing, summarizing, and taking notes on my sources. I became acquainted with new genres of writing (like annotated bibliography and biography) which will prove indispensable in my future academic endeavors. It also goes without saying that I became extremely well-read on the topic and got to flex my analytical muscles by searching for common themes in the findings.

Perhaps most importantly, though, I learned that historical research in the humanities was not only a field in which I felt competent, but one that truly captivated me. I experienced the thrill of descending into what my mentor called “the rabbit hole”: an hours-long journey of obsessively following leads and drawing connections in the data. And I was lucky to have a mentor who shared in and nurtured my fascination with the topic—a crossroads between history, feminism, Africana studies, medicine, and social sciences—and encouraged me to pursue tangential projects as

offshoots of the main research task. Because I enjoyed the work so much, I even accepted an offer to continue part-time as her research assistant during the school year.

I have had other academic and work experiences that have helped me realize which potential professional paths to eliminate from my list. Although those experiences were valuable in that they revealed to me what I do not like, I feel especially grateful that my PURM internship provided me with a new set of skills and a new interest that give me reason to pursue historical research further.