

Reflexivity in research: Three encounters and the ‘I’-index

Unplugged - Academic Non Fiction

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Creative non fiction in journalism uses narrative means from fiction to highlight dramatic tensions of reality and thus put the subjectivity of authors at the heart of the writing process to approach unfolding experience and practice from ordinary people. Life of academics is punctuated with astonishing, ordinary, ceremonial or dramatic scenes which sometimes take place in liminal spaces but may constitute a core social piece of the research practice. The unplugged “academic non fiction” section is dedicated to share these moments.

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Abstract. We praise reflexivity in management practice, but how willing are we to apply it to examining the reasons why we study what we study as researchers? The choice of what to study is a privilege but also a responsibility. This personal narrative dives below the usual explanations we give to each other in conferences, in the elevator pitches of academic life, in front of recruitment and selection committees, in our short bios, and in so many other venues of self-presentation and (re)construction. It is a *cri de coeur* from someone who is not only an immigrant to a dominant culture, but also an immigrant to academia: a Latina who still hesitates to write “I” in an academic article but, at the end of her career, turns back to look at the winding road and identifies three chance encounters that turned out to be signposts at critical crossroads. How about you? Whether you are at the start, middle, or end of your journey as a researcher, how are you deciding what to study? When it is your turn to look back, what will the papers scattered in the trail of your research career say about your “I”? Will you care most about your h-index or your “I”-index?

Keywords: research careers, reflexivity, authenticity, identity, I-index

“Some time when the river is ice ask me
mistakes I have made. Ask me whether
what I have done is my life.” (Stafford, 1998: 56).
“Now I become myself.
It’s taken time, many years and places.
I’ve been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people’s faces” (Sarton, 1974: 156)

Once upon a time, there was a young Latina who traveled to the U.S. to study for a PhD, with a husband and a baby, fully intending to return home after completing the dissertation. All right, as you may have guessed, this is my story, and I had better write it in the first person. But it might also somehow be related to your own story. After all, as Parker Palmer once said: “The story of my journey is no more or less important than anyone else’s. It is simply the best source of data I have on a subject where generalizations often fail but truth may be found in the details” (Palmer, 2000: 19).

So, what happened next to that young immigrant full of dreams? Two more babies and one cancer later, I decided to stay in America and work in a business school. How hard could it be? I had done exceptionally well as a student, finishing my doctorate with a perfect GPA¹ in one of the very top schools in the world—even though I was the first in both sides of my family even to go to college. Surely being a successful scholar would not be all that different...

One of my first challenges was to decide what to study. Everything seemed interesting, and I was having trouble finding my voice. My dissertation had been in an area of overlap between organizational behavior and information systems, my husband’s field of interest. However, there was not much reflexivity or soul searching in the choice of my dissertation topic: It had just been the kind of thing we talked about at the dinner table, an idea that sprouted from one of my multiple Venn diagrams of life and research interests. The dissertation might as well have been about a dozen other things, and was rightfully surrendered to the amorphous pool of ideas from where it came. Then serendipity intervened and three encounters helped shape the direction of my career and research.

The first encounter made me realize the person I did not want to be, and what I did not want to be my reasons for studying something. That first encounter happened when I met a job candidate who was applying for a senior position at my university. He had four *Administrative Science Quarterly* publications, and over dinner he confessed how he had chosen his area of research: It was something very narrow, in which he had absolutely no interest, but where he had found a niche that he intended to mine for gold until his very last career breath (or, as I silently commented to myself, until research rigor turned into rigor mortis). While my colleagues around the table nodded approvingly, I internally recoiled with disgust, knowing that there was no universe in which I would be ready to strike this Faustian bargain. After my own adventure in cancer-land, I knew that there is no “tenure” in life, and no tenure and promotion committee in the world had the power to give me something that would be make it worth wasting my time studying something I did not care about. So that first encounter made me realize that there was no point in selling (or renting) myself, and that there was no point in becoming a researcher who would spend a whole career trying to score productivity points no matter what. I decided, then and there, that I might still care about my h-index (Harzing, 2017), but I would care even more about what I started to call my “l-index:” the identity, the “l” that would inspire, and emerge from, what I studied.

