

# The PhD and Me: A Liminal Space

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## Abstract

In this chapter, I share the experience of how undertaking feminist auto/biographical research, for a doctoral thesis, has had an impact, not only on my professional identity as an emerging researcher, but most importantly on my personal identity as an academic from working-class origins. It is wrongly assumed that doctoral writing is by and large a lonely enterprise; in reality it is a complex undertaking for both the student and the supervisor(s). Using Axel Honneth's work on recognition as a framework to analyze my experiences within the academy I show how studying for a PhD, using auto-diegetic narrative, enabled me to enter a third space (Bhabha, 1994, p. 28) to bring about transformation, not only at an intellectual and cognitive level, but at a spiritual and emotional level as well.

## Keywords

une miraculée – auto/biography – Honneth – social class – third space

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I am *une miraculée*, an academic from working class origins.

BOURDIEU and PASSERON (1990, p. 175)

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## 1 Introduction

Having completed my PhD whilst working in higher education as a senior lecturer, I have travelled so far from the life in which my habitus was formed it could even 'be described as miraculous' (Bourdieu, in Bourdieu & Egleton, 1992, p. 117).

In this chapter, I share the experience of how undertaking auto/biographical research, for a doctoral thesis, has had an impact, not only on my professional identity as an emerging researcher, but most importantly on my personal identity as an academic from working-class origins. I illustrate how studying for a PhD, using auto-diegetic narrative, can bring about transformation, not only at an intellectual and cognitive level, but at a spiritual and emotional level as well. This chapter will illustrate how complex inter-relationships, both real, and 'imagined' (Quinn, 2010, p. 68) are fundamental to the formation of the 'self' (Mead, 1934) as the pathway from one class to another is travelled. My story is set in a post-1992 university which contains a statistically higher proportion of 'non-traditional' students, (first-generation university attendees from working-class or minority backgrounds and mature students, those aged over 23 years), yet still predominantly employs middle-class academics.

I employed my doctoral thesis, entitled 'Confronting Myself: An auto/biographical exploration of the impact of class and education on the formation of self and identity' (Stone, 2018), to explore the relationship between class transition and education based on my own experience. Being both the researcher and the researched; the subject and the object; the narrator and the protagonist enabled me to create a 'third space' in which 'the transformational value of change lies in the rearticulation, or translation, of the elements that are neither the One ... nor the Other but something else besides which contests the terms and territories of both' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 28).

I argue that my analysis of my own class transition reaches beyond my personal experience to present a 'collective story' 'a story which tells the experience of a sociologically constructed category of people in the context of larger socio-cultural and historical forces' (Richardson, 1997, p. 14) in this instance female academics from non-traditional backgrounds.

## 2 Theorizing the 'Self' Using Auto/Biography

Feminist scholars argue that if society hopes to address issues around misrepresentation and exclusion, women must build knowledge from their own actual life experience (Brooks, 2007). So, when starting my research, I sought an approach that could help me to confront my 'self' within broader ecological interactions, including my past, my family, and my work to celebrate the connectedness of family and social networks in influencing and shaping my life (Stanley, 1995).

It was Stanley (1995, p. 3) who first appropriated the term 'auto/biography'; an approach that enters the contested space between the socio-cultural

and the psychosocial, and biography and autobiography, instead recognizing their symbiosis (Stanley, 1995). Stanley's (1995) conception of auto/biography encapsulates the key elements of feminist approaches to research, in which the enquiry is guided by a feminist epistemology grounded in women's everyday experience (Stanley & Wise, 1993), which for me were not just gendered but are also 'classed'. My aim was to create an authentic and accurate understanding of what the life of an academic from working-class origins life was like, so that readers could understand from the insider's point of view the lived experience of class transition and class oppression. As such, my research approach challenged the dominant research practices that typically denigrate 'feminine' cognitive styles and modes of knowledge, instead celebrating 'women's ways of knowing' (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 3).

