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From the periphery: Experiencing being an academic newcomer

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From the periphery: Experiencing being an academic newcomer

Abstract

We humans share our life stories, as Bauer, McAdams and Pals (2008: 84) have suggested, 'to try to derive some sense of unity and purpose out of what may otherwise appear to be an incomprehensible array of life events and experiences'. Yet as Holtgraves and Kashima (2007: 91) have pointed out the sharing of stories is also an inherently communal event for what is shared and how it is expressed is also dependent upon the audience. The complex story I am sharing is centred on my experience of transition and change as a rural mid-life female and junior academic. I consider whether gender has been the most salient aspect of my identity in creating meaning within my story of transition and change. I explore how, for me, the performance of gender is intertwined with the performance of many other aspects of identity. I also describe how my relationships to, and in, place have influenced the story I share. The telling of my story was shaped with two audiences in mind. The first and more interactive audience occurred within the conference session. The second is an audience of academics interested in narrative theory and methodology who will silently read, and evaluate, my written story. Additional layers are inserted as I consider what must be left out of my narrative, as well as what I have chosen to include in order to portray the sense of unity, purpose and professionalism anticipated by an academic audience.

Keywords

Narrative, story, gender, place, nostalgia, solastalgia, communities of practice

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Learning objective: *Opening up for examination the paradoxes associated with entering into a peripheral position within established communities of practice.*

Introduction

In 2008–2009, after more than a decade working in various research-related roles at the University of New England and then completing a PhD, and a six-month stint working with a local government organization in Sydney, I took up a postdoctoral position with the University of Tasmania. This was a position that was to have lasted for three years, yet I resigned and left this position after just eleven months. This is my story about entering, and later exiting, a new academic community. It is a story combining a number of elements including hierarchy, gender, age, class, place, loss and grief. In the process of writing this story I have drawn on a range of literature on narrative, story, language and metaphor, gender, identity and academic careers.

A key goal in undertaking academic writing is to achieve publication and citation. This can tend to lead to writing practices which are exclusionary and unnecessarily complicated (Grey and Sinclair 2006). Writing differently as an academic, Grey and Sinclair (2006: 449) suggested, means paying attention to writing in ways that are ‘less exclusionary and more potentially influential’. For this reason I have chosen to intersperse discussion drawing on the academic literature with personal reflections written in italic text.

Why have I chosen to share this story? We humans choose to share our life stories with others, Bauer, McAdams and Pals (2008: 84) have suggested, ‘to try to derive some sense of unity and purpose out of what may otherwise appear to be an incomprehensible array of life events and experiences’. They further highlight the importance of factors beyond the self, the role of others in our stories. In addition, Gubrium and Holstein (1998: 173) have suggested that ‘occasions may “own” stories as much as people do’.

In sharing the story of my entry into and exit from a new academic community, I make a distinction between sharing my story within the ebb and flow of a conference conversation and this more formal written paper. In writing this paper I have been influenced by both King (2003) and Ingold’s (2007) discussions on the ways stories can be transformed, in more than form, when they are transcribed through machine-generated text.

Ingold (2007: 116) described storytelling as a form of wayfaring, ‘a movement of self-renewal or becoming rather than the transport of already constituted beings from one location to another’. Writing my story in machine-generated text as an academic paper has involved the transformation of a thread of meaning-making into an inscription, a series of fixed points which you, as the reader, will now navigate (Ingold 2007: 96). As Ingold (2007: 90) explained, unlike text, oral storytelling is an inherently dynamic performance:

To tell a story, then, is to *relate*, in narrative, the occurrences of the past, retracing a path through the world that others, recursively picking up the threads of past lives, can follow in the process of spinning out their own. But rather as in looping and knitting, the thread being spun now and the thread picked up from the past are both the same yarn. There is no point at which the story ends and life begins.

A prominent assumption in Western societies, described by Native American writer King (2003: 98) as an ‘ethnographic stumble’, is that in order for stories to be complete, whole, made permanent, they must be written down. As King (2003: 98) noted, it is not their recording in text that leads to the continuity of stories, but rather the process of telling and reading that will enable stories to continue. Storytelling thus implies a different conceptualisation of time, as suggested by Bergson (1911: 4):

our duration is not merely one instant replacing another; if it were, there would never be anything but the present - no prolonging of the past into the future and which swells as it advances. And as the past grows without ceasing, so also there is no limit to its preservation. Memory as we have tried to prove, is not a faculty of putting away recollections into a drawer, or of inscribing them in a register.

