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The Color of Water: An Autoethnographically-Inspired Journey of My Becoming a Researcher

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Abstract

In this paper, the first author autoethnographically describes, discusses and reflects on her process of becoming a researcher based on her PhD journey. She explores how the development of knowledge and her understandings of what counts as knowledge is entangled with her personal and professional development. The second and third authors join with her to explore and comment on the ways in which her doctoral topic knowledge and her process of becoming a researcher co-evolved. On this basis, all authors challenge and trouble what counts as qualitative knowledge and inquiry in contemporary academia and discuss the need for the provision of curiosity-nurturing and troubling environments.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Onto-Epistemology, Troubling, Critical Qualitative Inquiry, Becoming a Researcher

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The Color of Water: An Autoethnographically-Inspired Journey of My Becoming a Researcher

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In this paper, the first author autoethnographically describes, discusses and reflects on her process of becoming a researcher based on her PhD journey. She explores how the development of knowledge and her understandings of what counts as knowledge is entangled with her personal and professional development. The second and third authors join with her to explore and comment on the ways in which her doctoral topic knowledge and her process of becoming a researcher co-evolved. On this basis, all authors challenge and trouble what counts as qualitative knowledge and inquiry in contemporary academia and discuss the need for the provision of curiosity-nurturing and troubling environments. Keywords: Autoethnography, Onto-Epistemology, Troubling, Critical Qualitative Inquiry, Becoming a Researcher

I was six. Our kindergarten teacher had given us an assignment. We were to fill in the dotted lines of several drawings in the right color. The dotted lines resembling the water jet coming out of the garden hose were to be blue, only I drew them yellow. I remember thinking about what color to choose. To me, water had no color. It was transparent. No color or all colors, but not just a color. But how do you draw something transparent? I chose yellow. Of the colors available, yellow was the lightest and most transparent color that I could think of. I was not completely satisfied, but it was the best solution I could come up with. The teacher looked through my work and marked the drawing with the water jet with a red X – red X for wrong, for failure. I was told that water was not yellow, it was blue. I can still recall my frustration and mixed emotions triggered by her response. I experienced a feeling of shame and inferiority for having gotten it wrong. Everyone else in the class got it right. But I also felt a sense of protest, of rebellion and resistance. I wondered why my teacher's solution was the right one. What is the color of water?

Prologue

A story is commonly defined as having a certain structure; it has a beginning, middle and concluding section. In a story, one thing happens as a consequence of another (Polkinghorne, 1995; Richardson, 1997). According to Frank (2010), a story is told because something a bit out of the ordinary happened. I recently obtained my PhD degree, and I can call myself a researcher. My qualitative research has yielded certain findings and, based on these, implications for further research and clinical practice. But parallel to this development

of knowledge, there is also another story that has been unfolding. I like to refer to this as the story of *my becoming a researcher*. If it is a story, does it have a clear structure? And what are the crucial elements and experiences that shape this story? How is the story of my becoming a researcher related to the story of the knowledge developed from my Ph.D. project? To me, the story of my becoming a researcher has been an arduous journey that started long before my Ph.D. project began. I do not actually know when it began. I certainly hope it has not ended.

In this paper I aim to unfold and critically reflect on my becoming a researcher. In doing so, I will explore how the development of knowledge and my understanding of what counts as knowledge is entangled with my personal and professional development. Through this personal exploration, a further aim is also to explore and interrogate what counts as qualitative knowledge and inquiry in contemporary academia. In line with the questions posed above, the story of my becoming a researcher is perhaps best characterized as a messy one with no clear point of departure or end station. The paper is written up in a manner that aims to reflect some of this wandering about in the sometimes seemingly foggy landscape. Some of the critical experiences that guided this process and influenced my directions are included in the paper, expressed as three different acts. These three acts are also illustrated with personal vignettes. The acts are followed by an epilogue that reflects and challenges what counts as knowledge and research in contemporary academia.

According to Flyvbjerg (2001, p. 223), “Social science has not succeeded in producing general, context-independent theory and, thus, has in the final instance nothing else to offer than concrete, context-dependent knowledge.” A growing awareness of the impact of context and of how truth(s) and knowledge in social sciences can be understood as unstable and changing constitute crucial elements in the story of my becoming as a researcher. Perhaps even more so, my story is about how these truths and this knowledge is irrevocably entwined with me as an unfinalized and changing person. It has moved from being a story about a researcher researching a separate world to one of how researcher and participants, matter and meaning are entangled.

