6-1-2005

Research as Improvisation: Dancing among Perspectives

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Recommended APA Citation

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Abstract

This article captures the way research methods were intertwined with core identities to understand the success development of Caribbean-Canadian women. It highlights the importance of researchers experimenting with a blend of perspectives to fit their problem as well as their identity. Viewing the research process through the eyes of the researcher and her dissertation chair, issues of validity and collaboration emerge. Ultimately both authors listen to family voices as they dance among research perspectives.

Keywords

Research Perspectives, Research Identities, and Collaboration

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Research as Improvisation: Dancing among Perspectives

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This article captures the way research methods were intertwined with core identities to understand the success development of Caribbean-Canadian women. It highlights the importance of researchers experimenting with a blend of perspectives to fit their problem as well as their identity. Viewing the research process through the eyes of the researcher and her dissertation chair, issues of validity and collaboration emerge. Ultimately both authors listen to family voices as they dance among research perspectives. Key Words: Research Perspectives, Research Identities, and Collaboration

The purpose of this article is to highlight the dilemma researchers often face; how to find a match between research methods, institutional expectations, and personal understandings of what knowledge is and how research is carried out. It is a reflective piece showing some of the challenges faced by one faculty advisor and her student.

About five years ago I, (Shirley) wrote a poem to try to capture what teaching means to me. As I reflect on my experience as the chair for Glenda-mae Greene's dissertation, I realize the poem also captures some of what it means to me to be a research professor. I have renamed the poem, *Teaching and Researching*.

Risk-taking
Trying to make connections
between
what is known and what needs to be known
gigantic leaps!
Niagara falls would be easier to go over
than to assume we could connect

I must be a fool - to take such risks
We come together
my students and me
anticipating something
we might be bored
or
together we might go over the falls
dive into the unknown
go places we
haven't gone before

The fall may be gentle or tumultuous
But ahhh! The landing feels good
We've learned together
I – as much as they

It's worth the risk
teaching and researching
I can't, I won't, I don't give up
the desire to learn is innate
It's addicting
The magic is there
It's worth the risk.

I first met Glenda-mae in my narrative research class. I had just come from spending several months at the Center for Research for Teacher Education and Development at the University of Alberta where I was part of a collaborative research community. By telling my family stories and listening to the stories of my research partners, I had experienced a deep transformation. I became aware of the power of my own subjective reality as I shared some of my experiences and connected them with my Dad's stories. Growing up on *Coulee Co-op Farm*, I was immersed in a community where my Dad farmed with four brothers. This family community shared many activities: planting, harvesting, daily chores, schooling, church, recreation, and celebrations. The caring and collaboration we experienced extended into the larger farming community with many of the same activities shared outside the large family circle. The story of neighbors helping each other during harvest time was relived every autumn. It did not matter who needed help; instead the whole community came together to make sure all the grain was in before the snow fell. Dad had a strong connection to others and as I told my stories I realized that I too was happiest in collaborative relationships where professionals worked together toward a common goal – where hierarchical relationships were replaced with collegial networks.

Another aspect of my identity that became clear to me during my time in Alberta was the importance of creativity in my life. My Dad's life had been filled with creative opportunities such as designing and altering farm machinery and improvising to make machines to plow the ground, to pick up stones, to harvest short crops, and to auger grain. He used what he had available, easily welding odd bits of metal to make something new. He also collected antiques and recreated them into works of art. From classroom experiences to research activities, my life stories often have themes of improvising and creating something new.

My professional research opportunities had moved from a science background (biology major) to qualitative research for my dissertation. I was still struggling with the subjective nature of qualitative research, but my experiences at the Center had helped me see the value of personal stories. I was enthused by the possibilities of using narrative research in my research agenda and wondered if my students would see similar possibilities. Setting up my research class like Jean Clandinin, my mentor, we each told our stories of family, school, and leadership. Then one day Glenda-mae wrote her research story in her journal for my class.

