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# **Anxiety in the Doing: Impressionist Tales of Adults Learning to be Educational Researchers**

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Key words: doctoral programs, narrative, novice researchers

**Abstract:** This study investigated the inner experiences of adults learning to become educational researchers. Through narrative analysis of doctoral students' tales of memorable early encounters in conducting research, insight was gained into the tension, conflict, and drama they experienced.

## **Introduction**

A major goal of doctoral programs is to equip students with the concepts and skills necessary to become effective educational researchers. In fact, training in research methods in graduate programs can vary widely and may be influenced by a number of individual, departmental and institutional factors (Astramovich, Okech & Hoskins, 2004). The teaching occurs in the various methodology courses students are required to take, but the learning occurs both in the classroom and outside it, in the experiences students have of actually conducting research.

Doctoral students enter programs with a variety of background experiences, motivations, ranges of academic and social situations, and capacities for research and scholarly productivity which result in varying developmental progression rates (Nettles & Millett, 2006). If doctoral programs are to meet the needs of individual students with respect to research development, investigation into these above mentioned factors is essential. A particularly powerful way to understand the experience of the students, as they learn to conduct educational research, is through narrative. In this study, the participants wrote stories describing their early experiences of doing educational research. We contend that these early experiences provide important insight into the emotional and intellectual complexity of early learning trajectories associated with graduate education specifically related to research. Through the analysis, we gained insight into how these experiences contributed to their identity development as educational researchers.

## **Theoretical Framework and Review of Literature**

Contextual factors impacting the novice researcher such as professors, fellow students, and exposure to the literature shape their understanding and experience of doing research. Therefore, situated cognition was chosen to frame the study because context and influences inherent in the educational environment are considered important in this theory. Central to the theory are communities of practice which Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to as "a set of relations among person, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (p. 98). Within this framework, learning is viewed as a function of the context, actions, behaviors, and culture in which it occurs. In the educational setting, the community of practice consists of instructors, other experts, apprentices, resources, and contextual influences that bear on the learning and engagement of the learner. Learners,

therefore, are considered members of a community of practice where attitudes, behaviors, and values are demonstrated by the community. Learning within this framework is not located exclusively within the individual; instead, it is situated communally and is impacted by the differences of perspective among co-participants (Hanks, 1991). The present study is focused on a community of adults who are learning to be educational researchers.

Researchers, faculty, and students all call for more investigation into the preparation and training of doctoral student researchers (Drago-Severson, Asghar, & Gaylor, 2003; Young, 2001). Drago-Severson, Asghar, and Gaylor (2003) suggest that the developmental capacities of doctoral students may vary in ways that affect what preparation they will need to become expert researchers. Kegan (1994) suggests that courses providing support in the learning process, allowing for individual growth, and supplying continuity and availability throughout the program enable students to make sense of their learning in a variety of ways.

In the study of teaching and learning what counts as knowledge, as evidence of an assertion, and as merit of that evidence is abstract and diverse (Pallas, 2001). The range and assortment of beliefs about what is valued in educational research can be overwhelming for the inexperienced investigator. The complex milieu of disciplinary roots, epistemologies, and frameworks lead the new graduate student down multiple paths before one is chosen for personal use. In fact, training in research methods in graduate programs can vary widely and are influenced by a number of individual, departmental, and institutional factors (Astramovich, Okech & Hoskins, 2004). Reflective dialogue and story telling are encouraged in developing rewarding and essential supervisory experiences that empower students to become researchers (Wisker, 2005).

### **Methodology**

Certainly, the teaching of concepts and skills occurs in the various methodology courses students are required to take, but the learning occurs both in the classroom and outside it in the experiences students have of actually conducting research. As graduate students embark on new learning experience in research and research methods, it is essential to understand how they, themselves, perceive the learning and put the new knowledge into context with who they are as researchers. A powerful way to tap into those perceptions and identity-conceptions is through personal narrative. The essential function of narrative is to make sense of our experiences. It is a uniquely human activity, a notion Fisher (1984) captured with his famous term, *homo narrans*. Narrative is intimately linked to our understanding of ourselves. As Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992, p.1) argue, “Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one’s life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned.” This is no less true of how professional identities are developed. The essential function of narrative is to make sense of our experience (Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992), and studying how particular narratives are constructed gives insight into that sense-making process (Riessman, 1993).

Van Maanen (1988) created the concept of impressionist tales as one mode of writing about fieldwork. Drawing from impressionist artists, such as Renoir, Van Gogh, Seurat, and Monet, who focused on everyday scenes but rendered them in very personal, evocative, and vivid ways, Van Maanen saw impressionist tales as a way to bring to life significant fieldwork experiences. “Impressionist tales present the doing of fieldwork rather than simply the doer or the done. They reconstruct in dramatic form those periods the author regards as especially notable and hence reportable” (p. 102). Bryan and Tippins (2005) used them as a pedagogical strategy with preservice teachers to stimulate reflection on their experiences in science. Here we

use them as an analytic device to understand how doctoral students make sense of their experiences as researchers and work to construct their professional identity.

In the present study we analyzed a group of highly descriptive stories written by doctoral students about their early research experiences. Participants were 25 graduate students from a large, southwestern university enrolled in a mixed-methods doctoral research course. They were asked to write an impressionist tale recounting a memorable experience conducting educational research. The assignment encouraged the students to write stories that provided the reader with a strong sense of what they had seen, heard, and felt during the experience. We read and re-read the 25 impressionistic tales in order to gain a global impression of the data set, then selected nine of the tales that were explicit stories about identity development. Using several narrative analysis techniques (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Riessman, 1993) we first examined the structure of the nine tales and identified three common parts in each: a description of their initial identity; a complicating action or tension within the storyteller; and resolution that either involved a change in their identity or one that resulted in no change. We then focused on the content of the stories to identify such elements as overarching themes, dramatic progressions, and the use of imagery, repetition, and contrast.