I used to think that becoming a researcher was about acquiring certain knowledge and skills in order to fulfill *the role* of researcher. I imagined that in fulfilling this role, my researcher self would come to the fore. All the other parts of me would of course still be there but would constitute a backcloth that would not really be of interest or importance. Richardson (1997) describes this as the “story line” that academics are given. This story line implies that the “I” should be suppressed in academic work and writing, on behalf of the all-knowing and all-powerful work of the academy. Richardson argued this twenty years ago. In spite of this and more recent related critiques of conventional qualitative inquiry (Grant, 2018; Jackson & Mazzei, 2009, 2012), in my experience the critically reflexive, emerging and diffractive “I” still seems to be offered limited space and attention in mainstream qualitative research. This does not mean that this is always the case. In certain academic communities there appears to be a growing interest in and acceptance of critical qualitative inquiry. For many academics and students, however, it seems to be the case that the story line of conventional approaches is frequently taught and offered (Grant, 2016, 2018).

For me, the “I” is not of tremendous interest just because it is “the I,” but because it has become increasingly clear to me at a personal level that it is irrevocably and constantly intertwined with knowledge and truths and, thus, to the story of my becoming a researcher. I sometimes wished this was not so for me as I am generally not a person who craves attention. However, despite an occasional desire to stay in the shadows and fiddle with my research and writings, I have come to a growing conviction that my “I” cannot be left out.

This “I” is uncomfortable with the fact that in academia and in life we often appear to be given the storyline that there are right answers and truths. On the one hand, a world with no answers may be accused of being relativistic and confusing. Confirming approaches and

categorization in accordance with the already known can be important in research. On the other hand, much can be lost when *only* sticking to predefined research storylines (Davies, 2016). In order to develop knowledge and avoid reproducing the already known, the need to expand our understanding of *the meaning of* research also seems to be apparent. On the basis of the discussion so far, challenging and expanding our understanding of research involves challenging and understanding what constitutes knowledge and what place different kinds of knowledge have in the world. It also implicates awareness of ways of being, or, rather, becoming in the world (Denzin & Giardinia, 2008; Law, 2004).

My own experience in the training of PhD students in the Norwegian context is that such issues are often given limited attention. Methodological attempts to question, trouble and expand the meaning of knowledge and ways of developing knowledge can even be discouraged (Richardson, 1997). For instance, I was advised to use “proper,” meaning conventional, qualitative approaches (Klevan, 2017). When sharing these experiences with other PhD students or qualitative researchers nationally and internationally, such experiences appeared to be the rule rather than the exception. PhD students often appear to be trained to do research, but not so much to reflect critically on how research is done and what purposes it may serve.

Research in general is often described as having functions like testing hypotheses or filling knowledge gaps. According to Grant (2014, 2016), who writes from a standpoint position as a critical qualitative researcher, an equally important aim in qualitative research is to trouble the world. Troubling—which in this context means challenging the tacit assumptions governing specific aspects of life—clearly needs a troubler. As such, in doing research, being—or, perhaps more so, becoming—a qualitative researcher can also be argued to be about troubling oneself and one’s ways of reasoning.

My initial assumptions about reality, what can be known, and how to proceed in order to explore the truth were subject to constant troubling and successive reorientations in the course of my PhD project. These assumptions developed from searching for rule-based modes of analyzing a truth that I more or less understood as being out there to understanding truth as context-dependent, interpreted and co-created. An evolving understanding of how the researcher, research participants and what counts as knowledge are situated in historical, social, cultural and material contexts characterizes this process. Even more so, it involves taking in and exploring how the ways through which we proceed to find or create knowledge are inevitably entwined both with what we “find” and the “finder.” Barad (2007, p. 185) puts it this way: “Practices of knowing and being are not isolable; they are mutually implicated. We don’t obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world.”

What we regard as truth and how to get knowledge about truth is at the core of ontological and epistemological questions. Understanding reality as “made,” becoming and multiple is connected to understanding the acquiring of knowledge as becoming and multiple. This necessitates research approaches and a researcher evolving together in terms of questioning and troubling how knowledge is generated, the knowledge itself and how both these issues are contextually situated. Thus, knowing is never developed in isolation (Mazzei, 2014). An understanding of “reality” as becoming is entangled with selves becoming in the world. In this sense, ontological and epistemological issues are related, and they contribute to the becoming of each other. As such, to me the term *onto-epistemology* turned out to provide a useful way of thinking, indicating that we are in fact dealing with the study of practices of knowing in being, or more so, becoming in the world (Barad, 2007; Davies, 2016; Kaiser & Thiele, 2014).

Setting out on onto-epistemological journeys, derived from understandings of *world as is* and the researcher as a coherent and stable self to *world and researcher becoming and entangled* require research communities that allow for and encourage breaches with the common storyline offered to academics (Richardson, 1997). Encounters and dialogue with

troubling others that challenged and encouraged me to expand and rethink my framework turned out to be golden. The encounters with troubling-nurturers have been crucial to my becoming as a researcher. The voices of my two most important ones are included at the end of this paper as positioned responses to what I have written.

