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Abstract

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Keywords

Autoethnography, Narrative Inquiry, Subjectivity, Haiti, Qualitative Research, Narrative Research, Reflexivity, Positionality

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Introduction

This article is an autoethnographic exploration of the connections between my stories and experiences as a researcher and the stories and experiences of the participants in my dissertation research, which was conducted 10 years ago. The stories I share in this article foreground the role of subjectivity in the research process, countering the positivistic stance that research is a purely objective activity. Researchers are human beings with ontological, epistemological and political stances; and researcher subjectivity is not something to ignore or hide, but rather something to dive into and explore, to understand the ways in which it shapes the research process (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011; Mruck & Breuer, 2003; Peshkin, 1988). The autoethnography presented in this article is the result of a process of critical reflection and reveals the ways in which both macro and micro forces influenced the research process in a multitude of ways.

I conducted my research in Haiti after the catastrophic 2010 earthquake, and my dissertation became a narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006) into the experiences of Haitian educational leaders who were working to create systemic change in the post-disaster context. Though not central to the research, my stories as the researcher inevitably become a part of the dissertation, ultimately turning it into a tapestry in which the stories of the participants were interwoven with—and interacting with—my stories as the researcher, as well as with the literature from the field more broadly (for similar examples of this atypical format, see Campano, 2007; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). Now, 10 years later, I am using autoethnography as a method for diving back into the research. The stories I present in this article highlight the ways in which the 2010 Haitian earthquake ultimately led me to change the focus of my doctoral studies; they bring to light the various decisions I made as I designed my dissertation research; they reveal the ways in which the journey I took with my dissertation impacted me as a researcher; and these stories illustrate the various ways in which a researcher's background, positionality and subjectivity impact the entirety of the research process. As an additional layer, this article highlights how autoethnography can serve as a perfect complement to narrative inquiry.

Autoethnographic and Narrative Inquiry

Autoethnographic inquiry is both a process and a product: as a process, it creates a structure and space for researchers to critically reflect on their practice; and as a product, it creates an avenue for researchers to share their learnings with other researchers (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011; Starr, 2010). Autoethnography, as both a process and product, can be a tool for ongoing professional learning for researchers, as it forces a critical engagement with assumptions, decisions, mistakes and new perspectives; while the learning is particularly powerful for the autoethnographer, it can be powerful for other researchers as well, as they can learn vicariously through reading (or witnessing) autoethnography. Starr (2010) describes autoethnography as "a study of the space between self and culture" (p. 1) and Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) explain that autoethnography "challenges canonical ways of doing research" as "autoethnographers recognize the innumerable ways personal experience influences the research process" (pp. 273-274). As a blend of autobiography and ethnography, autoethnography emerged from postmodernism, and is steeped in alternate ways of knowing while it pushes against positivistic notions of objectivity. As Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) illustrate, "autoethnography is one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist" (p. 274). This aligns with Peshkin's (1988) argument that a researcher's subjectivity is like a cloak that cannot be removed; but it can be made visible, as indeed, subjectivity is an important component of the research process. By intentionally and systematically diving into one's subjectivity, research can become more intricate, and perhaps even more fragile. The relationships between the participants and researcher become alive, illuminating the complexity of the data. In this article, I present a research tapestry—the intertwined collection of my stories and the stories of my participants—in order to illustrate what is lost when we discuss data as if it sits alone in a bubble to be analyzed and presented. Data come from participants, undoubtedly, but in many ways, data are created by the researcher as well.

