Working Against the Grain: Rewards and Consequences of Developing a Personal Voice in Academia

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The idea of talking the talk and walking the walk is a nice idea, but what do you do when walking the walk could mean walking the walk right out the door and into oblivion?

Five years ago the two us met during an academic job search and found that despite our different backgrounds, we shared many similar experiences. Most significantly, we both had written our doctoral dissertations around the topic of women's development and these studies had become an important part of our personal identities. One of us (Pamela) is a White woman who conducted a study on women who achieved highly in academics and who were also disadvantaged as children. The other (Gretchen) is a Black woman who interviewed an older African-American woman who spent her life in the service of education in the South during the years of segregation and then integration. The following stories are told from a personal viewpoint. Pamela was disadvantaged as a child and could have been a participant in her own research. Gretchen described her older colleague's story as an intergenerational discussion in which the narrator passes on traditions and values that she associates with an African American schooling experience. In this article, we both look back over the last five years since we graduated from our respective institutions to reflect on our decision to write dissertations that were considered unusual at the time, and in the past would have been considered unacceptable. We also talked about our continued experiences writing material against the grain in academia, emphasizing both the rewards and

consequences.

Our Research and Our Stories-Pamela LePage

As a topic for my dissertation, I conducted a two-year study to explore the experiences of women who achieved highly in academics and who were also disadvantaged as children (LePage-Lees, 1997a). The women were considered high achievers since they had earned advanced degrees or were currently enrolled as advanced graduate students with at least two years of graduate work completed. Women were considered disadvantaged if they were raised in low-income homes, were first-generation college students, and had faced stress as children (e.g., family dysfunction or instability, illness, or death, etc.). From this definition, the women's resources had been limited in three categories: financial, informational, and emotional.

Although I did not include this information in my dissertation, later when I adapted my dissertation as a book (LePage-Lees, 1997a), I explained that I was initially motivated to conduct the study for reasons that related to my personal history. I was poor when I was a child, but I was also disadvantaged in other ways. For example, I went to 14 different schools in four different states by the time I graduated from high school. My mother was mentally ill and my stepfather was physically abusive. As a very young child, one of my first memories involved being placed in a "children's home." The guardians of that fortress put children into toilets and told them they would be flushed down if they cried or misbehaved. As a teenager, I lived with my mother on welfare, and those years were vividly marked by the death of my boyfriend who committed suicide in jail after getting caught burglarizing a restaurant with my brother.

Because of my history, I became interested in reading about women and disadvantaged children in books and journals. In most cases, I was disappointed with what I found. Although many people had tried to explain why children from poor backgrounds fail, when they succeeded, they were usually ignored. Those people who did write about poor children rarely wrote about their own experience with disadvantage. I still suspect that most academics come from a traditional middle- or upper-class childhood. Others hide their backgrounds, which perpetuates the common belief that all academics grow up privileged.

For many years I tried staying away from educational issues that were too personal. I now believe that certain groups have been shut out of the academic process because people from the traditional majority subtly communicate that it is inappropriate for people from marginalized groups to reflect on their own experiences. In many ways, they suggest that only the "objective outsider" can truly conduct a scientific study. After studying education for many years, it became clear to me that there was no way to conduct a completely objective study in social science and that it was important for me to adhere to my beliefs and express my voice honestly.

Even so, as people include themselves in their own research, they often run the risk of being criticized for being too self-absorbed. This problem is often colorfully illustrated

with the saying, "Okay, enough about you, now let's talk about me." Although my interpretations were influenced by my experiences, I made an extraordinary effort to accurately represent the women's voices. My research was appropriately qualitative. I used three methods of data collection including interviews, surveys, and documentation. In fact, for each of my participants, I sent away for school records (including transcripts) from high school all the way to graduate school. After I finished writing my dissertation, I sent the volunteers my interpretations of the interviews and asked them whether or not I represented their voices accurately. This feedback was especially important to me because often my explanations went beyond what any one person actually said in her interview. None of the women claimed her voice was misrepresented. In fact, all of the women who responded were very positive as I demonstrate in the following quotes (Lepage-Lees, 1997b, p. 4):

Maria: I think that my voice was well represented in this study.

