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Full Length Research Paper

Working From the Periphery toward Full Participation: Identity Frames and Social Practices that Shape Women as Researchers

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This research examined two women who were working toward doctoral degrees in the field of literacy education, specifically their experiences with socialization into an educational research community of practice. Gee's Identity Theory (2000-2001) and Lave and Wenger's Legitimate Peripheral Participation (1991) provided a strong theoretical foundation for this study. Data were collected in the fall of 2008, and the dominant methodology focused around Seidman's (2006) three-round interviewing method as well as one focus group.
Findings reveal that the community of practice of educational research requires its members to become specific types of researchers, networkers, presenters at national conferences, and supporters to other members of the community, with specific mentor expectations helping to define these roles. Furthermore, the rules, roles, expectations, and values required to become a legitimate member created conflict and tension with women's other identities, especially between the traditional roles society expected and their nascent roles as researchers.

Keywords: women in leadership, gee's identity theory, legitimate peripheral participation

Introduction

American women have made significant gains over the past century in their struggle to obtain college degrees, especially in acquiring Ph.D.s. However, their progress and processes are gauged more on challenges they face while trying to fit into the traditional social structure of academia, and less on how women's multiple roles and identities intertwine and shape them as researchers. One way to understand the experiences of women in doctoral programs is to identify how their experiences have influenced their sense of who they are as they become researchers.

While it was projected that during the 2007-2008 academic year women would surpass men and obtain more doctoral degrees overall (United States Department of Education, 2007a), during the 2005-2006 academic year, women received 4,920 doctoral degrees in the field of education, and men received 2,664 (United States Department of Education, 2007b), making women the frontrunners in the discipline. However, Curtis (2005) revealed that there were still gaps in salary equity and academic rank, and reported that among full-time faculty at all types of institutions, women faculty earned about 80% of what men earned, and at doctoral universities, women are less than half as likely as men to be full professors.

A doctoral program requires students to develop the knowledge and skills needed to teach on a college level, conduct research in a particular field (Helland, 2002), and/or become administrators. Furthermore, the doctoral program is a student's quest for personal growth and development (Gammel, 2006). Wenger (1998) wrote, "[Learning] is not just an accumulation of skills and information, but a process of becoming" (p. 215). The doctoral process is not just about learning how to conduct research – it is learning how to become a researcher.

The literature regarding women in doctoral programs focuses on two areas: (a) reasons women enter doctoral programs, and (b) challenges that they face as they go through the doctoral process. Studies viewing women's experiences have been minimal, especially in the field of literacy education. Higgins (2007) used in-depth interviews with three women doctoral students to learn more about how socialization influenced their experiences in their doctoral programs and found that women needed more academic advisement, better professional and academic preparation, and a stronger sense of an academic community. Wang (2006) interviewed nine female doctoral students from a college of education, and found women's traditional roles as mother, wife, daughter, sister, or grandmother were all equally important to them, and women's traditional family identities were more intense and overlapping than their identities as teacher, facilitator, learner, or feminist. Wang (2006) also learned that participants believed that taking research courses and being involved in research projects earlier in their doctoral programs would have been beneficial to establish a solid theoretical foundation of educational research. Gammel (2006) interviewed 19 female students who were enrolled in a doctoral program in educational studies to unveil how they made sense of their experiences, how voice signaled the development of meaning-making, and how the communities of practice influenced that meaning-making. The majority of the participants spoke at length about the struggles and/or challenges they faced during their doctoral programs, and how their formation of new identities, as well as social, relational, and emotional experiences to which they were exposed, were crucial to their transformation into researchers. Bean, Readence, Barone, and Sylvester (2004) explored the sociocultural process of the doctoral experience to gain a perspective on the key elements of an effective mentoring relationship between an advisor and her doctoral student in a literacy doctoral program. These researchers learned that the advisor's approach to mentoring her doctoral student was very different from the traditional model of doctoral programs in that she viewed students as "active participants in their learning and their personal epistemologies as entirely relevant to that learning" (Bean et al., 2004, p. 378).