But another problem still remained: I cared about too many things, and I was not quite clear about their relative attractiveness. Then a second encounter happened: In an Academy of Management junior faculty workshop, I met JM, a very senior and well-known scholar, who told us a

1. In the US, all grades from all current classes are averaged to create a grade point average (GPA) for the marking period.

story about how she had figured out her true, deeply held research interests. In the first years of her career, she would let several piles of papers gather up on a desk, and then would observe the piles to which her hands became naturally, habitually, organically drawn. I tried her trick, and it worked! Her process removed (or at least attenuated) the “shoulds,” the second guessing, the “this-area-is-hot-because-so-and-so-is-working-on-it” levels of decision-making. I never quite became a single-topic person, but this second encounter helped me go from a promiscuous, “hook-up culture” approach to research, grabbing all topics that tickled my fancy at any time, to a serial monogamy model of scholarship, where in each phase of my career I concentrated on something that really mattered to me at the time (such as subtle discrimination in appraisal, or managerial education).

The encounter with JM had another important implication: It made me understand the role of asceticism. She told us that in her first couple of years at her (extremely) R1 university², she had not published anything substantive, and that the university had understood and respected her process. This astounded me. I was under a crushing pressure from my own school to publish, publish, publish, and I did not question their right to apply this. I had internalized their expectations as my own: It did not matter that my youngest child, my son, had lost his eyesight and had suffered a complete developmental arrest, and that after two years of desperate efforts to find a diagnosis and some degree of rehabilitation, he had died. It did not matter that my cancer had come back. It did not matter that I had two little girls. If I had so many brilliant ideas, why wasn't I publishing “enough”? JM's story made me realize the absurdity of the pressure the school was placing on me, and even worse, the pressure I was placing on myself. The encounter with JM allowed me to learn that there are times for feasting on publications, but there are times for reflection and fasting as well.

The third encounter was in 2007, when Randy Pausch gave his [Childhood Dreams](#) lecture at Carnegie Mellon. Confronting his impending death, he took enormous delight in finding meaning in his career and life, and being thankful. Pausch's “Last Lecture” was a bravura performance; it reflected who he was, what he had learned, and what he had contributed to others.

That Pausch encounter made me wonder: Once all is said and done, what remains? At the end, we will not want to answer to ourselves that that we studied what we studied, the way we studied it, because someone—the university, the accrediting agency, the journal editors, or any other of so many stakeholders—made us do it. The privilege in our careers as researchers is that we can give voice to vocation, and in so doing find our own. No matter how much we acknowledge path dependence, that voice from within compels us to reaffirm our individual agency. What if we could respect each paper we set out to write, approaching it as if we were composing, piece by piece, a [photomosaic](#) (Sillers, 2017)? In other words, what if we measured success by how each of our papers contributed to our I-index, reflecting the degree to which we keep striving, on purpose, to write pieces worthy of turning out to be a “Last Paper?”

Of course, we all will end up, by default, having a “last paper”—but for most of us, it will be a lowercase “last” that just happens to be last because the curtain closed and no other paper happened to be written after that one. But what if we purposefully set out to write our “Last”—upper case—opus? What would it be about? Why? How would it be written? For which audience? And since the usual rewards would not matter anymore,

2. 115 institutions in the US are classified as R1: Research Universities (Highest research activity) period.

where would we like to see it published: still in the so-called elite places, or somewhere else?

Or, to use the language that populates our papers: If our lives are “experiments with truth” (Gandhi, 1927), what are the truly significant “results” from our own experiments? What can we “conclude” from these results? What are the “implications” for future researchers?

Once you—and I—have answered those questions, what keeps you—us—from writing a “last” paper right now? And then another one next year? And the year after?

In some ways, this feels more urgent than ever. Seemingly all of a sudden, the “liquid modernity” of recent years (Bauman, 2012) has now turned into a flood. It rages all around us, carrying with its troubled waters our traditions, beliefs, hopes, illusions, and allegiances. The “Other” surprises us—it arrives as a class-five hurricane, winning electoral votes or just claiming power any way it can, and it bursts through our academic doors. It is no longer an abstraction; it is very concrete, loud, and immediate—so concrete, loud, and immediate that we are tempted to react. But how? Should we—I—also be concrete, loud, and immediate? Is that the role of an academic?

If this were to be my own “last” paper, how forcefully should I react here to the flood in my American backyard? Should my personal urgency to react “trump” the rules of thoughtful academic dialog? As I struggle with these questions of personal responsibility and voice, a three-line email arrives, from a European colleague. In the first line, he asks for my thoughts about leaving/living in the academic world during this particular political period. My immediate reaction is to feel the challenge: Questions like “What should I do?”, “What is my role?”, “What does it mean to be an academic?”, and “Am I failing the test?” swirl in my mind and my heart. I’m in bed, and the limitations of my physical body feel like an oppressive prison that keeps me from any effective action, until I remember Vaclav Havel: “Someone who cannot move and live a normal life because he is pinned under a boulder has more time to think about his hopes than someone who is not trapped in this way” (Havel, 1997: 17–18).

