

# Using metaphor and poetry to portray the process of becoming a researcher

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## **Abstract**

Roles are associated with behaviours, attitudes, skills, and knowledge that individuals in the specified role should display, and role acquisition is the process by which these expectations are encountered, learned, and enacted. The ecological theory of development provides insight into all factors that play a role in the growth and development of individuals. As the ecological model assesses external influences, it is used to investigate how previous work experience and family context contribute to the process of acquiring the role of a researcher. Using a lens of writing as inquiry, a qualitative narrative approach was used to explore one woman's journey towards becoming a researcher. Data was analyzed using a content analysis approach which involves coding statements based on their key concepts, clustering these coded concepts into themes, and delineating and refining these themes. The results highlight the complexity of a non-linear journey from the role of a practitioner to that of a researcher, and how family influenced this chosen path. One's role as a researcher is impacted by one's role as a practitioner and as a parent, and as a result, reflections on these conflicting roles and responsibilities are interwoven throughout the text. The process of becoming a researcher was described as difficult, but friendships with fellow academics helped ease this transition. Relationships with fellow academics can assist individuals in becoming acculturated in their new role, and provide opportunities for collaboration, and thus increase the likelihood that new faculty members will achieve successful tenure outcomes.

## **Introduction**

### *Role acquisition theory*

Roles are defined as socially expected behaviour patterns that are determined by a person's status in society (Warda, 1992). Roles also refer to clusters of meaningful activities that are expected of, and assumed by, individuals in various contexts of their lives (Warda). Roles contain both privileges and responsibilities, and the expectations associated with these roles influence how people behave (Crowe, VanLeit, Berghmans, & Mann, 1997). Roles are associated with behaviours, attitudes, skills, and knowledge that individuals in the specified role should display, and role acquisition is the process by which these expectations are encountered, learned, and enacted (Yellin, 1999).

When examining the research surrounding adult roles, Crowe et al., (1997) found that multiple roles in adulthood were related to overall life satisfaction and a decrease in social isolation. These multiple roles had an enhancing or protective effect on physical and emotional health, including reduced depression and enhanced self-esteem (Barnett & Hyde, 2001; Marks & MacDermid, 1996). However, role conflict can occur when one takes on two incompatible roles; this may include the role of a parent and an academic.

### *Ecological systems theory*

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory can be used to understand human development within the context of the system of relationships within a person's environment as this theory defines complex layers of the environment which have an effect on an individual's development. According to Bronfenbrenner, in order to study an individual's development we must look at the immediate environment (the microsystem – people and institutions with whom the individual interacts), as well as the interaction of the larger environment (mesosystems – interactions of people in the microsystems; exosystems – the broader community; and macrosystems – attitudes, ideologies, and values of the culture).

According to Bronfenbrenner (2005), to study an individual without understanding the context, is to not fully understand all of the factors that affect the individual. The ecological theory of development is beneficial in providing insight into all factors that play a role in the growth and development of an individual. As the ecological model assesses external influences, it provides a tool to investigate how one's family, community, and culture have contributed to an individual acquiring the role, or "becoming", a researcher.

### **Methodology**

#### *Using narratives to understand role acquisition*

Qualitative research provides rich information about a topic, recognizes the influence of context, and focuses on the meaning of the phenomena to participants (Wright & McKeever, 2000). Thus, a qualitative approach is ideally suited to exploring the journey of becoming a researcher. Narrative research has been described as the study of stories (Polkinghorne, 2007). Using a lens of writing as inquiry (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008), a qualitative narrative approach was used to explore one woman's journey towards becoming a researcher.

Case study research provides a detailed account and analysis of one or more cases, with a case being defined as a bounded system or clearly defined context (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). This case study examines the experiences of one woman who was in mid-career when she transitioned from the role of a practitioner to that of a researcher. The data for this study was derived from a content analysis of a first person narrative. Purposeful sampling was used as I wanted to investigate a specific phenomenon – the experience of becoming a researcher. Upon becoming familiar with the purpose of this study, my colleague agreed to write a narrative to share the story of her journey. This colleague, who I will call Norah, was in her early fifties and was employed as an assistant professor during the time of this study.

