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Between Paradigms: Becoming a Pathological Optimist

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Abstract

Using an autoethnographic poststructural lens, I examined my academic journey in becoming a qualitative methodologist. I integrated my mentor's maxims such as, "the institution will not love you back," "prisoner of your words," "make plans; if they don't work, make new plans," "one has mentors and tormentors and both help shape us," "ever the opportunist," "strategic groveling," "a mosaic approach to mentoring" and "just get naked." Despite paradigmatic contradictions between my doctoral and postdoctoral experiences, I gained much from working between the polarities of the social science and biomedical discourse. In time, I became a "pathological optimist," one of the many lessons learned from an academic mentor that eventually led to my professorship.

Keywords

Qualitative, Autoethnography, Mentoring, STEMM, Academia

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Acknowledgements

Between Paradigms: Becoming a Pathological Optimist

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Using an autoethnographic poststructural lens, I examined my academic journey in becoming a qualitative methodologist. I integrated my mentor's maxims such as, "the institution will not love you back," "prisoner of your words," "make plans; if they don't work, make new plans," "one has mentors and tormentors and both help shape us," "ever the opportunist," "strategic groveling," "a mosaic approach to mentoring" and "just get naked." Despite paradigmatic contradictions between my doctoral and postdoctoral experiences, I gained much from working between the polarities of the social science and biomedical discourse. In time, I became a "pathological optimist," one of the many lessons learned from an academic mentor that eventually led to my professorship. Keywords: Qualitative, Autoethnography, Mentoring, STEMM, Academia

Live it - it's all you've got.
Grab it, squeeze it, exult in it.
Run with it.
Fight for it.
And when it tries to get away,
Take it between your teeth and wrestle it!   - Molly Carnes, MD, MS

This is one of the quotes that I collected from my post-doctoral mentor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison that I now use with my students during their data analysis. When I was a newcomer to Madison, I was struck by my physician-mentor's endless "one-liners" (*cited in italics*) that have contributed to my qualitative saga. This brief saga, defined here as a narrative of challenging exploits (Clark, 1972), is an autoethnography that may reflect histories of other researchers and educators who simply "love" qualitative research, in whatever discipline they find themselves. As I now teach qualitative methods, I struggle with what paradigmatic complexities are appropriate for students and novice researchers. For example, students often want to just do "frequencies" to find themes without regard to their theoretical framework to integrate the interpretation of their data.

Methods

Autoethnographies contain three elements: the autobiographical, the ethnographical, and the graphical or writing component. Pelias (2015) discusses the value of the story rather than theory noting that stories create space for "productive consideration and productive action" (p. 610) and "needed cultural work" (p. 611). This autobiographical story did "its work" (Sparkes, 2007) through personal memory, self-observational and self-reflexive data as I examined my emotions and behaviors within this particular cultural context (Grbich, 2013). I had collected a list of my mentors "one-liners" from her family and friends as well as my interactions with her over the years. This language "empowered" me, drove my research agenda, and contextualized and improved my life as I faced and reflected on my academic obstacles (Wadsworth, 2011; Wadsworth & Patton, 2011).

One ethnographical approach presented by Van Maanen (2011) is the confessional tale, "a more transparent account of the field experience written from the researcher's perspective"

(Willgens et al., 2016, p. 2384). As I wrote the chronology, the stories expanded through memory and self-reflexivity. The empowering "one-liners" became "interpretive act[s]" (p. 5) of "themeing the data" as I applied them in the form of themes with interpretive acts (subthemes) to my academic saga (Saldaña, 2015) p. 159). These interpretive acts were a consistent reminder of the role of my mentor in how I interpreted and deconstructed my own experience. As I wrote my story, the cultural perspectives of these interpretive acts became known as this narrative in turn constructed me (Ellis, 1995).

Chronological Narrative

The institution will not love you back

In 1988, I completed a Bachelor in Health Science in Physical Therapy. During the next 13 years I rose up through the ranks, starting as a hospital therapist, then senior therapist to a director of rehabilitation at a top-ranked for-profit hospital in a college community. Those years were marked by repeated physical injuries which also motivated me into management. As a director, the Chief Operating Officer suggested that I complete a master's in business administration; however, I "knew" that I someday wanted to achieve a higher education position so pursued an evening master's in educational leadership one course at a time as I was working 60 to 70 hours weeks. In September 2001 nearing the completion of my master's degree (during the week of 9/11), I was forced to resign due to political and financial ramifications. After 13 years of effort, the "institution will not love you back;" however, this opened doors not possible had I not been "reorganized."

Make plans; if they don't work, make new plans

I finished my master's in May of 2002. Fortunately, that July I received a fellowship, funding my Ph.D in Higher Education Administration. This by itself was an extraordinary leap as I left the biomedical discourse and found myself in a college of education. This opportunity gave me time for needed reflection to examine my leadership style in terms of the academic literature on feminist poststructuralism which expanded my post-positivist discourse.

