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# Poststructural Theorizing of “Experiences”: Implications for Qualitative Research and Curriculum Inquiries \*

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ABSTRACT

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This paper was to investigate urgent issues in qualitative research, specifically the ontological conundrum that researchers commonly encountered in depicting experience and social reality. The turn to “experience” has expanded the modes of qualitative research by hearing “marginalized” voices, and thus increasing cultural awareness. Based on the review over multiple approaches to “experience” to enrich conversation in qualitative research, three major approaches to “experience” were identified, drawn from phenomenology, narrative inquiry, and critical ethnographic studies. This examination provided a platform to explore complex meanings of experience, defined by poststructuralist theories: (a) experience as discursively constructed, (b) experience as non-linear development, (c) experience as performative acts, and (d) experience as (im)possible representation. To conclude, I examined two major implications of poststructuralist theories to develop different epistemological and ontological approaches to qualitative research—namely (a) interrogating experience built upon discursive subjectivity construction and (b) rethinking and restructuring experience differently. By debunking a normative approach to experience, I encourage qualitative researchers to revisit habitual ways of theorizing experience, while releasing their methodological imagination in qualitative research.

**Keywords:** experience, poststructuralist theories, curriculum inquiry

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## I. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the complex meanings of “experience” in curriculum inquiry from the perspectives of poststructuralist theories. The turn to “experience” has challenged empiricism-oriented qualitative research and has opened new approaches to curriculum inquiry, including phenomenological research, narrative inquiry, and critical ethnographic studies. Narrating educational and cultural experience is a salient methodological practice in qualitative research. Qualitative researchers use diverse data collection methods (e.g., interviews, observation, and reflection journals) to grasp participants’ cultural “experience.” When teaching research methodology courses, however, I have noticed that student experience is usually normalized using identity categories of race/ethnicity, gender, or class. Cultural experience is essentialized by stating: *As a White, middle-class, female that grew up in a rural area, I experience...* These identity categories become the signifier to describe and to understand self, other, and the culture, as informed by their “collective” identity categories. Yet I argue that identity is never the combination of several identity categories of gender, race, class, ability, etc (Butler, 1999; Miller 2005). Addressing educational experience from normalized ways blocks possibilities to challenge pre-given meanings of experience.

In this paper, I critically review multiple meanings of experience to imagine and generate different modes of qualitative research. The investigation of “experience” will provide a theoretical foundation to rethink conventional curriculum inquiry, and thus to imagine multiple methodological approaches for qualitative research. Most notably, I explore how to rethink any normalized meaning of “experience” stemming from multiple theoretical frameworks—namely, phenomenology, narrative inquiry, and critical ethnographic studies. This examination serves as a launching pad to debunk a humanistic meaning of experience, drawing instead from a poststructuralist understanding of experience. Additionally, I review exemplary studies in which qualitative researchers applied major poststructuralist ideas into their research.

Finally, I consider the contribution of poststructuralist theories in the rethinking experience for the advancement of qualitative research.

## II. Thinking Theoretically and Theoretically Thinking

This paper is theoretically grounded in Jackson and Mazzei's (2012) call for "creating a language and way of thinking methodologically and philosophically together" (p. vii, emphasis in original). In their book, *Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research: Viewing Data Across Multiple Perspectives*, Jackson and Mazzei (2012) introduced the ways in which various philosophical concepts are utilized in practices of qualitative research. They challenged interpretivism mechanics in conventional qualitative research in which *reliable* and *valid* methods should encompass coding data, categorizing emerging themes, validating data through triangulation, and deciding the "best" quotes to represent each emerging theme. To challenge this instrumental approach to qualitative research, the authors presented different views of poststructuralist theorists as a means of rethinking data analysis and representation. The theorists' philosophical concepts became the frameworks for reviewing and rethinking qualitative data, as well as their representation. Jackson and Mazzei (2012) articulated six poststructuralist theorists' philosophical concepts in order to analyze the same interview data collected from first-generation academic women. The six philosophical concepts are Derrida's deconstruction, Spivak's marginality, Foucault's power/knowledge, Butler's performativity, Deleuze's desire, and Barad's intra-action.

Qualitative research methodologists have adopted different approaches to social reality, memory, and experience by using various theories and practices. I value Jackson and Mazzei's (2012) approach in educational research to analyze and represent the same interview data differently as informed by multiple theoretical

perspectives. I have found a similar crucial effort to review the same qualitative research data from diverse perspectives across disciplines. For example, in her book, *A Thrice-Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism & Ethnographic Responsibility*, Wolf (1992) developed three different versions of text in representing her anthropological research in Taiwan: a non-fiction fiction text, ethnographic field notes, and traditional academic writing. Wolf explored the possibility of applying different modes of inquiry framed by feminism, ethnographic studies, and postmodernism. Wolf's innovative methodological practices extend the scope of qualitative research when a researcher reflects on theories mindfully in order to imagine new research methodologies for social transformation.

Drawing from the aforementioned major scholarship in qualitative research, I aim to participate in the leading-edge discourse in the field by focusing on thinking theoretically and theoretically thinking. Poststructuralist theorists interrupt the conventional norms in research where meanings, social realities, and symbols exist 'out there' to be discovered, and where researchers approximate realities through language, research, and writing. Poststructural theorizing in qualitative research refers to situating the subject's life experiences and narratives within the socio-cultural, political, and economic milieu of space and time (Lather, 2007; Miller, 2005). Major concepts related to poststructuralist theories include language and discourse, power-knowledge, representation, reality, and memory.