Auto/biography disputes the conventional distinctions between self/other, public/private, immediacy/memory, personal and political (Stanley, 1993) recognizing that knowledge is contextual, situational and specific. Thus, writing about the 'self' entails acknowledging the variety of social networks of others that a life moves between (Stanley, 1995, p. 50). In this way auto/biography challenges the idea of a single, stable or essential self and emphasizes the construction of a reflexive account of self through the writing process.

There is 'the self who *writes* constructs a self who *was* (an other self for biography, a past self for autobiography); but there is also a self who is, outside of the text as it is written, who continues to grow older and to change after it is completed but is prototypically unmentioned'. (Stanley, 1995, pp. 131–132, original emphasis)

Through my auto/biography, paying attention to the subjective dimensions of classed experience, I was able to provide insights into mechanisms of class, and class' 'hidden injuries' (Sennett & Cobb, 1977, p. 1), which may have been missed by more conventional, objectivist approaches.

Drawing Stanley's (1995) distinct concept I wrote auto/biographically, building a first-person account of the significant moments in my history, and the people in it, to chronicle my life experiences sharing the intimate and often hidden details of my life. This is what makes auto/biography distinctive; the power of the auto/biography lies not in nostalgia but in the courage to confront painful memories – and this is what I did. But to avoid the risks of hedonistic and narcissistic self-indulgence, always levelled at autobiographical writing, and to achieve an insightful analysis, I interpreted my account theoretically using Axel Honneth's psychosocial theory of recognition.

Honneth's theory of recognition (1995) provides a conduit between structure and agency which connects a theory of psychic development with a theory of social change (Fleming & González-Monteaudo, 2014). The theory determines that identity is constructed intersubjectively, through a process of mutual recognition in which citizens morally require recognition in order that their identities be fulfilled. As such, recognition is simultaneously an individual and social need. Honneth takes from Hegel the idea that human flourishing is dependent on the existence of well-established ethical relations – love, law and ethical life. He suggests that through three different types of social interaction: loving concern, mutual respect and societal solidarity, individuals develop three differentiated forms of relation-to-self: self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem, respectively (Anderson in Honneth, 1995). The first, and most basic form of relation-to-self, self-confidence, gained in primary affective relations of love and friendship is based on the right to exist. Honneth (1995) argues that if an individual experiences love, an ability to love one's self and others is developed. In this, a positive image of one's abilities, self-confidence is developed and the individual is then capable of forging an identity by receiving recognition from others. The next form of positive self-relation, self-respect, derives from an awareness of being a morally accountable subject through the moral respect and recognition of the other as a moral agent, in the context of civil society. The final level of relation to self relates to self-esteem or self-worth. This, claimed Honneth (1995, p. 129), is dependent on an awareness of having capabilities that are good or valuable to a concrete community. In this context one can achieve self-esteem by being recognized as a distinct individual with traits and abilities that contribute positively to the shared projects of that community (*ibid.*).

Whilst engaged in the research process, three unplanned phases emerged naturally and organically from the writing activity. I identify phase one as the process of writing auto/biographically about my experiences up until I became a teacher educator; during phase two, I examined my current context as an educated working-class woman working within the academy; and only during phase three, towards the end of the research process, I started to critically analyze my data through a collaborative narrative approach (Arvay, 2003), engaging myself in a reflexive process with my 'imagined social network' (Quinn, 2010, p. 68) and my supervisors to examine the process of 'becoming' an academic. I aimed for a self-conscious approach to writing, weaving together the research process, the writing process and the ongoing construction of my 'self' in a layered account (Ronai, 1995), which emphasized the emotional and personal dimensions of research alongside the cognitive (Coffey, 1999).

### 3 My Narrative and Struggling about Class

My story starts in 1963, my mum was just 17 years old when she gave birth to me out of wedlock. I am 'illegitimate'. Fifty years ago, mothers who had children but were not married were considered immoral and often consigned to reserved homes or mental institutions and deprived of their children. This meant that I grew up knowing that my family was abnormal. I was born in my grandad's house in London. Despite his absence, my mum still had strong affection for my dad, who by then had formed yet another new relationship. Notwithstanding this, a son, my brother, followed fewer than two years later. In this context, I developed my habitus, as stated by Bourdieu (2002):

[...] a system of dispositions, that is of permanent manners of being, seeing, acting and thinking, or a system of long-lasting (rather than permanent) schemes or schemata or structures of perception, conception and action. (p. 43)

My habitus, then, was formed in the context of low economic, social and cultural capital coupled with the stigma of being illegitimate. Primary school was a happy place; we were all poor and lived locally. I was clever and I flourished and managed to secure a place at a selective senior school. It was here that I realized that the assumptions held by middle-class children and adults about those from lower socio-economic groups carried consequences.

