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Two Autoethnographies: A Search for Understanding of Gender and Age

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Abstract

The authors describe a project that illustrates the use of autoethnography as a research methodology to better understand their decisions to become professors. Strangers to one another, both authors discovered common motivations to make mid-life changes in opposition to cultural expectations. A review of the literature on epidemic theory, creativity, the women's movement, role change, and life stage theory offer insight into the experiences that motivated them to reject their traditional cultural roles. Both also found a shared unwillingness to accept invisibility, a common aspect of life for women over 40.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Mid-life Changes, Feminism, Ageism, Creativity, and Epidemic Theory

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Two Autoethnographies: A Search for Understanding of Gender and Age

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The authors describe a project that illustrates the use of autoethnography as a research methodology to better understand their decisions to become professors. Strangers to one another, both authors discovered common motivations to make mid-life changes in opposition to cultural expectations. A review of the literature on epidemic theory, creativity, the women's movement, role change, and life stage theory offer insight into the experiences that motivated them to reject their traditional cultural roles. Both also found a shared unwillingness to accept invisibility, a common aspect of life for women over 40. Key Words: Autoethnography, Mid-life Changes, Feminism, Ageism, Creativity, and Epidemic Theory

Introduction

The authors of this article are two middle-aged women who left traditional role identities to reinvent themselves as professionals in tenure-track positions at a prestigious Southwestern university. Reese has a specialization in social studies, and I study educational leadership. At a time of life when traditional social roles would have us sitting on the front porch, shelling peas, and watching grandchildren, we packed our suitcases, left home, and began new careers as university professors. Moreover, both of us relocated, one of us into a different time zone, and accepted the challenges of a commuter marriage in order to pursue our careers.

None of the common causes for radical change applied to either of us. We have husbands who love us. Both of us have two cars in our respective garages, own our own homes, and have the means, to put a chicken in the pot for dinner. Neither of us has to support an extravagant lifestyle, and our children are successful in their own careers. In short, Reese and I were living Franklin D. Roosevelt's definition of the "American Dream." So why, we wanted to understand, did that not fulfill either of us?

The answer lay in listening to our own voices. To that end, Carol Gilligan's (1993) invitation to women provided the rationale for this research: "Among the most pressing items on the agenda for research on adult development is the need to delineate *in women's own terms* the experience of their adult lives" (p. 174). To tell our stories balances the large body of literature that gives explanations of men's adult experiences, and not women's experiences.

Our original purpose for this paper was to explore our personal experience of an emerging social phenomenon, middle-aged women leaving comfortable lives to explore new horizons. The research question that prompted the exploration was, how did two strangers who had led separate lives arrive at similar decisions, which brought them to the same place at the same time? Autoethnography seemed the best way to examine the

uniqueness that made each of us an individual, and to explore some of the cultural expectations and impact that had shaped our decision making. The problem was that autoethnography is one researcher's connection of the personal self to the cultural self. Since there were two of us, how could we solve that dilemma?

As a solution, we decided to write about our search through the literature for a conference presentation about our decisions to come to the university, our journeys, and the exploration through autoethnography into our past lives for commonalities. That substantial intertwining of ethnography when juxtaposed with the autoethnographies fully exposed the connections that influenced us, both as individuals and as women who were part of a greater culture.

Methodology

Qualitative methodology is a holistic approach to understanding the emerging picture of the social context under study (Janesick, 2004). Examining relationships, studying personal interactions, exploring the setting, and using the researcher as a research instrument are part and parcel of the qualitative experience. Qualitative methods allow the researcher to step around the platform of scientifically derived knowledge as the only truth and to explore knowledge as art, as intuition, as tentative and problematic, and as complex social questions that can be answered through problem solving and negotiated resolution (Creswell, 1997; Glesne, 2006; Patton, 1990).

Given that the role of the researcher as the instrument of data collection and analysis is unique to qualitative research, that type of research resonated with us, for our observations of life have taught us that research is not conducted in a vacuum. Through personal reflection, conversation, introspection, emotional recall, and sharing, we had talked about what incidents in our past had shaped us, had made us stronger, and had forced us to confront sexism and ageism in our culture. In other words, we had already engaged in some ethnographic research for the conference. Now, we needed to go deeper and tie our own experiences into that research. Writing our autoethnographies would give us additional data, other than the literature review and the conference presentation, which we could examine for common themes.

Credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness are terms in qualitative research that replace the positivist criteria of validity and reliability in quantitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Patton (1990) argued that intellectual rigor and integrity could be demonstrated through thorough examination of the data for themes, explanations, and interpretations, and that such thoroughness goes "beyond the routine application of scientific procedures" (p. 477). Our lived experiences are our own, and they have credibility from that personal standpoint. However, the literature review and the data we generated as to our decisions to become professors, to participate in the conference, and to examine past experiences that influenced us, allow our readers to determine the credibility and trustworthiness of our experiences. Furthermore, this data allows them to reflect on their own knowledge, intuition, personal experiences and apply those reflections to what we described in our study, equating to the criteria needed to provide transferability.

Our Conversations

For a period of three-four weeks, each of us found the time to review our pasts and write about those peak emotional experiences that had shaped our decision to become professors. Then our conversations with one another about those experiences prompted more insights, more recollections, and we both would again go back to our writings. The memories were there, the emotional residue still a part of who we had become, and it was that experience through the writing that allowed us to see our present from the past.

Data Collection

Getting to Know One Another

Reese and I met during two intense days of university orientation when new faculty were bombarded with information, procedures, and policies that would need to know, but were unlikely to remember. In the midst of official welcoming and getting settled, several members of the faculty suggested to each of us the benefit of a new faculty cohort meeting together on a regular basis to provide support for one another. From that support group, the two of us grew to know one another better, and when the opportunity came to present at the annual all-university conference, on the advancement of women in higher education, Reese sought me out.

“We need to do this,” she said, waving the flyer that had captured her attention.

“Why?” I asked.

“They’ve encouraged us to present at conferences. Don’t you want to help other women find a way to achieve their dreams?”

“I’m not sure this job is my dream. I’ve been here a year now, and I think being a high school principal was easier.”

She gave me that look I had come to know so well. The one that meant she was not buying what I said. So I tried again.

“I have to develop a research agenda,” I protested. “I don’t see how this will help me do that. I’m interested in decision making, not women’s struggle for freedom from oppression. That’s passé, Reese.”

“What do you think got you here,” she replied, arching one blonde eyebrow at my inability to understand.

She had a point. Discussions in our support group had revealed that sexism had provided both of us the equal opportunity to experience its limitations and restrictions.

For the next few weeks, I found myself immersed in the literature on decision making, specifically decision making as it unfolded via epidemic theory (Gladwell, 2000), and creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Reese focused on the women’s concerns (Bateson, 1989; Chittister, 2005), role changes, and life stage theory (Carlisle, 1997; Erikson, 1980; Gilligan, 1993). Our thought processes were that if we could untangle the “why” through an exploration of “how” that might provide some insight for those women who attended the conference.

Reese frowned when she read through the research we had collected. “This stuff” she said, “needs something to hang on, and it has to be our experiences.”

That comment bothered me. If I did decide to go back through my past, however selectively, what kind of research was that? Qualitative, yes, but it was not case study, the method I was most familiar with. The researcher separates from the self in case study methodology, and Reese was suggesting something else. At that point neither one of us had had much experience with autoethnography. However, after researching various qualitative methods, autoethnography seemed to be the best possible way to use ourselves as research instruments and involve ourselves in the analysis.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography, a qualitative method, is a postmodernist construct in that it combines autobiography with ethnography (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Ellis and Bochner (2000) posit that autoethnography displays multiple layers of consciousness in mixing the personal with the cultural and includes dialogue, emotion, and self consciousness through first-person accounts. It is highly personalized writing “where authors draw on their own experiences to extend understanding of a particular discipline or culture” (Holt, 2003). Pratt's (1999) suggestion is that alternative forms of meaning and power from those associated with the dominant culture could be explored in autoethnographical texts. Buzzard (2003) saw autoethnography as the “perfect aegis under which every heretofore silenced group might enunciate, from its own location and according to its own agenda, its vision of itself and the world” (p. 61). That resonated with Gilligan's (1993) challenge, our lived experiences, and the conference presentation.

Buzzard (2003) also pondered the limitations as to why autoethnography has not emerged as energetically as he thinks it should. He listed “three embarrassments” (his term) as to why researchers have not enthusiastically embraced this qualitative method. The first is that “it seems to involve us in forms of ‘essentialism’ or ‘identity politics’” (p. 61). The second embarrassment is that autoethnography lacks a process that allows “some individual participant in a culture [to go] about securing the authority to represent or ‘speak on behalf of’ the culture to which he or she belongs” (p. 71). The third point he makes is that autoethnography allows the examination of one's place in a culture at the same time one tries to escape from it, a problem of identification and one's place and movement within the culture.