Notably, poststructuralist theories emphasize the multiple and discursively constructed realities that are constantly produced in a particular setting, for a particular audience, and in a particular place (Britzman, 1995; Chase, 2005). The multiplicity of realities is "representative of normative and historically specific social constructs" of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, or the identity category of subjects (Miller, 2005, p. 51). By disturbing pre-determined reality, poststructuralist theories attempt to transition from linear illustrations of experiences, to the multiplicity of realities composed of the interpretations of those experiences. Poststructuralists challenge the singularity of reality in order to open

up the possibilities for multiple, complicating, and “abnormal” identities. Qualitative researchers cannot capture the truth or represent social reality accurately, as realities are not “out there waiting to be captured by language” (Britzman, 1995, p. 232). Nor can artists, philosophers, and researchers represent what exists out there objectively (Greene, 1994). The task of representing realities is always a “failure” due to the limited capacity of language or other media. Similar to the impossible task of representing reality, poststructuralists rethink the conventional understandings of memories and challenge the notion of memory in which an individual simply retrieves “facts” from his or her memory “storage.” Smith and Watson (2010) postulated that remembering is meaning-making by “a reinterpretation of the past in the present” (p. 22). The emphasis on the interpretation of memory challenges the conventional notion of memory in qualitative research that the fully conscious self is able to recover past memories from a memory bank. Rather, memory is always contextual and what the subject remembers is not isolated fact, but situated associations with a specific time and place. The political aspect of memory is also important because what is remembered and valued in memory is not neutral but political. Overall, remembering is an activity situated in cultural politics and collective activity, and memory is the subjects’ relationship to their own “ever-moving pasts” (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 30).

Among the multiple concepts addressed in poststructuralist theories, I focus on the notion of experience in this paper. Due to their epistemological grounding, qualitative researchers have attempted to explore and represent multiple versions of “experience” to promote equity in education and social transformation. I examine the meanings of experience as a launching pad in order to imagine different ontological and methodological strategies in qualitative research.

### III. Multiple Meanings of Experience

What does experience mean? Is it possible to conceptualize the definite meaning of experience for qualitative research? The etymology of the word “experience” is from the Latin *experitus*, i.e., *ex-* “out of” and *peritus* “tested” or “to lead” (Online Etymology Dictionary <http://www.etymonline.com/>). In addition to this literal definition of experience from an empirical perspective, I review the most widely implemented theoretical frameworks in curriculum inquiry influenced by phenomenology, narrative inquiry, and critical ethnographic studies.

#### 1. The Phenomenological Research Tradition

In phenomenological research, the notions of lived experience, reflection, and being-in-the-world are crucial in understanding human existence and educational phenomena. Phenomenological research focuses on the ways in which lived experience receives meanings through interpretation and on the search for meaning. According to Creswell (2007), the purpose of phenomenological study is to reduce individual experience within a phenomenon. Crucial components of phenomenological research include the descriptions of what and how an individual experience exists. Informed by Husserlian phenomenology, Creswell (2007) highlighted a process of *epoché*, which is a process to suspend all judgment or bias for discovering the essence of existence. This “bracketing” process of a researcher’s personal experience is an important procedure to concentrate on the participants’ core experience without bias generated from their experience (Creswell, 2007).

van Manen’s (1990) phenomenology is another salient approach for describing and analyzing meanings of lived experience. Heideggerian hermeneutics influenced van Manen’s (1990) conceptualization of considering lived experience as “text” for interpretation. The recovery of Being, *Dasein*, is possible by interpreting experience situated within the world (i.e., being-in-the-world). A human

being's freedom and choice become the center of this meaning-making process. Phenomenology is the study of lived experience and meanings of such experience within a historical context. Curriculum inquiry from phenomenology works on depicting and interpreting "meanings in the ways that they emerge and are shaped by consciousness" (van Manen & Adams, 2010, p. 644). Curriculum researchers influenced by phenomenological traditions are interested in the descriptions of students' and teachers' educational experiences and their interpretation. Creswell (2007) pointed out that phenomenological research provides a comprehensive understanding of an individual's lived experience within social/educational phenomena.

In curriculum inquiry, the *currere* method, informed by phenomenology and psychoanalysis, has contributed to exploring students' and teachers' educational experiences (Pinar, 1976). Participants follow four autobiographical moments or steps comprised of regressive, progressive, analytical, and synthetical moments. The participants tentatively remember their past experience, envision their future, analyze the self in order to expand their exploration of the past and the future, and then finally return to their synthetical moment. In his second edition of *What is Curriculum Theory?* Pinar (2012) articulated the procedures and purpose of the *currere* method:

Enlarging the pool of memory, focusing on fantasies of the future, both understood in the contexts of history and present circumstances, mobilized for conduct not only in the classroom, the four concepts point to the temporal structure of the autobiographical—that is, self-situated—study of educational experience. Indeed, they characterize the temporal structural of educational experience... Put another way, the method of *currere* seeks to understand the contribution academic studies makes to one's understanding of one's life (and vice versa), and how both are imbricated in society, politics, and culture (p. 45).



The *currere* method is powerful in terms of connecting participants' lived experience and historical narratives with academic knowledge, situated within a social structure. For example, Jung (2015) demonstrated how *currere* enhances self-understanding by situating self within the social milieu, and thus reconstructs subjectivity.