The purpose of this research study was threefold: (a) to examine how women who are obtaining doctoral degrees in the field of education with a focus on literacy describe their experiences and multiple identities; (b) how women see these experiences and identities contributing to their development as researchers; and (c) how the community of practice of academia has influenced their process of becoming researchers

Theoretical Frameworks

In this research study, I used Gee's (2000) identity theory and Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation as frameworks to support data analysis and interpretation.

Gee's Identity Theory

The term "identity" can take on a variety of meanings. A college student may be identified by a student number given to her when she sets foot on a college campus, or an American citizen may be identified by a social security number or even a fingerprint. Even though our identity is what makes us individuals, we do not have complete control over how we are identified. The communities into which we assimilate contribute to the formation of our identities.

Gee (2000) defines identity as "being recognized as a certain 'kind of person,' in a given context," and writes that, "all people have multiple identities connected not to their 'internal states' but to their performances in society" (p. 99). Our identities are certain expressions of who we are, and the way we speak and act differ in various situations depending upon the identity we wish to construct or reveal at the time. We enter a social situation as a certain self, and the community dynamic influences our transformation into another self. Because of this interaction and transformation, we become changed people. Consequently, we create new identities.

Gee's (2000) framework of identity consists of four components: nature, institutional, affinity, and discourse. Nature identity (N-Identity) is a "state one is in" (Richards, 2000, p. 100) and is comprised of elements over which one has no control (for example, the state of being a man, woman, or a person over 40 years of age). In my research study, I examined nature identity to understand how these factors influenced the participants' participation in their doctoral programs and recognition as legitimate educational researchers. In this study, the participants variously held nature identities as women, as well as other identities such as daughter and a person with attention deficit disorder.

Institutional identity (I-Identity) is one's status in society, which is determined by an authority (for example, the state of being a scholar, teacher, husband, or wife). In my study, the participants' institutional identities included their statuses as members of doctoral programs in the field of literacy education, as well as their current and previous roles as classroom teachers, college students, graduate assistants, professional developers (one who conducts workshops to promote professional development of others), wives, and adjunct professors.

Affinity identity (A-Identity) is one's participation in groups to which he or she chooses to belong because of a common interest (for example, being a member of a book club or a soccer player). Participants in this research study shared common interests as doctoral students, teachers, and research assistants.

Finally, discourse identity (D-Identity) is defined by the language used to describe certain characteristics of people (for example, a teacher may describe a student as being talkative, or a husband might describe his wife as being organized). This perspective of discourse identity is pertinent as it ties all of the other identities together: our identities are often only clarified because someone recognized them. One of the participants in this study indicated that she was Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (nature identity). However, she could not call herself ADHD unless a doctor diagnosed her with that label. Furthermore, to place one of your identities in one of the four categories proposed by Gee does not limit one to just that one category. One cannot be ADHD (nature) unless issued a professional diagnosis (institutional). After a professional diagnosis, a person is called ADHD (discourse), and may become a member of an ADHD support group to learn more about the disability or how to cope with it (affinity). Gee (2000) indicates that the power of this perspective is recognition, and he writes, "If an attribute is not recognized as defining someone as a particular 'kind of person,' then, of course, it cannot serve as an identity of any sort"(p. 109).

Depending on the community in which we are interacting, we can interconnect all of our identities or hide certain aspects of our identities. The four components of identity are not separate but interrelated as "they are ways to focus our attention on different aspects of how identities are formed and sustained" (Gee, 2000, p. 101). Furthermore, identities form, change, and interchange as we socialize with others including friends, family, colleagues, and any groups with which we choose to belong.

Gee's (2000) theoretical framework on the concept of identity is a significant tool for research in education, and he expresses the need to study how people build their identities through their interactions with others. The masks that we hide behind, or the faces that we reveal, define who we are in certain circumstances, and these identities cause us to make certain choices depending on the impressions that we wish to make. Thus, multiple identities (who and what we are) can be determined in the interactions that are encountered on a daily basis (Moore, 2006), how we react to them, and what we choose to reveal because of them.