Rather than my story being a series of memories to file away, in order to achieve a sense of closure, storying my life as a postdoctoral fellow provides the opportunity for reflection on certain experiences. This occurs within an awareness that as humans our lives, our identities, are fixed neither over time nor between contexts but are diffuse, fluid, shifting, complex, situated and placed (Davis, Sumara and Luce-Kapler 2000: 181). The concept of duration, or *duree*, to use Bergson's (1911) term, recognises that the same person, or group, will not be the same at different moments and have a history that is lived, not merely thought and spoken. Such a shift beyond point-to-point linear time to *duree* was illustrated by Mangham (2005: 245) through a paper, published posthumously, in which he reflected on his lifework, noting: '[T]he meaning of the past is not something fixed and final but is something that is continually refigured and updated in the present'.

I also share my story within this paper on the understanding that '[I]t is the sorting that makes the times, not the times that make the sorting' (Latour 1993: 75-6). This implies that, for the reader, grasping the meaning of my story will be an emergent process. It will involve 'an *event* of understanding' (Johnson 1990: 175, italics in original).

Holtgraves and Kashima (2007: 91) pointed out that the sharing of stories is an inherently communal event, with what is shared and how it is expressed dependent upon the audience. My reflections on my experiences have been shaped by keeping in mind the audience with whom it is now being shared. But this is not a meaning which is fixed, for the process of creating meaning through these experiences may continue right up to the end of my life (Kenyon, Ruth and Mader 1999). It is also suggested by Gubrium and Holstein (1998: 173) that within contemporary society our personal stories can tend to be constrained through the impact of institutional agendas. I will expose, within the story I share here, aspects of the institutional agenda to which I was subject as a postdoctoral fellow. I will also explore intersecting issues related to gender, class, rurality and age within my postdoctoral experience.

In feminist theory the concept of intersectionality refers to the crosscutting nature of oppression in different identities. It is the social significance attached to different aspects of an individual or group's identity that come to divide and distort human relations (Agnew 2003). Intersectionality is important to my story because, as Spector-Mershal (2006: 68-9) suggested, multiple aspects of identity intersect in lifespan time across and between persons, and also within the individual.

Thus intersecting performances of place-based identity, gender, class, rurality, social and occupational status all play an important role within my story. These identity performances impacted not only on me as an individual but also on the ways relationships were performed between members of the academic workplace I entered. They also influenced the ways linkages were created and maintained between some members of the research team, politicians and bureaucrats in Tasmania. This relational web was encountered as exclusionary by this academic newcomer.

As a recent in-migrant from elsewhere in Australia to the island state of Tasmania I often found myself being referred to by long-term Tasmanians as a 'mainlander'. I found that being identified as Tasmanian was socially significant, not only within the wider community but also within everyday interactions in the academic workplace. Regional and local connections and other forms of social differentiation were also

significant markers of identity which would be drawn on even within professional interactions. This territoriality created a social distinction through which, as a recent in-migrant, I was simultaneously being differentiated from an 'us' (Tasmanians) and being homogenized as part of an 'other' (mainlander). It was only through playing around with this process of othering, for example through emphasising my rural background in interacting with older rural Tasmanians, that I could begin to position myself differently within my research role.

My story

What follows is my written story of the experience of being an academic newcomer, a story being told on this occasion for an academic audience with an interest in narrative methodologies. It will be notable not only for what it is I have chosen to tell about my experiences as an academic newcomer, but also for that about which I have chosen to remain silent. As Charmaz (2002: 303) noted it is not only our stories but also our silences which emerge within particular social contexts, meaning that both the present and absent elements are always 'historically, socially and culturally specific'.

We can tend to conform, in the ways we tell our stories, to the expectations we conceive or perceive of the audience with whom it is being shared. The process of peer review within an academic paper can accentuate this tendency, leading to stories which may become constrained by the preferred plot structures of formal systems (Gubrium and Holstein 1998: 171). I have tried to disrupt this tendency by incorporating strategies, such as the use of italics, to differentiate my story from reflections, which integrate the academic literature.

The office for my postdoctoral position was located in a bright new academic building perched on the edge of North-West Tasmania. The building was full of glass, with windows angled to take in a magnificent view across Bass Strait and along the coast to Rocky Cape. When I was offered the position I had been given the opportunity to visit Tasmania before I took it up to decide where to locate myself – Hobart, Launceston or Burnie. The alternatives were a dark and dingy office with no external windows in downtown Hobart well away from the main university campus at Sandy Bay; a shared office in a building in Launceston also well away from the local campus at Newnham; or this building in Burnie tucked in between the public and private hospital — and also located away from the local Cradle Coast campus.