This *currere* method is crucial in curriculum inquiry to investigate one's experience not only for self-understanding, but also for connecting subjectivity within a sociohistorical context informed by academic studies. Theoretically influenced by phenomenological "bracketing," as Pinar (2010) explained, "one's instantiation from past and future functions creates a subjective space of freedom in the present" (p. 178). By creating this space, the subject asks questions concerning temporal complexity in the present impacted by historical events. Despite the value of *currere* as curriculum inquiry, I challenge the autobiographical structures of the regressive, the progressive, the analytical, and the synthetic moments, although such a division of time is temporary (Moon, 2011a).

The four steps or moments mentioned above are not always sequential or instrumental. The *currere* method definitely resists the Cartesian understanding of autonomous and stable self/other. Yet I problematize the assumptions embedded in the *currere* method in which a conscious self can possibly retrieve existing memories and put efforts into "[e]nlarging the pool of memory" (Pinar, 2012, p. 45). Smith and Watson (2010) theorized that memory is how researchers "situate the present within the experimental history" rather than accessing a memory storage (p. 16). Memories are not waiting *out there* and do not invite a researcher to walk in and retrieve the memories by meditation and conscious effort for remembering (Britzman, 1995). I challenge a methodological assumption of *currere* that self-conscious effort extends the subject's memory pool and facilitates remembering the past as well as imagining the future. The phenomenological curriculum inquiry has provided a foundation for understanding "curriculum as a lived text" (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 446). However, I argue for developing a different approach to experience

in curriculum inquiry that moves beyond Husserlian *epoché* and bracketing—namely emphasizing the reductionism of experience and examining the historicity of lived experience.<sup>1)</sup>

## 2. Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is another major mode of inquiry where experience is at the center of research. Although multiple theories have been proposed, Clandinin and Connelly's (2004) version of narrative inquiry has been one of the most widely applied approaches in the field. Grounded in Deweyan pragmatism, they conceptualize narrative inquiry as reconstruction of a person's experience in relation to both the other and to a social milieu. Narrative inquiry is a means for understanding experience on both the personal and social levels. Storytelling of an individual's experience in a society with other people becomes crucial in narrative inquiry. In addition, the continuity of experience is critical in narrative inquiry, as experience should be understood historically and chronologically in ever-expanding social contexts.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) conceptualized narrative inquiry grounded in Deweyan pragmatism of connecting education and personal experience. Deweyan pedagogy of *learning-by-doing* focuses on students' intellectual growth for further experience (1938/1997). The emphasis on "educative" experience is differentiated from traditional education in which the learning process may be boring, limited, and

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1) According to Pinar et al. (1995), David Jardine (1992) and Ted Aoki (1993) interweave curriculum, experience, and phenomenology in a much more complex way than reaching at the essence of experience. Aoki, for example, emphasized intersubjectivity in the conceptualization of reality—one that does not exist "out there" as it is, but is instead negotiated intersubjectively. Pinar et al. (1995) analyzed the theoretical complexity of Jardine and Aoki by living on the "edge of phenomenology, in the margin of poststructuralism" (p. 448). Major differences between phenomenological understanding of experience and that of poststructuralist theories will be elaborated in the section IV.

uninspiring. Progressive education challenges the defective character of traditional education that defines learning as acquiring isolated skills and drills without learning through personal experience. According to Dewey (1938/1997), experience becomes educative as long as it affects “fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experience” (p. 28). He highlighted the notion of *educative* experience because the progressive education movement in the 1920s did not pay much attention to the quality of experience for students’ intellectual growth. Progressive education follows the principles of growth and continuity, and is not “a matter of improvisation” (p. 28). Furthermore, social interactions among individuals are crucial factors in the creation of educative experience. Dewey’s philosophy of experience, therefore, underscores the positive direction of experience in selecting and organizing proper educational methods and resources to advance students’ growth for later experience through educative experiences.

Clandinin and Connelly (2004) claimed that Dewey’s theory of experience allows researchers to inquire into educational experience for a better understanding. Examining educational experience within a society provides an important framework for narrative inquiry. Subscribing to Dewey’s philosophy on experience, Clandinin and Connelly suggested describing an individual’s educational experience by locating it within a society from the past to the future. A chronological understanding of experience is important in Clandinin and Connelly’s version of narrative inquiry. The purpose of narrative inquiry is to analyze past educational experience to inform positive directions for future experience. Applying this logic, Creswell (2007) conceptualized the process of narrative inquiry by gathering data from a small number of individuals’ lived experiences, describing their experiences and chronologically arranging the meanings of experiences. An individual’s experience is essential data for narrative inquiry, and narrative researchers rewrite stories within a chronological sequence of past, present, and future experience.

Clandinin and Connelly’s (2004) version of narrative inquiry is similar to phenomenological research in terms of its emphasis on experience and its

interpretation within the historical context. As a method, description of experience is the starting point for narrative research in order to represent an individual's "lived and told stories" (Creswell, 2007, p. 70). Clandinin and Connelly (2004) highlight multiple narrative formats of data and research representation, such as storytelling, journal keeping, poetry, and performance. Overall, researchers in narrative inquiry interpret experience and represent experience with multiple media for social progress.

### **3. Critical Ethnographic Studies**

Similar to phenomenological research and narrative inquiry, critical ethnographic studies are also interested in the critical description and interpretation of experience. A major difference between these modes of inquiry originates from a strong emphasis on the structural understanding of social inequity in critical ethnographic studies. Phenomenological research, of course, does not underestimate the structure in which individuals are situated. However, critical ethnographic studies, influenced by Neo-Marxist schools of thought, highlight the structural social inequity that preexists in an individual's choice and freedom. The description or interpretation of experience is the investigation of "unheard" voices due to a hegemonic structure in a society. The inquiry centers on how to make voices heard and how to reveal "collective" experience of the oppressed (Ladson-Billings, 2001).