Despite these limitations, autoethnography remained a viable research method for us. It placed us back within a social context we had escaped from so that we might more clearly understand our experiences there and the impact of culture on the decisions we made. Those interviews with our memories reconstructed our past selves. By reliving the emotion of those peak experiences and withstanding the self consciousness they invoked, we could look more deeply at cultural interactions. Upon reflection, those experiences had shaped and molded us into the women we were today; women who were capable of moving away from husbands they loved to carve out careers in academe. We liked the depth that could be plumbed in writing about our current search, and coming together, while at the same time exploring the so very different pathways each of us had walked, only to reach a common destination. The delimitations of our project were set with this decision.

Data Collection

The conference

Separately, we each found time to review our pasts and write about those peak emotional experiences that had shaped our decisions. During the period of three-four weeks, we did not feel self-indulgent or narcissistic as we did so, a criticism that autoethnography encounters (Coffey, 1999). As Reese and I assembled the PowerPoint presentation for the conference, and I saw the depth of revelation that autoethnography uncovered, I realized that my uneasiness with the methodology did not stem from self-indulgence or narcissism, Coffey's criticisms, but whether I wanted to "come out" in front of a lot of strangers, even if they were in support of women advancing their careers. It would leave me vulnerable, and I was not sure I could risk that, either personally or professionally. Reese had no such qualms.

During this period, Reese and I met once or twice a week to discuss how the writing process was going. We discussed turning the conference presentation, if it went well, into a paper during that PowerPoint composition process. Those who would read that account might find some explanation for their own decision making through the exploration of our journeys. That rationalization gave us the motivation to continue.

Yet, for me, some reluctance remained, which was why, several weeks later, I found myself so nervous my legs were shaking as I stood with Reese before a crowd of women and some men, who were listening with rapt attention to our stories. Reese seemed to be a little nervous as well. Neither of us had realized the extent to which we had opened ourselves to criticism and rejection. Paradoxically, the journey back through time had enlightened both of us as to the many hurdles and barriers we had gone around, over, or through to get to where we were. Still, it did not make the presentation any easier. We were after all women over 40, and in this current culture, men and women over 40 are protected by age-discrimination laws. Those laws exist because the discrimination exists.

After the conference

Our presentation went well before an audience of 20-30 people, mostly women with a few men scattered throughout the crowd. As we walked across campus toward the College of Education building, I told Reese, "I think they clapped, because we didn't fall down."

"They clapped because they found our stories interesting and provocative. We both have something to offer, you know. That's why we're here." She smiled for a moment then grew serious again. "Now we have to write the paper."

Emerging Themes

Several common themes emerged from the autoethnographical accounts and discussions. First, neither one of us were feminists in our earlier lives, although both of us had experienced sexism. Second, though we lived separate lives unbeknownst to one another, the experiences that led to our decision making were similar. Third, the decision

to seek a university position was an example of a tipping point (Gladwell, 2000) in our lives. Fourth, the decision to accept university positions had its roots in self-actualization and cultural discriminations, specific to age and sex. Fifth, our motivation and experience to share our stories had little to do with self-indulgence or narcissism.

Never a Feminist

While we were independent mature women, neither one of us had been outspoken feminists in the 1970s or 1980s when it had been popular to be so. At that time, we were both married, raising children, and supporting our husbands as they forged their careers. In that regard, our lives were similar: We just lived in different states. Other than reading about Gloria Steinman and attending one feminist rally that featured Ms. Abzug, our younger selves had no time to consider another ideology among the distractions of raising kids and putting food on the table. As our children grew older, both of us turned to teaching as an acceptable career for women in that time period.

Similar Experiences

The decision to pursue a culturally acceptable career was the first common decision that started us both down the path that led to higher education. During this time, Reese found a community of women in clergy families who were feminists and joined other women who were active in the League of Women Voters. In 1986, she marched on the state capital in Oklahoma for equitable salaries and benefits for teachers in the state.

JoAnn

After I finished my bachelor's degree, I applied for a teaching position and secured one right away. After I finished my master's in educational leadership and applied for high school principal positions, rejection after rejection came my way. I thought the failure was my fault until I secured a position as a high school principal in 1997, and discovered that in my conservative state, only 25 out of the 400+ high school principals were female, a statistic that had held steady for over 25 years. What is more revealing is that I felt uncomfortable being in that minority.

