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Being a therapist, becoming a researcher: A collaborative autoethnography on the experiences of novice researchers

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Abstract: The aim of this study was to explore how four professionals who are both therapists and academics experienced the process of becoming researchers. Within the framework of collaborative autoethnography, and guided by a phenomenological approach, the authors sought to gain a collective understanding of their shared experiences (Ngunjiri et al., 2010). Data gathering involved a two-step process in which all four researchers produced autobiographical transcripts (datasets) in response to the question "What are your experiences of becoming a researcher?" Through the application of reflexive thematic analysis, four themes emerged: (1) "The tensions within academia as a hierarchy", (2) "The struggle to become an academic", (3) "Finding meaning and satisfaction in a new career", and (4) "Evolving a new identity". All four participants emphasised the hierarchical structure of academic institutions and the prioritization of research over teaching, resulting in conflicts and tensions. Participants also highlighted the demands and difficulties they encountered during the transition from professional practice to academic research: setting aside time for research was often at the expense of other activities, and issues of financial security also emerged. Describing research as "a landscape that is difficult to navigate and in which it is easy to feel overwhelmed", participants stressed the importance of support from those with more experience in the research arena. However, participants welcomed the opportunity to apply their practical experience as therapists to their research activities and to communicate research findings to those still in practice. All four described gaining a new identity through making the transition. They valued the resulting self-development, which was seen as an ongoing process involving openness to learning new things and diving into new and unfamiliar waters.

Keywords: Collaborative autoethnography, novice researcher, academic status, practitioner research, post-graduate research

In this article we explore the process of becoming a researcher in the specific context of professional development in Norway. Learning how to conduct research, a critical element of doctoral programmes, is considered a fluid and gradual process, one that involves constant movement and change and that is likely to transform the individual (Barnacle & Newburn, 2010). Becoming a researcher is also a social process that involves multiple others. Along the way, researchers interact with different individuals, develop different networks, and gain support and sustenance. All of these are social experiences that influence the novice researcher's identity.
Contextual factors are also of considerable influence. Context is to be understood as the personal framework within which we interpret what we see and build our own understanding and meaning (Jensen & Ulleberg, 2019). For example, academics worldwide operate in a context where they are expected to make significant, innovative contributions to their specific field (Levander et al., 2019). In such a context, conducting research is not a matter of independent choice; strong institutional messages make it clear that an academic cannot advance towards tenure or promotion on the basis of their teaching activity alone. Research by Levander et al. (2019) in fact suggests that teaching is not a major factor when it comes to assessing candidates for academic positions.

In the current performative context of higher international education (Archer, 2008; Gale, 2011), academics are under pressure to engage in research, scholarship of discovery and/or scholarship of teaching (Andresen, 2000; Boyer, 1990). However, researchers often struggle to find the time to actually conduct research. Research by Matthews (2018) found that full professors spent only 17 percent of their time on their own research, leading Matthews to wryly note: "If you love research, academia may not be for you" (Matthews, 2018).

In some cases, professionals embark on research relatively late in their careers, after years of work as practitioners (Dow-Royer, 2010). This was the case for the four of us as therapists. This shift towards more scholarly pursuits can be challenging (Ennals et al., 2016). The transition to academia from a career and strong identity as a therapist requires new skills and attitudes that are often experienced as confusing and isolating (Dow-Royer, 2010).

To date, most research in this area has focused on the experiences of doctoral students (Mantai, 2017) or of employees in fields associated with the rapidly changing university sector (Ennals et al., 2016). Few studies have attempted to explore the processes involved in the shift from a practice-focused profession (such as therapy) into research. One exception here is the work of Bager-Charleson, McBeath, duPlock, and Adams (2020). Their meta-synthesis of earlier published research of therapists' experience of and involvement in postgraduate research highlights a number of challenges. Their findings identified that the process of becoming a researcher including a loss of self, and attempt to understand and integrate oneself in new contexts. Their synthesis suggests that researchers in the field of therapy often are particularly disadvantaged in terms of having few professional research opportunities and limited access to academic journals.

Becoming a researcher, then, is not only a challenging process but also an under-researched one. Given the growing pressures on professionals to engage in research, more information on the process of becoming a researcher is urgently needed.

In this study, we sought to explore and discuss our own experiences of the process of becoming researchers, in part to make sense of our changing identities. As four social work professionals who are both therapists and academics, we decided to share our stories of making this transition. Our starting point involved the production of 'autobiographical transcripts': transcripts of self-focused and context-conscious stories narrating our individual journeys (Holman Jones et al., 2016). From the start, we were aware that our experiences would differ. One of us (AB) is in his first year of a doctoral programme, while another (LL) holds the position of full professor. As we see it, juxtaposing the experiences of novice researchers with those of more experienced ones enriches the narrative by shedding light on the challenges encountered at each stage of a researcher's career. We also consider it a strength of the study that not all of the authors work full-time in the university sector; the third author (AB) works there on an occasional basis (as a doctoral student, supervisor and lecturer).

