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Theoretical Promiscuity as a Response to Identity Crisis: Or How Can I Know How,

When I Don't Know Who I Am Anymore?

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Abstract

This paper examines the struggles of a doctoral student with an assignment to choose a pedagogical perspective that most appropriately reflects her values and experiences in a time of personal displacement as a foreign student. It describes her transition from quantitative to qualitative research after years spent toiling in positivism, and her subsequent experiences with a number of perspectives including worldview theory, critical feminist theory, queer theory, and feminist postmodernism. It also examines her experience as an invisible foreigner in the midst of American assumptions of common values, myths and dreams, and considers the extent to which the experience of displacement and otherness may contribute to one's theoretical promiscuousness. Interjected throughout the paper are a university professor's thoughts about the nature of the assignment and her perspectives of the importance of this self-reflection for doctoral students. The paper concludes with an exploration of issues and thoughts arising from this dialog.

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(The university professor's voice throughout the paper is in italics.)

Introduction

I had this dream. I was an old crone standing in front of a break in the foliage to

a secret garden. Standing with me were two young children. I asked them to follow me

into the secret garden. I stepped through the opening and they followed closely behind

me, a bit scared, yet also excited. Before I knew it, the children were running ahead of

me, then coming back to check on me, and then running ahead again. After awhile, I told

them just to go on ahead, I was too old to keep up with them. Before I knew it, they were

gone.

Sometimes this is how I feel with my doctoral students. I open up the door, then

they are on their own to investigate their own worlds. It doesn't take long before they are

way ahead of me and have grown their own wings of discovery into the world of

research.

I take the act of doing research very seriously. No matter what research

paradigm one "subscribes to," the very act of doing research is fraught with dilemmas,

especially ethical ones. The questions one asks, the methodology one chooses, the data

analysis process, the conclusions one comes to, what one sees and does not see, are all

bound by epistemological, ontological, and axiological biases (at the least). Because of

this, I believe it is important for doctoral students to investigate their own beliefs and

values and how these might affect their research process and ways of viewing the world.

For most students, this is a life-altering search. It can be painful and can impact relationships with others, including family. I know this, yet I pursue and push my students. We study several "research paradigms" in-depth in the students' first intense theory class: feminism, postmodernism, queer theory, critical theory, constructivism, and racialized discourses and ethnic epistemologies. We share personal narratives with both trepidation and strength. I used to believe that I was empowering my students. Now I don't feel that way anymore. I know I can't empower my students—they can only empower themselves. But I do seem to take them down a path of no return. I don't know exactly how I feel about this, but this work feels important to me.

One of the assignments of the course is to have students investigate various perspectives in small groups and present the basic tenets and critiques of the perspectives to their peers. Towards the end of the course, students are asked to reflect on what the theories mean to them, what makes sense to them, what "talks" to them, and then write a personal disclosure that pulls their thoughts together. I want this to be an act of self-reflection that will bring them closer to understanding how they view the world and how this view might affect the research process for them. This has proven to be a somewhat troubling assignment, as students often assume I am asking them to "choose" a research perspective that "fits" for them, and then discuss why. This really is not what I am asking, as I know there is not a "one size fits all" when it comes to investigating how these perspectives ring true to self. How can I get students away from that notion?

I often wonder how students deal emotionally with this assignment, although I don't believe I have ever come right out and ask them. What Chris and I are sharing in

this paper is her struggle with this assignment, interjected with my inner voice as I read

her paper and am faced with her struggle—a struggle I know I have initiated.