Looking back, I feel ashamed that I did not take more pride in being a female role model. The term "glass ceiling" has taken on new meaning for me. I have done some research of the feminist literature for a better understanding of male dominance, power structures, and underlying mythology, yet I am still reluctant to admit that as a younger woman I had been sexually discriminated against. I have discovered that sexism is the only form of discrimination that has been consistent throughout the centuries.

Reese

I turned to academia to reframe my work in public school. A female professor guided my studies about adult learners and creative female educators in the field of gifted education, which offered an exciting alternative to the structured education in public school. I had a vision for schools in a new social context. In addition, I had explored the

broad changes in women's roles in seminars with female theology students; those experiences changed me. When a superintendent interviewed me for a teaching position because one of his girls was pregnant, I walked out of the interview. At age 40, I didn't want to be one of his girls.

JoAnn

In 1994, when I took my first high school principalship in a town four hours away from my husband, my mother and two evangelical female cousins staged an intervention for me. They thought what I had decided to do was blasphemous and against God's will. I thanked them for their concern and took the job with my husband's blessings.

Today, I have accepted that equality does not exist for women in this culture, especially women who are over 30. Yet my friends, those few women I depend on for the truth, as well as my daughter tell me they see a woman who has not settled for mediocrity. Oddly enough, with this relocation to the university some 10 years later, those same cousins offered their support and congratulations.

Reese

Several acquaintances, women in mid-life, had recently finished professional degrees and were experiencing high levels of satisfaction. Having those role-models gave me courage to begin the educational process toward a terminal degree. My sense of autonomy and self-awareness gradually increased as I took courses and discussed philosophical and theoretical positions with noted female professors. Finally, I rented an apartment on campus to reduce the time on the road. The ingredients for change were coming together.

At the university a female department chair offered encouragement to earn credentials for a tenure-track position instead of continuing with adjunct appointments in the college. A few women principals in public school gave me confidence to continue seeking changes in my leadership style. I realized that women professors in university programs were part of the network of change, and they offered me an opportunity I couldn't refuse.

Discussion

It is an accurate statement that Reese and I have been successful in the male-dominated world of K-12 education. Our jobs came about because White male administrators, who were in positions of dominance and power at the time, valued our talents and gave us a chance. However, as the autoethnographies reveal, feelings of failure plagued us despite the successes. Revisiting those experiences and feelings of shame, which time has muted, allowed us to discover and admit that our shame stemmed from the fact that we had experienced sexism and had not protected ourselves from it. Our personal selves had been brainwashed by cultural expectations.

We also had given up careers to support husbands and to raise children. That came as a surprise for we both felt those were our decisions, not ones influenced by the culture in which we found ourselves. Also, it took the solidarity of two shared

experiences, through autoethnography and writing this article, to fully recognize that our individual experiences had not been as independent from cultural influence as we had originally thought.

“A profound confusion and ambivalence exists in American society today about sexism and feminism” (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997, p. 111). Despite the women’s movement, wage gaps persist as do patterns of job segregation and confusion about roles. Roles are socially constructed and dictate culturally specific behavior and expectations for women (femininity) and men (masculinity). Pursuing a career is a male role. Staying at home and caring for the husband and children is a female role. Women entering mid-life today belong to a generation who spent their formative years with traditional, pre-feminist socialization and imagery, but who have lived their adulthood with a feminist re-definition of women’s roles in society. They have two selves to be integrated (McQuaide, 1996). To illustrate the powerfulness of the cultural influence, Reese explains,

This part in our paper, this discussion of never being a feminist has always bothered me because I have been outspoken and have read women’s literature including the Gloria Steinman piece as a twenty-something person. I searched through Gail Sheehy’s *Passages* for understanding of developmental stages of women in middle age and took courses in faith development theory to reconcile my theology and my philosophy. I have almost always worked at part-time jobs in the communities where we have lived and have bristled at clergy spouse expectations forever. I actually walked out of a conference level luncheon in the late 70’s because of the inspirational speaker’s jokes at the expense of several male clergy spouses and did not attend another of these politically important events for more than ten years. In writing this paper, I distanced myself from the term “feminist” even though I felt in my youth that I was an outspoken feminist.

Another factor we had to consider is drawn from women’s experiences (Gilligan, 1993) as they relate to life-stage theory (Erickson, 1980). Gilligan revisited the stages of adult development from a female perspective and found that the stages were not as clearly defined as in studies with men. She found that the issues of intimacy and identity were interwoven in women’s relationships over many years before a woman engaged in a stage of generativity and self-expression with an orientation toward future generations. Our paths reflect that.