In his book chapter entitled "Ethnographic Inquiry: Understanding Culture and Experience," Janesick (1991) defined ethnography as describing and explaining a particular culture in a specific time and space. Relying on Spradley (1979), Janesick (1991) defined culture as "the acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and generate social behavior" (p. 101). A cultural awareness through discovering the pattern of collective "experience" is a key point of ethnographic research. Most notably, critical ethnographic studies aim to reveal untold "experience" from socially marginalized groups. A challenge of Eurocentric, patriarchal, and

middle-class practice is to include “Other” groups’ experience in curriculum inquiry and educational practices (Banks, 2013).

Critical ethnographic studies posit that common core “experience” exists among people who supposedly have the same cultural backgrounds. Collective, shared experience is considered an important and necessary signifier to fight against current curriculum practices perpetuating Eurocentric and patriarchal ideologies. Proponents of critical race theory (CRT), most notably, have argued that racism is institutionalized in U.S. society, challenging Eurocentric points of view on the systems of knowledge. CRT analyzes collective experience as it appears in various permutations in a society as a political strategy for racial justice. This theoretical framework provides a lens to explicate the ways in which U.S. society has socially and institutionally created a sense of otherness among racial minority families and children who are outside of the dominant Eurocentric cultural paradigm (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Critical ethnographic studies grounded in CRT examine experiential knowledge of people of color drawing from a shared history as the Other. The “experience” of oppression provides an analytical standpoint for critical ethnographic studies. Although various forms of experience exist within the same cultural groups, collective and shared experiences of women, people of color, members of the working class, and other socially “marginalized” positions become inevitable to fight against educational inequity, let alone social inequity in general.

A discovery of collective, shared experience is possible and important in critical ethnographic studies. Political actions purport to include experiential knowledge of the marginalized group within that of the mainstream. “We-ness” of a cultural group and collective experience is used strategically for the proper recognition of cultural diversity (Gay, 2010). Consequently, critical ethnographic studies mainly focus on “discovering” cultural differences and increasing cultural awareness about the Other through conversation (Obidah & Teel, 2001). The discovery of the cultural essence of the “Other” group’s experience is a prerequisite to differentiate its collective identity from that of the mainstream cultural group. In U.S. schools, for

example, the very notion of “Other” situates Whites and U.S.–born people at the center against which “Others” are defined, such as students of color and immigrants. Women’s ways of knowing, core common traits of students of color, and shared experiences as members of the working class have become salient research issues (Moon, 2011a). Overall, a political use of collective experience for its recognition and inclusion (e.g., making voices heard) have become a major goal of critical ethnographic studies.

In the tradition of critical ethnographic studies, experience is explained via collective and predictable ways for political initiatives to fight against Eurocentric and patriarchal curriculum practices. Discovering shared, collective experience for political usage is the premise of critical ethnographic studies. Yet I question the “efficacy” of the examination of collective experience that assumes preexisting and unique cultural traits and experience among different groups. What happens to qualitative research when knowledge of different “experience” becomes essential to teaching diversity, even if no essential knowledge of different experience exists? Understanding experience from critical ethnographic studies produces a normalized version of experience, and thus generates stereotypes of cultural sameness/difference (Santoro, 2009). The understanding of a normalized version of experience and culture in teaching “Other” people’s children (e.g., “students of color” or “low–income students”) neglects the multiplicity of students’ experience and tends to essentialize difference by figuring out commonalities (Ellsworth & Miller, 2005). Stereotypical images of students are exacerbated when these categories are used to represent cultural experience as predetermined, fixed, and unchanging. These objections in relation to an essentialized version of experience and culture generate a necessity for thinking and doing curriculum inquiry “differently.” Rethinking ontological and epistemological foundations drawing from poststructuralist theories enriches conversations by interrogating complex meanings of experience for more equitable curriculum inquiry and practices.

## IV. Complicating “Experience” from Poststructuralist Theories<sup>2)</sup>

Poststructuralist theories are seminal theoretical frameworks to complicate the taken-for-granted meanings of experience. In her essay, *Experience*, Joan Scott (1992) discussed how to redefine experience beyond the evidence to prove what exactly happened in the past. Unlike the conventional definition of experience as a possessive entity (e.g., I “own” my experience), she revisited the historical, political, and discursive nature of experience. The present study draws from Scott’s theory of experience as a means to complicate the meanings of experiences. According to Scott (1992), experience is inseparable from power operation within a specific historical context. Experience is always politically interpreted and influenced by very specific historical, cultural, and social circumstances. Thus, a poststructuralist version of experience investigates the ways in which the experience is created through the interpretation of language, instead of assuming that experience is political-neutral and is chronically saved in a “memory storage” Non-linearity is another crucial concept for rethinking the humanistic understanding of experience. Poststructuralist thinkers challenge the notion that future experience is indeed the collection of present experience. Among the many concepts of poststructuralist theories, I concentrate on four salient aspects: (a) experience as discursively constructed, (b) experience as non-linear development, (c) experience as performative acts, and (d) experience as (im)possible representation.

