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Research as Preparation for Practice-based Research

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Duality, Positionality, and Stance: Workplace Dissertation Research as Preparation for Practice-based Research

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Abstract

At United States online doctoral institutions, many doctoral candidates focus their dissertation research on study problems that emerge from professional practice, which may serve as a vital first experience and preparation for continued practitioner or practice-based research. Although there have been many definitions offered as to what constitutes workplace research, this scholarly reflection explores three essential considerations for duality (dual roles), positionality, and stance in a doctoral dissertation research problem originating from a doctoral candidate's workplace setting or professional practice. As a doctoral scholar with a dual role as a workplace professional and doctoral candidate, the doctoral candidate must often shift perspective and negotiate the concurrent dual or multiple identities of workplace professional, doctoral learner, scholar, and independent researcher. When accomplished, workplace dissertation research may also serve to evolve the candidate's enhanced perspectives, thereby preparing the candidate for continued practice-based research within the discipline that, in turn, may also expand the candidate's views and solutions to post-doc workplace problems. For this scholarly reflection, we defined dual roles, positionality, and stance within the practitioner and practice-based research literature, and further describe our reflections of the experiences as two recent doctoral graduates and our dissertation committee chair. We used Moustakas' critical self-analysis as a scholarly reflective mechanism in context with a critical review of the current literature to consider preparation for practice-based research through workplace dissertation research, and purport that these constructs need further exploration to better prepare doctoral candidates for practice-based research and to generate new knowledge during and following doctoral degree attainment.

Keywords: doctoral research preparation, duality, positionality, stance, workplace dissertation research, practitioner research

Introduction

Many scholars in doctoral education have commented on the importance of a quality relationship between the dissertation advisor or chair and the doctoral scholar-researcher as well as the best methods by which to prepare our candidates as principal investigators, especially so they may return to the field as ongoing researchers (Grant, Hackney, & Edgar, 2014; Ravitch, 2014). Doctoral students have become progressively older, have more years of professional experience, and do not necessarily pursue a doctoral program directly from other graduate studies (Offerman, 2011). As a result, the contemporary American doctoral candidate brings a wealth of professional experience to dissertation research, increasing the need for dissertation chairs and advisors to support the doctoral candidate as facilitator, coach, and colleague over the more traditional or hierarchical forms of research supervision, which may be more supervisory and less collegial (Offerman, 2011). The literature has also been replete with calls for innovative models for dissertation research advising in support of doctoral candidates who remain employed within the profession over the course of a doctoral program and dissertation research (Erichsen, Bolliger, & Halupa, 2014; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Grant et al., 2014; Offerman, 2011; Spaulding, Rockinson-Szapkiw, & Spaulding, 2015).

In a study of academic nursing, Andrew and Robb (2011) noted the “21st century academic” may be better served by a blended scholar-practitioner crossover earlier in a career path. Further, Gardner and Gopaul (2012) recommended, especially for part-time doctoral candidates, that doctoral programs improve support to better serve the working professional, a common candidate profile in U.S. online doctoral programs. This scholarly reflection begins the discussion of how to better support these contemporary doctoral students through further examining three pertinent constructs: duality, positionality, and stance. These constructs deserve further exploration and examination as elements with potential to better prepare doctoral candidates for practice-based research involving dual roles, insider-outsider perspectives, and necessary intentional transparencies needed to transition from a practice-based professional to practitioner researcher. Ultimately, this may improve post-doc professional practices, practice-based competencies, and generation of new knowledge, and the dissertation chair or advisor who encourages such considerations may lead the doctoral scholar to be better equipped for ongoing practice-based research and concurrent contributions to theory (Ravitch, 2014; Throne, 2012). As Baker and Pifer (2014) noted, this knowledge can benefit practice in previously unforeseen

ways as new independent scholar-practitioners integrate into a community of scholarship, establish unique research agendas, author new work, or return to practice with a changed worldview and elevated personal agency.