The PhD Project

The aim of my PhD project was to explore experiences of helpful help in a mental health crisis within the context of crisis resolution teams. Helpful help was explored from three different perspectives: service users, family careers, and clinicians. The overall study consisted of three sub-studies—one for each group of participants. Altogether, I conducted 34 semi-structured interviews that were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim (Klevan, 2017).

The design of the study, its findings and implications will not be explicitly elaborated on in this paper. Rather, what follows is an attempt to describe and explore my process of, simultaneously, developing knowledge and myself.

This PhD project was initially placed within a hermeneutic phenomenological framework. My plan was to explore first-person, lived experiences, recognizing that conveying and grasping these experiences would also involve interpretations from me as a researcher and the participants. As the project developed, it became increasingly apparent to me that the idea of developing knowledge based on decontextualized and common themes of experiences with helpful help could definitely be questioned. Although an interpretive approach acknowledges that experiences are interpreted through interaction with oneself and the other, there is still commonly an expectation that interpretations are related to some kind of truth “out there.”

When trying to make sense of my evolving troubling relationship to truth, knowledge and my role as a researcher, Ricoeur’s distinction between hermeneutics of faith and hermeneutics of suspicion provided a useful framework to me (Josselson, 2004; Sullivan, 2012). A hermeneutics of faith aims to examine a text in a manner that “gives voice” to the participants, regarding the text as a window to the intended meaning of the participant. Hermeneutics of suspicion, on the contrary, aim to decode and trouble the participant’s voice, striving for interpretations that go beyond the text (Josselson, 2004; Sullivan, 2012). Different methodologies will assume different levels of faith or suspicion in the interpretation of data.

In what follows, I will describe and explore my own evolving suspicion through three different acts. Rather than being linear, the process from acts one through three can perhaps more appropriately be described as a spiral. There is always something of the past in the present and something of the present in how we understand the past, implying that entanglement of becoming subjects and truths involve an entanglement of multiple presents and pasts.

Act 1 – The Hermeneutic Phenomenological Turn

In sub-study 1, which explored the experiences of service users, I used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach combining elements from phenomenology and hermeneutics to analyze data (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Klevan, 2017; Klevan, Karlsson & Ruud, 2017; Laverty, 2003). I aimed to stay close to the lived experiences as expressed by the participants and to represent, explore, and understand them. I entered the analysis with a faith that the voice of the participants could serve as a kind of pipeline to their true lived experiences (Alvesson, 2003). Although I used a semi-structured interview guide, participants also had the chance to elaborate on what they found important. The participants appeared to grasp this opportunity, and thus each interview appeared to have its own distinctive character.

To me, conducting and then listening to the audio-recorded interviews was an evocative experience. I realized that in addition to gathering research data, I was hearing people’s *stories*.

In this context, in line with Frank (2010), I understand stories as accounts that have personal plots as an organizing device which have deep significance for the storyteller. Personal plot appeared to run through each interview, forming a thread joining all interviews together. They revealed that participants had reasons for participating which exceed simply providing research data in response to interview questions.

The experience was somehow overwhelming. As an experienced clinician and grown up person, how could I *not* have anticipated this? People *do* tell stories. The American poet Muriel Rukeyser (1968, p. 115) states, “The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.” With a whole universe made of stories, why should people not be telling stories just because the context is research? The acknowledgement that people do tell stories even if you do not ask for them to and that these stories are important because they say something about how people make meaning off their experiences sparked off another question. How could I do justice to people’s stories? In the analysis of the text, I worked based on my initial beliefs about the data representing a possibility to reach the true meaning of the participants and the possibility of finding some common themes that could capture the lived experiences of “helpful help.” There was perhaps nothing wrong with the themes I ended up with. However, working with the analysis and writing up the findings was accompanied by an increasing feeling of discomfort. What I had experienced and received as a researcher seemed so rich, vivid and important. The themes that were distilled from this richness through the analysis seemed scant, in comparison. Not only did it seem like I was losing the context and nuances giving meaning to the experiences of the participants, I also seemed to be losing the impetus to why it was important for the participants to share them.

The days are short on the North Western coast of Norway in early December. In combination with the decreasing daylight, the heavy snowfall makes driving a challenge. I haven’t met a single car for the last hour, since I drove off the ferry. The house appears on the left side of the road, covered in snow. Getting out of the car, I am struck by the sound of silence of the falling snow. Soft and yet so distinct. Is it a warm sound or is it a cold sound? She lives alone in the house, after a divorce. The divorce did not only entail a breach with her husband and children, it also caused the house to be more or less stripped for furniture and household goods. In that house she shares her stories with me. The interview lasts for more than two hours. In the middle of the interview, she asks that we take a break so that she can cook lunch for me. The food is exquisite. She tells me how placing emphasis on making delicious and healthy food is one way of preserving dignity. There are many stories to be told.