#### *Data analysis*

Norah's narrative was read several times before it was coded. Data was analyzed using a content analysis approach which involves coding statements based on their key concepts, clustering these coded concepts into themes, and delineating and refining these themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The coding scheme was created inductively as it was based on patterns and themes that emerged from the data (Patton, 2002). Data analysis was terminated when no new information emerged from the analyses, when all excerpts were classified, and the categories were saturated (Lincoln & Guba).

Research findings must yield results that are meaningful to the people for whom they were intended (LeCompte, 2000). As a result, a member check was used for construct validity and to establish the credibility of the data (Mertens, 2005). Respondent validation is useful as the participant may suggest a better way to express an issue or may wish to qualify points (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). To validate my portrayal of the data, my colleague was provided with a draft of this article and a meeting was held to provide her with the opportunity to give feedback on my representation of her narrative.

The journey to becoming a researcher is influenced by many factors, and as a result, in the text which follows I aspire to link the personal with the theoretical, the individual with the universal, and words with images in order to portray one woman's path to becoming an academic. The results which follow highlight the complexity of a non-linear journey from the role of a practitioner to that of a researcher and how family influenced this chosen path. As demonstrated in this study, one's role as a researcher is impacted by one's role as a practitioner and as a parent. As a result, reflections on these conflicting roles and responsibilities are interwoven throughout the text.

## **Results**

### *Paralleling the experience of becoming a knitter and a researcher*

Narratives of the self are highly personal as they are revealing texts in which the author tells stories about his or her lived experience. Dramatic recall, metaphor, poetry, and images can be used to allow the reader to "re-live" the events with the writer (Richardson, 1994). According to Richardson, "the essence of metaphor is the experiencing and understanding of one thing in terms of another" (p. 519). Through their use of comparison, metaphor allows individuals to learn about something, and as a result, Richardson promotes the use of metaphor in writing in the social sciences.

Norah decided to write a story of how she came to learn, enjoy, and become skilled as a knitter, and in doing so, she paralleled this experience with that of becoming a researcher. She employed this methodology as she felt that "fellow knitters would have the experiences to enable them to understand my journey and those without experience can understand my metaphor as I parallel my journey in research." Norah described her passion with knitting saying,

My interest began early in my childhood. I was fascinated by the process of knitting. In a family of eight children, my mother would spend her late summer and early fall knitting mitts and socks for all of us children... When I was about ten years old, I must have bugged her so much that she asked a neighbor to start to teach me... So I learned, the first attempts were pretty bad, but I was so determined that eventually I could knit a scarf without dropping or accidentally adding stitches to the needles. I continued to practice off and on throughout my childhood and adolescence. In my early 20's I became very proficient at knitting, graduating from simple hats and scarves to sweaters, mittens, socks, and fair-isle projects.

My colleague noted that the process of becoming a knitter was a gradual one. The same was true of her experience of becoming a researcher, except there was not the same initial admiration of research:

In my graduate studies I often felt that a research project was a means to an end; a hoop to jump through on your journey toward graduation. As a graduate student I was a child of the research. Much like my initial projects in knitting, I made lots of mistakes, started several proposals, but with the guidance of my supervisor (much like the teaching from my neighbor), I was able to successfully navigate my first research study. From the research I was also able to obtain my first peer reviewed publications, just like I was able to wear the first hat and the first scarves I produced.

Throughout Norah's journey she was able to devote variable amounts of time to knitting and research due to competing family and career demands. She reported that,

Once I got married and started having children, I found that I had little time to devote to knitting... I would parallel this to my experiences after finishing my PhD. I spent significant time establishing myself in my career. I worked toward the process of registering as a psychologist, becoming competent in my areas of practice. I was fortunate to work for organizations that allowed me access to current research, but my focus was truly on how the research could apply to practice and to improve my skills.