Toni: I really enjoyed reading this study. It was interesting and amusing to see myself quoted alongside, within, and among others. Many of your interpretations hit the nail on the head. For example, attitudes described on page... which motivate children and families to hide dysfunction rang true for me.

Janet: In sum, it was validating to read of other women's experiences and to realize there's a whole closet community of us out there. I hope your study can help others.

Helen: Thank you for sending the results of your study. I appreciated hearing what others said and how you interpreted our material. In reading the quotes of the other participants, I found that many things that others said, I could have said too. I think you have done an excellent job of interpreting our material, and I can't say how glad I am to see such a study be done.

anonymous feedback: I was very impressed with how similar my experiences and attitudes were to the other participants in the study, both in terms of the interpretation and the quoted passages.

Sara: I'm really impressed by the study-as I said when you interviewed me, this seems like a really important area of research, and you've done an excellent job!

Reactions from the Academic Community

The research participants' responses to my book were very positive. The work also had a positive reception in other contexts. In most feminist organizations, I was celebrated. I won an award from the AERA Women Educators. I also received many e-mails and letters from women who had read my work and told me they were moved by my work shown in this quote:

Your book made much more than a small impact on my life. You made me realize that my past is not some terrible secret and I don't have to spend so much time letting it eat away at me.

I chose this quote because in almost every e-mail that I received, the women in some way talked about feeling as though they no longer had to "keep secrets" about their lives.

On the other hand I also got some odd reactions, even from the feminist community. For example, I once submitted an article related to my dissertation to a feminist journal. The article was about the women's relationship with the term "disadvantage," how they defined disadvantage, when they disclosed information, and when and how they connected their education to personal experience (LePage-Lees, 1997b). It was ironic that although the journal wanted the article, ultimately the article came back three times for revisions, and each time the reviewers gave me different instructions about whether I should include my personal history in order to give the reader a view of my perspective. They would ask me to put it in and then take it out and then put it in and then take it out. Finally, I had to speak to the editor personally and explain my dilemma. It seemed ironic to me since in the article itself (LePage-Lees, 1997b) I wrote:

Why do people have complicated relationships with disadvantage? The research suggests that sometimes associating with certain groups and disclosing information is helpful and sometimes it is detrimental; sometimes it is a sign of neurosis, while at other times it is a sign of mental health; sometimes it can help a student get into a graduate program and sometimes it causes them to be rejected. It seems an appropriate time to reflect on issues of disclosure, especially as they pertain to disclosure of "negative" experiences in educational settings. (p. 367)

Ultimately, it was very schizophrenic. On one hand, I was celebrated for my work in many ways, and on the other hand, I often felt the need to "hide" my own background and personal connection with the work. It became very clear to me that just because I was successful at exposing unhealthy norms and revealing injustices, these discoveries did not necessarily result in change, even in my own behavior. I often bowed to the norms that pressured me toward conformity. The idea of talking the talk and walking the walk is a nice idea, but what do you do when walking the walk could mean walking the walk right out the door and into oblivion?

Our Research and Our Stories-Gretchen Givens-Generett

My research emerged out of the need to make sense of multiple schooling experiences. Born in the early 70s, my primary and secondary schooling took place in predominantly white schools. I was the beneficiary of integration. My mother worked hard and saved long in order to offer us a home in the suburbs where the best schools were in walking distance. I worked hard to prove myself in this environment and ultimately left with many options and opportunities available to me. Upon graduation

from high school, I decided to attend a historically Black female institution. Moving from a schooling situation where I was one of a handful of African Americans to where the entire class (including most of the professors) were African American forced me to question the real differences that existed between my previous schooling experience and that of my college years. I decided to attend graduate school and study education in an attempt to make sense of the two lived experiences. After months in graduate school where I felt marginalized and invisible I found myself in the office of an African American female principal. Mrs. Lacewell, as I eventually began to call her, helped me come to a better understanding of why I was interested in making sense of these multiple experiences. In reality, she modeled why it was necessary for me to do so.

