Does theory matter? Reflection, transformation and agency after receiving a doctoral award

Donna Barwood
Edith Cowan University, Australia

This reflective paper critically examines the ruminations of the author after receiving a doctoral research award, to make better sense of what happened at that time and to support responsibilities when working with higher degree research students at a teacher education institution in Western Australia. Using autoethnography, the author re-examines the transformation and agency experienced during and post of the award, to facilitate academic identity. Through reflection, questioning of beliefs and seeking enlightenment, the impact of the author's lived histories are brought to light, allowing sense making of undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral circumstances. By pulling apart the tensions between a world view, previous experience and identity, the paper helps to disrupt the author's perceived dissonance between epistemology, theory and methodology. The paper supports the erosion of personal doubts and promotes growth as an early career researcher.

Background

Ethnography is an observational approach to research characterised by cultural interpretation and social inquiry (Punch, 2004). Autoethnography is an ethnographic approach that is focused on the self within a social context. More particularly, it is a qualitative, transformative approach that engages researchers in self-exploration and self-reflection to prompt the interrogation of beliefs, practices and assumptions (Butz & Besio, 2009). Jones, Adams and Ellis (2013) referred to autoethnography as research methodology that questions an individual's "way in the world" (p.10). The author refers to the approach as a way for sense-making of identity, past events and in her case, academic integrity.

Unsurprisingly, autoethnographic research can be quite painful, requiring vulnerability within the social research framework. It is often used by researchers to re-examine traumatic or uncomfortable events (Custer, 2014; Parke, 2018). The author used this methodological approach to revisit, unpack and make sense of particular events associated with discomfort. She explained:

> As an early career researcher, I was absolutely flummoxed when asked by a professorial mentor: "What theory do you identify?" In that moment, I had to admit that I had no idea and as I sat and questioned who I was and my understanding of theory, I realised that I wasn't where I wanted to be. I realised that my silence was unbearable. (Barwood, 2018)

The author purposefully engaged in autoethnographic research after a doctoral award to generate understandings of 'self' as an academic, and to further her effectiveness as an early career researcher. By recounting particular events or what the author refers to as

'knocks' to confidence, this paper explores the author's perceived dissonance between epistemological thinking, lived histories and mobilisation of theory in research. The paper deliberately switches between the research, the subject and the author to provide a personal and informed account of a research journey. This technique is designed to support higher degree research students grappling with similar experiences and methodological issues (Aspland, 1999). The author also acknowledges that the paper has been a means for catharsis; to discharge pent-up emotions relating to her thesis (Golde, 2000; Zhao, Golde & McCormick, 2007).

Reflection: The research, the research journey and the impact of lived histories

The author has come to know that a myriad of experiences yields the research journey and for each researcher that journey is unique, crafted from enlightenment, disappointment, and in some cases, sheer frustration (Dewey, 1938; Schön, 1987). Like Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985), she has come to know that for some the research journey is a life journey, a personal quest for affirmation, an overt declaration of self-worth, self-meaning and self-love. She has also come to know that for others the journey is not as self-fulfilling and in some cases it is forged from necessity rather than desire (Aspland, 1999; Breier, Herman & Towers, 2019; Golde, 2000; Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2015). She pointed out:

> Unlike some of my colleagues, my research journey commenced with passion, excitement and a commitment to success and although I had parked the idea for many years to focus on family, I was eager to get started. In 2012 my journey officially began with the acceptance of the doctoral research project: *What We Know, What We Do and What We Could Do: Creating an Understanding of the Delivery of Health Education in Lower Secondary Government Schools in Western Australia.* When I got the good news, I truly felt like I had jumped over the moon. (Barwood, 2018)

At that time the author was well into her 40s and having planned to achieve the award of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) before the age of 50, she felt somewhat under pressure to get the job done. She explained:

> I had four years to complete the task and despite a great degree of trepidation as I was inexperienced and lacked confidence as a researcher, I was very grateful for this wonderful opportunity. I knew I could do it but I was also terribly scared as I didn't want to fail. (Barwood, 2018)

Creswell (1994) believed that research "paradigms in the human and social sciences help us understand phenomena" (p. 1). Kuhn (1970) believed that a research paradigm is guided by the researcher's beliefs, values and experiences as they help the researcher think about the research as a whole. Crotty (1998) on the other hand, focused on the researchers themselves and in particular, beginning researchers. He used the term "fledgling researchers" (p. 1) to report that they often "express bewilderment at the array of methodologies and methods laid out before their gaze" (p. 1). In contemplating Crotty, the author commented:

> In all honesty, I wish I had taken the time to read Crotty's introduction to his book earlier because there is a somewhat paradoxical comfort/discomfort and even a quietness to his discerning words. I now recognise myself as his fledgling researcher as I experienced confusion, frustration and turmoil, to the point whereby I just wanted to walk away. I now recognise that this is normal. (Barwood, 2018)

She assimilated her earlier experiences further with Crotty:

> Had I read Crotty at the beginning of my PhD then I might have escaped some of the self-inflicted doubt I imposed on myself. Had I read Crotty earlier, perhaps some of that noise and guilt for time away from my family could have been quietened. Had I read Crotty earlier, I would have recognised that my doctoral research was akin to standing on the edge of a precipice. Not wanting to jump but recognising it was the only way to fly. (Barwood, 2018)

Attrition rates in higher degree programs of study is a global concern with many factors contributing to students exiting their fields of study. Personal hardship, poor supervisor feedback and the inexperience of supervisors, to name a few (Lee, Dennis & Campbell, 2007). Similarly, lack of knowledge in the field of study by supervisor and student is causal to tension in this relationship. The author recognised that her research did not emerge from scholarly passion, nor a sense of theory or even an understanding of technical rationality (Schön, 1987). She acknowledged that it emerged from a desire to interpret, to understand and to create meanings that could inform academic commitments as a university lecturer with pre-service teachers (Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). She commented:

> For many years I had been troubled with what I regarded as a phenomenon of poor representation of health education in schools. I regarded the representation as a social justice issue for the health of children and young people and as such, I sought to explore others' meanings of what I viewed as the dominant discourse within the Health and Physical Education learning area in WA; physical education. I recognised that my view, whereby school practices, policies and procedures prioritised physical education over health education, was simply my view. I realised, to create an understanding of this setting and to inform preparations with my pre-service teachers, I needed to explore the perceptions of others. (Barwood, 2018)

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) referred to a theoretical perspective as a position from which the world is viewed. Kuhn (1970) and Creswell (1994) explained that this perspective is critical because it is inextricably linked to research design. Neuman (2007) viewed a theoretical perspective as providing the framework for conducting research: the parameters, strategies and procedures. Using Schön's (1987) *Reflection on action*, the author ruminated the theoretical perspective selected for her research, claiming that in some ways this reflective process has helped to deconstruct some of her doctoral demons (Hickson, 2011). She explained:

> The memories of thesis revisions regarding my theoretical perspective are hard to bare and as such, they have haunted me for some time. In reflecting and trying to make sense, I have been able to release some of this tension but if I am truthful, I have been unable

> to completely let go. This is partly due to the discrepancy between thesis markers and their views of theory. (Barwood, 2018)

In ruminating the author shed some light upon the complexity of thesis examinations. She expanded:

> I am aware that others at my institution, who used similar methodologies as my own, were not critiqued in the same way. Thus, in my moments of frustration and anger I comfort myself by pondering: "What did I learn?" I always answer forlornly: "Discipline matters!" (Barwood, 2018)

As Aspland (2013) noted, thesis examination protocols and procedures are difficult to navigate and the four or more years of study does not always prepare students for the shock of examiner feedback.

Towards the beginning of the research journey, but not right at the start, the author believed that she viewed the world with a postpositivist orientation. Through reading, she settled on postpositivism as a theoretical perspective because it could best accommodate the broad scope of her research; the policies, practices and people (Phillips & Burbules, 2000; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). The author chose a postpositivist perspective to allow for the collection of multiple sources of data (Gephart, 1999), to capture the multiple discussions operating within the research context (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann,, & Hanson, 2003) and to explore the complexities of the research as a whole (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). She clarified her choice by stating:

> I learnt that the postpositivist perspective could accept and yet, counteract my career-long assumptions of the research context to enable broader fields of understandings to arise from the data itself and not from what I believed to be the case – a poor representation. Initially, I was worried that my biases would cloud my judgements and my research, so I selected postpositivism as I believed it could support competent inquiry. (Barwood, 2018)

However and at the outset of the research, the author did not align with postpositivism, but intended to use a constructivist interpretive perspective to underpin the research methodology (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). At that time she was encouraged by her doctoral supervisor to reflect upon her past academic achievements – what she knew, what she understood and what she had experienced – and in doing so, became confused. She explained:

> I had completed an undergraduate and postgraduate degree that had been imbued with positivistic and behaviourist learning experiences and subsequently, I was more accustomed and felt more familiar with science than social science. This obviously came across in my discussions with my supervisor. (Barwood, 2018)