### 1. Experience as Discursively Constructed

Phenomenological research, narrative inquiry, and critical ethnographic studies

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2) The Sections IV and V, with a major revision, appear in Moon’s (2011a) unpublished dissertation study.

in general emphasize the narration of research participants' lived experiences. The description of students' and teachers' experiences at school is the beginning of curriculum inquiry. Self-reflection plays a crucial role in retrieving an individual's experience bound with reality. Qualitative researchers collect unheard and unspoken stories via interviews or reflective journals (Moen, 2006; Ramsey, 2004). Poststructuralist theories, however, challenge any fixed notion of experience and argue that what counts as experience changes over time with a broader cultural transformation of collective history and memory (Smith & Watson, 2010). The unsuspected beliefs within the individual's reported experience, which exists as a "thing," are problematized in poststructuralist theories. In contrast, poststructuralist theories underscore experience as being discursively constructed and embodied through power/knowledge (Foucault, 1980).

Foucault (1976) conceptualized discourse not only as a linguistic component, but also as a particular set of rules that manifest people's ways of constructing realities and taking actions. Discourse controls who can speak, what can be thought, and in what circumstances "truths" can circulate. The power relations constitute the social body and the subject's experience is constructed by particular discourses. Put differently, legitimate experience is politically established not by the existing or stable truth, but by power operation within a given community. No neutral knowledge exists and experience becomes the effect of power/knowledge operations. Unlike a traditional understanding of the power of a *thing*, Foucault (1978) argued that power is *exercised* in multiple and unexpected directions (i.e., not always top-down), and is constructed by experience through particular discourses. A new form of power/knowledge is manipulated by disciplinary practices and the invisibility of visibility (a.k.a. *panopticism*) rather than by punishment (Foucault, 1977). The interpretation of experience is closely related to the *regime of truth*, where power/knowledge is explicated and interwoven with the subject's discursive formation (Scott, 2008). The analysis of a *truth game* is an inquiry of experience that is historically and discursively constituted. Curriculum inquiry is thus a project to revisit experience by



locating it within a specific historical moment and space. Lived experiences cannot be located within preexisting structures without considering the regime of truth and intersubjectivity.

Experience as a discursive construction rejects a passive reception of already-defined structured notions of experience that remain ignorant of sociocultural and discursive constructions of the subject and experience. Current predominant discourses on experience apply the binaries of self/other to explain cultural sameness/difference. Critical ethnographic studies, for example, highlight the oppressor/oppressed narratives with regard to emancipating those who are historically marginalized. Power is understood as showing authority through operating repression or compulsion by law and punishment. Foucault (1978) coined this facet as “sovereign” power, which a person or institution can acquire, hold, or share. If power is understood as an *entity* possessed by a certain person in a top-down manner, then experience is dichotomized by that of the oppressor/oppressed. Curriculum inquiry might be limited to uncovering the unheard, unspoken, and untold voices of the oppressed. The assumptions inherent to these binaries generate a normalized version of understanding self/other and do not explain complicated and discursively constructed notions of experience.

As such, as long as “discourses” construct the subject and experience, they are temporal, contextual, and in-process within the socio-political, cultural, and historical context and moment (Jabal & Riviere, 2007). Experience can never be singular because experience itself is discursively constructed by sociopolitical, cultural, and economic influences. Scott (1992) elaborated the multiplicity of experience by affirming that experience is discursive and political not only by nature, but also in its construction process. A single truth is not possible when explicating the complexity of the subject’s experience. Experience is always discursively constructed and interpreted in a particular setting, for a particular audience, and in a particular place (Chase, 2005; Miller, 2005).

*Exemplary Research*: Baker and Heyning (2004) edited a book *Dangerous*

*Coagulations?: The Uses of Foucault in the Study of Education* and deliberately offered multiple aspects of Foucault and introduces the ways in which educators work through Foucault in research. Among the multiple chapters, Weems (2004) particularly explored the discourses about experience in “professionalism.” She genealogically historicized the discursively constructed meaning of professionalism operated by racialized, gendered, sexualized text. Weems drew documentary evidence in examining the creation and circulation of professional subjectivity. She challenged the normalized meaning of family, race, and nation, and investigated the discursive construction of teacher professionalism and education. Similarly, Walkerdine (2001) reviewed the notions of childhood in which go beyond discussions of the developmental psychology of a child. She looked at the ways in which a child’s particular behavior is normalized in public space and how children become the “objects of pathologization of discourses” (p. 16). For example, Walkerdine called into question the naturalized understanding of (sexual) violence towards women/girls by normalizing the message of “boys are naughty and playful” (p. 16). By applying Foucauldian ideas of discourse and the regime of truth, Walkerdine challenged educators’ taken-for-grantedness about children’s experience and educators’ normalized approach to children concerning safety, violence, and anxiety.

## **2. Experience as non-linear development**

In narrative inquiry, a pragmatic ontology of experience emphasizes its continuity. In other words, each point in the past, present, and future has a past experiential base that leads to an experiential future (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). Narrative inquiry, therefore, is an act within the stream of experience generating new relations that then become a part of future experience. Clandinin and Connelly’s emphasis on the past–present continuum seems to be similar to the poststructuralist rejection of linear development of time. However, the Deweyan idea of progressivism is still grounded in the present and future dichotomy, listing future experience as the

accumulation of past experiences. Poststructuralist theorists, especially Deleuze and Derrida, refer to the complexity of time that cannot be traced by linearity. According to Jagodzinski (2010), Deleuzian thought considers time as being constituted by heterogeneity and difference, not by homogeneity or linearity. The ontological search for “being” from phenomenology is shifted to the ontological creation of “becoming.” Experience, in the same logic, is a creation of heterogeneous singularities and becoming, not a fixed being throughout linear time. In addition to Deleuze’s elaboration, I explicate Derrida’s *différance* as a lens to challenge any linear and chronological concept of experience.