On the surface, my dissertation is an intergenerational discussion between African American women. I think it is more than that. It is an example of how an older member of the Black community mentors and nurtures a member of a younger generation. In the end, Mrs. Lacewell helped me to embark upon a career in education. During our conversations, Mrs. Lacewell constructed a story ripe with the traditions and values she associated with African American education. By agreeing to tell me the story of her lived experiences as a Black female student and educator, Mrs. Lacewell initiated conversations about schooling, how they changed and how they remained the same for Black women despite our generational differences. Her story was the beginning of a series of conversations that, for me, went full circle touching on the complexity of issues facing African American women educators.

It was important to me that I write a dissertation that represented this journey in its presentation. Letters to a friend begin and end each chapter. These letters serve as a window, if you will, to the conversations I had with friends my own age about my conversations with Mrs. Lacewell. Questions such as, "Have you ever thought about your school experiences? Have you ever thought about what our generation thinks about segregated Black schools? Have you ever thought about what was lost?" are discussed. These very personal letters are followed by theory and an historical context to understanding segregation and integration in the American South.

I decided to present Mrs. Lacewell's voice without the theory, uninterrupted. Her words are presented on the paper without my questions or comments sprinkled throughout. Instead her words are presented as the story that they represent. It was a deliberate decision on my part to present Mrs. Lacewell's voice in this form. I felt that her words did not need to be interpreted. They speak for themselves. The format of the dissertation is as important as the research and the story that is told. It was very important to me that my work be accessible. I was at the point in my journey where I needed to feel connected to a larger Black community. Fortunately, I worked with a group of intellectuals who understood the significance and need for that type of work.

I met Mrs. Lacewell during a collaborative qualitative research project overseen by my academic advisor. My initial interest in her teaching philosophy lead me to keep in touch with her after the project was complete. Our conversations ended up being my dissertation. Ultimately, she chose me to tell her story to, to interview her about her

experiences in the educational system as a student, teacher, and administrator.

My conversations with Mrs. Lacewell are best described as qualitative research. Qualitative research methodology is used as an umbrella to discuss several research strategies that share particular characteristics (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Data in a qualitative research project is descriptive, offering rich, full detail of people, places, and conversation. Metaphorically, some qualitative research has been compared to jazz. The dialogue that Mrs. Lacewell and I had was analogous to jazz and the improvisation of jazz musicians. Oldfather and West (1994) wrote:

> Jazz is adaptive and shared by the participants. Their improvisations are collaborative and interdependent; the quality of the music depends on each musicians hearing, responding to, and appreciating the performances of the other players (p. 22).

Together we composed a story complete with values, traditions, and daily acts which helped me better understand how she views African American educators. Like jazz, Mrs. Lacewell and I used our dialogical encounters, our conversations, like instruments to negotiate and improvise our multiple identities.

Qualitative research allowed us to shape our project in a collaborative and independent manner, according to our understanding, needs, and desires (Oldfather & West, 1994). Like musicians, we let the rhythm of the project lead the way.

Reactions from the Academic Community

For the most part, my work was met with enthusiasm. As I gave job talk after job talk, I could see people nodding their heads. I was happy that people were getting it, that they understood how I had constructed this research. Invariably, however, there was the person in the audience who questioned my methodology and the way I had constructed the research. "How do you address issues of validity? Is your interpretation of this work valid? Do you believe that you were being objective in this investigation?" I found myself having to defend the construction of the dissertation and my relationship with Mrs. Lacewell. Unlike job talks that I had witnessed where people discussed the ideas as presented, I felt as if I were in a dissertation defense trying to get permission to write a non-traditional dissertation. While academia acknowledged that there was a need for the type of research issues that I discussed and wrote about, they were uncomfortable (some even seemed troubled) by my presentation of the information. The questions of validity seemed to say that yes, we agree with what you say, just not the way you are saying it.