When engaging in the important and priority-shifting doctoral-level research, specifically workplace dissertation research where a dissertation study is conducted within the doctoral candidate's workplace or practice setting and may involve dual relationships and potential conflicts of interest. In such settings, it is essential that doctoral candidates first recognize their dualities of roles and relationships, synergies of theory and practice, and contrasts between conceptual or theoretical constructs versus workplace metrics inherent to workplace dissertation research in the context of the profession. This can be accomplished from within the workplace research setting or as a scholar outside the practice-based perspective by attending to the chasms that may exist between academic research, theory, and practice-based research (Andrew & Robb, 2011). We focused on duality as these synergies and contrasts that resulted from workplace dissertation research done from within a practice setting, and positionality as the complex and contextual perspective of a researcher who decisively strides across practice and theory, and who becomes cognizant of the social, political, economic, and environmental influences of a researcher's singular worldview (Baker & Pifer, 2014; Bourke, 2014; Throne, 2012). Stance was then considered as distinct from positionality, but similarly encompasses the complex and contextualized worldview constructed from scholarship and layered by experiences within the profession because it may better prepare doctoral candidates for practice-based research (Andrew & Robb, 2011; Bourke, 2014; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009a; Ravitch, 2014; Throne, 2012). This is especially true as doctoral candidates' self-perception and professional identities transform when conducting workplace dissertation research (Kumar & Dawson, 2013). For example, as doctoral candidates learn more about the problems within the profession through study, they evolve from a student and/or professional to an independent scholar capable of investigating future problems using empirical methods.

We used Moustakas' critical self-analysis as a mode of scholarly reflection to immerse, explore, assess, and synthesize our own experiences in using workplace dissertation research to prepare for practice-based research in our respective professions (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Moustakas, 1961, 1995). This Moustakas form of critical self-analysis and reflection allowed us to retrospectively, and with temporal remoteness, consider our common experiences with

workplace dissertation research from perspectives that may have been important to unlock this tacit knowledge and understanding (Grant et al., 2014; Moustakas, 1961, 1995) as insiders to our profession and workplace environment, as well as outsiders and doctoral scholar-researchers.

Thus, scholarly reflection through critical self-analysis allowed us to explore essential meanings through a self-exploration of our experiences that may otherwise remain unknown (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Moustakas, 1961, 1995), and to eliminate pre- or misconceptions for a systematic exploration of a post-doctoral experience (Kleining & Witt, 2000). The following offers considerations of the current literature for these constructs amid a narrative device of reflective heuristic analysis to determine patterns within our collective experiences, and to offer our own heuristic experiential assessment of workplace dissertation research with respect to duality, positionality, and stance. In closing, we offer our collective discussion and recommendations for continued empirical exploration of these constructs.

Duality and Workplace Dissertation Research

As defined by Andrew and Robb (2011), duality was explored as the synergies and contrasts that resulted from workplace dissertation research done within, without, or from a practice-based perspective and the chasms that may exist between academic research, theory, and practice-based research. It was especially helpful to the doctoral candidates' duality of roles as researchers and members of the profession to account for the dual roles of the research with participants from within the profession that layered the duality consideration (Throne, 2012). This duality has also been reported as the intersecting identities whereby consideration for the role of practitioner in the workplace or profession can motivate dissertation scholarship (Henriksen, Mishra, Greenho, Cain, & Roseth, 2014; Spaulding et al., 2015).

In our own doctoral research, we found that not only were there dual roles, but dual workplaces as well. We were in positions as academic researchers studying professionals in the workplace from within our respective discipline areas. We found this research impetus came from a well-founded need for practice improvement. While dissertation advisors may expect a duality of learning for doctoral candidates, it is common to see candidates possessing knowledge of their workplace/professional landscape rather than theory. From this duality perspective, our chair understood the role was to oversee student investigators concurrently as colleagues and students who were professionals within their disciplines, and guide them in designing research to prepare them for this duality. However, the chair helped us consider the multiple roles we held

as concurrent doctoral candidate-workplace professionals and to move beyond the expert-learner dichotomy of traditional doctoral supervision. We may have further discussed these notions of duality with our chair and peers to concurrently and more overtly improve our practice-based research skills as professional insiders.