For men, in their early adult years, issues of identity preceded relationships leading to intimacy. They described themselves in terms of their work as accountants, businessmen, or clergymen, while women focused on relationships and saw themselves as moms and teachers, or wives and nurses. They often interrupted their careers to care for children and families (Carlisle, 1997), leaving the work of unraveling the interconnected issues of identity and intimacy for later periods of their lives. Women may take a more narrative approach to understanding the continuous changes that occur in their lives. They typically manage a variety of activities at the same time; feeding children, caring for extended families, organizing community functions, and pursuing

careers. They can “accept ambiguity and allow for learning along the way” (Bateson, 1989, p184).

As women’s stories unfold, Joan Chittister (2005) notes that women face the struggles similar to those described here. She explains, “We all have stories of pain and grief, depression and despair, hopelessness and sorrow” (p. ix), and we survived some of them well. In our stories are times where we faced death of loved ones, loss of jobs, isolation in new locations, and rejection, but from those came determination to continue with careers that utilized our intellect and our creativity (James, 1990). We did not want to return to an interruptible career in mid-life. Our lives were not without commitment, but were “lives in which commitments are continually refocused and redefined” (Bateson, 1989, p. 9).

We were now ready to unravel the issues of identity and intimacy amidst the changes taking place in our lives. Age played a big part in our decision making, we realized, once we read through our accounts and this research.

The Tipping Point

A popular myth in our culture is that one can become an overnight success. Yet, studies show that most people spend 10-15 years immersing themselves in ideas, hard work, and creativity before they tip into success (Hayes, 1989). In epidemiology, that point is known as the tipping point, which is the moment an epidemic becomes an epidemic. For example, the flu tips each year: Sporadic cases appear and then there is a week when it seems everyone has the flu.

In his book, *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell (2000) applies the epidemic theory model to social phenomena. “Ideas and products, and messages and behaviors spread just like viruses do” (p. 7) through people to people contact. Rumor theory poses examples of how this is done. Allport and Postman (1947) posited that the kernel of truth in all rumors is distorted through leveling some details, sharpening others, and changing the story somewhat. Connectors, mavens, and salesmen, those idea spreaders, drop some details of the idea, exaggerate other details, and change the story so that it makes sense to them. This process can tip an idea toward failure or success.

Our pursuits of terminal degrees are examples of how individual lives can tip especially in those periods leading up to peak periods of creativity. Connectors had urged both of us to pursue a doctorate. Mavens had assured us the universities we attended were quality. The idea of becoming professors certainly stuck because we finished our rigorous programs. And when the context around us changed, we tipped and made our decisions to apply for assistant professor positions. The rapidity, with which that context changed, at least in one situation, gives some clues as to the “why” of our decisions just as the review of literature helped us understand the “how”. Before you read our stories, we want to share that the tipping points in our lives, which were traumatic, served us well. Both of us emerged with a sense of moral courage that we would not have had but for those experiences.

JoAnn

Within the space of two weeks, during the month of October, 2000, my sane, orderly life tipped. We had put our Iowa home up for sale and my husband was already working at his new job in the South. I'd finished my coursework for the PhD, and all the signs were that we would be starting yet again in a different state. On October 12th, my father had a stroke and an automobile accident because of it. I drove home to Illinois hoping I could get there in time to say goodbye. He lived through the night and rallied. Because dad was doing better, after a week at the hospital, I drove back to Iowa and defended my dissertation on October 19th. Our Iowa home sold that afternoon, and my siblings called later that night and said my father had taken a turn for the worse. We held his funeral that following week.

A month later, I was in a large city of strangers without a home, a father, a mother back in Illinois who was quite frail, and a husband who was not sure he had made the right decision regarding his new job. All of the security that I had taken for granted was gone. That summer, I searched for a job as an administrator, but I was an older woman from the North with a brand-new PhD that put me in a higher income bracket than most young assistant principals. When I asked one administrator why I was not considered for a job I was qualified for, he told me they were looking for a male assistant principal who could check in boys' bathrooms on a regular basis. Surely I could understand that, he said, but I wondered to myself what checking the boys' bathrooms had to do with leadership strengths.

Another administrator told me that the Civil War was a recent event in the South and then asked did I like living in Iowa. I had bumped my head on enough glass ceilings to know that if I persisted, I would eventually get an administrative position. The truth was my heart was not in the search. I was coming to the realization I had a life that I had not lived. Instead of accepting other's valuation of me, I decided that if I was invisible, I could do whatever I wanted to do. The fears I had about becoming a professor vanished with that new sense of freedom.