Understanding the Assignment and Beginning the Exploration

Like many graduate students, I am now at the point in my doctoral program where I am beginning to grapple seriously with issues of perspective in qualitative research. Fortunately, I am in the kind of program where the instructors encourage us to undertake serious but open-minded explorations in order find a perspective *[Chris, I am not asking you to find "a perspective," but to explore what these perspectives mean to you.]* that is most consistent with our personal experiences and educational and cultural values, and so most accurately encompass our ontologies, epistemologies, and axiologies. Lately, however, I find myself wishing for simple answers to complex questions and hoping that someone will tell me the best and right thing to do. *[I hope you are not expecting me to do this!]* I am beginning to wonder, though, if my inability to enter into a serious, if not committed, relationship with any given research perspectives *["relationship" with a research perspective…interesting concept. Is this what you think I am asking you to do?]* is more the result of a personal identity crisis than of an unwillingness or inability to understand deeply and to choose appropriately. *[Sometimes I question if I even "understand deeply." How could I expect this of you? What makes you think there is an appropriate choice?]* This paper explores my research experiences to date and attempts to situate my current dilemma within the context of my experience as a foreign student at a U.S. university.

The Invisible Foreigner /Who Am I Now and Why It Matters to My Research

While I am fully cognizant of the responsibility researchers have to deeply know and honestly convey their research perspective, I find it extremely difficult to profess absolute allegiance to any one in particular. *[Again, Chris, what makes you think I am asking you to do this?]* Reasons for this include: fear my knowledge of research theory is not of sufficient depth to facilitate the best choice; fear that in constructing and operating rigidly within a specific research perspective, I may be sacrificing the flexibility of mind and practice that allows me to continue to evolve as I learn and grow as an educator and human being; and finally a sense of displacement that has left me unsure of who I am and what this means for the work I do. *[Smile!—I think you get it!]*

Through the active process of research and teaching, we determine not just what it is to carry out our professional duties, but who we are in relation to ourselves, others, and the world. It makes sense that our engagement with the world and our profoundly personal experiences impact how we see that world and our place within it. By requiring us to clarify and assess our cultural identity and its impact on our paradigm, our methodology, our interpretive acts, and the manner in which we convey those interpretations to the world at large (Ibrahim, 1999), existential worldview theory provides researchers with a perspective that allows us to examine and acknowledge ourselves and our subjects as whole and complex beings. *[And don't forget the subjective nature of self.]*

The power of the worldview research perspective lies in its potential to encompass both the researcher and the researched and thus reduce the chances of racial, cultural, and gender oppression by emphasizing consideration of issues related to human

existence that are pancultural and individual specific. As Ibrahim, Roysircar-Sodowsky, & Ohnishi (2001) noted:

> Worldview is a set of beliefs, values, and assumptions that undergirds a person's behavior and emotional reactions. It provides an implicit frame of reference for interpreting the world and its experiences and is derived from one's social and cultural world (including family, primary group, secondary social cultural groups, community, and nation). (p. 445)

In my attempt to examine my own cultural identity using the worldview lens, however, I began to realize that my current struggle might be as much personal/emotional as it is theoretical/intellectual.

I am a White woman from a working class background. As is common in my country (Canada), my ethnic heritage encompasses Scottish, British, Irish, and Native North American ancestry, and I see each of these as contributing essential elements to my character and my values. I believe in hard work, harmony, and kinship. I retain my commitment to fairness, especially as it is expressed in the socio-political movements, such as social democracy, that provide the foundation for the Canadian political system. Like most Canadians, I would rather be perceived as stupid than rude, and would be more embarrassed to be rich than poor.

My sense of family encompasses multiple generations of my maternal clan. I am the youngest woman of my generation, but was the first to attain a post-secondary degree. I am the only one to work in academia. With the exception of myself, my entire family still lives within one hundred miles of the original homestead established five generations ago in a small Ontario town. I am the only one to have left the enveloping nest of my family and friends. For those closest to me, I am a source of great pride, some confusion,

and considerable sadness. For those remaining from my parents' generation, the place where I now live is too far away and "a place we don't know."

Just over one year ago I became a foreign student in the United States and so I became an invisible minority, experiencing my 'otherness' in a new and entirely unexpected way. I look like a typical resident of the white middle class community in which I now live. But inside, I am not the same. My myths, dreams, and fears are different and none-the-less potent. And so I struggle to hang on to my sense of who I am, and I find myself needing to assert my difference just so I won't disappear.