More than a decade ago, in another place, I (Glenda-mae) set out to find what success meant for those high school students whose working-class mothers came from the Caribbean to Canada to improve the qualities of their lives. I sought to trace the trajectories of their success. The traditional methodology – surveys, printed checklists and questionnaires – did not help. My participants complained, "You are asking the wrong questions. They don't fit me!" I had insider knowledge on that perspective. I too had a Caribbean working-class mother and an unfolding pathway to success. What was this knowledge I was seeking and why was I having such difficulty uncovering it? I stopped searching for a while until the nagging questions would not be stilled. I finally realized that my problem was primarily a function of the methods I was using. I turned to the interview. After the first round of interviews; however, I began to sense the one-sidedness of the questions. I was mining the minds of my participants. They were merely vessels to whom I expected straightforward access. My participants' enthusiasm dwindled, as did my committee's.

And so Glenda-mae asked me if I thought her study could be revived. I listened and heard the cry of someone desperately searching for ways to do research that honors the individual, shows respect, invites participation, and shares discovery. The research methods (survey and interviews) she had previously tried clearly did not work for her. I was appalled – ten years seemed like a long time to have an unresolved "wonderment." She was ready to try different methods; collaborative dialogue and listening for narratives. But was I ready? I thought of Heron (1996), Richardson (1993, 1994), Noddings (1984), Clandinin and Connelly (2000), and Fine (1994). I worried about the other committee members, the graduate dean, and my colleagues. They were pretty much entrenched in the postpositivist paradigm. But, my recent experiences at the University of Alberta reminded me that there were other meaningful ways to do research. I remembered my Dad's improvisation and collaboration and I remembered who I am. I revised my poem:

It's worth the risk
teaching and researching
the desire to learn/create is innate
improvising, collaborating
I can't, I won't, I don't give up.

Together we made a plan. Glenda-mae wanted to use a lifeline in the form of a staircase (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Success Staircase.
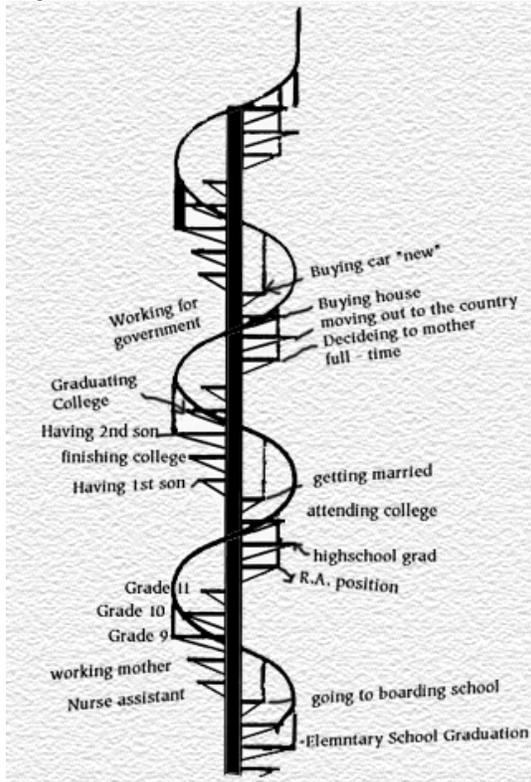
The staircase was more than a simple line. It projected climbing and success. The three women were pleased to be able to document on the staircase when and how they had been successful. Glenda-mae wanted to use cameras to capture notions of success and the in-depth interview (Hollway & Jefferson, 1997). She found three women from her previous research efforts, and I clung to Heron's words, "The challenge after positivism is to redefine truth and validity in ways that honor the generative, creative role of the human mind in all forms of knowing" (p. 13). But what is knowledge? How do we find it? Create it? Creswell (2003) and Paul (2005) unpack some of the assumptions and knowledge claims guiding different research perspectives. Where did Glenda-mae and I fit? Were we postpositivists, constructivists, pragmatists, or critical theorists? We did not think about it very much. We were determined to make research meaningful for others and ourselves. We would find a way to dance among the different perspectives!