My first memory of 'classed' humiliation was at senior school. The Senior Mistress, a middle-aged, middle-class woman, gave an observable sniff of disdain when she met my mum for the first time: the single-mother with two illegitimate children who was too young to be a mother, and inappropriately dressed in her mini skirt. It was clear to me, from that moment on, that she felt I had no right to be in that setting. Founded on feelings of illegitimacy and inferiority, during my first year at senior school I suffered what I now recognize to be an episode of childhood depression. In a short space of time I had gone from a clever, cheerful child to emotionally demanding and problematic; my mum did not cope well with this situation.

It was during this time that my mum met the man she was later to marry. The relationship was unstable, and alcohol featured heavily, there were intra-family disputes; physical and verbal assaults and police visits. At the age of 13 and 15 years respectively, although our basic needs were met, my brother and I were left to depend on ourselves. We reacted differently; he started to hang out with friends on the streets 'doing nothing and getting into trouble' (Corrigan, 1979, pp. 119–121), and I turned to academic study. My room with my school books became a sanctuary.

It is widely recognized that the kind of person we are is strongly influenced by our relationship with our parents and in particular with our mothers (Lawler, 2000). As Dowd (1999) points out, the negative social construction of the single mother is not a burden borne solely by the mother, children also lose out because of the stigmatization and isolation of single-parent families. Because of our circumstance, my mum unconsciously transmitted to me that we were seen as valueless in society.

My mum's longing to be seen as respectable and valuable in society initially propelled my class transition; educational achievement was imperative to gain and maintain her love and affection. Through writing my life history, I now realize that my class transition was initiated to overcome the stigmatization of illegitimacy my mum faced as a single mother. My duty as her daughter was to show the community that her illegitimate children were educated and she was making a valid contribution to society (Honneth, 1995, p. 164). This proved to be a significant element of my story.

However, like many mothers in Lawler's (2000) study, as I became educated, mine found it difficult to accept who I was becoming, when, over the years, my beliefs and values started to diverge from hers. I now carry the burden of being expensive, ungrateful, and not good-enough (Steedman, 1986) and we have endured long periods of estrangement over the years, right up until the present time. Indeed, much of my adult life has been spent in a 'spiral of emotional conflict' (Eichenbaum & Orbach, 1982 in West, 2010).

Despite leaving school at 16 years, at the age of 27 I returned to college to gain a professional qualification, which gave me access to Higher Education, and training to be a primary school teacher. The critical analysis of that period of my life, using Axel Honneth's (1995) theory of recognition, enabled me to realize, for the first time, that behind those choices there was a quest for respectability, legitimacy, and recognition – a way to show that I had the capacity to contribute to the community.

Despite higher education institutions in the 21st century hosting a diverse population, the institutional habitus of the university is still strongly racialized, gendered, and classed (Reay et al., 2010). When I entered the field of higher education, as a teacher educator, those well-established feelings of illegitimacy and inauthenticity, grounded in my primary cultural identity, became even more apparent. I felt, and still feel, that I must work harder and longer than many of my peers to prove myself as equal, despite completing my PhD. I continue to live in fear of being found out as a fraud, thus, denying myself legitimacy. Sadly, this is not an predicament I face in isolation; over the past four decades working-class academics have been writing about the 'cruel duality' (Law, 1984, p. 1) of being a working-class academic in higher education; collections of stories edited Ryan and Sackrey (1984), Dews and Law (1995), Mitchell,

Wilson, and Archer (2015), and Binns (2019) have illuminated the enduring middle class myopia and sense of displacement when entering academia.