Back in my tiny hotel room that night, I feel a desperate urge to call my family, to reconnect with my world and stories. That soothing feeling when I hear my daughter’s voice chattering on about school and that she is thinking about bleaching her hair. About how the dog misses me. When are you coming home mum? The house looks rather messy...

Who are we, when deprived of context? What are our experiences without the stories they are enmeshed in? Loneliness is never just loneliness.

Troubling the Hermeneutic Phenomenological Turn

As I described above, in conducting interviews and in the process of transcribing, it occurred to me that participants appeared to be telling personal stories that ran through the semi-structured interviews. These stories framed the interviews in idiographic and personal ways and this context provided was crucial in creating meaning of what was spoken of. By

searching for common themes across the dataset, the importance of context was lost. Furthermore, it appeared to me that by not involving the personal stories possible agendas expressed by participants were somehow ignored. Though, as a researcher, I had an agenda for conducting the interviews, it seemed apparent that so did the participants. The setting of the interviews in people's homes and the way participants so generously shared their personal stories somehow required a different approach. It seemed crucial to aim to bring their stories to the fore.

I needed to find a way of analyzing data that would safeguard the contextual stories shared (Jones & Fenge, 2017). It was time to "move closer" and explore my notion that participants were telling stories.

Act 2 – The Narrative Turn

My decision to use a different approach that preserved participant stories forced its way through. At that point, in my mind, there was no other option. I aimed to develop an analytical approach that could preserve the unique stories that the participants' experiences were embedded in. I did not follow a rigorous set of procedures for narrative analysis. In fact, I did not find such a "recipe." Most of the approaches I found that were entitled "narrative analysis" appeared to be the opposite of what I believed they would be, resembling what Polkinghorne (1995) refers to as following paradigmatic cognition. A primary operation of paradigmatic cognition is to classify objects or experiences as belonging to specific categories or concepts. Polkinghorne (1995, p.12) calls this approach "analysis of narratives" and distinguishes it from "narrative analysis." In contrast to paradigmatic knowledge, which focuses on what is common among actions, narrative knowledge and narrative analysis focuses on unique actions in context (Polkinghorne, 1995).

I made a decision to conduct a narrative analysis of the interviews of my second sub-study, using Polkinghorne's (1995) definition and description as a guide. My first step involved taking notes about immediate reflections after conducting the interviews. What was the interview possibly about? The interviews were then transcribed verbatim before I read transcripts naïvely, taking notes of reflections concerning possible plots in each interview. I understood the plot as an organizing structure or common thread that served to give each interview as a whole coherence and that the expressed store evolved around. I then reread each transcript closely, marking possible plots and subplots. The evolving main plot of each interview was iteratively tested in relation to the text in an attempt to determine if the plot I had found could serve to configure the data into a coherent story. Following this, I constructed a core story using mostly the informant's own words around the emerging thematic plot for each interview (Emden, 1998; McCormack, 2004).

To me, a narrative analysis seemed to encompass some of my evolving suspicion related to the idea of being able to find a common truth out there. A narrative analysis can be understood as to be inspired by both hermeneutics of suspicion and hermeneutics of faith (Ricoeur, 1991; Sullivan, 2012). Although narratives can be understood as revealing the inner world of the participants, it is also possible to understand narratives as reflecting certain agendas that the participants appeared to have. The aim of my writing up stories was therefore twofold. It was an attempt to capture the possibly intended agenda of each participant, but it was also an attempt to explore and elucidate how experiences are contextual, personal and related to time and space. I do not claim that the narratives created in this sub-study represent "the truth." However, they do represent an attempt to capture contextual truths that can be understood as true at a certain time and in a certain relational context (Klevan, Davidson, Ruud, & Karlsson, 2016).

Troubling the Narrative Turn

As described above, I understand narrative analysis to work on both hermeneutics of faith and hermeneutics of suspicion. The suspicion element is connected to an idea that what people say is not only a reflection of their true and untainted meanings. People also have certain agendas, explicit or more covert in what they say. The notion that people have such agendas became very apparent to me in the interviews of Sub-study 3 which consisted of focus group interviews with clinicians from crisis resolution teams.

Through these interviews, I understood the groups of clinicians to be discussing and constructing their stories of how they understood helpful help and helpful practices within their respective teams. Often, there appeared to be a great deal of agreement within the team. The participants almost seemed to be speaking with “one voice.” In that sense, I experienced that in these focus group interviews, each team appeared to create a joint story of their respective team and its practices. They created the story of their team. However, although the dominant stories of the teams appeared to be about how the participants experienced the CRTs to represent new and more humanizing practices in the field of mental health, something about the stories troubled me.