I was confused. In one case in particular, I interviewed for a non-traditional program that seemed to promote the very type of experimental writing that I had chosen. Unfortunately, I could not explain to those on the committee how I was making a conscious decision to blur the boundaries of traditional academic research and how it was normally presented. In telling Mrs. Lacewell's story, I also told my own, ripe with the doubt and complexities that shape and propel my life. I wondered, how do I

position myself as the knower and teller? Who am I as a writer? Who is going to read my work? These were just a few of the questions I was happy to espouse upon; instead they focused on whether or not my work was valid. The people who interviewed me seemed more concerned with whether or not the conclusions I drew were true. Whether or not it was true was not paramount to me. Sociologist Laurel Richardson (1997) wrote:

> Postmodernism claims that representation is always partial, local, and situational and that our self is always present, no matter how much we try to suppress it- but only partially present, for in our writing we repress parts of ourselves, too. Working from that premise, we are freed to write material in a variety of ways: to tell and retell. There is no such thing as "getting it right"; only "getting it" differently contoured and nuanced. When experimenting with form, ethnographers learn about the topic and about themselves that which was unknowable, unimaginable, using prescribed writing formats. So, even if one chooses to write a final paper in a conventional form, experimenting with format is a practical and powerful way to expand interpretative skills. (p. 91)

Unfortunately, my analysis was not seen as powerful. I was so surprised by some of the questioning that I must have sounded naïve or defensive. At the very least, I must have sounded like I did not know what I was doing and that my research really had no content but was merely fluff. In the end, this non-traditional program, dedicated to feminist values, hired a person with a traditional research orientation. Two years later I was asked to apply for the same position that I was denied a few years earlier. I gave a similar talk for the interview. This time, there were no questions about validity, and this time I got the job.

Continuing our Work Against the Grain

Since our dissertations, both of us have worked in a non-traditional master's program for practicing teachers that is dedicated to transformational change in education. Because of this program and our own personal styles, we continue to conduct research and engage in teaching that rubs against the grain. And, we try to stay enthusiastic and energized in a context where we still receive conflicting messages about our scholarship. For example, as part of her work in this non-traditional program, Pamela wrote a chapter for a book on the program that was meant to expose some of the internal problems of the program (LePage, 2001). The faculty members involved in writing and editing of the book agreed that in order to show that they had the capacity for self-reflection and critique, they needed to not only talk about what they did right, but also what they did wrong. They also agreed that collaboration should be the focus of an internal critique. Still, many faculty members were upset when the chapter was first disseminated, feeling that the chapter pressed too hard against academic norms that prohibit academics from exposing dirty little secrets. At that time Pamela had to endure some personal and professional attacks. Later, however, she was celebrated for her honesty. Most of the faculty came back to her at some time and admitted that she had "named" some difficult problems that needed to be addressed. At that time the

document was used as a centerpiece for faculty discussions about how to improve the program.

After teaching English as a second language in Japan, Gretchen returned to teach in the same nontraditional program. One week after returning to the United States, Gretchen found herself in front of a cohort of teachers where the topic of the day centered on race. After giving a short talk on research and how it has been used to define race, she looked into the audience at the sea of white faces staring wide-eyed at her. She had forgotten how it felt to be an African-American female and talk about race in front of a group of white people. Later during the day, she came back to a large group discussion where the day's discussions were readdressed. She began the dialogue by reading the class a letter she had written them during break. It began, "I had forgotten how difficult this work can be and how vulnerable I sometimes feel." After reading the letter, the teachers opened up and began sharing their own feelings about the morning discussion. In the end, people commented that it was the first real dialogue they had about race since starting the program.