That year, I sent out a few applications for assistant professorships, was in the loop for a position, and then the state budget fell apart and the university could not hire. Disappointed, I convinced myself that I should be satisfied to care for my husband, take care of our home, and build a consulting business I had started. My children were grown, and I had what mattered most to women, or so I'd been raised to believe, a husband who loved me, a lovely home in a nice neighborhood, and enough money to pay the bills. Except, I wasn't using that degree I'd struggled so hard for.

My husband didn't want us to live apart. We'd already done that in a previous job move, and although a commuter marriage had worked to our advantage for three years, he really wanted me to concentrate on finding something within a hundred mile radius of where we lived. I agreed and put away my dreams of a professorship. A year later, my husband's company downsized, he lost his job on a Monday, and regained it on Tuesday when they found out they could not do without him. My mother died suddenly on Thursday of that same week. Again, life seemed to be telling me something. This time though, instead of withdrawing in fear and uncertainty to contemplate the nature of my existence, I started sending out my curriculum vita to universities that were looking for assistant professors in educational leadership. If I had opportunities, I should pursue

them, and I wanted to help train effective principals and superintendents. Fortunately, my husband agreed with my dreams. When this university offered me a position, I was on the short list at three other universities. I accepted this offer, and my husband's smile was as big as my own.

Reese

Decisions surrounding relocation often bring unexpected changes. In retrospect, I can see the impact of recent moves and events surrounding them as tipping points, leading toward the tenure-track position I now hold.

Nine years ago, as our youngest son graduated from college, we were in the midst of moving away from my husband's unsatisfying job situation and my long commute to an increasingly frustrating middle school teaching position. The relocation would put us in a familiar urban area with friends and activities we enjoyed, even though we had some reservations about the advantages of the new position. We returned from Pennsylvania with a family and four years of college memorabilia in the car, planning to bring closure to a school year and to pack all our household goods within ten days. Our son had been away from the family and decided to visit his grandmother for two days, before returning to help load the U-haul truck and take a job in New York. I called my mother to tell her he was on his way from Oklahoma.

Four hours later, he called from the emergency room. My mother had had a heart attack and would have by-pass surgery within 48 hours. We left boxes unpacked and spent the next four days with her. She responded well after surgery, so we returned to the task of moving two hundred miles in three days and sent both sons back to work. For the next six months, I drove four hours back and forth, staying with her three or four days a week and setting up a new house with my husband at other times. There was no time to find a new teaching position even though we had bought a house expecting two incomes and no college expenses. Lack of time, energy, and money created stress and frustrations; furthermore, my husband was unhappy with the new job.

When he received a better offer two years later, we accepted it with a mix of hope and anxiety. Consulting with schools on developing curriculum, collaborating on a textbook, and adjunct teaching had not been professionally satisfying to me. I looked forward to new career directions at the regional college or other educational programs within the community. I did find a combination position as an adjunct and director of a student support lab. In a university culture that values advanced degrees, I gladly received encouragement by a department chair to acquire credentials for a full-time faculty position in higher education. It was a career decision with potential for making significant contributions to the future of the field of education.

An offhand comment by a young, male faculty tipped the decision. "You know," he smugly said "you do have a good job here." In truth, it was not a good job. It was a second-class, female position in a male-dominated system, paying \$6000 less than my middle school job. I had no input into the curriculum I was teaching, no voice in department policies and procedures, and no choice in assigned courses or schedules. The idea to begin coursework at a major university 100 miles away, while continuing to work part time, finally took hold. The decision to be away from home three or four night a

week, unknowingly was leading me closer to accepting a commuter, dual-career marriage, and an assistant professorship.

My children had begun their own careers and families. My spouse's professional success released me from the role of business partner. His staff now included secretarial support, an administrative assistant, a program coordinator, and a technology assistant. My energy and time commitment to family in earlier years became less intense and the long-time maturing relationship with my spouse shifted to emphasize questions of who I was and how I wanted to express those values.

Accepting a position in another state, separated from family and friends, demanded a thoughtful review of the advantages and disadvantages. New places, new jobs, new friends had been part of my whole life, so relocating was not a primary concern. As a young adult, I dreamed of teaching in international environments, but set that aside in favor of family and teaching opportunities in communities where I lived. That dream of international friendships remains.

Financially, the position was appealing, but we had to consider the cost of keeping two homes and traveling between them. Email and unlimited phone minutes support daily communication, but being together would also be important. The strongest appeal was the challenge of the tenure-track position. For years, teaching students who were pushing the boundaries of traditional learning captured my energy, creativity, and imagination in both rural and suburban communities. Here was a chance for me to do what I had encouraged students to do. Take a chance. My husband summed up his thoughts, "You've followed my career for years; now it is your turn. Go for it."