This is a gentle but radical refocusing: I’m not “spending” time under my boulder; I’m “having” time to think. And it’s exactly when things seem most urgent, most critical, that I must do just that: Think. Isn’t thinking even more necessary when I claim academia as a calling? Žižek warns us: “The urgency of the present situation should in no way serve as an excuse—the urgent situation is the time to think [...]: we need to reject both defeatism and blind activism and ‘learn, learn, learn’ [...] what has caused this fiasco” (Žižek, 2017: 194).

My thinking is then liberated by the second line in my colleague’s email: “Please feel free.” Yes, he probably meant it in the kind tone we use in emails. But, having invested so much time thinking about the challenge of the first line, I **am** able finally to take his second line quite literally. I am free—as the existentialist friends in the audiobooks on the nightstand whisper to me. After all, isn’t freedom part and parcel of authenticity? What’s more, a literal reading of his second line invites me not only to *be*—but also to *feel* free. Experimenting with—and then fully experiencing—this feeling of freedom takes me beyond the anxiety and responsibility of choice: I finally reach the exhilaration and full-bodied authenticity of the acrobat who, letting go of the certainty of one trapeze, is flying through the air toward the next one.

Between trapezes, it’s OK that I do not know exactly what to do in this political moment. But that does not mean that I will not do something. And, in doing each “something,” I’ll learn more about what to do next. After

all, isn't this what I have been doing all my life? It's not been about planning—I couldn't have planned I'd get here, from where I started. It's been about effectuation—a chef creating a menu based on the ingredients and utensils in the cupboard (Sarasvathy, 2001: 245). My trial-and-error process is not yours, so it is only natural that we might come up with very different answers along the way; you will hopefully find ways to act more concretely, more loudly, and more immediately. After all, that's the beauty of it: that we can learn from each other, that our actions can build on each other's, and that along the way, we can make some difference. Improv theater can help us learn a thing or two about dialog—"Yes, and ..." instead of "but ...": *improv-ing* and therefore improving.

As we go about *improv-ing* where and how we can, let's not be distracted by the latest political hurricane, even as it keeps claiming our energy with its torrents of daily provocations; if we do, we might succumb to disaster fatigue. Instead, let's find out how each of us can help: Some will make heroic rescues and save lives; some will hire an ice-cream truck, and take it to a shelter (Collins, 2017); some, like my two young granddaughters, will pick apples and sell apple cider and cookies to raise funds for the victims, carefully researching online where their donation will be most helpful; and some will do research and teach others about ways of avoiding hurricanes, or preventing and attenuating their consequences. These actions will stem from who we are, and through these actions we'll become who we can be: self-making-in-a-situation.

The latest political hurricane is not the apocalypse. It's not unprecedented—it's neither the end of history nor the beginning. We can deal with [it](#). I was born a few years after World War II, and grew up in a Latin American dictatorship. Authoritarianism is once again, in so many places and in so many different ways, threatening freedom, but I know it can truly win only if each of us personally consents to it: if we introject the oppressor (Freire, 1970), cease to search for meaning (Frankl, 1959), and, when fighting monsters, become monsters ourselves (Nietzsche, 1886).

The current flood, too, shall pass. Let us not be paralyzed with fear or despair: The work of reconstruction will be easier if we remember that the river of time periodically swells and overflows, but it eventually recedes. The flood leaves humus behind, and from this humus come humility, reconstruction, and new life. Together, in community, we can reclaim what was lost, or build anew.

And that's what I take from the third and final line in my colleague's email: "All the best," and then his name. Yes, let's wish each other "all the best," let's have hope, and let's take action, in whatever way is authentic and true for each of us.

I realize, with gratitude, that the three lines in his email paralleled the stories of the three encounters in my research journey. His first line, about taking a stand in difficult political times, reminded me of the first encounter's story of authenticity. His second line, about feeling free, reminded me of the second encounter's story of how to handle the abundance that comes with freedom of choice. And his third line, wishing me all the best, reminded me of the third encounter's story of what we aim to contribute to others, through the accrued interest of our I-index.

As you approach each of your future choices, I wish you authenticity, freedom, and all the best.

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