For the first time I also know, although in a way clearly mitigated by White privilege, how it feels to have my freedom curtailed. As a foreign student, I must carry papers from the university confirming my right to return from my Canadian home to my American home. If I move my place of residence, the authorities must be notified or I will be deported. In every interaction with the U.S. government (Customs and Immigration, the IRS, the DMV), I am subject to interrogation. I would guess that it is the color of my skin that ensures that it is almost always understated and civil.

Previous Perspectives and Current Wanderings

Prior to becoming a foreign doctoral student, I worked for sixteen years as an educational researcher within the discipline of computer science, carrying out multiple research initiatives centrally situated within a quantitative methodology and a positivist perspective. As more of my work began to focus on issues of gender equity, however, I found the need for a more nuanced epistemology. I began seeking a perspective that encompassed a richer understanding of the complexity of human life and the multitude of powers that act upon the individual and at the same time resonated with my own

experiences as a woman working in a predominantly male field. I also began to experience what Lincoln and Cannella (2004) described as the unsuitability of the experimental quantitative model for "examining the complex and dynamic contents of public education in its many forms, sites, and variations" (p. 7) especially as they related to ethnicity, gender, race, and class.

My early readings in critical feminist theory were instrumental in allowing me to make the shift away from positivistic quantitative research methods to qualitative research methods. In feminist scholarship I found what Lather (2003) described as "a softness where interpretation is central and findings are always subject to debate and reinterpretation" (p. 11) which was significantly more representative of my experience of working with teachers and students than the hard certainty of my positivist research. Because feminist theory requires the researcher to question whether the institution truly encourages and enables human beings and then demands engagement in concrete projects for social change (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), adopting *[How does one adopt a perspective? Does this say that feminism is outside of you and that you must take it on externally, as one adopts a child?]* a feminist research perspective allowed me to move from what seemed to me a false or fainthearted position of inactive observer to active informed engagement.

Critical theory, meanwhile, provided me with what Giroux (2003) described as:

 a mode of analysis that stresses the breaks, discontinuities, and tensions in history, all of which become valuable in that they highlight the centrality of human agency and struggle while simultaneously revealing the gap between society as it presently exists and society as it might be. (p. 51)

It further expanded my conception of my role as an educational researcher from one who simply observes and reports, to one who seeks to use knowledge in a way that "aims at

creating the conditions under which irrationality, domination, and oppression can be overcome and transformed through deliberative, collective action" (McLaren, 2003, p. 73).

The combination of critical theory and feminist scholarship provided a theory with an action basis (Ropers-Huilman, 1998). It allowed me to inform my research on gender equity and technology with an understanding that the class structure and capitalism have a profound effect on schooling and that capitalism and the patriarchy are mutually reinforcing (Weiler, 2003). It also helped me to move beyond observations of what was and is, to considerations of the kinds of interventions that could be undertaken to make the educational system more just and equitable. *[What of feminists who claim critical theory is not a part of their world?]*

Soon after, however, I began to struggle with what I perceived as the inability of critical feminist theory to provide a means of analysis that was sufficiently broad to encompass the rich variety of human experience. In particular, I began to notice what hooks (1994) identified as the propensity of even such liberatory movements to silence, marginalize and deny.

> Again and again black female activists, scholars, and writers found ourselves isolated within feminist movement and often targets of misguided white women who were threatened by all attempts to deconstruct the category 'woman' or to bring a discourse on race into feminist scholarship. (p. 121)

Lately, I have also been struck by the writings of queer theorist such as Bryson (1993), who in their efforts to grapple with the conceptualizations about 'gender,' 'lesbian,' and 'difference' and their relationship to actual lived practices and social relations, noted that:

> This is what 'equity' in education seems to have meant for minority students: the right to try but inevitably to fail to become white, male, middle class. And this is what institutional 'gender equity' policies seem to signify most often for girls and

women: an impossibly contradictory injunction, on one hand, to enact a series of characteristics designated as 'gender-appropriate' in educational feminism's project, and on the other hand, to embrace and participate more 'equally' in the set of rules, roles, and relations established and maintained by a predominantly masculine power-elite. (p. 344)