I reflected on the question: “What are the functions of the stories we tell ourselves and others about ourselves and our practices?” According to Hitzler (2011), stories can be understood as part of constructing our identities and justifying our actions, at individual and group levels. Being a former mental health clinician myself, the uncomfortable thought of how I had often had the need to present and understand myself and my practices in more favorable ways than what was perhaps the reality struck me. I started thinking about how the positive stories we create about ourselves and our practices, and the words we express them through can conceal other stories. Happening over time and being enmeshed in the common workplace culture – at what point do we stop noticing? To what extent are we allowed to notice? To borrow from Goffman, in the context of impression-managed mental health organizational stories, how free individual workers are to shape their own truth and stories emerged as an important question for me. It was time to attempt to “move behind” possibly sanitized “frontstage” stories. To me, as a former CRT clinician, this also involved revisiting my own stories and experiences of working in a CRT. In doing so, I recognized how developing new knowledge was entangled with my already-existing knowledge. Revisiting the old in the light of the new was also an element in my process of becoming a researcher. It changed how I understood the old and, hence, how I develop the new.

I still recall how proud I was back then, to be a part of the local CRT. The team represented something like a new dawn in the field of mental health. Humanizing, non-medicalizing, holistic, service user oriented, family and network focused. Those words, we used them all.

“Crisis resolution team, how may I help you?” I was on call at the local crisis resolution team (CRT). The person calling expressed deep distress and the need for an appointment. I aimed to explore the nature of his distress. How severe was it? Was this a “clear case” for the CRT or was it “just” a life crisis? We had just been going through the current caseload of the team. The conclusion was that our team worked with too many “light” cases and that we needed to “sift” our service users more carefully. I asked the caller if he had any thoughts or plans of ending his own life. “No, I don’t have thoughts like that.” “Ok... Well, I’m sorry, but I don’t think the CRT is the appropriate service for you. We are a service for those experiencing severe crises. May I suggest you contact your GP instead?” The caller hesitates for a moment, and then snaps back. “Do you

think I would have called if it wasn't necessary?" He hangs up. Good. I had managed to set some limits. I had acted professionally.

Why do I think this story from way back then is important? Why do I, all of a sudden, seemingly move from a researcher position to a clinician position? To me, there is always something of the past in the present. Even when my reasoning and actions in the past, viewed from a present perspective, is not very appealing. The clinician-me and the researcher-me seem to be entangled with each other and my developing understandings of knowledge, truth and research. What a mess.

Act 3 – The Discursive Turn

Both during interviews and in studying transcripts in sub study 3, I realized that a frequent lack of coherence between *what* participants said and *how* they expressed was a critical factor for my study because language can be understood as crucial in construction of meaning and development of clinical practices but also in concealing a lack of change. I selected a discursive psychological approach to explore how language is used in specific contexts to constitute and construct certain meanings and actions (Klevan, Karlsson, Ness, Grant & Ruud, 2016).

This approach acknowledges that people and their actions are shaped by not only external structures and power relations but also through the ways people talk about and understand their world (Winther Jørgensen, & Phillips, 1999).

Most kinds of discourse analysis tend to be suspicious of the purposes served by people's talk. Talk is never just talk, but has certain functions, both at local and macro levels. Thus in the focus groups, I understood talk as possibly reflecting personal agendas and positioning within the group, but also as reflecting issues of power and knowledge at conscious and unconscious levels (Sullivan, 2012).

In the discursive psychological turn in sub-study 3, I aimed to introduce a more suspicious and questioning approach to the understanding of data and my role as a researcher. Thus in analyzing the data, I did not attempt to be un-biased. Neither did I follow a strict sequentiality in the analysis. The identification of possible discourses involved a repeatedly reading and interrogation the text to become familiar with the data. I coded rather long sections in the material, aiming to focus simultaneously on *what* and *how* in terms of content of possible discourses and how these were expressed in the groups. The material was organized into clusters according to the content and how the participants expressed it. I then organized the clusters into possible discourses, which I interrogated in relation to each interview and the data set as whole. This whole process must be understood as a back and forth process. To me this was a challenging way of working with data. Trying to reveal what was possibly expressed but not clearly spoken and what mechanisms that influence what can and cannot be said, involved an increased level of suspicion. While taking a suspicious stance felt important, *not* taking what people say as face value was also somehow challenging. In my understanding, the knowledge generated through the analysis was a result of my interaction with the participants during interviews and my interaction with transcription texts after them. It was also a result of my engagement with my own evolving suspicion that the truths we present or represent are part of larger discourses about what counts as knowledge or not within the field of mental health. It was a process of troubling and questioning not only the data but also myself and my positioning and how this contributed in the development of knowledge.