Derrida (1982) developed a provisional concept of *différance* to address the temporality and spatiality of meaning. In French, no written word like *différance* exists. When French language users listen to this term, they relate the pronunciation to the word *différence*. The graphic intervention that substitutes “a” for “e” in French remains exclusively graphic: It cannot be heard, although it can be read or written. Using this tentative concept, Derrida argued that meanings are always “deferred” and “different.” *Différance* does not belong to either speech or writing, yet it is located in an “unfamiliar” space between them. The word *différance* thus compensates for the loss of meaning by simultaneously referring to the formation of its meaning. The coherency between a signifier and a signified in written and spoken language is always deferred and different within this preliminary concept of *différance*. The authority of presence or origin is in doubt. Furthermore, the structure of delay (or deferring) complicates the meaning of living the present or preparing the future as an original or chronological development. The horizons of past, present, and future present “a ‘past’ that has never been present, and which never will be, whose future to come will never be a *production* or a reproduction in the form of presence” (Derrida, 1982, p. 21, emphasis in original). Derrida complicated the chronological concept of time, for example, present or the presence of the present, using this liminal concept of *différance*.

According to Derrida (1982), every meaning or reference is always different and

differed. The very meaning of “experience” is subject to being delayed, depending on the time and space in which both researchers and the researched discuss it. Derrida (1982) questioned what the conditions of the present are, as well as what it is to “think the present in its presence” (p. 21). Derrida challenged a linear development of time by articulating double strategies—namely, both *different* meanings and *deferral* of time. Similarly, qualitative researchers review experience through these dual strategies of *difference* of meaning and *differed* time. If the meaning of present or being present is differed and different, qualitative researchers must question the notions of “present” experience or preparing it supposedly for “future” experience. The meaning of experience is always different and differed depending on particular time and space. “Past” experience does not exist as residue of past lives. Similarly, future experience is not retrieved by the past experience stored somewhere in the memory box.

*Exemplary Research:* In her book, *Getting Lost*, Lather (2007) discussed both theoretical and methodological implications of *being lost* as a qualitative researcher. She theorized that getting lost entails “the necessary blind spots of understanding” knowledge and experience (p. vii). Particularly in Chapter 5 entitled “Applied Derrida,” Lather argued that Derrida’s deconstruction is an indispensable complicity in that deconstruction aims at “provoking fields into new moves and spaces where they hardly recognize themselves in becoming otherwise, the unforeseeable [sic] that they are already becoming” (p. 106). By revisiting her previous book, *Troubling the Angels*, Lather addressed researchers’ ethical and methodological responsibilities, recognizing such blind spots in research and demonstrating openness to unknown knowledge and possibilities. Lather’s narratives and experience in this book instigate qualitative researchers to rethink experience, which in its meaning is always differed and different.

### 3. Experience as performative acts

The ownership of individual experience is a crucial element in the aforementioned theoretical groundings. It is “me” who experiences a certain event as an active agent. It is “me” who voluntarily keeps memories about this experience. Poststructuralist theories question this ownership of experience. In her seminal work, *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler (1999) revisited the habitual categorization of gender as cultural and sex as biological. She argued that both sex and gender are constructed by discourses. In her gender performativity theory, Butler interrupted a binary approach to gender identity with the use of male/female. According to her, gender identity is the “stylized repetition of acts” by reiterating a set of social norms (Butler, 1999, p. 192). This articulation goes against the public assumption that gender is an expression of what one is or what one possesses. On the contrary, gender identity is a compulsive ritualized production that repeats a set of social norms which “precede and exceed the subject” (Butler, 2005, p. 17). Thus, the subject is constituted by “performative acts,” which are repetitively constructed, produced, and sustained by social norms: Specifically, there is no doer behind the deed. The cause and effect of the subject’s action shifts within this sentence: It is not “me” (i.e., doer) who voluntarily chooses what to experience; it is a set of social norms (i.e., deed) that constructs experience (Moon, 2011b).

Influenced by performativity theory, I challenge the conventional notion of identity and experience as the properties of individuals or the result of voluntary acts by choice. Because of the emphasis on a set of social norms [deed], the performative subject does not voluntarily choose costumes, acts, and behaviors with a will. In contrast, the performative subject needs to be understood as the resignification and reiteration of a norm (Butler, 1999). Experience becomes performative “effects” of discourses. Compulsive repetition of social norms is what enables the subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject and experience. This notion of the performative subject challenges a humanistic understanding of experience that assumes the possibility of “displaying” the essence of experience that an individual

possesses. Rather, a subject's performative acts are grounded in the framework that the subject and experience are the effects of discourse. The subject is not a voluntary agent who performs pre-discursive identity with a will. Experience as performative acts is interested in the ways in which the subject and experience are discursively and socially constructed through compulsive repetition of social norms.

A different idea of subject and action challenges the ownership and autonomy of experience. Inquiry based on poststructuralist theories examines a set of social norms that constructs the subject's experience. This type of investigation might be similar to narrative inquiry in that Clandinin and Connelly (2004) also are interested in examining the ways in which an individual's experience is constituted and enacted. Yet major differences exist when considering an individual's choice given the circumstances: According to Clandinin and Connelly, there is still a doer [individual] behind the deed [a set of social norms] in which underscoring an individual's performance and voluntary choice. However, experience is a discursive construction according to performativity theory; the subject does not possess experience before discourse (Butler, 1999). Experience does not exist pre-discursively; Experience is the effect of discursive practice that takes place in a specific time and space.

