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'The leveller of laughter': reflections on positioning and identity within a research community.

Charlotte Haines Lyon

Doctoral Researcher York St John University

This paper will use Lacanian theory to explore how I and quite likely others' views of ourselves can become distorted within the university research community. I will explain how PubMethods creates a space in which to challenge these distortions of our identity and our positioning. After exploring the importance of the pub as a third space, I will explore how laughter — a key component to PubMethods — is a vital part of the Irigarayian process of 'becoming' and thus reshaping our identity and positioning and possibly the research community.

Please note that I am using the term university to describe the wider concept of rather than specifically York St John; the same goes for the use of terms such as students, supervisors and staff unless explicitly stated.

The neoliberal gaze

In the current climate we are neoliberal subjects; as Fielding and Moss argue the school is "at risk of becoming a place of regulation and normalization, tasked with producing subjects fit for the purposes of the nation state and the capitalist economy" (Fielding and Moss, 2010: 15). I would argue that the same can be said for the university, which as Mountz et al argue, has become about counting; whether our output, input, progress, or metrics (Mountz et al., 2015). This culture demands that students and staff are supplicant, self-policing and responsible by dint of ensuring they are economically viable. Bibby's work on the classroom, illustrates how students are individualised (Bibby, 2011). Within a school, simply the setting of children in ability groups, makes it clear that one child is different to another, moreover some are 'better' than others. Likewise, practices within academia such as ranking of articles with regard to impact, are individualising. Such

individualising practices further govern the neoliberal subject, making it difficult to see other ways of being.

Lacan's 'Mirror phase' describes the phase of the infant looking at the mirror, recognising its mother and others, whilst at the same time processing that is seeing an image and not its actual mother, whom the infant knows is holding them. The infant starts to work out that their own reflection is themselves but isn't actually them. This is how we become a subject, as we start to see "gestalts" of ourselves we gain insights to ourselves, whilst simultaneously recognising the gestalt is only an image or reflection (Lacan and Fink, 2006: 76). We can never accurately see ourselves, but only reflections of ourselves in order to gain insights into who we are and how we are constituted.

Bibby uses the mirror as a metaphor within the classroom arguing that assessment, teacher behaviour, governmentality aspects of the school, all act as mirrors, reflecting messages back to the child, thus shaping how the subject understands themselves, in turn shaping the subject. She critiques Lacan's simple concept of the mirror for implying the mirror is somewhat benign, and the responsibility for interpreting is solely that of the subject. Arguing that as mirrors such as broken ones or fairground mirrors distort the reflection in different ways, it is necessary to pay attention to how we may cause faulty mirroring (Bibby, 2011).

I am arguing that within the university and the wider research community including Facebook research student communities, books and blogs, there are plenty of faulty mirrors providing distorted images to academics including myself. This might include feedback on an article, the eternal pressure to be productive with daily ideas as to how to be so, and the seemingly endless exhortations to write 500 words every single day, regardless of family commitments. (Whether those 500 words are of high impact journal standard is a moot point.) The failure to achieve these standards can lead to isolation and the feeling I am failing to be a good student or researcher. It can lead to distorted views of how others are working. Everyone else must be more productive, effective or simply better than me, and of course all professors and quite likely supervisors, just breathe out

concisely written high impact journal articles without terribly messy draughts and weeks of sweat and angst.

Lacan argues that desire is "generated in the gap between 'me' as I experience myself (including what I see mirrored by other people)and the 'me' I would like to experience" (Bibby, 2011: 34). As I have already argued the mirroring may be distorted which can lead to problematic or unrealistic desires – for example of perfection. Not only am I unable to realise these desires, I am unable to see that others are not realising these desires either.

Such desires are informed by the 'Other'; encompassing values, discourses and ways of being, rather than the 'other' – which refers to another person. The concepts and reflections that we encounter are part of the "Gaze" of the Other (Bibby, 2011; Lacan and Fink, 2006). I am arguing that in this situation the 'Gaze' is a neoliberal 'Gaze' informing us as to how we should be neoliberal researchers, thus leading to failure or indeed castration – the inability to understand that we can't achieve the desire of the mythical Phallus.

Lacan is be criticised for his 'phallocentrism' in that he blurs the differences of men and women by subsuming their bodily differences and thus their embodied experiences, whilst simultaneously prizing the male organ (Grosz, 1990). Indeed, I share Irigaray's concern that western philosophy has built the ideal subject around the concept of the ideal male. I will return to Irigaray's counter to this later. However, it is possible to use the Phallus as a metaphor as described by Bailly (Bailly, 2009). It may be that the Phallus represents the machismo, somewhat like a codpiece, and patriarchal culture that provides the distorted reflections for us within the university (and other parts of society). The overvaluing of the Phallus could be seen as overvaluing particular 'signifieds' or concepts of the neoliberal ideal subject or researcher.