Though my dissertation was not autoethnographic in nature, I can now see the ways in which autoethnographic inquiry aligns strongly with the process of narrative inquiry. Connelly & Clandinin (2006) describe narrative inquiry as "the study of experience as story" and explain that stories become "a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful" (p. 375). Narrative inquiry highlights people's lived experiences and can be used as a starting point for understanding how people make sense of their lives, and for understanding how and why peoples' stories are shaped and reshaped (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Importantly, narrative inquiry moves beyond simply the telling of stories to seek to understand the broader significance of the stories by analyzing them in their social and historical context. Narratives allow researchers to examine the ways in which people's stories are constructed through "historically specific social relationships" (Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett, 2008, p. 2). As Pavlenko (2002) explains, "narratives are not purely individual constructions – they are powerfully shaped by social, cultural and historical conventions as well as by the relationship between the storyteller and the interlocutor" (p. 214). In other words, both macro and micro forces are constantly shaping people's stories. These intimate connections between the macro and the micro were profoundly felt as I wrote my dissertation, and through this autoethnography, I seek to shine light on the ways in which my stories interacted with, shaped, and were shaped by, my participants' stories, as both their stories and mine were simultaneously shaped by other macro and micro forces which have also weaved themselves into the research tapestry.

An Emerging Relationship with Haiti

Just before 5pm on January 12th, 2010, I was sitting in my house in West Philadelphia, listening to NPR. At the time, I had no personal connection to Haiti; even still, it is hard not to be affected by a catastrophic event like the January 12th earthquake. When I heard the news announced on NPR, I was shocked and deeply distraught but I was also removed from the situation in every sense imaginable; I had no way of truly understanding the experience of the millions of Haitians whose lives were forever changed. Though I hear about natural and human-made disasters on the news on a daily basis, for some reason the Haitian earthquake moved me into action in a way that other catastrophes had not. I could not help but become involved in the recovery efforts, and the aftermath of the earthquake ultimately consumed my life in many ways.

In January 2010, when the earthquake happened, I was a third-year doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education and had already started collecting data for what I thought would become my dissertation. I was engaged in a youth participatory action research project with a group of Philadelphia youth committed to changing the school district's zero tolerance policy. Though I loved the work I was doing in Philadelphia, and continued to work with the youth, after the earthquake, my focus on Haiti slowly began taking up more and more of my time. Ultimately, I could not resist the urge to shift the course of my doctoral studies, even though it was late in the process. I worked closely with my advisor, Dr. Sharon Ravitch, and we co-developed the Haiti Education Initiative at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education. Before I knew it, my work in Haiti, and the relationships I formed through the process had consumed my life, in both wonderful and complicated ways.

A Shift in Perspective: My First Trip to Haiti

I tend to gravitate towards grassroots movements and grassroots leadership, and so, as I prepared for my first trip to Haiti, I was particularly interested in our meetings with the Haitian teachers and community leaders. I am also generally skeptical of governments and government officials, and the Haitian government, in particular, carries with it a deeply negative reputation. The media and academic literature alike repeatedly describe the Haitian government as corrupt, and government officials as incapable and uncaring (for important critiques on this deficit-oriented discourse about the Haitian government, see: Clark, 2001; Farmer, 2005; Schuller, 2007; Sheller, 2000; Smith, 2001; Trouillot, 1990). The negative stories I heard about the Haitian government before traveling to Haiti were only reinforced during my first trip, through the conversations we had with local Haitians; the teachers, school leaders and NGO workers we met with held outwardly negative opinions about the government of Haiti.

Between the media representation of the Haitian government and personal accounts from on the ground in Haiti, I did not have high hopes for our meeting at the end of that first trip with the Ministry of Education. Luckily, however, with the right types of experiences, assumptions can be productively challenged. That is exactly what happened in our meeting with the Haitian Minister of Education and his two top advisors. During that meeting, those three individuals (without knowing it) forced me to rethink my assumptions about the Haitian government, and more specifically about the people who work in, and in support of, the government. When I entered the meeting that afternoon, I was, admittedly, expecting to meet people who did not truly care about the majority of the population, who were not familiar with the concerns, needs and experiences of the vast majority of Haitians. Instead, I met individuals who, well before the earthquake, had been dedicating their lives to creating a more equitable and effective education system in Haiti. They were very much attuned to the realities of the