Bourdieu (1986, p. 241) contended that the intellectual field generates its own type of legitimacy with their own particular 'logic of practice' or 'game'. Entry into that field is dependent upon at least an implicit acceptance of the 'rules of the game'. The analysis of my auto/biographical data showed that, while I have attempted to adapt to the field by adopting the cultural dispositions valued in my new cultural milieu, for example through ways of dressing and speaking, I have often felt undermined by tacit and subtle distinctions of class difference based on lack of social and cultural capital.

Linguistic practices, above all, are measured against what is legitimate. I know I practice a direct communication style, which is often more expressive of my feelings than most of my colleagues; I can't help but challenge silence and obedience to authority. In my institution, the right to speak seems to be appropriated by those agents who possess the 'right' type of capital and, as such have become spokespersons for the dominant ideology. There have been many occasions, in which I perceived speaking my mind and sharing my opinions as evidence of passion, honesty, and integrity, that were received as being confrontational and truculent. My contributions in the academic context have been dismissed or even undermined, mostly by white middle-class men who take offence at what I am saying and misrepresent me. These small but significant acts of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1994) in the form of a lack of recognition or disrespect, even within the most intimate of intellectual spaces, have created a barrier to ward off dissent, and for me these 'classed' experiences continue to resurrect early childhood experiences of exclusion and humiliation.

As I wrote about these experiences, writing became an ethical practice for me that went beyond the pure mechanics of completing a doctorate. The activity of writing strengthened the connections between body, mind and spirit which enabled me to recover fragments of my life, to re-educate myself, and to create a new story. My thesis exemplifies how the process of writing was not a merely cognitive or intellectual activity, a disembodied action removed from questions of gender and class; it was, in fact, an embodied ecological endeavor with all the complex, emotionally difficult, and messy experiences that underpin the process of becoming a Doctor of Philosophy. I spent many sleepless hours regretting my decision to undertake the PhD and specifically to write auto/biographically, which had left me doubly exposed: as an academic and as a human being. Indeed, my research was filled with tensions, challenges and moments of intense emotion because of the personal nature of the data. But, it soon it became a way of working myself out; providing a source of hope and promise. Writing auto/biographically about class transition and feelings of illegitimacy in the academy provided a unique opportunity to analyze the

interplay of history and my current struggle for recognition and legitimacy (Honneth, 1995). Indeed, my early explorations, as I chronicled my life and theorized my assumptions, started to reveal aspects of my life and self that I had never dared to consider before. In this space, my life and work became entwined – I began to explore, during the academic activity itself, how my own participation with the doctoral process, and the impact it was having on me, was shaping who I was ‘becoming’ (Dall’Alba, 2009).

As I began to share my research with others at conferences, my narrative revealed how internalized feelings of oppression, inferiority and vulnerability (Pheterson, 1986) would resurface, as this extract from my research diary shows:

I always feel vulnerable in these settings [a conference]. Not because of my gender but always because of my class [...] despite working within a university for 10 years I always feel illegitimate, like I am here under false pretences. I feel people can sense the lack of social, cultural and educational capital. Rather than feel proud that I am here by my own virtue, I must remind myself what is good for me. (Research Diary, March 2016)

Serving to illustrate how enduring these feelings are.

#### 4 Finding Solidarity – My Theoretical Friends

My research sits within an important body of theoretical work that illustrates the experiences of women like me, academics from working-class backgrounds. I have found comfort in their work since I can identify myself with them, having shared experiences. Beverley Skeggs; Pat Mahony; Christine Zmroczek; Valerie Walkerdine; Helen Lucey; Carolyn Steedman; Anne Oakley; Diane Reay; Steph Lawler; Liz Stanley; Sue Wise; Louise Morley; Gillian Plummer; Lisa Mckenzie and Lynsey Hanley, writing mostly in the zeitgeist of the women’s movement in the 1990s, and some recently, have shared through their own autobiographies the feeling of being oppressed because of both their gender and class. At a time when I was feeling illegitimate and marginalized in the university setting, these women became my imagined social network (Quinn, 2010), engendering both social and cultural capital. These educated working-class women, who have embodied being a feminist working-class intellectual, proved to be good collaborators in my doctoral journey; affirming, provoking and critiquing my own thoughts and feelings. With their help, I was able to ‘engage in a simulated conversation’ (Brookfield, 1995, p. 187) about my/our experiences that has enabled

me to reclaim my past and articulate the subjective experience of class, illegitimacy and education, as both a learner and an educator. As I wrote, I was able to reconcile, for the first time, the contradictions between my values and beliefs and the demands of the academy on my personhood.