Troubling Through Dialogue and Curiosity

The above three acts are used to illustrate how knowledge and understanding are intrinsically entwined with the researcher. This movement between each act can perhaps show how knowledge, understanding and the qualitative researcher are dynamic and movable processes. The researcher in motion meets and is inscribed within truths and knowledge in motion. Motion requires some kind of propelling force. Moreover, this force also needs nourishment to keep going. I like to think of the force as curiosity. If this is so, then perhaps the fuel is dialogue, both with oneself and with others.

According to Frank (2010), dialogical approaches in research are connected to recognizing the unfinalizability of the research participants and the stories they share. Stories and people are in the making. However, in research, the person recognizing these unfinalizabilities can also be understood as unfinalized. Thus, research can be understood as encounters between becoming-persons *and* becoming-truths. In this sense, the task of the researcher is not to report on truths existing outside the persons. Rather, the aim is to access onto-epistemological becoming-truths, in the moment of the encounter (Davies, 2016; Mazzei, 2014).

To me the idea of accessing becoming-truths is a radical one and not necessarily one that is encouraged in the research communities many PhD students are part of. It is somehow paradoxical that qualitative research often appears to stay within its comfort zone, exploring the unknown in known ways, and therefore simply endorsing and replicating the known. According to Denzin and Giardinia (2008, p. 6),

They (students) are more often than not taught particular “methods of data collection” within the context of research methods or research design courses; it is few and far between that philosophy of science and philosophy of inquiry seminars are required of graduate students—and even fewer still, we would contend, that call into question or contest the very notion of data or evidence itself.

Baumgarten (2001) explores the concept of curiosity as a virtue. According to Baumgarten, curiosity is related to the desire to know. Curiosity differs from attentiveness and taking interest, by its clear connection to this desire. The curious person will experience an apparent lack, before the desire for a particular knowledge is satisfied. As such, curiosity can be understood as a force that propels the troubling of existing knowledge and enables an expansion of knowledge. In its implicit desire to question and expand, curiosity adheres to an understanding of the world and knowledge as becoming. Through a desire to learn and to know, humans engage with other human beings and the world. New knowledge can be created, entailing that neither the actors, nor understandings of the world remain the same.

The desire to question and destabilize taken for granted assumptions may need a sympathetic social environment in order to flourish. If our attempts to satisfy our curiosity and trouble the world are met with restraining responses that direct us towards a stable and fixed point of knowledge “as is,” a staggering number of curiosity-driven attempts to leave safe ground will crash and burn. Perhaps a crucial feature of pedagogy and mentoring is to encourage processes of curiosity and troubling. Sometimes, rather than being taught how “proper” research should be done and being cultivated into becoming a respectable member of the research society, as a becoming-researcher you need to be encouraged to let go of your safety net (Colebrook, 2017).

As a PhD student, I received several pieces of advice and well-meaning persuasion to join the normative research community. One professor advised me to let go of my attempts to explore and challenge conventional ways of doing data analysis. Another was deeply concerned about how I made myself visible, suggesting that research should be about the informants and not the researcher. Luckily, I was also encouraged to keep troubling.

Epilogue

This paper could be read as the story of the becoming of a researcher. Initially, when starting out as a PhD student, I had no idea that the PhD journey would give me some answers, furthermore, that it would give me confidence as a researcher. Did it? I guess the answer is both yes and no. I have fewer answers, but I feel more confident in *not* having the answers. The practice of being an *unknowing* researcher is something I can stand for.

Through the onto-epistemological turns explored above, truth and knowledge are better understood as connected to ways of actively *becoming* in the world rather than being *situated* in it (Davies, 2016; Grant, 2010; Mattingly, 2010). These ways of becoming in the world can be understood as connected to emerging truths, to how truths are explored, and to myself as a researcher. Moreover, my exploration of how the onto-epistemological assumptions and methodology and my becoming as a researcher are connected can be understood as driven forward by *troubling* as the source of propulsion. Troubling can be argued to be a force that drives practices that aim for new understandings through change and movement but also through uniting and contextualizing. Troubling needs to be understood as entwined with the researcher and the relational contexts the researcher is involved in, at both micro- and macro-levels. Troubling requires the acknowledgement of a culturally embedded and experiencing researcher.