Our dissertation research examined problems within professional practice; our research was exploratory in nature and, in hindsight, our duality gave no evident reason to influence or bias participants. The doctoral workplace dissertation research prepared us for future workplace research within our respective disciplines and raised additional questions for our continued research of these problems within practice. To refine the fundamental aspects and roles of researcher and workplace professional required reflection and systematic investigation of not only of our professional roles, but also to cultivate our participants' views.

The duality we considered later was unique to our professional settings, operational parameters within the industry, and, while we often obliquely discussed duality with our chair, we focused less on our dual roles as candidates and professionals within practice. We maintained singular roles as investigators with our study participants, and, in retrospect, we may have more fully considered our dual roles as insider and outsider to the professional setting. Doctoral chairs and dissertation advisors may further consider dual roles, duality, and the inherent insider-outsider perspectives of doctoral candidates and those they bring to the doctoral program. Investigators may further consider duality in future post-doc workplace research as it supplements a person-centered approach within industry combined with extensive internal and external stakeholder dialogue and further insider-outsider duality self-examination.

Positionality and Workplace Dissertation Research

A doctoral candidate acquires a researcher identity from the profession and educational program, which the candidate must consider and integrate through an ongoing and evolutionary process of reflection and integration throughout the doctoral research experience that distinguishes an emergent positionality (Throne, 2012). Based on the literature, we defined positionality as tantamount to the complex and contextual perspective of a researcher who decisively strides across practice and theory, and one who becomes cognizant of the social, political, economic, and environmental influences of a researcher's singular worldview (Baker & Pifer, 2014; Bourke, 2014; Throne, 2012).

Positionality was not aligned with partiality so much as *standpoint* and the contextual influences that surround the statuses, abilities or disabilities, geography, and attributions of birth that comprise any single researcher who considers a problem embedded from within his or her workplace from the overlapping and concomitant ontological center (Bourke, 2014; Throne, 2012). Specifically, within the context of a research project, Bourke (2014) defined positionality as “the self-conscious awareness of the relationship between a researcher and ‘another’” (p. 2). Similarly, we found this to be the case in the assessment of our experiences of our own insider/outsider relationships with other professionals in the field.

Positionality, while perhaps not labeled as such overtly, was desired and considered to enhance the complex and contextual viewpoints we brought to our dissertation research as professionals and independent scholars. This had been evident within our coursework and further considered within the dissertation research. There are limitations specific to studying a workplace target population of human subjects; by training, and perhaps nature, we found workplace professionals resisted study and invasion of their professional space. Participants’ resistance varied, which illuminated our own positionality as outsiders/researchers who desired entry into their organizational sphere and its membership because we, as members of these professions, felt we belonged there. We found these professionals somewhat difficult to study without applying motivation or pressure and without considering our protected population because of the nature of the profession. We also found these barriers existed across multiple disciplines and work environments, with various personal and political barriers that may have influenced our positionality, positively or negatively, and sometimes this philosophy hindered advancing the research objectives.

Conversely, if positionality had been fully considered, it may have been a more rewarding aspect of the research because in today’s world, individuals have strong worldview convictions of issues, whether they are valid or not, and some of these convictions are clouded and based on personal and social ideologies. The perspective of right and wrong was frequently blurred. The organizations that served as our research settings must protect not only the individuals within their employed from being inundated with requests for the time involved as research participants, but also organizational integrity. We found that supervisors with similar positionality might have been more inclined to refer us to potential sampling frames within the organizations or more proactively allow for participant recruitment. As we entered these

systems, the research we conducted afforded an insider view of the complexities involved in everyday operational activities. It was sometimes awkward to solicit responses from professionals in our field that uncovered evidence of professional challenges or necessary improvements.

Our chair was cognizant of the complexities and the contextual nature of the research we designed brought an inherent development of our positionality whereby we developed as independent scholars and were able to articulate our own expanded capacity to view problems through views of scholarship and experiential standpoints. Our new learning to bridge theory and theoretical domains to the profession and the workplace, which may not have occurred outside of dissertation workplace research, enhanced this. It may have been especially evident within the development of the theoretical framework and the theoretical contributions of the results as two distinct avenues, which we could have discussed further to more overtly identify the bridge from theory to practice in our development as new investigators. These experiences enhanced our positionality, or in most simplistic terms, expanded and articulated a clearer positionality for us, which was transformed and extended throughout the workplace dissertation research process.