There was really no competition between the three options for that view, and the apparently friendly welcome and hospitality I was given during my brief visit to Burnie won out. With each option being a location well away from the respective campus whatever choice I made, my location at UTAS involved being within a discipline-specific environment. This impeded my capacity to become a part of the broader multi-disciplinary university community, even though this was the academic environment I both had a preference for and was most experienced working within. This meant I was placed within an unfamiliar disciplinary environment with limited opportunities for boundary crossing.

My location as an academic, and disciplinary, newcomer on the periphery of Australia's island state away from the capital city draws into my story the key image schema of centre–periphery. The centre–periphery image schema comes out of our perceptual experience and is one of those basic, metaphorically extended, image schemata that

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structure our understanding and reasoning (Johnson 1990:124). This image schema is based on our experience of a perceptual centre, which radiates out from our body and ‘from which we see, hear, touch, taste and smell our world’ (Johnson 1990: 124).

In Australia, one way the centre–periphery image schema has often been used in the academy is for the centre to be defined as the metropolitan, from which the rural is measured as marginal, and therefore an Other. The peripherality of the rural has tended to be reinforced in the ways the academy privileges research, with power privileging the centre, and the centre conceived as metropolitan (Berg and Longhurst 2003: 356). In Tasmania this metropolitan centre is Hobart, the locality where the majority of the research team for the project on which I was employed were located.

The variation in the moods of the sea through the tea-room window in Burnie came to reflect my quest for a sense of belonging within the environment which I had entered. As an optimistic new arrival, in the expectation of a bright expansive future, I focused on the breathtaking beauty of Bass Strait on a sunny, still day. The expansive twinkling blue sea seemed to be offering endless possibilities.

This sense of expansiveness starkly contrasts with the pessimism and loneliness I experienced as the months went by and my disappointment grew within a job that failed to live up to expectations. In particular, I had come to Tasmania with an expectation for continuity — that this would be an opportunity to extend and expand upon my previous research work on rural ageing — but I found I was impeded from drawing these experiences into the project in any meaningful way. I was also dealing with the tensions of trying to meet work demands whilst concurrently having a profound sense of being out-of-place during the final days and eventual death of my mother in faraway Armidale, New South Wales.

During the stormy, dark days of despair I experienced leading up to and following the death of my mother, I felt marooned within a sea of strangers. Even though some of those strangers were kind, I still missed the familiar faces and places of my previous life. During this period Bass Strait came to represent an impenetrable watery barrier, for I felt trapped within a location where I didn't belong and was longing to escape. The weekends were the worst, the period when I felt most alone and lonely. I was on the periphery of the small island state and longing to be back on the more familiar territory of mainland Australia.

This was a period when I was experiencing not just grief but also a profound sense of nostalgia. Albrecht (2005: 42-3) discussed how we have lost a connection to an earlier definition of nostalgia, which was an acknowledged melancholia, pain or sickness caused by the inability to return home. This is the home that Tuan (1977: 138) suggested is the centre of felt value through intimate and nurturing experiences. We have tended to lose sight of this meaning for nostalgia in the early 21st century because of the power we have delegated to the medical professions to determine and define sickness. Our present-day understanding of nostalgia has also been caught up within the dominance of clock and calendar over temporal understandings of time. My experience of nostalgia as a sense of displacement is indicative of Johnson's (1990: 137) explanation that:

understanding is never merely a matter of holding beliefs, either consciously or unconsciously. More basically, one's understanding is one's way of being in, or having, a world. This is very much a matter of one's embodiment, that is, of perceptual mechanisms, patterns of discrimination, motor programs, and various bodily skills. And it is equally a matter of our embeddedness within culture, language, institutions, and historical traditions.

Later, and apparently paradoxically after I had tendered my resignation, those strangers and the environment which I had entered, began to feel less alien, and my engagement more nuanced. What led up to my resignation? Well that is what is at the core of my story.

When I had taken on the role of postdoctoral fellow I had done so because of my interest in the research topic. The focus on rural communities, ageing and community engagement had seemed to fit with my particular research interests and experiences. I believed I had been recruited because of my previous work in this area. When I actually began work and read the full research proposal I did so with a sinking feeling, for I had not expected to be working on a project in which was embedded so many assumptions which my previous work, and in particular my PhD thesis, had fundamentally challenged. I then set out upon an ill-fated quest: to try to generate some discussion within the research team on my reservations.