*Exemplary Research:* Miller (2005) theorized a poststructuralist version of autobiographical inquiry in her book *Sounds of Silence Breaking: Women, Autobiography, Curriculum*. Drawing from Butler's performativity theory and major poststructuralist theories, Miller challenged the normalized definitions of women, teacher, and researcher. In this book, qualitative researchers can observe how experience of "women"—which is a problematic term for Miller—is embodied through reiterating the sociocultural constructions of gender identity and a failure to follow the repetition of gender norms. Borrowing Butler's (1999) performativity theory, Nayak and Kehily (2006) similarly explored the ways in which the subjectivity was constructed via the subversion, regulation, and embodiment of gender norms. Ethnographic narratives in this study address the ways in which sexual jibes, stories, and name-calling construct a peer group relation and thus

creates heterosexual hierarchies at schools. Additionally, Renold (2006) analyzed how children's gendered worlds became a key space for reproducing compulsory heterosexual normativity, while conducting his one-year ethnographic fieldwork. He introduced salient narratives and experience that the heterosexual matrix regulates gender identity as a boy and a girl. Renold suggested that gender performativity and heterosexual hegemony are a significant theoretical framework in order to interrogate identity constructions and gender/sexual relations.

#### **4. Experience as (im)possible representation**

How to present and to represent experience is another major issue in poststructuralist theories. Telling stories does not always demonstrate the subject's experience. Nor does the use of multiple methods provide an accurate representation of truth and experience. This crisis is generated from the undecidability of language: Language itself cannot be a mirror of reality or experience. Language does not mean the transport of meaning (Derrida, 2005). I argue that a high reliance on storytelling in reporting experience is problematic in conventional qualitative research because experience is always partial and non-transparent.

Drawing from anthropology and cultural studies, Marcus and Fischer (1986) theorized a crisis of representation as a situation in which researchers are confronted with paradox and uncertainty when describing and interpreting experience. This contradiction generates the dilemmas of representing experience and realities through research. More specifically, researchers can never represent experience "accurately" due to the limitation of language and their incapacity to report an external reality (Lather, 2007; Miller, 2005). In the midst of representational crisis in the postmodern era, Greene (1994) asked the epistemological question "What happens when we can no longer trust in the mediation of language, when the best consciousness can do is grasp the appearances of things—telling us nothing of a representable realm beyond?" (p. 209)

In curriculum inquiry, several researchers have proposed alternative representations in order to answer Greene's (1994) question and to show "multiple venues in different forms" for presenting experience (Richardson, 2000, p. 929). Richardson (2000) applied innovation in writing experience by developing Creative Analytic Practices (CAP)—namely, autoethnography, fiction—stories, poetry, drama, polyvocal texts, reader's theater, responsive readings, aphorisms, comedy and satire, visual presentations, allegory, conversation, layered accounts, writing—stories, and mixed genres. She posited that researchers advance their understanding of their research topic and themselves by implementing creative analytic procedures and writing formats. According to her, qualitative researchers bring an alternative perspective to their research by raising one's consciousness as well as expanding interpretive skills. CAP is important to extend the ways in which researchers represent diverse interpretations of experience. In addition, CAP can report research processes and products via multiple modes of representing experience.

However, I argue that creative methodological inventions in terms of data representation do not guarantee that researchers approach reality more closely with multiple tools. The full representation of experience is never possible due to a crisis of representation in qualitative research. Obviously, diverse representations of visual art or performance, in some cases, help provide certain perspectives that writing cannot provide. Yet it is an epistemological illusion when qualitative researchers use a methodological innovation as a solution or alternative to report experience as it is. Multiple representations can never approximate external experience due to its discursive, incomplete, and non—linear construction. Multiple procedures of representation instead provide an opportunity to contemplate assumptions regarding self—other, experience, and their representations. Qualitative researchers utilize these methodological procedures to explore the sociopolitical, discursive, and economic context of experience. They also use such methodological process in order to revisit subject construction through the investigation of power operations. Qualitative researchers reexamine the complex meaning of experience by acknowledging the



impossibilities of representing “experience.” As mentioned earlier, multiplying analytic or interpretative tools of experience does not guarantee that researchers can get closer to the “authentic” experience than any conventional analytic procedure of writing. Nor does increasing consciousness and bringing a new perspective presumably lead to better data collection and analysis of lived experience. This recognition regarding the crisis of representation is crucial in qualitative research to minimize current research practices that perpetuate the myth of validating research methodology with multiple representations.

*Exemplary Research:* The book *Unflattening* by Sousanis (2015) challenged Western epistemology in which words prevail over images in academic writing, including dissertation research. As a professional cartoonist, Sousanis visualized his thinking concerning experience and social reality. The title, *Unflattening*, implies his resistance to current epistemological research practice which involves a “flattening” fluid experience and multiple realities in normative and linear fashion. Strople’s (2013) dissertation research experimented with representing identity and knowledge using alternative research representations. Strople is both a professional media artist and member of a faculty of education. He depicted both the process and the outcome of his autoethnographic research using both traditional text and multimedia representation. He autobiographically complicated his subjectivity in the world and visualized his thinking across text, images, and multimedia.