Stance and Workplace Dissertation Research

We defined stance as distinct from positionality, but similarly encompassing a complex and contextualized worldview constructed from scholarship and layered by experiences within the profession. We found and used Cochran-Smith and Lytle's definition for *inquiry as stance* fitting for the construct. Especially in the multiple roles practitioners perform, both individually and collectively, to generate local knowledge, perceive practice through a theoretical lens, and to dissect and synthesize the current research and theory that bridges theory and practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001, 2009a, 2009b; Ravitch, 2014). From a scholarly perspective, and not one founded solely on the workplace setting, we found this fluid knowledge base pertinent to the inquiry at hand and relevant as a viewpoint to be sustained throughout the workplace dissertation research process.

Our chair intended that we would bridge theory and practice as Ph.D.-level researchers and assumed that we would evolve our perspectives as practitioners to one of reflexive practice whereby theoretical considerations influenced how we viewed the research problem and any resulting theoretical contributions before and after reaching conclusions. Stance was

foundational to this doctoral learning expectation, and our initial stance was primarily as outsiders trying to gain access to a professional practice research setting; however, we found this view of stance evolved. Human factors and interactions will always influence stance as an agent of change as insider to industry and a professional with responsibilities not only to theory, but also to practice requirements where we envisioned future rigorous practitioner-driven research with an eye to theory and ever-changing requirements within practice. Insider perspectives of the research problem influenced our stance, which required open minds and objective approaches during the research. It was sometimes disheartening to uncover evidence of the problem, not just within the literature, but verified within practice.

In retrospect, because of our evolving stance as new investigators, we found participants willing insiders to inform our research and our stance of exploring the future and the past to solve problems within our divergent industries. While our research was quantitative, our stance was incorporated via empirical analysis expectations that involved reflection, context, subjectivity, and tacit knowledge for practice-based inquiry, and a desire for solutions for imminent problems within the profession that we brought to our research. This was especially illuminated when determining inference of quantitative results and offering recommendations for practice based on our respective findings. We began to shift a worldview of the problem, ultimately our stance, from solely a practice-based perspective to a more complex view that encompassed the theoretical framework along with the practice-based and experiential knowledge we brought to rigorous workplace dissertation research.

Discussion and Recommendations

Our assessment of duality, positionality, and stance as cognizant considerations for doctoral candidates pursuing workplace dissertation research points to the need for empirical examination as necessary concepts for any doctoral candidate desiring to pursue a research problem from professional practice. As Henriksen et al. (2014) noted, unique perspectives on improving doctoral candidate preparation does not erode the foundational principles of doctoral-level rigor, research skills, and theoretical foundations, but innovative changes to a doctoral program may only enhance the scholar's development as an independent investigator. Likewise, this article provides a reflective analysis of our experiences and leads us to echo other researchers who have called for further exploration of duality, positionality, and stance as important concepts to integrate within a doctoral candidate's readiness for the primary

investigation, especially for those who pursue workplace dissertation research, regardless of the discipline from which the study originates. In addition, doctoral candidates may seek out consideration of these constructs as they experience an epistemic transformation to independent researcher and research practitioner, and use them to navigate such complexities.

Similar to Bourke (2014), we found our research shaped by our own positionality and stance, both inside and outside of the research setting, where our positionality and stance met that of our participants. Such encounters must occur with intentionality and cognizant consideration over happenstance. Similarly, Ravitch (2014) noted that while stance is recursive, iterative, reflexive, and discursive, which some may view as confined within a qualitative paradigm, it also requires the research skillset typically developed in a doctoral dissertation research process. While we conducted a contemplative assessment of these constructs after our own primary quantitative investigations had concluded, we found them as essential and relevant to our continued development as practice-based researchers and new doctorates; yet, a more aware understanding of these constructs may have better equipped us to navigate our evolving insider-outsider roles within and outside the profession and our doctoral program. Therefore, we are collective proponents of continued research of duality, positionality, and stance as constructs to improve doctoral candidate preparation to use workplace dissertation research as a pathway to ongoing practice-based research.

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