## 5 Love, Rights, and Solidarity – The PhD

It is wrongly assumed that doctoral writing is by and large a lonely enterprise; in reality it is a complex undertaking for both the student and the supervisor(s). Supervision of doctoral students is the development of the ‘becoming’ scholar, but it is equally a process of continuing development of the experienced academic (Bryant & Jaworski, 2015). This intersubjective relationship, which suggests a dialogically co-constructed self in relation to others, is more than important to the ecology of doctoral research (Bryant & Jaworski, 2015). It involves each subject recognizing the other, and allowing the possibility of identifying with the other (*ibid.*). Whilst it is important to acknowledge that my doctorate came to life within the confines of a neoliberal university setting, which generally necessitates the denial of emotions in the process of achievement, both my supervisors, recognizing how gender, and class affected my position in the research, adopted what I would call a feminist approach to supervision, based on a ‘collaborative relationship that is characterized by mutual respect, genuine dialogue, attention to social contextual factors, and responsible action’ (Szymanski, 2003, p. 221).

The relationships with my supervisors, both white middle-class, one female and one male, have been crucial to my survival in very different ways. The male supervisor recognized something deep within me, even before I could see it myself. Like me, he has working class origins and is interested in people’s lives. The female supervisor, acting from her middle-class position, often inadvertently ‘misrecognized’ (Bourdieu, 2000) my working-class habitus, provoking me to challenge and question my assumptions. By her own admission, she struggled to see how academic success is not a simple case of upward social mobility, as a path of redemption or empowerment for those who have a working-class identity. I am confident that these relationships were borne out of intersubjective love, rights and solidarity (Honneth, 1995). From the outset my supervisors considered, and indeed celebrated, my humanness, my emotions and values, enabling me to go beyond ‘the process’ of engaging in research and writing a doctorate *per se*; instead, they helped me to focus on how the self is being (re)constituted and (re)negotiated in the process of doctoral research (Petersen, 2014, pp. 823–834).

The fact that we valued each other's qualities despite differences has made me feel accepted for who I am. This relationship was significant in my successful completion of doctoral study because the supervision meetings played a significant and integral role in the development of who I am as a researcher and academic and indeed as a woman from the working-class in academe. Resisting the 'care-less culture' (Bryant & Jaworski, 2015) of doctoral supervision in a neo-liberal university, the 'undertaking' of my supervision was deeply embodied; there was a strong sense of reciprocity and through sharing our lived experiences, there became a sense of deeper understanding of self for all of us. Over time, through the love and recognition of my supervisors, I began to have trust in myself; and to see myself as worthy of the doctorate and my position in the academy. Being valued as an academic has led to a more secure, stable, and self-esteem (Honneth, 1995). This contrasted with how I felt in other areas of the faculty, in which I believed I could only achieve relational value, belongingness, or acceptance by behaving inconsistently with my natural inclinations.

However, like any long-term liaison, the supervisory relationship was complex and inevitably, and properly, challenging at times. Over the years, our meetings have involved surprise, passion, disappointment and euphoria; all of which have provided emotional and intellectual sustenance during the long marathon of the PhD in which the emotional histories of both candidate and supervisors are lived and relived in fragmented moments (Bryant & Jaworski, 2015). Some of our exchanges inevitably aroused feelings on both sides, as we challenged each other's perspectives; 'these became interactional moments that left marks on all of our lives' (Denzin, 1989, p. 15) as this extract from my field notes illustrate.