Discussion

As academics we have worked to integrate a personal perspective into the research process. Our cases provide an example of the confusion, inconsistency, and ambiguity that is often experienced by many feminist scholars, especially during and after graduate school when they are searching for an identity and seeking acceptance in the academic community. Pamela was confused about whether and when to integrate personal experiences into her work and when and how she might press against academic norms to create change. Gretchen, whose research was conducted a few years later, was able to integrate herself in her work, but she found that many still focused on questioning her methods rather than probing her insights. Over the years, many women have fought to develop a personal voice in educational scholarship (see for example, Richardson, 1997). In the late 80's and early 90's, investigators emphasized the need for women to connect new knowledge with personal experience (Clinchy, Belenky, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1985; Bartolomeˊ, 1994; Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg & Jalomo, 1993). For example, Tarule (1988) described the problems associated with women bringing their experiences into the learning process:

> In classroom discussions, women often join the dialog starting with long stories that detail what seems relevant from their lives. They ground their learning and understanding in their experience, while the listeners, students and instructors alike, squirm, unable to hear the logic of connection, and therefore the essence of the idea. The listeners are simply mortified by an apparently inappropriate sharing of life experience. They roll their eyes, the instructor tries to figure out how to break in, and the speaker begins to perceive that her presentation of the ideas, as well as the way she thinks about them, are wrong. (p. 26)

In many ways, our stories raise questions about academic norms surrounding

disclosure. Our dissertation work forced us to consider when it is appropriate to incorporate the personal into our research. How much autobiography is too much? How much is not enough? Disclosing ourselves in our research is risky, and, at the same time, frightening. When the research is rejected as not valid, there is a way in which our lived experiences are simultaneously devalued.

The difficulty incorporating personal experience can be interpreted through the lens of critical theory. According to Foucault (1979), the normalization of society produces attacks upon the bodies and souls of individuals who, for whatever reason, reject society's norms. The attacks come not only from the state, in the form of legal authority; but also in manifestations of social control through a system of constraints and punishments evident throughout the entire social structure. Foucault (1979) argued that each of us have become "our brother's keeper," watching over one another, making sure that norms are not violated and that dominant beliefs and values are upheld.

Educators interested in critical theory tell us that discursive practices refer to the rules by which discourses are formed (McLaren, 1994), rules that govern what can be said and what must remain unsaid, and who can speak with authority and who must listen. They are "not purely and simply ways of producing discourse. They are embodied in the technical processes, in institutions, in patterns for general behavior, in forms of transmission and diffusion, and pedagogical forms which, at once, impose and maintain them" (Foucault, 1926, p. 200).

Insights offered by critical theorists are helpful, but the difficulty comes not when you analyze the norms or discursive practices in a traditional way, but when you choose to reject the norms and live up (sometimes) to your own rhetoric. Other researchers have been working to redefine research and inquiry. In fact, many people in academics over the last 20 years have written about personal experiences including bell hooks (1996), Mike Rose (1989), Jane Tompkins (1996), Richard Rodriquez (1990), and Lisa Delpit (1995). These people, however, could be described as people who "made it" in academia in traditional ways which then gave them permission to be personal. But still, these pioneers paved the way for others to be open about who they are, integrate their personal stories, and question academic norms.

In addition, beyond these few successful people, we were pleased to find such recent publications as those written by Laurel Richardson (1997) who made a powerful argument for including personal experience. We have also discovered edited volumes such as that organized by Carl Grant (1999) called Multicultural research: A reflective engagement with race, class, gender and sexual orientation. In that book, the editor invited people to write chapters about what guided them during their research in the area of equity, social justice, power and/or the interrelationship between their life experiences and the theoretical underpinnings of their scholarship. In each chapter, the authors describe their personal relationship with their research and, although the book includes well-known voices such as Michael Apple and Peter McClaren, it also includes less experienced academics, such as Jennifer Obidah (1999), who described her experiences in graduate school. And, what makes her chapter even more unique is

that her comments about a well-known graduate school are fairly critical, which is unusual since norms in academia often discourage people from talking about negative experiences and criticizing their institutions. This book is one of the first books to explore the motivations of researchers and how that impacts their work.