Discussion

Like a virus that will not replicate itself unless the environment is favorable, ideas prosper or die depending on the environment. Conditions must be right for ideas to be accepted by people and to take hold (Menand, 2001). Human beings, Gladwell (2000) contends, are intensely affected by the environment in which they find themselves. Change the environment and human behavior changes.

Much controversy surrounds this concept, and that controversy has its roots in philosophy and the search for knowledge and truth. A fundamental premise of modernism, the preferred philosophy of educational leadership, a field which has its base in psychology (English, 2003), is that the search for truth rides in the vehicle known as science. Post modernist challenges, such as Gergen's social constructivism, which he first introduced in a 1973 article, posit that there is no one truth that can be discovered by science. Gergen stated that research methods may be scientific, but social psychology is historical inquiry. Moreover, the conduct of scientific research alters reality because people recreate reality by acting on their preconceptions and knowledge (Gergen, 1973, 2001).

Self actualization versus Cultural Discriminations

For us the environment changed as we aged. So we looked at aging and creativity and found that peak periods of creativity emerge in critical periods of crisis and change within the human life. For adults, the age ranges corresponding to those critical periods

are 18-20, 29-31, 40-45, and 60-65. Furthermore, speculation has it that the 10-15 years leading up to those critical periods are spent in preparation for the peak period. That research, along with Gergen's theory of social constructivism brought insight into the "why" of our decisions. However, this research did not explain everything. Two elements were missing; the element of receptivity, of openness to change, and satisfaction with work that was fulfilling.

Koenig and Cunningham (2001) note that a person who scores high on measures of openness tends "to assertively seek out challenging and novel experiences, to have a vivid imagination, and to willingly consider new and unconventional ideas" (p. 208). Openness to new experiences extends to those of us who are willing to move to another place. The feeling of being at home is not tied so much to a physical place as it is to the valued items that relocators keep with them in a new environment. The simple tasks of hanging pictures and unpacking books can claim a place as a new home.

Flow is a word coined by Csikszentmihalyi (1996) to define a state of deep focus that occurs when people engage in challenging tasks that demand concentration and commitment. Flow occurs when a person's skill level is perfectly balanced to the challenge level of a task that has clear goals and provides immediate feedback. Csikszentmihalyi's theory of optimal experience and flow nested within Maslow's theory, which contends that a person's behavior is motivated by his or her most basic needs at any given moment, goes to higher order needs, specifically self actualization. As basic needs, such as food, water, and shelter, become satisfied, a person is able to focus on higher-order needs, which is what Reese and I had done.

Creativity

Psychologists, artists, and entrepreneurs cannot agree as to what a definition of creativity might be except that it must contain originality, expression of ideas, and a contribution toward the well-being of mankind. Csikszentmihalyi (2003) theorized that humans are born with many aptitudes. He also believed that many of those aptitudes go unrecognized throughout a lifetime. Life demands innovation and growth from those individuals who seek self-actualization, which he correlated with happiness. Creativity for Csikszentmihalyi is rooted in an intrinsic motivation, not extrinsic rewards.

While aging does not lessen creativity, aging is not a valued process in the United States. To re-invent oneself after the age of 40 or 50 is difficult because of an element of risk regarding self-actualization. Employers do not identify older workers as valuable commodities. If an older person yearns to be self-fulfilled, that opportunity within the workforce may be denied based on societal perceptions such as ageism and sexism. As the autoethnographies indicate, our desire to express our creativity in work we found fulfilling, the work of professors, led us to challenge many of our culture's accepted roles for women of a certain age.

JoAnn: I have noticed that my circle of women friends belongs in two camps; those who are taking care of their grandchildren and those who are pursuing careers they love. There are no middle ground dwellers. When I confided this to a colleague, she said, for women in their 50s there is no middle ground.

A Criticism of Autoethnography

Autoethnography is tainted with accusations of narcissism and self-aggrandizement (Coffey, 1999). Our engagement in the methodology was not motivated by an excessive need to be noticed. Rather, the quest for discovery of why and how we came to be at the university had its roots in helping others and ourselves better understand our decisions. The resulting discussion between us led to deeper interpretations and sparked discussion of richer interpretations and explanations including emotion. For example, we realized through those discussions that the self-consciousness I experienced at the conference when presenting our stories is inherent in autoethnography as the researcher, in our case researchers, try to connect the personal with the cultural.