education sector, the needs of the people, and the limitations and possibilities of the system they were operating within. Since the earthquake, these individuals, in collaboration with many others, had been working relentlessly—first to triage the situation, and then to develop a plan to drastically reform and restructure the Haitian education system. And they were doing so in psychologically and physically precarious environments. But the earthquake had placed a spotlight on all the flaws in the system and created an opening for change; these leaders were compelled to act. When I met with them several months after the earthquake, it became clear that they, along with their colleagues, had barely seen their families since the earthquake; they often worked 7 days a week, late into the evenings, and they continued to move forward with very little sleep. Contrary to my expectations, corruption and apathy did not seem to fit into their stories. I was obviously only seeing the tip of the iceberg and did not have a full understanding of the social, historical or cultural context, but it became clear to me that I needed to deeply examine my assumptions. I was experiencing a moment of cognitive dissonance that I needed to work to resolve.

When we left Haiti the following morning, I felt quite disoriented. For one, I knew that the images of the tents that were endlessly lining the streets, filling every open space possible, and of the rubble that seemed to be consuming the city, would forever be etched in my mind. At the same time, I was now also trying to make sense of the cognitive dissonance I was experiencing about the Haitian government: on the one hand, the negative images about the government had deeply shaped my assumptions going into Haiti, but on the other hand, I had just met a group of people who seemed to effortlessly challenge those assumptions. As I was flying back to Philadelphia that afternoon, I began to think critically about my assumptions and how exactly they had been shaped. I thought about the neocolonial discourse (for important critiques of this discourse, see Bhabha, 1990; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988), and in particular, the neoliberal post-disaster discourse (de Waal, 2008; Gunewardena, 2008; Lakoff, 2010; Roberts, 2010; Schuller, 2008), and about how these discourses were being used in Haiti in this post-disaster context, and in other moments throughout Haiti's history as well. It was a long journey back to Philadelphia that day, and I knew that I would have a much longer journey ahead of me—one filled with continuous and iterative sense-making, deep introspection, and of course, copious amounts of reading.

New Directions

Before I knew it, Haiti had found a way to seep into every aspect of my life. I spent the bulk of my time reading and thinking about Haiti, and I was particularly influenced by the work of C. L. R. James (1963), Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1990), Randall Robinson (2007), Paul Farmer (2005), and Mark Schuller (2007, 2008), to name a few. Each of these authors helped to (re)shape my understanding of Haiti, Haitian history, and in particular, the long, sordid history of international involvement in Haiti.

It was around this time that I started to imagine what it would be like to conduct my dissertation research in Haiti. Although I had met a variety of inspiring people while in Haiti, I specifically could not stop thinking about the people we met at the Ministry of Education. Academics who seek to counter the neocolonial discourse are often drawn to the "subaltern" (Spivak, 1988), focusing on grassroots leadership, indigenous communities and civil society (Makhulu, Buggenhagen, & Jackson, 2010; Seed, 2001; Smith, 2001; Trotz, 2010), and I, too, had originally focused my attention on the grassroots. With this focus, however, the neocolonial state—and its inherent complexity—is often overlooked or oversimplified (with notable exceptions, e.g., Clark, 2001). As an entity that is simultaneously positioned "above" (the civil society) and "below" (the international community)—not to mention the ways in which it is intricately interwoven within the two—the state is often the target of criticism from

both directions. This is particularly the case for Haiti, as academic and public discourses often oversimplify the complex historical, social and discursive forces that have created the Haitian state (Clark, 2001). As a result, the Haitian government is often labeled as "predatory," glossing over the role of foreign governments and international agencies in the creation of the Haitian state; additionally, such portrayals tend to homogenize the Haitian government, making it singular and static, and failing to acknowledge the diversity of individuals within the state (E. Dattatreyan, personal communication, 2011). The more I became immersed in the academic literature about Haiti and the post-earthquake media frenzy, the more I began to realize that there was an opportunity to share the stories of these Haitian educational leaders who were deeply tied to the Haitian state, that their experiences could not only add much-needed texture to the stories about the post-earthquake recovery efforts in Haiti, but could also provide important insights to the field of international development more broadly. Before I knew it, I had made the decision to completely change the focus of my dissertation.