She reported that a typical lecture/workshop in her undergraduate course focused on the biomechanics of movement, with physical activity sessions proceeding a little as follows:

> We often received an explanation of the movement, which was then followed by a
> demonstration of the movement, a shadow practice of the movement, copy and practice
> of the movement in a movement drill, refinement of the movement, placement and
> practice of the movement in a modified game setting and finally, the movement within a
> game. There was little room for creativity in all of this. (Barwood, 2018)

There was little focus on the sociocultural perspective associated with contemporary health and physical education (Cliff, 2007, 2012; Cliff, Wright & Clarke, 2009), and pedagogies such as game sense, teaching for understanding or teaching for social and physical responsibility weren't explored (Light, 2002; Pill, 2007; Werner, Thorpe & Bunker, 1996). Similarly, and from a health education perspective, lectures were often content-based, centred on statistical perspectives of health issues as opposed to examining the sociological causes underpinning health inequities. The author recalled:

> At that time, Australia was grappling with the Human Immunodeficiency
> Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS) and a lot of what we learnt
> was doom and gloom. It was all about fixing the ills of society and as such, we did little
> to take into account the context or the individual. (Barwood, 2018)

Following her undergraduate studies, the author stated that her first attempt at research was "totally predictable", commenting that her postgraduate quantitative case study was a reflection of what she knew:

> For my Master's thesis I examined the quality of life concerns, health problems and
> perceived health education needs of a particular school community through a
> quantitative research project. This research was completed without ever interviewing
> anyone and without ever considering why I needed to. (Barwood, 2018)

Transformation

Creswell (2013) argued that there is merit in accepting and acknowledging the beliefs, experiences and values held from previous research. The author, despite experiencing internal struggles, gained confidence to accept her past and assert the difference between constructivist pedagogies and constructivism as a theoretical perspective. She explained:

> I finally understood that constructivist pedagogies were intrinsic to who I was as a
> teacher, as a person and in some ways to my research, but I also accepted that I could
> move beyond seeing the research through what I wanted; through my own eyes and that
> I could embrace the perceptions of others through postpositivism. (Barwood, 2018)

Accordingly, the author pursued social research to accept that there was dualism within the research (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Creswell et al., 2003; Phillips & Burbules, 2000).

As suggested by the prefix 'post', postpositivism is an epistemological and ontological approach to knowledge that succeeded the positivist philosophical paradigm. It emerged through philosophers, theorists and sociologists like Weber (1998) and Kuhn (1970), who rejected the justifications underpinning positivism and the ability of science to discern

reality (Allmendinger, 2002; Fox, 2008). Crossan (2003) captured the distinction between positivism and postpositivism, stating that "humans are not 'objects' and are subject to many influences on behaviour, feelings, perceptions and attitudes" (p. 51). He asserted that positivists reject such notions as irrelevant to discard the meanings created through human interaction. Like many other postpositivists, Crossan accepts that perceptions of reality are relevant; a creation of the human mind to explain phenomena and accommodate human conjecture.

In contrast to the quantitative perspective underpinning the author's earlier research efforts, she viewed a postpositivist perspective as supporting a qualitative approach to research methodology. Further, by exploring research that was focused from differing perspectives, the author accepted that knowledge could be disputed; that it need not be the absolute truth but of sound proof (Greene, Caracelli & Graham, 1989), and that it would involve a second level of sense-making (Fox, 2008). She commented:

> I accepted that postpostivist research could be criticised as unscientific. However, I viewed a methodologically rigorous, defined and disciplined inquiry, using triangulated data, as a way to counteract the limitations of an interactive, participatory and interpretive research design. (Barwood, 2018)

Additionally, in acknowledging that she was as much a part of the research as the research participants themselves, the author believed that reflexivity was intrinsic to her sense of reality as it was to those to whom she planned to study (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003).

Agency

Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) argued "that epistemological and methodological pluralism should be promoted in educational research so that researchers are informed about epistemological and methodological possibilities" (p. 15). Crotty (1998) premised two key considerations in this process: 'purpose' and 'justification', and in returning to his "fledgling researchers" (p. 1), encouraged them to seek a research design that justifies the methods and methodologies. Crotty maintained that a congruent commitment across and between epistemological positioning, theoretical thinking and methodological application as key.