In the midst of all of this uncertainly, I am now beginning to contemplate the connections between who I am, what I believe, and how I wish to conduct the research that will provide the basis for my dissertation. I am only just beginning to design my research project, but the one thing of which I am absolutely certain is that my methodology (however it is informed by theory and perspective) must also reflect the commitment to the empowerment of multiple voices that shapes my constructivist teaching practices. *[Yes, Chris, this is your challenge.]*

My constructivist pedagogy revolves around two principles: that learners construct knowledge rather than receive it passively from the environment and that learners come to know by constantly modifying their experience of the world (Jaworski, 2003). In constructivism, students are required to be active managers of their own learning in order to better prepare them to be autonomous thinkers and learners. Constructivism confronts learners with situations that create inconsistencies in their models and challenges them to either construct better models or ponder the merits of alternative models provided by the teacher (Perkins, 1991).

Connecting my educational and research praxis therefore demands that I find a way to meaningfully incorporate my research subjects *[participants]* into both the framing of my research question and the interpretation of data. I want their concerns to be addressed and their voices to be heard. I want to know what they need to know, so that I can continue to contribute in a meaningful way to not just the body of knowledge, but to

the exploration and development of solutions. *[And what about power? Can you truly engage in research in a constructivist manner as you envision? This is hard work. What if your participants don't want or appreciate your perspective?]*

For these reasons. I am also drawn to interpretive frameworks provided by feminist poststructuralism for the extent to which it allows researchers to both thoughtfully engage with and to transform the world (Weedon, 1987) and, at the same time, requires us to focus on developing a new understanding of knowledges and situations that are assumed to be tentative, partial, and relational (Ropers-Huilman, 1998). I am mindful, however, that in embracing a perspective that allows me to choose between different accounts of reality on the basis of their social implications (Middleton, 1993) may simply be another way for me maintain my current lack of theoretical commitment.

Sitting In a Place of Confusion

I am not sure if my present need to be theoretically promiscuous (Middleton, 1993) stems from my personal identity crises, from the fact that I still have some way to go in this pilgrim's progress of learning to be a better researcher and educator, or from the nature of this time in the history of educational research, where the "courage to act within an uncertain framework, then, emerges as the hallmark of liberatory praxis in a time marked by the dissolution of the authoritative foundations of knowledge" (Lather, 1991). I do know, however, no one can give me the one right answer, and that allowing myself to sit in this place of confusion just a little longer, while not intellectually and emotionally comfortable, is completely in keeping with my values and my commitment to continued growth as a professional and as a person. *[This place where you are at right*

now, no matter how uncomfortable it feels to you, is so important to your development as a researcher. I don't believe you can take the person out of the process. Can you be comfortable sitting in this place of confusion forever, constantly growing and changing through this serious work we call research?]

Conclusion

The process of developing a dialog around this paper was an exciting and enlightening experience for both of us.   Not only did it lead us to think more deeply about our roles as educators and researchers, but also about how much we had learned from and taught each other in our roles as teacher and student (Ropers-Huilman, 1998). In conclusion, we would like to share several questions around issues that surfaced during our exploration in hopes of engaging others in dialog around our thoughts.

1.   Is it possible for neophyte researchers to go through this reflective process without "trying on" perspectives?

For some beginning researchers, the exploration of different research perspectives may take the form of trying on different ones, just as one might try on pairs of shoes. First, you identify those that attract you for some reason. You put them on, walk around in them for a while, see which ones pinch and slide, and, in the end, choose the pair that fits best. Then again, this choice may not be a linear process at all, as one may find that after a while, and for a particular purpose, an older more comfortable perspective is best for achieving the task at hand. It is also important to note that the fear of choosing the "wrong' perspective may be pervasive, not just because we know how important it is, but because the arguments between various camps and the vitriol with which they are sometimes expressed are enough to scare the neophyte half to death. Plus, what if the

student doesn't actually "choose" the right perspective for the world view of the instructor of the research course? It would be naïve to think that students do not think about this! Although the instructor of the course in this paper resisted the desire of the student to "choose a paradigm," further reflection sees this as a natural part of the evolutionary process of understanding self as it relates to one's role as a researcher.