From Leadership to International Development

I had originally assumed that the focus of my dissertation would be leadership. But I soon found out that I would not be able to focus on leadership in that particular context without also focusing on the world of international development. This became clear after we had been working in Haiti for several months and we began to have a better sense of the overall context. When we realized how many different organizations and universities had reached out to the Ministry of Education after the earthquake, we did not understand why they had chosen to work so closely with us. So during one of my interviews I asked. The senior advisor to the Minister responded by explaining that all the other universities and organizations that had approached them came with a pre-determined plan and a request for money. Sharon Ravitch, my doctoral advisor who I first traveled there with, was the only one who started the conversation differently. He explains below:

> …what struck me the most was that Sharon spent time to understand what did we need, what did we want, what were we already in the process of doing. It was not about telling us what our problems were. And that was important. She didn't come with something already planned for us. Instead, she told us, this is what we know how to do, this is what we have experience with, this is what we are in the process of doing in other contexts. And so, I listened to her, I spent some time thinking…It was Sharon's approach to really working to understand what we wanted, what we were hoping to do. She had that approach instead of coming to us with something already planned, an idea to sell to us. And also, it was that, well, ok, we knew we would need money to do what we wanted to do, and we knew we would have to find the money, but the others who came focused on needing money at the beginning. So, it was like an opportunity to them. And I understand that, that this can be an opportunity, but it can't be only be that…I don't remember exactly when, but I had some exchanges with the former Minister and I remember talking to him about how we need serious partners, partners we can confide in, partnerships we can be confident in because, we weren't in an easy situation. And you know, that was the feeling I had in the exchanges with Sharon.

It is clear to see from this interview excerpt that this work is deeply personal and highly relational. Even in our first meeting with the Minister of Education and his top advisors, it was clear they were struck by Sharon's orientation to her work—and to their work as well; they

were struck by the fact that she started with questions rather than answers; and they were struck by the genuine respect she demonstrated for their knowledge and experience. Indeed, all of this led them to feel confident in Sharon, to trust her as a potential partner; and to trust me as a researcher, by extension.

Our first meeting with the Ministry of Education created an important foundation for our work in Haiti, one that continued to be based in deep respect and solidarity with our partners. Indeed, from the perspectives of the participants in this research, the partnership we built with them made it clear that different kinds of international partnerships can exist, and their reaction to us made it clear to me that I needed to learn more about the history of international involvement in Haiti; and that governmental leadership in Haiti could not be separated from colonialism, post-colonialism and international development. Another participant expands on this below:

> You know, we have a dream, and that dream is to devise a new kind of cooperation with Haiti. This is why your university is here, because we want to change international cooperation. NGOs and traditional donors, we have been working with them for years, since the second world war. … And what has been the impact of all that? … 76% of the population living on less than $2 a day. I am not trying to say that it is one specific organization or another. What I am trying to say is that Haiti is one of the most assisted countries in the world. … And as you can see, development cannot happen without assistance. But this is why [your university] is here, because we want to try to find a new way for collaboration, we want to see what would happen if we changed the model. … So, what we need to do is create institutional strength. Capacity building is the master word for us.

The participant's words speak to the complicated nature of international involvement in Haiti. As he explains, he is not suggesting that international aid disappear altogether, but rather that there must be a fundamental shift to focus on cooperation and capacity building. Though the participant's words above indicate optimism that one partnership with one university might change things more broadly, the field of international development is much bigger and much more powerful than any one partnership. Sadly, things have not yet changed.