Prisoner of your words

During my first semester, my academic advisor encouraged me to take an introductory qualitative research course, where I was immersed in theory that I did not understand for the most part. Physical therapists do not routinely learn about epistemology, constructivism, poststructuralism, or deconstruction (Crotty, 1998), and I was extremely skeptical of this "soft" form of research. Compounding this lack of knowledge was the final project for the course which involved two interviews with doctoral students about their experiences in graduate school. Both of my interviewees were under-represented minorities. The doctoral student from education talked for over an hour about social injustice theories and her experiences. The doctoral student from STEMM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine) sat across the room from the tape recorder, and during member checking (a qualitative verification technique) challenged the content and accuracy of the entire transcript of her interview. Her e-mail response stated that "none of the transcript was correct" in any way. This was shocking to me as I compared her demeanor to the previous interview. My reaction was heightened as I reflected on my position in the world as a White woman from the Midwest. As a former administrator, I had once been accused of making a racist comment. I do not know what I said (organizations cannot tell you); I just know that we are *prisoner of our words*. My

exploration into poststructuralism helped me explain my reaction because "power must be analyzed as something that circulates" (Foucault, 1978, p. 98). Not only did I have power as I recorded her words, but she had power based on my experiences unbeknownst to her, and this experience led me to interpret my data using a poststructural lens, examining the dynamics of power and discourse. Qualitative research made a substantive impression on my experience that semester.

One has mentors and tormentors and both help shape us

Because I had been steeped in medical discourse, I planned a quantitative research design for my doctoral studies. The next semester and summer, I studied t-tests, ANOVA's, Chi-squares, and even took an advanced linear regression course. But in May 2003, my subjectivity was shattered by the suicide of my sister, a clinical physician, who had failed to gain a tenure position in a top tier, medical school. As I read the notes that she had left behind, I realized that my sister's tormentors ravaged her mind because she did not have a mentor to help her navigate academic medicine. This tragedy prompted a re-evaluation of my academic work, and prompted me to write a qualitative dissertation. I had two women professor-mentors that allowed me to engage with my loss in an active way – through the writing process. I needed to understand how women successfully manage obstacles, and so I studied women deans (Isaac, 2007). That was the only way I could finish my PhD. Later, I wrote directly about my experience with my sister's tragedy and torment (Isaac, 2007).

In the following year, I took a course in advanced qualitative data collection and data analysis. I devoured feminist poststructural writers (Collard & Reynolds, 2005; Lather, 2001; Richardson, 1997; Sarup, 1989; St. Pierre, 1997; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000; Young & Skrla, 2003), and Foucault (Foucault & Gordon, 1980; Foucault, Martin, Gutman, & Hutton, 1988), and then Derrida (Caputo, 1997; Derrida, 1982). I needed to see the "messiness" and the "shades of gray" in life. My grief deplored black and white one-liners as concerned bystanders (and family) politely stated: "you have to move on with your life," "time will heal," "all things work for the good." During a week as I was selling my sister's house, I found time to read St. Pierre and Pillows' book on feminist poststructural theory called *Working the Ruins*. I negotiated my grief as a nomadic ethnographer through "connections and conduits and multiplicities" that extend the territories of understanding (St Pierre & Pillow 2000, p. 264). I presented, *Life out of Soul: A Nomad's View of Academic Women*, to the First International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry in Champaign-Urbana (Isaac & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005). As I was working my ruins, I lived deconstruction at the time as my life did not "reside in binaries but in multiplicity" (Isaac, Behar-Horenstein, & Koro-Ljungberg, 2009, p. 150). On the other hand, I was told by an Educational Leadership professor during a national conference the following year that "you can't do this kind of research" and obtain an academic position.

Ever the opportunist

At the time she was right. After I graduated in 2006, I found no job in academia, as no departments in physical therapy or educational leadership wanted a scholar with my background or research interests.   That year I only briefly attended a qualitative congress because of lack of money and embarrassment over having no academic home, as I kept "*a high visibility, low profile.*" That year I published my dissertation as well as worked as a physical therapist. Then in May 2007, I was drawn to a mentoring workshop for women in medicine given by Dr. Molly Carnes from UW-Madison and handed her a copy of my published dissertation (Isaac, 2007). We had similar research interests to make life better for women in academic medicine. And being "*ever the opportunist,*" that meeting resulted in a whirlwind

move from Gainesville, Florida for a post-doctoral position in Madison, Wisconsin in 2007. If you are *ever the opportunist*, you must *love the journey* wherever it takes you, even to subzero temperatures and record 100-inch snowfalls.

Strategic groveling

My post-doctoral position in the Department of Medicine was exciting but challenging. The first course I took was "Introduction to Systematic Reviews," and one of our textbooks was *Evidence-Based Medicine: How to Practice and Teach EBM* (Sackett, 2000). Qualitative evidence is at the bottom of the evidence-based medicine hierarchy (Henry, 2006). The evidence-based medicine movement advocates that all decisions be based on causal findings. Proponents privilege quantitative evidence and "convince themselves to mistrust or suppress qualitative knowledge as unreliable." But, for the next five years I worked as a qualitative researcher (although I took 11 hours of biostatistics) while publishing several "quantoid" articles (Isaac, Kaatz, Lee, & Carnes, 2012; Isaac, Lee, & Carnes, 2009; Isaac, Lee, & Carnes, 2011). However, "*You don't need luck, you've got brains*." Despite my apparent assimilation into the biomedical discourse, I also published qualitative papers based on my quantitative work, because "*a good idea should never be used once*." This double life was uncomfortable for me as it relegated my true research interests to the "ontological basement" (Martin, 1985).