To me research and its possibilities of expanding and troubling knowledge, truths and the world are of crucial importance. It is not just about finding truth. It is also about challenging how we find and what we hold as truth. It is about shaking us out of our deep, safe and comfortable slumber. It is about triggering and reinstating curiosity and attentiveness. Minnich (2016) describes attentiveness on a continuum. At the one end, there is the insensitive, closed denial to recognize as significant anything except what one has already habitually categorized. At the opposite end, we sense and take in something or someone with full consciousness untainted by such preconceptions. This involves being open to new encounters and to the uniqueness even of the familiar. Listening with full attentiveness opens up free thinking. It entails the possibility for movement and the jettisoning of predefined categories (Davies, 2016; Minnich, 2016).

Through its potential to question, trouble, destabilize and expand, curiosity can be understood as connected to onto-epistemological understandings of the world and people as made and in the becoming. In this sense it is possible to connect curiosity to diffraction. Barad (2007) uses diffraction as a new materialist conceptual replacement for reflexivity. Reflexivity pre-supposes known, predictable people, changing in predictable ways within pre-established reality-knowledge parameters. In contrast to reflexivity, diffraction does not reproduce an image of what we assume is already there. Diffraction focuses on the ongoing production of ourselves, the other, and reality through intra-action. Thus, it concerns subjects and truths in the making (Barad 2007; Klevan, 2017).

Ironically, the word “production” often appears to pop up in academia. In our universities, we tend to talk about production of academic papers, or the production of students or PhDs. Less attention is given to how we *produce* doctoral students and what purpose such production serves. Following Barad (2007), should a person with a PhD be simply another product in terms of them simply constituting the reproduction of a standard image of existing,

safe research practices and practitioners? Or should the “production” of doctoral students focus on nurturing their ongoing and unfinalized self- other- and world-realities?

Furthermore, should research reflect “reality” or should it also address and trouble what and whose purposes reality serves? Alvesson and Spicer (2012, 2016) suggest that often organizations are characterized by restricted cognition and a refusal to encourage and value intellectual capacities, reflexivity and demands for justification of the status quo. The authors refer to this as “functional stupidity” (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012, p. 1196) that serves the purpose of creating unquestioning employees who adhere to a single, master narrative of the organization and its purposes, suppressing more critical and negative voices.

What do the expectations placed on and accepted more or less by academics to adhere to predefined and single storylines actually do to them? What is at risk? Curiosity may have killed the cat, but it may also provide lifesaving support to researchers. Understanding the researcher, the world and knowledge as becoming, also implies that curiosity is not something that “is” but rather something that develops and becomes through intra-actions. My concern about keeping curiosity vital is thus not only about supporting and encouraging it as a trait that researchers should possess. It is also about developing research communities and understandings of what counts as knowledge that are simultaneously curiosity-based, curiosity-nurturing and curiosity-troubling. However, how can we maintain our curiosity in academia? How do we develop and keep our sense of curiosity vital and troubling? Water has no clearly defined color.

Bengt: I find Trude’s writing very interesting and stimulating, related to her troubling of research, the researcher, scientific knowledge and what truth can be. To me Trude raises two important questions in her epilogue. The first is how we can maintain our curiosity in academia and the other is how we can keep our sense of curiosity vital and troubling? I would like to elaborate on Trude’s arguments while continuing to trouble the notions of research, scientific knowledge production and truth within the mental health field.

The history of the field of mental health cries out for such troubling. Foucault (1967) describes how the understanding of mental health problems is closely linked to the taken for granted medical understanding of people being divided into being either insane or normal. Furthermore, he states that our understanding of being insane or normal varies as a function of shifting cultural, historical and social periods. Bringing mad people into institutions was based in a humanistic understanding of treatment and care. Foucault describes how these humanistic ideas and practices very often, and soon however, turned into dehumanized oppression and stigmatization. He elaborates on how the question of humanistic and dehumanistic practices will always be at stake in the understanding of mental health issues. To Foucault, this points to the dialectical relationship between knowledge/power and truth. Knowledge gives power, and power gives knowledge and the right to tell what the truth is.

In this context, I would like to quote Baak (2016, p. 29): “Research is a dirty word for many of those who have been affected by colonialism and its legacies.” Baak uses the word “dirty” because research as a term and set of practices is linked to Western imperialism and colonialism. To me the research on mental health issues is an example of this. It is based in an assumption and an understanding grounded in the western medical model, which focuses on mental health problems as individual sickness and disorders, caused by the individuals themselves who need individual cure.

Mainstream research within mental health is dominated by the biomedical approach, which includes the basic assumptions and vocabulary of “mental disorders.” This vocabulary states that people experience changes to their lives as a result of severe mental illness. Recently,

the United Nation Human Rights Council in Geneva published a report which stated that the western medical model is outdated and there is therefore an urgent need to prioritize policy innovation at population levels internationally. The report underlines the need to target social aspects and factors of mental health issues, focusing on inclusive and accepting communities for every citizen (UN Human Rights Council, 2017).