Conclusion

In our dissertation studies (early to mid 90's), we took risks and we pressed against the norms. So, the question is where do we stand now? In this paper, we not only talk about our experience with our dissertations, we talk about how our nontraditional research has affected our lives and our careers since our research was completed.

In conclusion, we offer four suggestions for change. First and foremost, we believe that it is important for academics to live up to their rhetoric. In countless situations in academia, we find people who argue for change, and yet they perpetuate entrenched norms in their own environment. For example, this often happens when academics suggest that K-12 teachers should do X (such as collaborate), yet in their own environments, academics have difficulty engaging in those practices themselves. This is also true of reflective practice. Being a reflective practitioner demands that we examine and critique the internal and external forces that motivate us. In the end, we also have to examine what it is that sustains us. We believe that there has to be spaces available in academia for scholars to make sense of the world through the examination of their own lived experiences. The norms surrounding personal disclosures need to be re-evaluated in the light of reflective practice which demands that people not only look openly at their motivations, but also at their mistakes.

Second, educators need to continue to engage in serious discussions about philosophical questions surrounding educational research: How do we define and describe educational research? What is it for? How can we make it more useful? When and how should we imitate research norms and traditions already established and entrenched, and when and how should we forge our own path? We argue that knowledge is constantly evolving, rather than a fixed concept. While some people would argue that researchers should strive to be objective, we advocate a critical and constructivist epistemology (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Kegan, 1982, Minnich, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978) to guide our understanding of interpretive research. As Diane Wood (2001) stated, "knowledge is perspectival, relational, contingent, partial, and situated" (p. 36). We argue that researchers must acknowledge, not only their personal connection to research, but also the underlying threads of power and privilege that exist between research stakeholders as we conduct and interpret women's lives. We argue that it is not only useful to include (and weave) a personal experience throughout a research project, but that it presents a more "honest" presentation of the material. Ultimately, being inclusive of the personal experiences provides a much wider range of narratives from which everyone can learn. If research fails to be inclusive of a variety of ways of knowing and being, then the written pool of experiences is limited, thereby silencing many of the voices that could help us come to richer understandings. Whether or not something is valid has traditionally been based upon how the research is constructed, more specifically, the methods used. Traditional

thought suggests that research that has been triangulated offers one of the best options for validating qualitative data (Richardson, 1997). Research that has been triangulated presumes that however you put the pieces of the puzzle together, you still produce the same picture. Like our research, issues of validity take a more personal approach. Validity can be defined very differently by people who may not understand, for example, cultural differences such as the importance of the intergenerational responsibility to pass on important historical knowledge in the African American community. An argument can be made that one reason our research is valid is because the individuals and community members whose lives we discuss say it is so.

Finally, it seems obvious that we must continue to work toward change, but we also need to be realistic and cautious. Graduate students need more training in developing a voice and facing the current confusion surrounding disclosure in educational scholarship. They must be prepared for mixed responses and ambiguity, even when they write insightful and useful prose. Right now feminist researchers and critical theorists, to name a few groups, are trying to change the current paradigm, while functioning within an old paradigm. They are trying to do it differently with very little guidance, support, and time. Working within a system that operates with different conventions means oscillating between two sets of epistemological norms and moral practices. Finding a balance is hard because there is often tension between being politically suave and being honest, being diplomatic and being straightforward, standing up for your principles and being open to reconciliation, protecting yourself and being selfish. There are no clear boundaries. Graduate students must be prepared to constantly negotiate these distinctions. They must learn to live with ambiguity and contradiction.

Our love for the work with teachers makes us intensely aware of how the bureaucracy of the university hinders our ability to achieve the aims we have listed. At the root of this very complicated problem, we believe, is a fear that plagues teacher educators. Our eagerness to be seen as "hard scientists" often prevents us from doing the type of experimental work that sheds light on possibilities and prevents constraints on thinking. This path needs to be negotiated with a great deal of care for others, understanding of differences (including in our case, conservative voices), understanding of politics, persistence, and most important, -- a managed heart (Hochschild, 1983).

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