My Puzzlement Finds a Medium

My (Glenda-mae's) dissertation developed in response to my "puzzlement" (Stake, 1995) about how young Caribbean-Canadian women's definition of success is shaped and developed. It is, in essence, a longitudinal study thick with heuristic, narrative description designed to help readers hear the voices of three young women as they recount how they counteracted "stereotype vulnerability" (Way, 1995), garnered support, challenged obstacles, and achieved their goals. This article is a reflection on the collaborative nature of my dissertation; the way empirical poems (Sullivan, 2002)

became collaborative poems as I sought ways to be true to my participants. It is also a reflection of the way my chair and I collaborated to find meaningful research methods.

My first awareness of my own minority status came when I enrolled in college in the United States. In Jamaica, the country of my birth, status was more a matter of class than it was of race. Our island's motto celebrated the rhetoric of diversity: Out of many, one people. I was a member of the privileged class.

It was not until I flew over the Caribbean Sea and landed in this country that I realized that privilege was not so much a matter of class as it was of having a role model for success; a model such as the one I had, up close and personal. My sense of privilege had been shaped primarily by the success stories of my grandmother-the-teacher as told to me by my mother. These were stories that just about everyone we knew had heard or lived.

In this country no one knew who I was, a phenomenon which was as threatening as it was exciting. For the first time, I experienced the barriers to achievement that I had read about. It no longer seemed possible to follow the footsteps that my grandmother and mother had trod. The rules of the game had changed with location. It seemed to me that I had been marginalized by the norms of a new society.

My grandmother had been a legend in her own time. Born in what was then British Guiana, of an English colonialist father and a French-Amerindian mother, she grew up on the banks of the Demarara River with the gift of story telling and a passion for learning. Graduating from Pacific Union College in northern California about the time World War I broke out, she traveled by land and sea to Jamaica to teach at what is now West Indies College.

Clearly, or so the stories go, she was an excellent educator with a passion for surmounting difficulties. There were no textbooks. She used her memory and elocution to create an oral tradition of texts. Marriage was not permitted during the school year. She and her student fiancé eloped to be married in a limestone cave, announcing their marriage from separate residences only when the school year ended.

As the biological clock moved to "shut-down time," as she described it, they had their only child, my mother. Nevertheless, my grandmother taught with the infant in a basket, in a corner of the classroom. The stories about her were as riveting as fairy tales but even more powerful. As her granddaughter, I was indeed privileged. She had been a wonderful role model to me. My mother was like grandmother in many ways and together they had convinced me that whatever I dreamed of becoming, I could be just that! They had been successful and so would I. Mine was an awesome birthright.

As I listened to the taped musings that I had personally transcribed and had validated by each participant, a pattern began to evolve. I knew their voices had to take center stage. After hours of listening to the interviews, sometimes falling asleep while hearing the percussive force of their telling, I sought to capture the young women's phrasing, their cadences, their silences, and their style. I tried to highlight the moments they thought significant to their search for success. Free verse seemed the only medium. Implicit in the choice of free verse was the tacit knowledge that art abides in the souls of Black women (Wade-Gayles, 1995), and that there is power in the in-between spaces of unspoken text.

Walking in the footsteps of Elliot Eisner (1997a) I chose poetic representation, "a symptom of a fertile imagination seeking to understand its limits" (p. 5) to display the

study's findings. Laurel Richardson (1994) appeals to social science researchers: "Experiment with transforming an in-depth interview into a poetic representation. Try using only the words, breath points, pauses, syntax and diction of the speaker" (p. 526). While entering the field in a path Richardson cleared, I developed poems for each of the three women in my study.