"I am going to speak to you in French from now on"

It was during my second trip to Haiti that I started to talk with the leaders about the possibility of participating in my research. The first person I knew I needed to speak with was an extremely accomplished and well-respected leader at the Ministry who has been working at a high level at the Ministry for the past 15 years. His approval and permission were quite important for me; in fact, I do not think I would have proceeded without it. And so, before dinner on a Thursday evening, I had the opportunity to speak with him privately about my dissertation. Our conversation that evening began in English (to that point, the bulk of our communications had taken place in English; this is something I have since come to regret). However, as I started to tell him about my dissertation that evening, something interesting happened. When I asked him if he would be interested in participating in my research, he paused, looked at me, and switched to speaking in French (I speak French conversationally, but not fluently). He told me that he was going to be speaking to me in French from that point on. And then, without my asking, he began, in French, to tell me about the days immediately following the earthquake. Tears came to his eyes as he recounted the confusion, sadness, horror and chaos of those first few days. He told me about the meetings he had with the Minister in

the lot where the Ministry of Education had once stood, before it was destroyed by the earthquake. During those meetings, he recounted, they had only a tree for shade and rocks and broken chairs for seats. He told me that they had to wear masks over their faces because the smell of the bodies was starting to take over. Tears started to come to my eyes as well. It was in this context that these leaders had to make decisions about how to try restart their country's education system after the earthquake.

Beyond the details of his story, there was another level of this interaction that moved me. It was in this moment that I began to understand the significant role language would play in my research. His story was so powerful and moving, and, though he speaks English fluently, I am not sure he could have conveyed his experience to me with such power if he had told his story in English. As I listened to him recount his experience that evening, it became abundantly clear that, although each of the people I was hoping would participate in my research spoke English fluently, l had to remember that English is not their first language. I decided to conduct the interviews in French and get assistance with translation when needed. This, of course, opened up new challenges, but they were worthy challenges, indeed.

Another concern this linguistic moment highlighted for me relates to the everyday reality of these leaders. Although they are working in their home country, working to rebuild the *Haitian* educational system, within a government that conducts its business in French[1], many of their meetings and interactions with international agencies and organizations took place in English. The intimate relationship between language and power is clear and became even clearer in this moment. I realized I had been taking for granted the fact that all of our partners spoke English fluently and I immediately felt ashamed that the bulk of our interactions had taken place in my dominant language, not theirs. That evening, I made a commitment to myself to no longer fall back on English because it is easier for me, but instead, to challenge myself to improve my French. And so, that small moment in which he switched from English to French was anything but small to me. His shift in language reverberated and created a shift in my perspective, and ultimately in my research design as well.

A Gender Challenge

Originally, I had hoped to have at least equal representation of men and women for my dissertation, if not balanced to the side of women; the field of leadership studies has largely been based on White male experiences with leadership (Blackmore, 1999; Eagly & Carli, 2008; Fletcher, 2004; Walters, 1990; Young & Skrla, 2003), and I wanted to push back on that in my dissertation. However, in my experience working at the Haitian Ministry of Education before I began this research, I had met a number of men who were working in leadership roles at the Ministry, but only one woman. When I told our partners at the Ministry that I was looking for more female participants for my research, I was told there were no other women in leadership positions (formal or informal) at the Ministry. Our partners were able to recommend numerous additional men, but not a single additional woman. When I asked the sole female participant why she thought there were not more women in leadership positions at the Ministry, she replied: "Smart women don't get involved in the State" (Fieldnotes, 6/6/11). While she made that comment with a hint of sarcasm, as she herself is a very intelligent woman who is involved with the State, she went on to explain the various ways in which her experience working at the Ministry had been mediated through gender in, arguably, very unproductive ways. I noticed a great deal of examples when I was working there as well; for example, in team meetings, she was regularly the person translating for the international partners, though all the men were

[1] Though the majority of Haitians speak Haitian Kreyòl, government offices carry the residue of colonialism in many ways, including the structures and language; as such, French remains the language of government and many businesses

equally capable of doing so, and she regularly tended to the needs of the guests by getting coffee, water, etc. Although I have a great deal of respect for the people working at the Ministry, it is, indeed, a male-dominated environment. Aside from her, every other woman I saw while I was at the Ministry was working in either a secretarial or housekeeping position.