PubMethods disrupting the Gaze

PubMethods disrupts this 'gaze of the Other" by providing a space — a pub — thus changing the location and to some extent the gaze of the Other. The very process of working out just how snugly we can sit together in the snug, somewhat disrupts the usual discourse of professional distance.

It seems salient to point to Oldenburg's observation that the political movement, the Levelers , whose aim it was to abolish the hierarchy during the English civil wars in the 17th Century, met in coffee houses which provided 'neutral ground' upon which to bring men from different ranks and positions together (Oldenburg, 1989).

Oldenburg argues that the third place such as pubs or coffee houses, is that which is not home nor work; It enables its constituents to hold both work and home at a respectful distance which enables an exploration of important issues within one's life without too arduous an argument or concern (Oldenburg, 1989). Whilst PubMethods does indeed involve talking about research methodology, it is removed from work. There is a distance, which enables a more playful approach to methodology that does not have to be directly related to our work within our usual roles. For example I can play with ideas, rather than specifically engage with my doctoral research. If I do talk about my research, it is not within the usual supervisory or university forum, which makes it possible to play without the expectations I sometimes feel from the 'Gaze'.

Laughter is key to PubMethods; none of us are able to take ourselves or our work too seriously. Oldenburg argues that the distance of the other places, is augmented by humour, which enables a more deprecating approach towards home, work, as well as rank and positioning. Humour he says, allows people to explore and contend with the realisation that everyone has to deal with the absurdity of life and our concepts of how it should work. Furthermore it allows the challenging of rank, by teaching people to laugh at themselves and prevents them from standing on a pedestal. (Consider the banter in pubs, when someone might think they are above the others.) In terms of challenging the neoliberal gaze, Yalçintas argues that

> The energizing and liberating nature of humour and laughter is suspected of expressing a sense of challenge, rebelliousness, and defiance, due to which even the supreme authority, God, can be degraded, disgraced, humiliated, possibly denied, and ultimately rejected. (Yalcintas, 2015: 43)

Soja brings a different perspective to the third space, arguing that the first space is something that is mapped out clearly and distinctly, the second space is that which can be described in terms of its usage for example. The third space, whilst encompassing the first and the second, Soja argues , incorporates the relationships, dynamics and discourses that abound within that space (Soja, 1996). PubMethods is a third space that incorporates the dynamics of research and university whilst at the same time allowing the challenging of those through humour and care, a form of praxis which meets the ethical demand that Soja places upon it (Beswick et al., 2015).

Irigaray and becoming

As we look and listen to each other our assumptions and those aforementioned distorted reflections are challenged. For example when Matthew shared a dilemma, I was suprised to discover that he, a professor and my apparently all-knowing supervisor, a) did not know everything and b) was quite nervous about particular types of research. This challenged my assumption that everybody else knew everything and was good at everything. It made me re-evaluate my own positioning as a non-knowing student. Furthermore Jane, brought her own article, which she had worked hard on to publish and was rightly proud in her success. Not only did it become clear to me that other people had to sweat to write, but they were proud of their achievement that such toil had led to. Again this challenged my view of everybody else churning out multiple articles a week.

Furthermore, as people share their dilemmas, there can be such a range of comments that, I am able to realise that my 'two-penneth' is also worthy of sharing. Consequently I have developed not only more knowledge of methodology but confidence in my identity as a researcher. In fact I have

developed an identity as a methodology nerd which is over-taking my earlier identity as a methodology fraud.

As I mentioned earlier, Irigaray argues for multiple subjects as we cannot define the subject as male (Irigaray, 1993; Irigaray, 1996; Irigaray, 1998). It is necessary for us to relate to each other as subjects rather than simply others, recognising each other's desires, reflections and sameness and differences. This is why Irigaray does not consider the formation of a subject as a temporal, finite entity but rather understands it as a process of becoming. I am arguing that laughter at and with each other helps us to restore our sense of self as we relate to each other. Each encounter disrupts the gaze of the other, thus restarting the process of becoming a subject.

PubMethods provides a space in which we can relate to each other as different subjects, and remake ourselves as researchers, continually challenging the neoliberal 'Gaze'. The laughter provides for disruption of the 'Gaze', a levelling of hierarchies and distortions, in that it is possible to understand that all of us have distortions. As we restore some of the distorted reflections of our identity it is may also be possible to restore the identity of the research community.

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