## V. Doing Qualitative Research “Poststructurally”

What is the value of doing qualitative research poststructurally? I articulate different meanings of experience as a means to challenge any normalized thinking to limit the possibility to rethink experience in qualitative research. In exploring methodological imagination, I discuss two specific aspects in conducting qualitative

research poststructurally: (a) interrogating discursive construction of the subject and experience and (b) rethinking and representing experience differently.

## 1. The subject and experience as discursive construction

Poststructuralist theories provide frames to explore the complexity of experience and identity that moves beyond discovering the core self and other. Methodologically, qualitative researchers investigate the complexity of experience constructed by a very specific interaction among subjects within a sociopolitical, economic, and historical context. If experience is limited to discovering the *essence* of racial/ethnic identity, qualitative researchers universalize experience by perpetuating a normalized and essentialized understanding of self and other. I argue for poststructuralist qualitative research as a frame to interrupt habitual understanding of experience by analyzing the nexus of power/knowledge, as well as subjectivity construction.

Conventionally, qualitative research pays attention to the question of “what” difference each cultural group “has” with the premise of pre-existing cultural sameness/difference. Identity politics emphasizes solidarity among “marginalized” group members for social transformation. This solidarity is founded upon supposedly shared experiences and collective memories. The direction of cultural awareness is limited to “discovering” a static version of experience and experience-related questions reveal “what” different experiences already exist. I do not underestimate the importance of overcoming social inequity that is prevalent in our society. Rather, I explicate diverse approaches to social justice through the different epistemology and ontology of qualitative research. Qualitative research guided by poststructuralist theories shifts researchers’ attention in relation to experience from “what” questions to “how” questions. In other words, a poststructuralist version of curriculum inquiry asks “how” experience is discursively constructed and explores the ways in which the notion of sameness/difference is economically, historically, and socio-politically

constructed. This approach to experience provides opportunities to rethink prevalent research on cultural identity. In this way, qualitative researchers interrupt their existing epistemology and ontology of experience that is traditionally informed by a static and collective version of it. Poststructuralist theories transition the inquiry to a level that complicates the meaning of experience, and such inquiry is connected to a critical exploration of what kinds of sets of social norms construct the subjectivity and experiences (Butler, 1999).

## 2. Rethinking and representing experience differently

Doing qualitative research “poststructurally” aims to dismantle a myth of *scientific knowledge* that emphasizes triangulation and transferability of research with the use of multiple representations of experience. In her book *Getting Lost*, Lather (2007) argued that “narrow translation of scientificity” or truth should be revisited for constructing something new that does not yet exist (p. 153). These challenges or *getting lost* are critical to contemplate the advancement of research by enhancing the public discourse about conducting “important” and “rigorous” research. Typically, what is deemed to be valid research or educative experience is often indicative of a theoretical framework (e.g., postpositivism) that aggressively seeks to invalidate other perspectives or ways of knowing. Epistemological violence in research occurs if the myth of scientific knowledge perpetuates the notion of experience as if it were fixed, stable, and seamless. An openness towards not-knowing and what is not yet known is a crucial implication of poststructuralist qualitative research.

Methodological imagination in poststructuralist inquiry aims to reduce any epistemological violence of normalizing experience, which ostracizes the subject who does not follow a set of social norms. Highlighting the need for cultural translation in the crisis of representation, Butler (1992) asked, “[W]hat possibilities of mobilization are produced on the basis of existing configurations of discourse and power?” (p. 13). She challenged current identity politics that presumes a

predetermined “individual” without considering actual interactions among the subjects. The emphasis on a collective “we-ness” perpetuates another hegemony to ostracize the subject who does not follow a predetermined identity. Persuaded by Butler, I argue that if the notion of “experience” is essentialized with the use of a humanistic assumption (e.g., autonomous, independent, fully conscious self), then there are limited chances to rethink a universalized meaning of experience for possible transformation. This critical reexamination of experience is a task to transform the concept (Stoller, 2009). Situated within the crisis of representation of self and other, qualitative researchers complicate discursive and non-discursive meanings of “experience” by investigating different symbolic and political representations within a sociopolitical, cultural, and economic context. The impossibility of representing experience thus opens up the possibility to (a) examine power/knowledge operations that discursively construct who I am and who they are, and (b) explore the political impact of representation within the specific context.

## VI. Final Remarks

Jackson and Mazzei (2012) postulated that the purpose of “thinking with theory” (p. vii) in qualitative research is to open up possibilities for creating new knowledge rather than simplifying knowledge. Poststructuralist theories have revisited existing predominant discourse on social reality, truth, knowledge, subjectivity, and experience by “questioning the naturalness of these categories” (Peters & Burbules, 2004, p. 100). Poststructuralist theories provide provisional “frameworks” in order to dismantle “comfortable” and stereotypical ways of understanding experience, social reality, knowledge, and research. Poststructural theorizing in qualitative research is valuable to provide various epistemological and methodological frames for research by transforming the concepts of experience. In this paper, I have challenged a

normative notion of experience and discussed various theories and practices in order to examine multiple meanings of “experience” in qualitative research. With this paper, I thus call into question the instrumental practices typically used in qualitative research, i.e., the “best” procedures to conduct research, such as underscoring “objective” coding procedures, minimizing subjectivity, and emphasizing interrater reliability and triangulation. The values and implications of poststructuralist theories exist in encouraging qualitative researchers to interrupt their taken-for-grantedness about self/other, experiences, and realities. Thinking theoretically and theoretically thinking in qualitative research, overall, are necessary, indispensable efforts not only to revisit the concepts of important knowledge in curriculum inquiry, but also to release methodological imagination in qualitative research.

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