The synthesis of Jade's (pseudonym) stories, the essence of her persona, and her definition of success development are mediated through the poem below. It became a collaborative effort. After writing her poem, it only seemed right to send it to her for feedback. When she mailed the poem back to me with her revisions, she complained: "It sounded frilly and a little disjointed. It needed that Maya Angelou's 'guts' to it."

In response to her feedback, I reviewed the poem. Her critique highlighted a dialogic tension between the text in mystory (Denzin, 1997) and herstory. I sought my journal and thought with my pen.

> There is indeed more "guts" to her poem revision than I had shown. I had muted the quiet strength of the little immigrant girl who rejected her aunt's mittens almost two decades ago. . .Or the petite graduate who spent a year of service in an African country while the warring drums were beginning to beat. Or the June bride who refused to bow to tradition and moved down the aisle on her mother's arm. Yes, the courage that I saw and heard is indeed her strength.

The relative brevity of the free-verse genre allows for quick and cogent revision by the written about. The mother-line theme, down to the futuristic final stanza, is illuminated in her developmental sequencing of the verses. As Jade answers a question, reflecting on the years which led to the development of her unique brand of success, her poem is born. Her revisions, made as soon as the work was mailed to her, expanded the narrative. They are noted in italics.

When I Look in the Mirror

I see
the faces of three women—
my grandmother, my mother, *and myself*,
I am the product of their struggles and sacrifices.
They are a part of me.

I see
a child uprooted from her Motherland
striving to adjust
to a new country, climate, and culture,
but I can get bubble gum.

I feel
my *adolescent* backbone—
the big stick of my character—

growing stronger.

I ponder
the words
of my grandmother,
When yuh see rain on yuh neigba 'tep,
p'epare yuh owna 'ouse.

I hear
the lessons my mother ingrained in me.
Get your education.
Be faithful to God.

I see
a woman of color in quiet defiance
of the establishment,
an ethnic rainbow
reaching back
to anchor herself in her heritage.
I will not let you put me in one box.
I know who I am.
I know where I am going.

When my daughter
looks in the mirror,
she will see
the faces of four strong women.
She will know
who she is
and where she came from.

And the legacy lingers.

Corrine Glesne (1997) reminds us that although poetic transcription only moves in the direction of poetry, it gives pleasure and truth. Jade's poem reflects that truth. Her persona and her success development are mediated through the poem. We see her mother's role in her success. The poem reflects her characteristic style; omissions, avoidance of troubling issues, and awareness of invisible audiences. The poem, which she revised immediately as the italics indicate, now hangs on the walls of two homes; hers and the home of her mother.

Ring of Truth

The poems had a ring of truth. I (Shirley) was comfortable with that, but would the committee accept Glenda-mae's work? Qualitative research was still quite new in my institution. Art-based forms of representation, like poems, had never been used in a

previous dissertation at Andrews University. "You said the poems came from listening to the taped interviews and sometimes falling asleep—I don't think it's going to fly!" I said. "Where did the mother theme come from? How can we show the committee that it is a theme?" So, Glenda-mae organized her data in a table format (Table 1). She even found a reference (Miles & Huberman, 1984), making a strong case for creating data displays to help analyze the data.

Table 1
Theme Chart – The Awesome Mother

THEME	JADE	EBONI	SILVER
Mother as nurturer	When I was small, it was just the two of us. We did everything together.	After the beatings, my face tear-stained, she packed my breakfast and we took the bus.	I always came back to the solid touch of her up-stretched palms.
Mother to the rescue	I didn't want to live in the residence hall. So she moved our house to the university town.	You're better off going to the school at church. There are other Black children going there.	All of a sudden. . . my mother was there. She had my gym clothes.
Mother as teacher	She is an example to me that I could do whatever I set my mind to do.	She teaches me to cook—the West Indian dishes.	Always remember, it's not just you that people are seeing; it's everybody that is Black.
Mother as motivator	She's always pushing me to do good in school- Get A's.	Look in the mirror, see how ugly you are.	I don't want you to ever work like I did.
Mother as therapist	Wen yuh han'in de tiga mout', rub he head.		He won't be marching down the aisle. You will.
Mother as mirror image	I am my mother's daughter.	Becoming like my mother is my greatest fear.	We're becoming just like them.
Gilding the pink hibiscus	[By omission or implicit comparison]	I covered up what she really was like. My mother has a hard time controlling her awful temper.	In my family, when you do something, you pay the consequences to the fullest. You don't get any special treatment.