2. What does it take for the assessment process to truly be a dialog between instructor and student?

The dialog that took place as a result of this assignment led us to ponder how some assessment/assignment responses could actually be considered a type of written dialog. Burbules (1993) defines dialog as "a particular kind of pedagogical communicative relation: a conversational interaction directed intentionally toward teaching and learning" (p. x). How often do teachers' written comments on students' papers lead to further dialog in the way described by Burbules? What is the role of power in these discussions around teaching and learning? How do dialogical relationships develop through the teaching/learning assessment process?

Students certainly approach assignments with varying levels of commitment and ability, but there is no question that most desire to do well. Often this desire translates into trying to discern what it is that the instructor really wants—through the syllabus or ever-fleeting class discussions on assignment requirements. The ability to find that answer is further complicated by the student's ability to grasp the complexities of the topic at hand.

Most instructors strive to respond to students' works in meaningful ways, pointing out particularly good insights, raising questions to prompt deeper thought, or just nudging

students back to the path when their writing or thinking leads them astray. Is this a type of dialog? In addition, instructors often are more constrained than their students when it comes to this written dialog, as there are always questions of how much can or should be said, where guidance is most needed, and how much time the instructor actually has to engage with each student's assignment.

This paper allowed the instructor and student to engage in meaningful dialog around the assignment. This dialog took commitment and desire, and a willingness to appreciate what each had to contribute to the process of engaging more deeply in understanding the role of self in research. We don't believe this happens very often in a typical classroom due to many of the constraints discussed above.

3. How should teachers deal with the deeply personal aspect of what they ask their students to do?

This question of constraint also affects the instructor's ability or even desire to respond to sometimes deeply personal and poignant discomfort students are bound to have when they engage with issues which center on the core of their being and their experiences of the world to date. This is a tremendously difficult and complex issue for educators, as questions of when and how much to respond or even intervene are never as clear-cut as we would like them to be. That's exactly why some instructors choose not to "go there." So they remain puzzling over how much responsibility they must take on when they ask their students (especially neophyte researchers) to open the doors of self-examination. If instructors ask students to walk through that door, how much can they do to help their students feel safe, and how much should students expect them to do? The ethical dilemmas abound in these situations when Pandora's Box has been opened.

4. What can the unique experience of teaching educators to be researchers tell us about both the research and teaching process?

We often hear from our colleagues that the student evaluations from faculty in schools and colleges of education are some of the highest on campus. We believe there are many reasons for this. We know that many faculty who teach educators, especially teacher educators, are often former public-school teachers themselves. They think seriously about modeling the kinds of practices their students could actually use in their classrooms. Because of this, teaching tends to be a complex task and perhaps taken more seriously than in some of the other disciplines, although we know there are exceptional educators all across campus.

Teaching educators to be researchers becomes a moral endeavor, where knowledge of self and one's perspective towards "truth" are paramount in engaging in the research process. Classroom discourse and challenge are imperative for this process to take place. According to Shor (1992), students claim that attendance in class is often a waste of time as they can usually do the work on their own. The value to be gained by students and teachers meeting in class to talk over ideas, as well as time set aside for intellectual growth, was not a part of their university experience. "Student participation and positive emotions are influenced by the teacher's commitment to both" (p. 26).

The combination of this commitment, placing value on critical dialog and challenging discourse, and creating a safe learning community where diverse perspectives are seen as opportunities for intellectual growth, has the potential to create magic in the classroom. It doesn't happen all the time, and it doesn't happen with all students, but when it does, you know it. When this happens in a course devoted to

understanding research, one can't help but feel a little better about the next generation of researchers!

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