Not only our experiences but also where we are located within our culture — on multiple dimensions including position on the social or occupational hierarchy, gender, generation, sectoral connections, communities and place — all have an influence on the implicit assumptions we take into our work as researchers and practitioners. As Agnew (2003: 9) pointed out, the choices we make on what we do and how we do it depend on the preconceptions, assumptions and norms which are embedded within our representation and analysis of the problems, as well as in the language which we use to discuss them. As an example, it has been suggested that the midlife position of many researchers has had an important impact on the assumptions and values which are commonly used to frame research on ageing (Angus and Reeve 2006: 142; Calasanti 2005: 12).

I had argued within my PhD thesis that older people, and in particular older rural Australian men towards the bottom of the social gradient, had too readily been defined by the middle-aged, middle-class health and care professionals with whom they come into contact as somehow inherently deficient, rather than being understood as differently positioned within the world (Foskey 2007). As Yanow (2004: S19) has indicated, the knowledge gained through everyday practices and experience, and expert knowledge, involve entirely different sorts of knowledge practice, but experts can too easily disparage and denigrate the knowledge of others rather than acknowledging and valuing this difference.

It has been suggested that within practice communities a peripheral location, or position on the boundary, can be either a source of power or powerlessness; a position either affording, or preventing, 'articulation and interchange among communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991: 36). In the first few months it became apparent that as someone placed on the periphery in multiple dimensions (as an in-migrant to Tasmania, someone located in Burnie and not Hobart, and not a health professional) I could not

penetrate the strong ties that characterised the well-established community of practice centred on health and care services to which key members of the research team already belonged. Yet, as Granovetter (2005:44) has highlighted, such strong ties can become counterproductive where the goal is to develop responsive services. It is weak ties, rather than strong ties, that can generate the diversity of views necessary to enable interventions to focus on the needs of clients.

When I tried to shift my relationships and open up opportunities for dialogue with certain team members I found I was quickly drawn back into line. It was made clear that I was the junior researcher on the team and therefore expected to follow the research direction and process which had been determined prior to my arrival. There was no time, I was told by my immediate supervisor based in Hobart, for attention to theoretical discussions, as this was not a PhD but applied research. In my time in the position leading up to my resignation only one Hobart-based academic team member, not my immediate supervisor, took the time to genuinely understand the background and experience I had brought into the project in any depth and breadth.

It is ironic that one of the critiques made of gerontological research is that it has had a tendency to be data-rich but theory-poor. Powell and Hendricks (2009: 87) noted in a recent examination of the sociological construction of ageing: '[W]hile a significant amount of sophisticated data has been generated, there has been a dearth of theoretical discussion of the meaning and place of ageing within the structure of society'. From the peripheral position I occupied within the research team (even though paradoxically it was a role central to the interviewing of older rural Tasmanians) I faced structural impediments to generating a broader theoretical discussion on ageing within the research team.

Among academic women, and in particular for non-tenured women, feeling valued and being recognised within the academic workplace has been identified in research as a crucial component in career satisfaction and retention (August and Waltman 2004). In the research team meetings, and in discussions with my academic supervisors, I often felt I was being placated, rather than that I was heard. This was accentuated though the ways in which power was performed within the research team meetings.

Yanow (2004: S14) has described the peripheral position I occupied as a postdoctoral researcher located away from the state capital as 'bi-directional' on the centre-periphery axis. It was a position that was vertically peripheral in that I was positioned at the lowest level of the occupational hierarchy and spatially removed from the perceived centre of authority. It was a position which was horizontally peripheral as it involved moving outside organisational boundaries in interacting with the members of the local communities participating in the research — communities which were also geographically distant from the state capital.

I thus became what Yanow (2004: S15) has dubbed 'a bicultural translator', involved in translating the team's expectations for the research to the members of local participating communities, and their local knowledge and practices to the other members of the team. As Yanow (2004: S23) suggested, workers, such as myself, located on this double periphery can bear an emotional cost, as translation 'is not recognized as a contribution to the organization'. This process of translation from the periphery to the centre, Yanow (2004: S15) has pointed out, is very different to transcription as the meaning is not

fixed, and is not the same as transferring knowledge, with its implications of the objectification and commodification of information, but rather a way of moving ideas and experiences between very different knowledge forms. Another way of describing the difference in knowledge forms between the centre and periphery is, to use Ingold's (2007) distinction, between movement as way-finding (on the periphery in relation to local communities) in contrast to point-to-point travel (between the academic centre and periphery).