Another reason those feelings might have been avoided could be the enthusiastic response we received from the conference participants. Also, this search through our histories and experiences focused on a comparison of two lives, not one, lived at the same time in different parts of the United States. That examination of two separate lived experiences for commonalities of a culture that shaped us and that we escaped from lent more rigor to the study and contributed to a detachment regarding the data that did not lend itself to feelings of self-indulgence.

Limitations

To reflect upon life's experiences and how those experiences led to decisions is one thing, to encapsulate two lifetimes into one journal article is another. Our ethnographic/autoethnographies have many limitations. We left out minor incidents that may have carried more weight than what we gave them credit for. We did not mention differences in our lives, but those differences may have been very important in our quest to understand our similarities. Yet, perhaps our attempts to understand one another because we were strangers led us to discoveries that we had more in common than what we really did.

The theories we explored, while explaining portions of our experiences, did not explain all our experiences. We left out the humor that shaped us, the resiliency that is a large part of who and what we are, and the determination that kept us strong. We do not know yet why that came to be. Perhaps it was the fortuitous experiences we shared. Perhaps it was others that are lost in our memories. We certainly know that along the way, we managed to retain hope and some control about the futures we shaped for ourselves.

What we could not examine, although we tried and came close at times, in our discussion and reflection, were the sacred myths that we have based our lives on, and for that we apologize. There are just some things that one cannot articulate, not even with oneself. They are too personal, precious, and fragile to expose the light of reason, science, and examination.

Reflection and Conclusion

The feminist movement in the 70s and 80s brought an awareness that lay dormant. Thirty years later Reese and I have finally awakened in a culture that has not changed significantly for women. To choose to pursue a career at midlife required that both of us step out of traditional roles into ambiguity and confusion. Our society has no commonly accepted role models of courage for women, other than women who sacrifice themselves for their children. That model is attached to traditional male roles, like firefighters, policemen, and soldiers. Although we had never considered ourselves courageous, nor had anyone else of our immediate acquaintance, we had to overcome fear and frustration when we went against socialization to carve a new path for ourselves.

Reflecting on the literature and our stories forced us to consider many facets of our experiences that led to our decisions. We have come closer to understanding why we felt a need to re-invent ourselves. The first realization was that we have a strong commitment to ourselves as individuals and to the quest for gender and age equity in our personal and professional lives. Our frustrating encounters with culture's expectations for women have fueled a determination to make a difference and have a voice in overturning those expectations. When the deciding factor in hiring an assistant principal becomes an issue of who can check the boys' bathrooms, the gender inequities in education demand that people of integrity take a stand.

Second, at some point in our lives, we realized that we had allowed our own dreams to emerge. Now at our age, we place a high value on self-fulfillment and self-realization. That is a trend that has been growing since the 1960s, contributing to more dual-career couples finding highly desirable jobs, while maintaining separate residences (Gerstel & Gross, 1982). We feel we have acquired a measure of wisdom that sustains us. Creativity does not diminish the older one gets nor does the need for adventure. What does hamper the expression of creativity is the invisibility of older people in our culture, and the discrimination they face. The importance of context cannot be denied in our accounts of tipping points and our quest for self-actualization.

So, now that we have finished our search for understanding the "how" and the "why" we have come to be on the tenure-track, what do we plan to do next? About that there is no question, not with our backgrounds and that invisibility factor. We hope to use our invisibility to better the world around us, particularly for the generations of women that are watching, including my daughter and our granddaughters. At times within the cacophony of demands for time management, creativity, publishing, and teaching, it is difficult to recall the clear notes of purpose and a desire to change the world around us that prompted our decisions. Yet, as we work with colleagues at the university level we find ourselves promoting programs that require change in established policies and procedures. We are enlisting the aid of communicators, people with strong community connections; mavens, those with substantial knowledge of issues related to education, and we're selling our idea.

It is a sticky idea, one that has been around for centuries. We believe that individuals can change the world around them and make the world a better place. We also realize that that is not an attribute normally associated with humans of our age and gender. However, we understand now that age and gender are not limiting factors unless we allow them to be.

If the telling of women's stories in their adult lives contributes to the understanding of decision making and adult development, we offer our reflections as a vision of hope and possibility for future generations. As women of a certain age, we realize that despite our culture's enormous influence, the choice really is ours to define our lives as we chose. We can be invisible, or we can live our lives making a difference. We have chosen to do the latter. And to those two men who are lucky enough to be in our lives, as we are in theirs, we say "hang on" for the adventure has just begun.

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