As I look back at the table and others like it they look "boxed in" – in stark contrast to the flow of the rest of Glenda-mae's dissertation, but it would fly: I was sure of that! But why a table? How does a table help? If knowledge claims are derived from

assumptions of objectivity, the table somehow makes the "mother theme" less subjective. The table portrays the "voices" of the three women. It provides a way to "show" the strength of the "mother theme."

I knew the dissertation defense questions well. "Where did the "mother theme" come from? Would another researcher find the same theme? How strong is the theme?" The positivist (postpositivist) paradigm is pervasive in western culture. It was pervasive in my institution. Science had taught us to value objectivity. The table and others like it objectified the data and acted as a bridge connecting different philosophical assumptions. Any reader could see the "mother theme" portrayed in the table yet it was less subjective than a poem. The committee appreciated the data displays and Glenda-mae and I felt a deep sense of satisfaction that we were able to improvise and to satisfy the committee without giving up the poems.

During the dissertation process, I began to think differently about validity. I had learned to trust the qualitative methods of member checking, triangulation and/or peer review as ways to demonstrate validity, but Glenda-mae taught me to see issues of validity on a continuum. At one end of the continuum are techniques "to do" while at the other end of the continuum are relationships "to be." The idea that our research is valid depending on sampling procedures, use of valid instruments, and an objective stance comes from the positivist paradigm. We internalize the idea that there is something we need to "do" to make our research valid. We often do not think about "who" we are as researchers and how our attitudes and dispositions influence our research. Because we bring our own cultural experiences to our research agendas and because we do our research in institutions with their own unique research stories, we will always be seeking to find our place on this validity continuum. Glenda-mae's ten-year hiatus represents an internalized commitment to the relationship -- "being" end of the continuum. She couldn't move forward until she had confidence that she was being fair to her participants. Her study has validity because she was able to maintain a sense of shared humanity with her participants (Heshusius, 1994), their voices were celebrated (Lather, 1986) along with the cooperative approach (Heron, 1996), which reduced power differences. All of these represented ethical issues for her. Angen (2000) continues to open the door at the ethical/relational end of the validity continuum by stating:

> The etymological root of valid is the Latin word *valere*, which means to be well, strong, powerful, or effective and to have worth or value. Thus, validity does not need to be about attaining positivist objective truth, it lies more in a subjective, human estimation of what it means to have done something well, having made an effort that is worthy of trust and written up convincingly. (p. 392)

My students and I are improvising to demonstrate to others that our findings are valid – not so much because of techniques we "do" but because of the relationships we establish and nurture. The problems associated with research are the same problems we face as we endeavor to live moral lives (Noddings, 1984). Moral issues are fundamentally about how we treat other human beings. How shall we "be" with the people we study? How shall dissertation advisors "be" with researchers? How will my attitudes affect the people I study? What will be the repercussions of my research activities? What is the

"right" and "good" thing to do? (Schram, 2003) For Glenda-mae and me the "right" and "good" thing was connected to core values and ideas from our families; internalized ways of "being." These helped us move into collaborative relationships with one another and the research participants. Together we danced away from a postpositivist perspective toward a critical constructivist perspective. "The same negotiation, acceptance of ambiguity, and reliance on dialogue that are required in all our myriad daily interpretations of meaning are also required for the validation of research" (Angen, 2000, p. 392) Glenda-mae and I trusted each other to be in a dialogue about what was working and not working for our research project – her dissertation. I remembered my Dad's stories of creativity and collaboration and trusted them. I took a risk and learned with Glenda-mae.