Biomedical discourse "silences other, interpretive, and contextually situated voices" because the conventions of discourse and peer review give preference to quantitative methods and knowledge (Isaac & Koro-Ljungberg, 2011, p. 240). Reviewers demanded frequencies of codes and the elimination of qualitative "jargon" such as "grounded theory," "member checking," and "axial coding." Frequently biomedical reviewers, unfamiliar with qualitative methods, judged them harshly and then suggested changes that were methodologically inappropriate. "Theorizing failure" was unavoidable (Lather, 2009, p. 227), and I learned "*strategic groveling*" to reviewers' demands because of my overriding desire to make a difference for women in academic medicine, in conjunction with my postdoctoral mentor's aims. Despite the contradictions and discrepancies between my training and my postdoctoral experience, I sought the path through the middle as I was folded, unfolded and refolded (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). For one biomedical journal, it took six weeks to create code frequencies and provide a detailed explanation of "grounded theory" to satisfy the reviewers. In the future, I never made that "mistake" again, and used "simplified" descriptions of my methods (with frequencies) for future qualitative articles in STEMM journals. I learned to "*be a little vague to keep people from getting confused*." My "old ideas" were blown up as I was deconstructed.

A mosaic approach to mentoring

I learned much about academia working in a top-tier department of medicine. I learned through difficult experiences that "*Three points which people are completely irrational about: sex, money, and first-authorship*." I learned from repeated failure that "*Everything takes longer; that's why they call it research, instead of search*." I learned to be "*persistently pleasant*" as I learned to hide yet reinvent my research.

At my first grant advisory meeting, one of the board members asked what I wanted to do. I "*pitched my vision*" and stated, "I want to be a qualitative methodologist." They laughed and discussed what my priorities "should" be. It came to me that "*The problem with rolling with pigs in the mud is that you can't tell who the pigs are*." These eminent scientists meant well, but I clutched my qualitative roots, although I did begin using mixed methods because in STEMM, "*You're only as good as your standard curve*," and "*You're only as good as your last*

[published] paper." Although I disagreed with these scientists at the time, they were also mentors (not tormentors) as I expanded my qualitative focus.

I did not get a job at the University of Wisconsin-Madison during those five years. I moved back to Florida and worked on several grants with one of my former mentors, trying to create a position. I did not get any of those grants; however, I kept writing. After 14 months and being advised that "maybe you need to do something else," I was hired in July of 2013 by a small university in Atlanta to be a qualitative methodologist in an educational leadership department. I have taught qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods as well as higher education courses. In the end, my synthesized experiences were transformed into a job where, *"I'm doing just what I always wanted to do and I never even knew it."*

Just get naked

I learned some valuable lessons during this saga. I learned open-mindedness as *"[my] greatest strengths are [my] greatest weakness*;" my poststructural focus had to morph in Madison. I learned that students need a "*mosaic approach to mentoring*." I was entirely too theoretical and judgmental of my quantitative and even some of my qualitative counterparts. I learned the most from working in between the paradigms, within multiplicities. I learned that the role of the qualitative researcher in EBM is not to oppose established, effective methods, but to demonstrate where qualitative methods explain and can show when scientists are asking the wrong question. I learned to be a "*pathological optimist*" and that good can come out of failure, which is the deconstruction of my experience.

Doing qualitative research is a gift, but it is not something that I own. Derrida said that a gift is something that cannot be reappropriated and "never appears as such and is never equal to gratitude." (Caputo, 1997, p. 18). If a person says thank you for a gift, the gift starts to be destroyed, and so a gift goes beyond the circle of gratitude. Gift-giving goes beyond calculation because calculation can fail. A politics calculated "without justice and the gift, would be a terrible thing, and this is often the case" (Caputo, 1997, p. 19). As I moved though this saga, there are many people that I have gratitude for, even those board members and reviewers that I disagreed with, as "failure stimulates individuals to look outside their discourse" (Isaac & Franceschi, 2008, p. 657). The gifts I have received go beyond words as I attempt to facilitate dialogue across difference.

During vulnerable periods of our lives, we undergo deconstruction then reconstruction, and then the circle repeats itself. Fortunately, a deconstructive view in the blurring of boundaries of what might seem like an oppressive hierarchy expands the conversation and rejects emancipatory arguments. The complexity of this discourse cultivates repeated failure as practice does "not exist in opposition but in mixture" (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p. 264). Perhaps methodologists should bridge theory and methods by remembering a medical phrase, *"If they've seen it before, they won't be interested, and if they haven't, they won't know what it is. Just get naked."* Perhaps by providing the vulnerability of our stories, experiences and failures when doing qualitative research is the gift that will equal the circle of gratitude.

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