Although gender equity is important to me, I also realized that I had to be responsive to the context. Ultimately, this experience highlighted for me the conflict that often arises between the *ideal* and the *real* of both research and ideology (S. Ravitch, personal communication, 2011). Robson (2011) emphasizes the importance of what he calls flexible research designs, of allowing research to unfold organically as it moves forward. As Robson highlights, when research is carried out in "real life" situations, the complexity of life often takes over and reshapes even the most strongly and well-designed research. In other words, no matter how clean the research design may be on paper, the "messiness" of the real world requires a certain amount of flexibility when engaging in the actual research (Robson, 2011). And so, this experience highlighted for me the importance of maintaining a flexible design, of being open and responsive to the context.

Concluding Thoughts: The Constantly Weaving Tapestry

Freeman (1998) illustrates the role of vulnerability in research, emphasizing the importance of remaining "slightly off-balance" throughout the research process; as Freeman reminds us, "being unsure about what you know creates a sense of openness and vulnerability fundamental to good research" (p. 55). I have shared only a few of the stories that make up the narrative tapestry of my dissertation, but it should be clear that this constantly weaving tapestry has been shaped by a sense of vulnerability, openness and flexibility that I maintained throughout the process of forging relationships, collecting and analyzing data and ultimately writing my dissertation. This openness allowed me to learn from the participants in ways I may have been closed off to otherwise. I argue that not only listening to, but also hearing (Delpit, 2006) the stories of the participants helped me to (re)shape many aspects of my research process along the way. My reflexivity allowed me to see the ways in which the participants' stories were not separate from my own, but rather, through the process of narrative inquiry, became deeply interconnected with my stories. Freire (1998) talks about the dialectical nature of critical teaching, explaining that there should be a constant relationship between "doing" and "reflecting on doing." Though he speaks particularly about critical pedagogy, the same can be said for critical research. Writing my dissertation provided me with many opportunities to reflect on my research, and through that process, I came to understand the myriad ways in which the participants not only transformed my research but also the ways in which they transformed myself as a researcher. Now, 10 years later, I have found autoethnographic inquiry to be a wonderful tool to help me to illustrate the complexities of these interleaved relationships.

Sandelowski (1991) argues that stories "do not simply present, but rather (re)construct lives in every act of telling for, at the very least, the outcome of anyone telling is necessarily a re-telling" (p. 163). In essence, both the act of narrating and the result of that process hold significant meaning in narrative inquiry—and also in autoethnography inquiry. As I have illustrated in this article, narrative inquiry is not simply a reflection of the participants and their context but is also very much a reflection of the researcher as well, and autoethnography can help illuminate the ways in which this is the case. Pavlenko (2002) argues that "the constructed narrative and subsequent analysis illuminates the researcher as much as the participant" (p. 210). Similarly, in their presentation of portraiture, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997) emphasize the role of the researcher; as they explain, portraits are "…shaped through dialogue between the portraitist and the subject, each one negotiating the discourse and shaping

the evolving image" (p. xv). Indeed, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis describe researcher's voice as:

> …overarching and undergirding the text, framing the piece, naming the metaphors, and echoing through the central themes. But her voice is also a premeditated one, restrained, disciplined, and carefully controlled. Her voice never overshadows the actors' voices (though it sometimes is heard in duet, in harmony and counterpoint). (p. 85)

My voice certainly did not overshadow the participants' voices in my dissertation, as their experiences were the focus. Autoethnography simply provides an additional space to play; it creates a complement to my original dissertation.

Through this autoethnography, I have highlighted some of my stories that became part of the fabric of my dissertation, as I (re)imagined, and then (re)designed, my research. The participants' stories, the literature and theory from the field, and my stories all merged together in intricate ways to create pieces of this tapestry in hopes of illustrating the ways in which both macro and micro forces play around together to shape the research process and the narratives that ultimately emerge. The micro forces were the relationships I had with my participants, the intentionality in which they shared their stories with me, the circumstances under which they shared those stories. And the macro forces were constantly surrounding us as well: the post-colonial context, the post-disaster context, the racial dynamics, the linguistic dynamics, the gender dynamics. I am sure I am not even fully aware the extent to which all of these forces influenced their stories and mine but this autoethnography has at least helped me to start the process of inquiry.

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