In ruminating about Crotty (1998), and in seeking enlightenment from collegial conversations with a mentor, the author commented:

> I have become more cognisant of the importance of theory in educational research after reflecting on my thesis examination and in particular, the opposing views of thesis examiners. This process has allowed me to embrace my doctoral demons and understand that although postpositivism was apt to inform my methodological approach, it is not theory. Hence, I needed more. (Barwood, 2018)

Jackson and Mazzei (2012) suggested that thinking with theory in qualitative research allows researchers to create "a language and way of thinking methodologically *and* philosophically together" (p. vii). Moreover, to allow wider social forces to be

interrogated, disrupted and challenged so that complex codes within the discourse are opened up and multiplied, as opposed to being shut out or simplified. In appreciation of Jackson and Mazzei, and in reflecting on the themes derived from the self-imposed mechanistic coding and recoding of data in her research, the author acknowledged that she did little to critique the complexities of the research. She disclosed:

> On reflection, the data in my thesis was sieved, compartmentalised and reconstructed in a narrative that fit my preconceived idea of the research context. Did I realise this at that time – No! I certainly didn't but in reality, the narrative or the 'insights' as I referred to them in my thesis, these were unconsciously organised to fit my story, my narrative. I hadn't applied a theory in the analysis and that lone examiner was on to it. Although postpositivism informed my methodology, I needed theory to inform the analysis. (Barwood, 2018)

By way of contrast, Jackson and Mazzei encouraged qualitative researchers to resist such temptations to limit the analysis and 'inhibit the inclusion of previously unthought "data"' (p. viii). They beckoned researchers to use theory to think, so that the research is 'free of context and circumstance' (p.viii) and in the author's own words, "free of researcher bias."

There is no doubt that time has signified the importance of theory as a methodological priority in research design for the author, and through reflection, transformation and agency she has learnt that theory does matter. She comments:

> I couldn't see it at the time because there was such a big discrepancy between two examiners and the third, and I was so focused on the negatives of the third rather than looking for the positives. The thesis is such an emotional part of who you are, and it is hard to disconnect. It is hard to take in the criticism and be rational at such a demanding time. (Barwood, 2018)

The author has come to know that there are methodological implications from the privileging of meanings through the process of re-telling and remembering in qualitative research. As eluded to by Fox (2008), breaking open qualitative research devoid of theory has the propensity for a subjective layer of complexity to be subconsciously applied, which may or may not inhibit what Jackson and Mazzei referred to as 'unthought "data"' (2012, p. viii). Denzin and Lincoln (1994) also cautioned that such a process is problematic as it can be the source of control as opposed to liberating data.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) deployed *plugging in* as a means to carry thought elsewhere, believing that in the process of making and unmaking, and becoming, that constant relationship(s) with other forces evolve. González-Calvo, Varea and Martinez- Álvarez (2019) theorised with Deleuze and Guattari to investigate how pre-service physical education teachers problematise the body during practicum placements. In thinking with Deleuze and Guattari, they found that better preparation is required for the pre-service teachers to process, counteract and disrupt the subjectivities that they themselves execute upon their own bodies. In a similar fashion Evans and Davies, in Evans, Davies and Wright (2004) turned to Bernstein (1996) to theorise the mobilisation of pedagogic discourses as curricula. They applied Bernstein's *code:*

to explore how the distribution of power and principles of control in society translate into pedagogic codes and pedagogic modalities in schools; and, thereafter, how these codes and their modalities are acquired, shape pedagogic consciousness and, … are "embodied" (p. 207).

Therefore, in applying a Bernsteinian theory to create links between macro and micro structures at play in physical education, Evans and Davies theorised how power and control are legitimised in schools and classrooms by schools, teachers and curricula.

Conclusion

Through reflection, questioning, re-questioning and seeking enlightenment, the author has learnt that theory in research really does matter and especially in her discipline. In returning to the *precipice* metaphor mentioned earlier in this paper, she concluded that theory is the only way to fly free of constraint, and comments:

> I take this new knowledge of theory with me. I take the learning – from reflecting, processing my thesis demons, listening to others and conducting further research – with me, and I use it to support my efforts with higher degree supervisions. In this way, I hope these students can benefit from my mistakes. (Barwood, 2018)

When asked what she prized the most from the research journey, the author laughed and lamented:

> My fear of theory has finally been put to rest and I forgive myself for what I didn't know back then. Although this journey has been challenging, it has also been the gift that keeps on giving. (Barwood, 2018)

By pulling apart the tensions between a world view, previous experience and identity, the author's perceived dissonance between epistemology, theory and methodology has been diluted. In conducting autoethnographic research, the author has eroded personal doubts to promote growth as an early career researcher.

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Donna Barwood is Coordinator and lecturer for Health and Physical Education in the School of Education at Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia. Donna's research interest focuses on health education and inclusivity in the delivery of health and physical education.
ORCID iD: 0000-0001-7447-6333.
Email: d.barwood@ecu.edu.au