Legitimate Peripheral Participation

Legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) is a theoretical framework that defines learning as being situated in social circumstances rather than in one's mind. It characterizes the relationship between learning and the social situations where the learning occurs, and it promotes the importance of learners participating in a community of practice where participants have common interests and understandings (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Within this community are members who are deemed "old timers." Old timers are considered full participants of the community and are called such because of their contributions and actions within the community of practice. Old timers are the gatekeepers or guards who make careful decisions about who to let in to the "gated" community. If newcomers, those who are standing on or outside the periphery of the community of practice, get past the guard/old timers, they are encouraged to fully participate in the sociocultural practices of the community. In my research study, professors and other influential members within the schools of education at the participants' universities were considered old timers. The ways in which these professors recruit, advise, and mentor doctoral students as well as how, on whom, and why they conduct research studies, determine whether or not a doctoral student is accepted into the community of practice of educational researchers. In my research study, women doctoral students were characterized as newcomers. It is through their actions and interactions with old timers that newcomers may or may not move from the periphery toward full participation in the community of practice of educational researchers. Once newcomers move forward, they are able to take full advantage of the social practices and activities that the community has to offer. In the case of women pursuing doctoral degrees in the field of literacy education, their choice to change their identities from classroom teachers to researchers is recognized by other members of the community of practice when they share a common interest, build relationships with other members of the community, engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other when needed, and share experiences, stories, tools, and/or ways of addressing issues or problems (Wenger, n.d.). Wenger (1998) wrote,

> Because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity. It is not just an accumulation of skills and information, but a process of becoming – to become a certain person or, conversely, to avoid becoming a certain person. (p. 215)

Learning involves the development of identities within a community of practice, and a person's identities transform and change as a result of participation in a community of practice.

LPP provides a lens to understand an individual's attempt to be accepted into a practice and culture. Lave and Wenger (1991) recognized the correlation between entering a community of practice and formulating a new identity, which is constructed through interactions with other members of the community of practice. This framework complements Gee's (2000-2001) identity theory, as Gee stresses the need for educational researchers to explore how people build their identities through interactions with others. In the case of women doctoral students, women gain the knowledge and skills that they need to become researchers when they become legitimized through their participation in the sociocultural practice of an academic community.

These theoretical frameworks were used to answer the following research question: What are women doctoral students' stated and observed experiences with socialization into an academic community of practice?

a. What are the processes, procedures and/or methods they experience as they construct new identities as researchers?
b. What specific struggles and conflicts do doctoral students face when attempting to enter the community of practice of educational researchers?
c. What reasons did the participants articulate for their struggles and conflicts?

Methodology

Participants

Two women who were working toward doctoral degrees in the field of literacy education participated in this study. Before entering the doctoral program at East University, Anna was an elementary classroom teacher and a reading consultant. At the time of this writing, Anna was working on her comprehensive exams and her dissertation proposal, and she was hoping to complete the dissertation by the following spring. Before entering the doctoral program at South University, Becky was a special education teacher for grades K-8. At the time of this writing, she had collected all of her data and was writing her dissertation. Both participants were friends because they were research assistants on a federally funded grant that had been awarded to Dr. Jeff Francis, Anna's academic advisor, and Dr. Daniel Jones, a member of Becky's dissertation committee.

Data Collection

To examine the work and words of my participants, I used a phenomenological research method employing interviews in accordance with Seidman's (2006) interview protocol, where each participant engaged in three, 60-90 minute interviews. Participants responded to questions by reflecting on and interpreting their experiences, both inside and outside of their doctoral programs. They each told their stories in a chronological style and outlined those identities and experiences that they believed were most pertinent to their development as researchers.

After completing all individual interviews, I conducted a focus group with both participants in December, 2008, when we all attended the National Reading Conference in Orlando, Florida. I also kept a journal where I recorded field notes and observations as I watched my participants present at the National Reading Conference, teach courses, and interact with their peers.