Lundstøl (1999) refers to the Greek philosopher Aristotle and his three areas of knowledge: 1. Theoretical, 2. Practical and 3. Experience-based. Lundstøl emphasizes that these are equal forms of knowledge. One form of knowledge is not superior or any truer than the others. This is important in understanding what makes knowledge “valid.” In the current mental health cultural context, the theoretical knowledge domain—especially in the form of research-based or scientific knowledge—prevails and sometimes monopolizes what constitutes valid knowledge.

Today, scientific knowledge is referred to as evidence-based knowledge. Ekeland (2004, 2011) refers to this as the “Gospel of evidence,” preaching that scientific knowledge is the true knowledge. Researchers and politicians often use statements like “Research shows that ...” or “This knowledge is evidence-based ...” Both statements indicate that knowledge based on research or evidence-based methodology represents the truth—even more true and more valid than other forms of knowledge, such as that which is practical or experience-based. The rhetoric rests on the fact that knowledge-based is synonymous with evidence-based knowledge, developed through randomized, controlled studies and meta-analyses. This in turn is referred to as the “gold standard” of scientific knowledge production—knowledge which is considered as most obviously the highest ranked in the hierarchy of methodologies.

I criticize mental health science and evidence-based practice for such an excessive focus on methodology and less on critical reflection (Karlsson, 2016). Such evidence-based understandings trivialize and subordinate experience-based knowledge in mental health research. Thus, the Gospel of evidence becomes a hegemonic power discourse about knowledge. This discourse affects us both as collective and individual researchers. How this discourse affects me on a personal level as a researcher is something I have been thinking about in recent years. I am a qualitative researcher and as such I emphasize the importance of listening to people’s stories in research. However, at a certain point, I experienced a disturbing feeling about turning these stories into research, academic writing and scientific papers. The implicit idea and expectation of doing so is that academic writing will make people’s stories more trustworthy and true. I read in a newspaper recently that there are 17,000 academic papers published in the world each day. I wonder how many stories there are to be told, researched and read.

Alec: I agree with Bengt when he says that Trude’s writing makes an excellent *troubling* contribution. I’m interested in picking up on her point that knowledge is always context-dependent. Knowledge always comes from somewhere and is always political, even when it pretends otherwise. As Bengt also suggests, mental/health research can more or less unwittingly constitute, and contribute to, oppressive practice. In its non-critical variety, I think one of its functions is to keep people—including doctoral researchers and their participants—in their place in the societal and academic moral order.

That this is not sufficiently robustly challenged is strange and disappointing. From an onto-epistemological standpoint rejecting of foundational, essential and transcendent certainty, there are no privileged metanarratives. It’s just not possible to step outside of time and place to argue with absolute certainty about anything. “Truth” is an unfortunate word, and Latour (2013) makes the point that many social and natural scientists wrongly confuse knowledge with truth. There are lots of knowledge(s); lots of windows on the world, and behind them are lots of people looking through glass, more or less darkly.

What Trude has *seen* in her research journey pulled on her to both see it, and to see herself seeing. Her vistas constantly shifted and changed, as did she, and as did what she needed, wanted, chose, and was forced to see. There are differences between all of these optical positions: often what she *needed* to see was the result of her vision being constrained by normative academic processes. What she *wanted* and *chose* to see was in large part conditioned by these processes, at least to start with, until she became more independent of normative academe. What she was *forced* to then begin to see seems to me to be a function of this increasing independence and curiosity. While, through necessity, keeping a place in the emotionally-chilled conventional academic world, Trude unashamedly joined the community of warm, passionate, transgressive international scholarship—the Paraversity.

And of course, the “I” that is Trude is constantly, inescapably entangled in passionate knowledge, at personal, professional and academic levels. Normative researchers are far too icebergish, in keeping much of what makes for their research coolly submerged below the line of outside scrutiny. Six decades ago, Wright Mills (1959) urged social researchers to do the opposite by making their private matters public concerns. It’s unfortunate that his call has been insufficiently heeded. I think this is because of a long-standing, inappropriate disparagement of subjectivism—something that in my experience is—ironically—particularly true in mental/health qualitative inquiry (Grant, 2018; Grant, Short, & Turner, 2013).

As Trude argues, challenging the assumptions underpinning knowledge is an emergent, diffractive task. Drawing on DeleuzoGuatarrian ideas (Fox & Alldred, 2013), I believe that her research journey was a courageous *line of flight* away from normative qualitative inquiry practices and assumptions. Slavish adherence to these can lead to bland, anodyne research, and knowledge that doesn’t really rock any cultural boats (Grant, 2018). I’m with Chomsky and many other critical educationalists, when they argue that knowledge should trouble the world.

Well done, Trude!

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