#### *Personal experiences influence career orientation*

Postmodernist writers claim that writing is always partial, local, and situational (Richardson, 1994). Just as it is important to consider context in writing, one must also remember that an individual's development is a product of a variety of critical dimensions including context, process, time, and the individual's personal attributes (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). In order to provide a better understanding of her process of becoming a researcher, Norah described how personal experiences influenced her career orientation.

I moved from a career in health to school psychology. It was at this point that my personal life and my work life intersected. The school board where I worked developed an autism team and required a psychologist to become a part of the team. Having had a sound personal foundation, I was invited to join the team... I began to develop competency to work with children diagnosed with autism across the spectrum on a professional basis.

Norah also described how her personal experiences impacted her research endeavors.

As my competencies increased and I became more comfortable with my understanding of autism, I began to notice patterns of behavior and difficulties that students with autism had in educational settings. I found that I was interested from both a personal and a professional basis. I felt

there were things that should be explored and ways developed to prevent difficulties for the students within schools.

*Family impacts research agenda*

According to Richardson (1994), poetry may better represent the speaker than the practice of quoting “snippets” in prose (p. 522). Richardson advocates for the use of poetry as a practical and powerful method for analyzing social worlds, with this in mind, Norah composed the following poem to portray how her role as a parent influenced her decision to become a researcher.

*My child is born, he is perfect.  
He is perfect, but as he grows I see him transform.  
My child is transformed and lives in a world of his own – autism.  
Autism has transformed the perfect child.  
My child is my teacher. I patiently learn what is best and how to care.  
Will others care? Will others protect? Will others understand?*

*My child lives in a world of his own, will others understand?  
My child lives in a world of his own where “the look” is meaningless.  
My child lives in a world of his own where tone of voice is meaningless.  
My child lives in a world of his own where his peers are hard for him to understand.  
My child lives in a world of his own. “Your world” and his experiences are not the same.  
The ever changing environments are difficult for him to understand.*

*My child attends school where he lives in a world of his own.  
Will his teachers understand him? Will his peers understand him?  
My child attends school in a community, will the community understand him?  
My child lives in a world of his own, will our world understand him?  
I love my child, I want understanding.  
How can I make this happen? How can you help?*

*School is a difficult place for my child.  
School is a place of confusion and fear.  
School is a necessary place, but it creates stress.  
School is a place that creates anxiety.  
Does anyone understand?  
How can I possibly help him?*

*His teacher tells me, “He’s tattling. Make him stop.”  
His teacher tells me, “He’s reached his potential.” He’s in Grade 3.  
His teacher tells me he does not fit in her class.  
In her class, all the students are expected to sit in their seats, raise their hands, and quietly do their work.  
His teacher tells me, “He needs to adapt. He needs to be quiet.” Even though it’s been explained that to sit quietly means he cannot learn, he cannot focus.*

*Finally he is finished with school. I am so happy on graduation day.*

*Little did I know how difficult the adult world would be for him.  
Little did I know how difficult it would be to help him navigate a world of adult services.  
My child, now a man, lives in a world of his own – autism.  
My child, now a man, lives in a world of his own where the community does not understand.*

#### *Family impacts career choices*

Bronfenbrenner (2005) encourages researchers to consider an individual's topography – the setting and how internal and external factors influence development. Being aware of the degree to which setting and family can influence development and decision making, Norah discussed how her family life impacted her career choices. She noted that, "When my youngest child aged out of daycare support my husband and I made a conscious decision to find employment that would allow us time to be with our children when they were not in school." Norah reported that both her children and her parents impacted her decision making, and described this experience saying,

I worked as a school psychologist until I made the transition to higher education and a tenure track position. Our child with a developmental disability was almost finished high school around the same time my mother-in-law was diagnosed with cancer-we really needed to seek positions where we would be closer to our family to lend support.