Data Analysis

Prior to collecting and analyzing the data, I created a preliminary list of codes that was used during the first round of data analysis. However, as data were read and analyzed, new codes were created, specifically related to the struggles and conflicts that participants experienced during their doctoral journey. After the data were collected and interviews transcribed, I created folders, or nodes, on NVivo 8, a data management software tool that organizes and stores data. This software allowed the coding process to run quickly and helped to better connect with the data so as to generate themes and patterns (Basit, 2003). The transcribed interviews were placed on NVivo 8, and reviewed line by line. I analyzed the data to determine how they answered my research questions and how it correlated with the theoretical frameworks of Gee and Lave and Wenger to compare participants' views, situations, actions, accounts, and experiences. By examining frequency (items that were identified because they were numerous), omissions (items that never appeared, even though the researcher suspected that they would), and declarations (items that sometimes were identified as present or significant by the participants who tell researchers that they exist), new themes emerged that were not considered during initial coding (LeCompte, 2000).

Once the data were coded, I used thematic networks (Attride-Stirling, 2001) to organize the data by mapping out three classes of themes: (1) basic themes; (2) organizing themes (categories of basic themes grouped together to summarize more abstract principles); and (3) global themes (super-ordinate themes that capture the principal findings in the study as a whole). Using thematic networks allowed me to not only look for frequency of occurrence, omission, and declaration, but also create patterns of "things that go together" (LeCompte, 2000, p. 150) in meaningful ways. Once thematic networks were created, I revisited the data not in a linear way (line by line in the raw data) but rather through the global, organizing and basic themes so as to bring together the data and the interpretation (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

Limitations

There were limitations to this research project. First, this study focused on one researcher's findings with a limited number of participants. However, a small sample size allowed for an in-depth look at the data to find underlying themes. Second, this study does not proclaim to be generalizable to all populations of women doctoral students. Instead, it contributes to the existing body of research on women's identities and experiences and how they influence a researcher's identity. Third, I have made the assumption that my participants were open and honest during the semi-structured interviews. However, the data collected was limited to the participants' own words, and I was not able to control for participant bias. Finally, because I used myself as an instrument by collecting the data, I understand that my researcher bias may factor into both the collection of data and the analysis of data. However, I did member checks with my participants by summarizing our conversations before each interview session and asked them if there was anything that they wished to add so as to ensure the accuracy of their stories (Creswell, 2007). I also utilize my peers to review my research before publication (Creswell, 2007; Freeman, deMarrais, Preissle, Roulston & St. Pierre, 2002). Despite these limitations, this research study was carefully planned out, systematically implemented, and thoroughly analyzed through multiple rounds of coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and thematic networks analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001) to unveil themes at different levels.

Findings

When Anna and Becky determined that they could not make a change in the curriculum within their small classroom communities because of administrative demands, they left the classroom to become researchers in an effort to make change happen to benefit the larger community of public education:

> Becky: I was getting really frustrated with the system, not so much the kids. If it wasn't for the administration and the parents I could've taught emotional behavioral disorder kids forever. But I just got really fed up because the system was setting them up to fail … I thought if I went on I could maybe influence policy or do research or something that would change that for those kids.

As newcomers to the community of practice of educational researchers, both Anna and Becky hoped that their future identities as researchers would provide them with the necessary tools and resources to engender change to the larger community of public education.

Although the reasons that these two women pursued Ph.D. degrees were consistent with findings in other studies, the women's transitions from classroom teachers to educational researchers was not only challenging but also created conflict and tension with their other identities. Both of the women in this study wished to become legitimate members of the community of practice of educational research. However, findings revealed that the community of practice of educational research had specific expectations in order to acquire membership.

A Legitimate Member is a Researcher

In this community of practice, research was valued much more than teaching. Each participant participated as a researcher in multiple research projects and both stated that their experiences with these research projects had helped them to understand the process of becoming a researcher. However, this active engagement in research studies had them questioning whether they could continue at their present pace if they obtained high-powered research positions:

> Anna: I have to stop and question all the time: why am I here? Do I really want to do this researcher thing? Do I have to sacrifice one identity for another? My husband doesn't have to make these kinds of decisions. I don't regret what I am doing and every decision that I have made I am o.k. with, but I see Lola [a friend and faculty member at a research institution] go from a crazed doctoral student to a crazed professor. I think, my God, can I continue at this pace? Do I really know what I am getting myself into?