Yanow (2004: S17) has suggested that, regardless of organisational type, organisational theories about management practices drawing in and building on what peripheral workers know do not coincide with the empirical evidence. She suggested that this is because border-crossers, such as myself, through continually interacting across organisational, sectoral and disciplinary domains, are inherently transgressing the boundaries and polluting the category systems established by the organisational centre in a quest to maintain a sense of order and avoid chaos (Yanow 2004: S18).

Paradoxically, in that I had been employed on a project centred around the processes leading to the social disengagement of older people, I began my own process of disengagement from the project. This occurred as I came to a realisation of just how little capacity I had within a hierarchical organisational structure, as a junior team member from a different disciplinary and experiential background, to question the a priori assumptions that had been taken into the project. I found I could not perform as researcher in the subservient ways being required of me by some key team members. My major concern was the absence of any opportunity within the research for older rural people to have an active voice in relation to social engagement; rather, they risked being transformed, via the transcription of their interviews into text for analysis, into passive research subjects. This was ultimately research about, rather than with, older people.

My disengagement accompanied the realisation that in taking up this position I had entered into an academic environment which was classed, gendered and age-graded in particular ways. I was also being supervised by a male who could fall within Lave and Wenger's (1991: 112) description of 'didactic caretaker'. I found myself reflecting on how this experience linked with an article by Hughes (2004) I had read some months before in which she explored the negotiation of the 'pedagogies of the everyday' as experienced by a working-class woman in Britain entering a middle-class managerial career. I found I was being exposed to unfamiliar pedagogies of the everyday within the new academic environment I had entered, requiring a form of role performance in my relationships with the team hierarchy with which I was not comfortable. This new work environment came to represent, for me, one step too far away from my own classed, gendered and multi-disciplinary sense of self as an academic.

Reading the paper by Hughes (2004) had highlighted, for me, the illusory nature and theatricality of organisational behaviours as they are constantly shaped through discourses and disciplines. Hughes highlighted how, for the working class woman in her study, the capacity to 'pass' via the expected organisational performance of a middle-class identity would bring with it the capacity to become invisible in the situation (Hughes 2004: 542). Conversely a failure to adapt and perform identity in an acceptable way would leave the woman exposed to the risk of censure. In a similar way, when I

failed to adapt to the expected role performance of junior academic I found myself exposed to both tacit and explicit censure from some members of the research team.

In Hughes's (2004) study the subject, Sian's, performance of middle class-ness involved unlearning aspects of her working-class experience (for example the use of 'straight talking'), instead adopting appropriate public displays of feelings and emotions which were configured in terms of masculine and middle-class notions of detachment and objectivity. In a similar way I was being implicitly required to unlearn, and repress, aspects of my identity (including my own tendency towards straight talk) and experience in order to become accepted as a full participant within the academic environment I had entered.

In Western societies particular identities have tended to be classified on a 'superior–inferior hierarchy modeled on a mind-body dichotomy', with the dominating group defining its own worth through negatively valuing the Other and essentialising this as an essence or nature (Young 1993: 125). A logic of identity based around this dichotomising process then tends to essentialise the nature of groups, or alternatively attempts to overcome such a conception through a move in either the direction of assimilation or separation (Young 1993: 123). Ironically, the attempt by some team members to discipline me into compliance did not engender the desired result of acquiescence. Rather than adopting the required behaviours to pass into invisibility within this context, I found that my role performance as junior researcher came to have qualities akin to a rebellious, subversive and somewhat emotional adolescent as I rejected that option.

I had been trying desperately, and ineptly, to achieve a sense of meaning within my work but that attempt had been thwarted. I was also spending far too much time on my own contemplating what I had lost. What had I lost — a sense that my work could and would have some positive influence on the lives of people in rural communities, my mother through her death, familiar and caring faces of family and friends, and a familiar landscape within which to escape. Everything at this time felt strange, alien and devoid of meaning. Eventually, with three years looking more and more like a sentence to hard labour than an opportunity for personal and professional development, I chose to resign. Paradoxically it was this choice that then freed me to find my own way within this new environment.

Through resigning I had recognised and responded to the risk of depression arising out of a sense of social dislocation. There is evidence that where people experience some sense of loss, alienation or disconnection from a valued place, even anticipation of this occurring in the future, the consequences for health can be marked (Albrecht 2005: 45; Bott, Cantrill and Myers 2003: 108; Read 1996: 197-8). In a concept of particular relevance to research on rural ageing, solastalgia was coined by Albrecht (2005: 45) to refer to the pain of loss associated with place:

Solastalgia is not about looking back at some golden past, nor is it about seeking another place as 'home'. It is the 'lived experience' of the loss of the present as manifest in a feeling of dislocation; of being undermined by forces that destroy the potential for solace to be derived in the present.