### **Findings**

Through their impressionistic tales the students presented us with the opportunity to learn more about the process of how early researcher identities are defined and developed. Although the original assignment was not necessarily to relate narratives about initial encounters with academic research, the nine narratives chosen consistently conveyed tales of early research experiences. All illustrated a tension, conflict, or drama which revealed an anxiety in learning about or conducting research, and about who they were as individuals in that process.

Each of the students experienced state anxiety, the type of anxiety in which individuals experience apprehension in certain situations (Spielberger, 1966). Four uncertainties fueled their anxiety. The students were uncertain about a) their role in research, b) their ability to do the research, c) the learning process of becoming a researcher, and d) how to discern whether their research is, in fact, legitimate. As novice researchers, it is reasonable to assume doctoral students aspire to become proficient at conducting research. They want to become part of the community of practice who know and do what expert researchers know and do. They want to learn what they need in order to do real, legitimate work. The uncertainties expressed were defined by conceptual questions our participants had about becoming competent researchers, or as we have termed it, *real* researchers.

#### *Role: How Do Real Researchers Act in the Field?*

Students revealed their anxiety through their uncertainty about how to do research required in their doctoral coursework. They told stories of the ethics and mechanics of data collection and struggled with their inexperience in handling real-life problems in working with people and in using a variety of technologies. Their stories brought to light the complex question, “How do I do this right?” Each struggled with an awareness of a lack of expertise in performing the role of a proficient researcher.

#### *Ability: What Must Real Researchers be Able to Do?*

Three of our participants told stories of struggling with the possibility that they may not be intellectually able to do scholarly research. Sincere questions like, “Had I lost my mind?” and

“Am I ready?” punctuated their thoughts and their narratives. The participants were faced with reservations about whether they were capable of completing a doctoral program and becoming successful researchers. They had chosen this educational path and were now faced with the challenge of finding out whether they were able to do the work.

#### *Learning Process: How Do Real Researchers Construct Knowledge?*

Students also told stories about their concern and anxiety in the experience of learning about academic research. One of the participants struggled with a linguistic disadvantage as an international student who could not find a translation for a key research concept, while others related narratives about their early encounters with qualitative methods of inquiry. They expressed apprehension about not having experience with vital steps in the process and even suggested that conducting research was akin to falling down a “rabbit hole.” The use of vivid imagery and metaphor eloquently illustrated their sincere anxiety and prompted questions such as, “How can I learn to swim if I am relegated to the baby pool?” and “How will this change who I am?” Innovation and critical appraisal of the learning process summarized their conclusions, but their paths to confidence and identity growth as researchers differed.

#### *Legitimation: How Do Real Researchers Know Their Work is Valid?*

Participants offered stories that illustrated their anxiety about whether their work was really legitimate. Questions in their vignettes included: “Was my project worthy of their attention?” “Would they hear what I had to say?” “Could we really draw these conclusions?” and, “Would this really be publishable?” Our attention was drawn to the anxiety arising from not having confidence in their own work.

In all nine stories, the students struggled with different forms of anxiety or uncertainty related to their perception of themselves as competent researchers. Some of the narratives concluded with a resolution that indicated growth in their identity as researchers, while the anxieties in the other narratives were either only partially resolved or decidedly unresolved. Yet all nine were stories of adventure and perseverance illustrating the fundamental determination that these students have in their pursuit of a doctoral degree - a determination that was greater than any anxiety they experienced.

### **Discussion**

This study was about students who recalled their experiences of anxiety at the early stages of learning how to conduct academic research. Their stories are of the novice who embarks on a path of developing expertise in a new community of practice. The vignettes of our participants’ experiences with graduate research suggest that anxiety is a common emotion that is evoked in this learning process. The sources of that anxiety are complex. Adult learners in doctoral programs told stories of struggling with feelings of inadequate knowledge and capability, risk of exposure, and intimidation during the research process. Many of the vignettes illustrated a struggle with personal identity in conducting research, a tension within themselves that by the end of the stories was only sometimes resolved. All had a tension, conflict, or drama that was deemed important in their reminiscences of their previous research experiences. Yet the stories were of adventure and perseverance which may speak to the nature of self-determination in graduate study. Borg (2001) argues that “we rarely hear about the emotional side of doing research, and the implicit message researchers may derive from this silence is that emotions have

no role to play in their work and perhaps even that these should be denied and suppressed. Emotions, though, are an undeniable part of the human researcher's work" (p. 164).

"Because of the tremendous growth in the size and diversity of graduate programs and enrollments in the United States...there is no clear sense of the characteristics of the people who are pursuing doctoral degrees or the experiences of the expanded population of students" (Nettles & Millett, 2006, p. 2). The use of students' reflective writings can provide educators access to student perspectives, backgrounds and developing experiences with research, which can in turn shape how methodology courses and individual supervision programs are designed. Mentors of novice researchers can address the questions uncovered in these analyses as they build the researcher community of practice. We can conclude from this study that anxiety is a normal part of the learning process. We must find ways to support our students as they move through these discomfiting experiences, and use them as learning opportunities for us all.

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