Furthermore, assuming primary identities as researchers conflicted with these doctoral students. They both saw themselves first as teachers, then as researchers:

> Becky: Part of my problem as a researcher is when I am out in the schools I'm not very good at just objectively observing because I want to get involved with the kids. So I really have to draw a line … A lot of times the research gets so much focus that the teaching falls by the wayside. That's so counterintuitive because we are preparing students to be teachers. I know there are places out there where I can find a healthy balance between teaching and researching.

A legitimate member of the community of practice is no longer a practitioner but a researcher, which requires a very new way of thinking about education. Anna and Becky struggled with this because they both wanted the researcher identities that they hoped to one day assume to complement the teacher identities that they both valued.

A Full Member Significantly Contributes to the Field of Literacy

According to the old timers, contributing to the field of literacy meant publishing in top-tiered journals, presenting work at national conferences, and having others read and cite your research. However, from these participants' perspective, contributing to the field of literacy also meant working with teachers and students to implement technology into the classroom; they wanted to know why working with children or uncovering new ways to teach children was not significant. That, they believed, should also be recognized as a contribution to the field of literacy. However, their advisors appeared to value something different. Furthermore, one of the points of tension and conflict that each participant disclosed revealed that researching and publishing was time consuming; both participants indicated that they were not sure if they could "keep up the pace" of constantly researching and publishing.

A Legitimate Member Must Network With Other Educational Researchers

A legitimate member has to know and interact with other educational researchers by attending conferences and networking. Both participants indicated that their advisors required them to network for the primary purpose of getting their names known by others in the field of literacy, and that they would not acquire a job at a research institution or obtain the grant money that they would need when they became faculty members unless they networked with people in the field of literacy. However, both participants revealed that in the beginning of their doctoral program they, "Did not feel worthy enough to rub elbows with leaders in the field" because they believed they had not yet made any significant contributions to literacy. However, as Anna navigated her doctoral program, she gained more confidence:

> Anna: Personally, I'm great with kids. I love kids, but with adults it's not possible for me to be in situations where there are millions of people that I don't know. I will not walk up to a researcher who is prominent because I will feel stupid and feel like I have nothing to contribute. But now that I have been around for a while, and I'm writing and feeling confident, I feel I could probably walk up to them and introduce myself

> and not feel like I have nothing to contribute. They don't know everything I know about the internet, and I feel like I'm not dumb anymore. When I first started, it was awful.

Also, for Anna, attending national conferences meant that she had to leave her son behind. Her role as mother conflicted with her responsibilities as a community member, and when she made the decision to attend conferences, her father made her feel extremely guilty about her choice. He felt that she should be at home, raising her son, a traditional role of a woman.

A Legitimate Member May Need to Negotiate Other Identities for the Sake of Fitting in with the Community

Findings revealed that both participants had to negotiate, and sometimes even abandon, particular identities that were important to them. The rules, roles, and expectations of the community of practice often left Anna and Becky at a crossroads between what they really wanted to do in certain situations and what they were expected to do. For example, while at the National Reading Conference, going out to dinner with friends had to come second to having dinner with members of the research team. If Anna and Becky wanted to become educational researchers, they had to learn to navigate between their desires and the requirements of the community for the sake of moving forward. They also needed to make certain sacrifices and align themselves with certain people: people who would show them what it meant to be a full member.

A Legitimate Member has a Ph.D

Even though Anna's advisor introduced her as a promising young scholar and called her a researcher, she believed that she was not a full member of the community of practice of educational researchers because she had not attained a Ph.D. Both participants thought that because they had not completed their dissertation, they were still newcomers. In the case of obtaining a doctoral degree, an institution of higher education is the only community that can officially offer a student the title of Ph.D. Anna and Becky would not feel like researchers until someone officially called them that or the institution gave them that identity. Only then would they have the credentials to join the community of practice of educational researchers and be comfortable sharing their knowledge within it.

A Legitimate Member Becomes a Faculty Member at a Research Institution

Anna and Becky were expected to become faculty members at research institutions once they entered the field as academic professionals. Anna revealed that she would like to work at a prestigious institution like Harvard so that she could say that she was a Harvard professor. However, she realized that she would struggle with managing and balancing her other identities. Her advisor had had conversations with her about her plans after the doctoral program, and she told him that she would like to be at a place like Harvard, but she had not told him about her concerns about how to balance her life outside of academia. As of this time, Becky had accepted a position at a teaching institution for the fall perhaps in search of finding that "healthy balance between teaching and researching." However, during our interviews she struggled with what she wanted to do when she finished the doctoral program:

> Becky: I've pushed aside waterskiing, my workouts. Do I really want to do this for the rest of my life? I want to have kids and a family. I don't want to keep this pace. I'd like to be a place that has a healthy balance.