It was such a sense of dislocation which led me back to a position on the periphery of an academic environment, an environment in which a quest to become a full participant had, for me, become unhealthy. Yet as Lave and Wenger (1991: 36-7) had noted, peripherality, or placement on the boundary of a community of practice, is not always negative; it can also be positive, providing ‘an opening, a way of gaining access to sources of understanding’. Whilst the boundaries of communities of practices are their point of contact with the rest of the world, these are boundaries that are constantly renegotiated, ‘defining much more fluid and textured forms of participation’ (Wenger 1998: 119).

It is interesting to reflect how when I resigned I felt, physically, as if a weight had been lifted even though, being an academic position, I remained working in the position for several more months. I felt I was now free to engage in my work with anticipation rather than a sense of dread. Resigning allowed me to begin to position myself differently in relation to other members of the research team. In doing so, my contributions to the research were acknowledged by members of the research team in a more productive way. I also reached out and began to form relationships at a different level both inside and outside the workplace. I gradually began to take a more positive view of Tasmania.

That is my story of my experiences of being on the periphery of an academic research team. My aim has been to communicate how, regardless of our backgrounds, our lives move within landscapes that are constantly changing, and therefore our places, our home, can never be a haven set apart from the world and ‘identity can never be a refuge’ (St Pierre 1997: 366). I experienced that adapting to a changing work and living environment was neither a predictable nor a lineal process. My story encompasses constructs that were identified by August and Waltman (2004: 190) as required to enrich research on career satisfaction among academic women including work/family balance, role clarity and conflict, and the impact of external trigger events on the response to work.

The conference: shifting from my story to a shared story

Writing this paper allowed me to position myself in a different way to the experience of being an academic newcomer. I have been able to confront and come to terms with what had become a sense of personal failure. I have been able to rediscover my resilient capacity. In turn, sharing my personal story, and weaving in references to the academic literature, allowed for a more relational creation of meaning in discussions with the audience at the Narrative Inquiry conference held at the University of New England in July 2009.

Responding to my story at the conference, one young health academic in the audience told me that I was being brave in being so open about my experiences. His response highlighted, for me, the structural impediments in bringing ourselves, including our vulnerabilities and weaknesses, into institutional narratives of academic life. The fact that an individual’s academic reputation is a prime criterion for career progression (Enders and Kaulisch 2006) can present a significant barrier to sharing our human qualities, and in particular our human frailties, with our colleagues.

Other members of the audience, in engaging with my story, shared their own stories about coming to feel at home, accepting and becoming accepted, within a new

environment. In reflecting on my presentation another audience member, a senior female academic, focused on the impact of loss and grief and gender within my story. Another audience member came up to me privately after my presentation to congratulate me on raising issues associated with the impact of exclusionary practices by established local networks on professional newcomers within Tasmania. My story had resonated with her experience within a different occupational setting.

The oral sharing of my personal story, linking in some relevant academic theory, created these opportunities for the emergence of a different sort of dialogue among peers. The weaving together of our stories of transitional experiences helped to create a shared sense of identity within a narrative community of practice. This sense of group membership contrasts with the plotting of connections between self-contained individuals, which can tend to characterise academic life.

Conclusion

I have now shared my story with you through this paper in order to highlight the importance of opening spaces within everyday academic life in which we are enabled to communicate our vulnerabilities, experiences of loss and/or grief, our concerns, and disappointments, without the risk of judgment and censure. I have also highlighted how, when this process is impeded, there is the risk of disengagement and withdrawal by a newcomer to an academic community of practice.

This paper is one example of the potential of narrative approaches to open spaces for the sharing of our stories of academic life in ways which can incorporate different aspects of identity. It is also an example of the potential of narrative approaches to encourage active listening across those structural boundaries that can otherwise tend to divide senior (or tenured) and junior (or non-tenured) academic staff. This paper suggests that narrative is one approach which could assist in disrupting the many unproductive silences, and silencings, based around factors such as gender, ethnicity, disability, socioeconomic position, disciplinary background, place connections, tenure status and seniority within the academic world. Narrative approaches have the potential to transform the underlying tensions that can become so destructive of relationships between colleagues within academia, into creative learning experiences.

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