Collaborative Production of Meaning

At the end of each interview, I (Glenda-mae) asked one final question: "What did the interview process do for you?" Their responses were slow and deliberate. Jade's words epitomized them: "It put breath into my thoughts." The interview process was a form of dialogue in which we (each participant and I) tried to come to grips with her truth in the context of mutual care and understanding. I construed Jade's words to mean that her experience had little value until it was connected to story. By telling a story about their lives, the women understood more clearly that their lives had structure since stories make explicit the meaning that is implicit in lived experience (Widdershoven, 1995).

As I listened to each woman's story, a curious series of processes evolved in my consciousness. I experienced the phenomenon that multicultural theorists describe as spontaneous identity (Axelson, 1993). I began to celebrate, perhaps flaunt, my hyphenated identity, Caribbean-Canadian. I understood my life more clearly because of the vividness with which the women had illuminated theirs. Atkinson's (1998) concluding statement made sense: "The more we share our own stories, the closer we become" (p. 76).

Nor did it seem that the years, which evolved as this study dragged on, were in vain. I needed to find a medium for my "puzzlement." Participatory forms of inquiry were not yet in vogue when I first started this quest for meaning. Nor were poems a possible way to write up results; to capture truths. I understand more clearly how my "position," my standpoint influenced my choice of research strategies. It is also clear to me now that I unconsciously had a critical perspective (Paul, 2005). I wanted to challenge the power relations in the school system that made my Caribbean students appear (un)successful. I also had a race and ethnicity perspective (Paul) through which I was committed to uncovering the ways my identity and those of my research friends had been shaped by our cultural interactions – especially those with our mothers. I mouthed the words of the poetic polylogue.

In search of success,
I lost my way
'til my mind saw my mother
her little face lighted up
my pilot heard her voice

as if from afar
It's you marching down that aisle
I kept going
prodded by expectations
mine, hers, theirs

In search of success,
I found my roots,
I am my mother's daughter

I finally realized how closely that quest mirrored my own search for a medium to call my own. Eisner (1997b) described that phenomenon: "Through our imaginative participation in the worlds that we create we have a platform for seeing what might be called our 'actual worlds' more clearly" (p. 264). My world has changed. Finally, the fit is right. My researcher self has been found and I am delighted. I realize more deeply how my mother and grandmother shaped my path and although it took me almost 15 years to complete my research, I know it was their voices I had to listen to in order to maintain my identity and integrity.

Conclusion

As we (Glenda-mae and Shirley) reflect on the dissertation process, we are struck by the ease with which we experimented with different methods. We improvised with data collection methods, with forms of representation, and with notions of validity. In the final analysis we moved away from the positivist perspective toward a more critical, arts-based perspective. Together we let our creative minds construct new ways to be responsive to our research participants, including the dissertation committee. We pause as we realize the current expectation to "construct an intellectual orientation" (Schram, 2003) and understand multiple perspectives (Paul, 2005). We wonder whether we could have understood and identified our stance before the research process began. We needed to "be with" each other and the study participants to be able to improvise our way towards new perspectives. We have a strong sense that researchers "learn by doing," and that individual perspectives are constructed and reconstructed in environments where the research ethic gives the researcher choice and autonomy to find methods that make sense for her. We suggest that research is an improvisational activity where the researcher dances among a potpourri of methods, representations, and assumptions.

As constructivists we now facilitate research that gives ourselves and our colleagues freedom to experiment and be creative with multiple methods; to improvise as we move back and forth on the objective/subjective continuum and the doing/being continuum – having confidence we will discover the "right" approach for our research.

It's worth the risk
teaching and researching
the desire to learn/create is innate
improvising, collaborating
We can't, we won't, we don't give up.

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Author Note

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Article Citation