Later in the transcript she reported that,

I took the job at the university because it offered flexibility. My youngest child finished high school and had been attending programs at the autism society for the last two years. He does not work, but he does require support to attend programming.

#### *Nonlinear journey*

The research literature demonstrates that women often take a different or "nonlinear" pathway to academia (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Butterwick & Dawson, 2005; Halpern, 2008; Knights & Richards, 2003). This was the case with Norah as she described her journey as nonlinear and indicated that,

I never consciously made a decision to work in a post-secondary institution. While completing my PhD I sought information. I wanted to develop competencies that I felt were lacking in my Master's program, and further study was a means to obtain that knowledge. I started seeing patterns of behavior; feeling the need to look further to investigate and put pieces of the puzzle together is what caused me to look for an academic career.

My colleague recognized that her journey towards becoming a researcher was influenced by both her work experience and family context. She reported that,

I started my PhD after working in the school system as a guidance

counsellor responsible for the assessment of students with learning issues. My intent in starting a PhD was to better perform my job competencies... During my PhD my youngest child was diagnosed with a developmental disability and I actually switched my program from an internship-based program to a course-based program so I could make myself available to be involved in his rehabilitation program.

*Difficulties associated with becoming a researcher*

It is difficult to become a researcher as a high degree of knowledge and skill is required to enact this role. The difficulties associated with becoming a researcher were evident in Norah's narrative. She discussed her experience as a novice researcher saying,

As a novice with very little publishing experience I have lots of difficulty. Establishing myself as a researcher is extremely challenging. I don't regret working in applied practice; I firmly believe that this helps me teach. I have so many experiences to draw on in an attempt to get concepts and competencies across to my students. I can help them apply what they are learning. However, the 11 years that I worked in applied practice leaves me behind. I have to learn to catch up. I have to learn to use research and various strategies that have grown and developed in the 11 years I was not researching.

Norah relayed the difficulties she experienced moving from the role of a practitioner to that of a researcher. She described how this experience impacted her perceptions of competency saying,

I have found the process of tenure extremely stressful. I went from feeling competent in my career, and permanently employed in a school district, to always feeling like I am not good enough, that I don't work hard enough, and that I do not have enough hours. I regularly ask myself why I did this to myself when I was perfectly fine in the school system and I still come to the same answer-flexibility.

Despite her difficulty associated with assuming the role of a researcher, and acquiring the knowledge and skills that are expected of you in this capacity, Norah persisted in acquiring new competencies for the sake of her family. This was demonstrated when she conveyed that,

In the school system I would not be able to drop what I am doing and take care of my grandson. I would not be able to take my own child to appointments or to various programming opportunities. If my family circumstances were different I don't believe I would put myself through this process.

She continued to report that,

Flexibility is really a double-edged sword, because even though I am available to do the daytime appointments, I spend many evening hours making up for the time I take away during the day. I don't keep a time

score but there are many things that can't wait. Generally, I have students waiting for feedback on assignments, timelines for thesis completion, and deadlines for articles and conference submissions. Not to mention course preparation and faculty and committee meetings.

Norah decided to pursue a career in academia because she wanted to equip pre-service and in-service teachers to work with children with autism. Acutely aware of her son's school experience, Norah wanted to make a difference in the lives of other individuals with autism and to help ensure that they had a more positive school experience. While Norah was passionate about her area of research, and motivated by her ability to improve practice, she discussed the stressors surrounding her non-linear journey into academia and the associated issues with developing a research agenda.

[Because] I came to the university from the school system, and not from a PhD program, getting a research agenda off the ground has been extremely challenging. But this means nothing to anyone but me; the institution does not consider this when evaluating for promotion and tenure.

The difficulty associated with developing a research agenda and the associated implications for tenure resulted in psychosomatic symptomatology. This was demonstrated when Norah reported that, "Next year I apply for tenure and the thought has me extremely anxious and uptight. I have had many wakeful nights worried about the financial repercussions of not making tenure on my family".