Both participants indicated that they would like to be in an institution where they could have a healthy balance among their identities, inside and outside of academia. However, the roles that they would have to play as faculty members were concerning for both participants.

Discussion

The community of practice of educational researchers trained Anna and Becky to become researchers. However, both Anna and Becky wanted to retain their identities as teachers, and that caused conflict when the community of practice said that they had to become someone else. They wanted to evolve so that their researcher identity would "supplement their teacher identity" rather than replace it. While both participants hoped to grow as educators, the community of practice hoped that they would transform into researchers and continue their work at a research institution.

A classical construct appears not only in what it means to do research, but also in the defined roles and identities of the academic researcher. This study revealed two women who initially entered the education profession to instill a love of literacy in children. When they were not allowed to make curricula changes that would meet the needs of the children that they taught, they left the classroom. They wanted to exploit the academy, in good ways, to make a bigger difference in children's lives, specifically to change educational policies for children with special needs and to promote technology in the curriculum. When they entered their doctoral programs, they realized that there were roles, rules, and expectations of the academy that they had not known, and wrestled with whether or not they really wanted to enter the community. As time went on, they were appreciative of the things they had learned, but wondered if the community of practice would accept them if they did not live up to the roles designated for potential members.

Previous research reveals that students pursuing Ph.D. degrees needed strong scholarly communities where research students can network, support, and receive encouragement from interactions with other researchers (Appel & Dahlgren, 2003; Austin, 2002; Engstrom, 1999; Ghosh &Wang, 2003; Heinrich, 2000; Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Johnsrud, 1995; Kluever, 1997;

Lazarus, Ritter & Ambrose, 2001; Lenz, 1997; McIlveen, George, Voss &Laguardia, 2006). What is significant is that even though both of these women learned what it meant to become legitimate members and participated in ways that researchers do research, there was still conflict. Much of this conflict came from not wanting to give up certain identities when taking on a new identity that was defined by the expectations of the community of practice. Both participants struggled to evolve and change who they were fundamentally and wanted to change in different ways than the community expected them to. While Lave and Wenger (1991) and Gee (2000-2001) argue that the community of practice defines its members, this research has revealed that the individual's traits and desires have a tremendous impact on membership and one's role within the community.

In the community of practice of educational researchers, members learn to assume the identity that the community expects. In the case of these two women, the doctoral process was not just about learning how to conduct research – it was learning how to become researchers. However, newcomers often have multiple goals and identities, many of which conflict with the researcher identity that they are trained to assume. Even though newcomers want to assume the identity of researcher, they may have to answer the following question: what do I give up if I want to change? When newcomers decide that they want to enter the community of practice of educational researchers, they must be prepared to change. As Gee (2000-2001) pointed out, we are comprised of multiple identities that interact and conflict with each other and influence how we enter a community of practice.

A doctoral student could accomplish all of the things required to become a member of the community of practice of educational researchers, but that does not make them a member if they have not assumed the identity. The community of practice of educational researchers, according to the old timers and newcomers presented in this study, requires its members to transform into a certain kind of researcher: they had to become faculty members at research institutions where they applied for major grants to study children as researchers not work with children as teachers; publish in top-tiered journals; network with others in the field of literacy; and present at national conferences. However, these participants wanted to become something different and this was where the struggles lie.

This research sheds new light on how doctoral students' identities can frustrate or flummox them, even preventing them from moving toward full participation in the community of practice of educational researchers. Entering a community of practice is not as easy as simply deciding to join, inserting yourself in, and then assuming a new identity. Individuals have multiple identities and often they are unwilling to abandon those identities that are important. If the community of practice expects newcomers to transform into different people at the expense of abandoning identities that are important to them, then there will be inevitable conflict.

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