A: [Talking about our last meeting] You just became angry

PS: I wasn't angry. I was ... It wasn't anger ... although I know it came across like that ... it wasn't anger ... I don't know what it was ... it was complete and utter frustration, impotence. I felt out of control. I was not angry ... not for a moment did I feel anger at anybody ... even myself. I just didn't know what to do with myself. I honestly didn't know what to do with myself ... I felt backed into a corner by you all. (Collaborative Narrative, February 2017)

With the support of my supervisors, as my self-confidence developed, I had enough courage to present a paper at the Life History and Biography Network. This group of scholars welcomed me as an emergent researcher.

[European conference] I am now entering a cultural space that is very frightening. Who am I to share my thoughts about the research process – I am merely a novice. I read an extract from my doctoral research as it existed at that point. [The auto/biographical content (which is clearly illustrated in this thesis) would make anyone feel slightly exposed]. At this point the ‘Reader’ as I will call her detected a hole in my research – her challenge was relentless. Thankfully some experienced academics offered their support– I was truly grateful for their support. Later, I cried a lot! (Reflective Diary, March 2015)

Once again returning to Honneth (1995), he argues that moral growth flourishes only when the development of three psychological self-relations is guaranteed: self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. Over the years, I have become part of this affiliation of scholars who recognize me as a distinct individual with traits and abilities that can contribute positively to the shared projects of that community which has proved vital for my academic and human flourishing.

## 6 Emerging from the Third Space

So, despite being born into structures of inequality which could have circumscribed my academic and professional success, I have begun to thrive in academe. But as my story tells, class transition is not simply an escape from disadvantage to a more privileged situation, it is also associated with pain, estrangement and feelings of illegitimacy.

Traditional research methods easily neglect the moral character of life and experience. But, in the spirit of feminist epistemology, through an auto/biographical narrative, I was able to enter a third space (Bhabha, 1994) to embark on a journey into myself to tell the story of who I was to who I am now. As I wrote and re-wrote I began to recognize and understand myself in a different light; I saw a human experience – a woman, filled with fear, anxiety, denial and ambivalences, struggling with notions of self. And whilst I wrote tentatively at first; as I found my voice and garnered the courage to write about the emotional and personal dimensions of my life, and how this was intrinsically connected to the research process, the relationship between the research process, the writing process, and the ‘self’ became stronger. The auto/biographical examination of my childhood enabled me to look beyond my own experience to begin to understand that my own desire for educational attainment was not about escape, a desire for a better life and ‘bettering the self’ (Lawler, 2000,

pp. 105–112), but instead was based on gaining legitimacy or what Honneth (1995) would call recognition, in the form of love, rights and solidarity. My narrative also revealed that ‘policy micro politics’ (Hoyle, 1982, p. 88) is still enacted within the institution, by which the culturally marginal are sometimes identified as the ‘other’, and treated as irrelevant and/or inferior as a status group.

Emerging from the third space (Bhabha, 1994), I can now recognize that my thesis went far beyond a piece of academic work and became an important part of my ‘self’ as writing became a way of working myself out; identifying and challenging feelings of inferiority and illegitimacy. The thesis itself, proving to be a dynamic, creative process; a method of discovery (Richardson, 1994), and a source of agency. Being both the researcher and the researched; the subject and the object; the narrator and the protagonist has afforded me a double consciousness; a unique ‘mode of seeing’ (Brooks, 2007, p. 11) which made visible the ecological mechanisms that have constructed ‘self’ and identity. Becoming a Doctor of Philosophy has served as a powerful space of resistance and a ‘site of radical possibility’ (hooks, 1989, p. 149).

But the story does not end there; my struggle to gain a place in the academy is still ongoing, but I am starting to make a difference for and on behalf of working-class students and colleagues who are all striving to find their place in higher education. Since completing my doctorate, through my work, I have been breathing new life into conversations about equality and diversity within the institution so that they include consideration of those of us who come from lower socio-economic status (SES) groups and non-traditional backgrounds. These are important incursions into once unimagined territory of the academy, in which classed inequalities are deeply imprinted despite continued efforts to narrow the gap between the privileged and disadvantaged. Thus, auto/biographical writing has become a social action which linked knowledge production with healing and reconstruction (Walsh, 1997).

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