#### *Importance of relationships in academia*

Chen and Anderson (2008) discuss the importance of developing friendships with other pre-tenure faculty members. Through these friendships faculty members may come to understand that other academics experience similar difficulties. In addition, these friendships may provide opportunity for collaboration, and according to Chen and Anderson, collaboration plays a key role in publishing success. Norah valued the friendship of her peers, and noted the importance of these relationships in supporting her journey to becoming a researcher.

Rejection of my work by a journal amounts to shame and feelings that perhaps I have made a wrong decision; that I really do not belong in a post-secondary institution. Being a part of a group of academics who are not yet tenured has softened the blow because I am told everyone goes through this.

McCormick and Barnes (2008) discuss the importance of mentorship in academic careers. The importance of mentorship was evident in Norah's journey towards becoming a researcher as well as an expert knitter. She reported that,

I had difficulty mastering a cable stitch; even though I was able to read patterns, cable patterns are far more complex. So I sought out an expert who was able to quickly teach me the basics of cabling

and I have since knit several complex patterns.

## **Discussion**

### *Difficulties associated with becoming a researcher*

Transitioning into the role of a researcher through the process of acquiring a faculty position can provide new stress, uncertainty, and emotional upheaval. Negotiating new academic and institutional cultures, along with varied expectations from administration and colleagues, is difficult for any newcomer, but can be particularly challenging for women (Grant & Knowles, 2010). Women continue to be underrepresented in academic careers (Williams, 2004). In addition, women often take a different “nonlinear” nonpathway to academia (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Butterwick & Dawson, 2005; Knights & Richards, 2003), and are faced with consistent gaps in career advancement and salary. Some researchers attribute these discriminative outcomes to the negative impact of juggling the incompatible roles of a parent and an academic (Armenti, 2004; Kemkes-Gottenthaler, 2003).

In academia, one’s likelihood of receiving tenure is strongly associated with their ability to publish and obtain research funding (O’Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005). Unfortunately, women with children have lower publication rates which reduces their likelihood of obtaining university promotion and tenure (Acker & Armenti, 2004; van Anders, 2004), and increases their likelihood leaving academia (Armenti, 2004). McCormick and Barnes (2008) indicate that writing should be a priority for new faculty members. In order to increase writing productivity, faculty members should start a writing group, maintain a writing schedule, and set deadlines for themselves (McCormick & Barnes).

### *Support for new faculty*

Halpern (2008) discusses the challenges faced by pre-tenure faculty with family care responsibilities and notes that “We cannot talk about nurturing careers in any field without also talking about ways to simultaneously handle the demands and joys of our lives outside of work” (p. 58). Support is needed for new faculty members, especially females who may be juggling the incompatible roles of a parent and an academic. Research demonstrates that when employees have access to family-friendly practices they have fewer stress symptoms, are less likely to plan to leave their employer, and are more committed to their employer than employees without these policies (Halpern, 2005, 2006).

Mentorship has long been regarded as an effective method for the socialization of new faculty members (Tierney & Bensimon, 1996). Informal mentorship can be equally effective and as satisfying as formal programs (Goodwin, Stevens, & Bellamy, 1998), and mentorship can impact one’s chances of obtaining tenure (McCormick & Barnes, 2008). Chen and Anderson (2008) discuss the importance of relationships with more senior academics; however, McCormick and Barnes report that early career faculty can benefit from having multiple mentors which may consist of senior faculty, other pre-tenured faculty, and graduate students, and note that these relationships may be reciprocal.

Despite the passion which may drive one’s research agenda, individuals are often faced with many difficulties on their journey towards becoming a researcher. Relationships with fellow academics can assist individuals in becoming acculturated in their new role, and provide

opportunities for collaboration, and thus increase publication opportunities and the likelihood that new faculty members will receive successful tenure outcomes.

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