Participants

In line with the collaborative character of autoethnography (the inspiration for this project), the four participants in our study are both providers of data and researchers collecting, analyzing, and discussing data (Ngunjiri et al., 2010).

- Lennart Lorås (LL), 41, comes from the field of family therapy. His research interests are systemic therapy, psychotherapy and family interactions.

- Hege A. Hansen (HH), 52, draws upon her experience of social work in mental health. Her research interests relate to recovery processes and social participation for people struggling with mental health problems.

- Sari Lindeman (SL) 56, comes from the field of family therapy. Her research interests include the impact of problematic substance use on families, couples, and individuals; bereavement after drug-related death; interdisciplinary collaboration; and systematic literature reviews.

- Andreas Breden (AB), 40, has practiced in the field of child and family protection. His research interest is in gender differences and similarities.

Three of the four authors (LL, SL and HH) are permanent employees of the Western Norway University of Applied Science, Bergen Campus. The first author (LL) asked three of his colleagues/partners to participate in this project, based on a common interest in the research topic and in exploring a new and different way of conducting research. The fourth member of our research group, AB, is employed by the Church Family Protection Foundation (CFPF) in Trondheim. CFPF is one of Norway's largest, with over 30 employed family therapists and psychologists. The institution provides specialized treatment and mediation for all kind of relational and family problems, spanning from problems with love, children and communication to high conflict, intimate partner violence and sexual abuse. As such, his knowledge of academia derives not from being as an employee, but from what he has learned through his collaboration with several partners employed in academia and from his own supervision and tutoring activities within the sector. In demographic terms, we are two women and two men. All of us are Norwegian nationals of Caucasian ethnicity, and 'middle class' in terms of socio-economic background.

Methodology

We conducted our research within the framework of Collaborative Autoethnographic (CAE) methodology. Our aim was to explore the process of becoming a researcher as it was experienced by the four participants in this study.

CAE is a qualitative research method in which different researchers collect their autobiographical materials related to an agreed topic and then proceed to jointly analyze and interpret them (Ngunjiri, et al., 2010). Personal meanings and experiences and their links with the researcher's socio-cultural context are analyzed (Chang et al., 2014). CAE is more widely known as a socially orientated version of autoethnography where the socio-cultural context of personal experience is interrogated. The methodology appealed to us because we knew each other well and often discussed our experiences of becoming researchers. Using CAE gave us the opportunity to gain a collective understanding of our shared experiences (Ngunjiri et al., 2010).

In terms of our epistemological commitments, we drew on phenomenological philosophy (Pitard, 2019). Here, the intention is to investigate the meaning and content of lived experience rather than simply focus on narratives, which is often the case in autoethnographic approaches (Wertz et al., 2011). Moreover, our phenomenological stance can be regarded as hermeneutical (Zimmermann, 2015), given the emphasis we place on interpretive elements (Smith, 2007; Smith et al., 2009).

In addition, we used this as an opportunity to reflect on, and discuss, our own subjective and shared experiences in a particular context: that of higher education. As such, we found elements of autoethnographic thinking helpful in guiding our research process. In autoethnography the goal is to connect the "personal" with the "social" (Chang, 2016), something we set out to do by exploring lived experiences connected to different relational contexts (Pitard, 2019). In such qualitative and autoethnographic research, the researcher influences the collection, selection, and interpretation of data. Our behaviours and assumptions will always affect participants' responses, thereby influencing the direction of findings (Finlay, 2002).

Our approach is inspired by Linda Finlay's (2012) perspective on relational reflexivity, where reality is considered the result of co-construction. Research of this kind requires self-reflective researchers who strive to reflect on their own assumptions and the impact theses may have on the research process and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020). To prevent our own assumptions from becoming too intrusive and taking the research into self-preoccupied directions, we have tried to be as reflexively transparent as possible throughout this article.

Data gathering: Autobiographical transcripts

We collected data through a two-step process: The first step involved each of the four researchers involved in the study writing autobiographical transcripts (hereafter referred to as "datasets"). Each of us responded to the question: "What are your experiences of becoming a researcher?"

The resulting initial datasets varied in length from six to nine pages. The descriptions set out in them derived from the wealth of information available to express inner experiences and relational and contextual experiences (Holman Jones et al., 2016), including researchers' families, social networks, colleagues, managers, lecturers, supervisors, fellow students, workplace culture and contextual regulations (such as legislation).

The second step was to undertake an initial analysis and coding of the transcripts. On this basis, we identified five preliminary

themes across the first dataset: I've always had the desire to learn; motivating factors; self-development; realizations; and experience of academia. Based on these themes, each of us wrote a new text which varied in length from five to twelve pages. This provided us with the opportunity to reflect further on the collectively identified themes we had found in the first dataset and co-create the themes we finally settled upon.

Analytical steps

In order to search for and develop themes across data material, we used a slightly adapted version of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), as described by Braun and Clarke (2019). Thematic analysis is not bound to a specific theoretical or epistemological approach and, consequently, offers considerable flexibility. We made a number of adjustments to the six steps of TA (Braun and Clarke, 2019) to ensure they would be optimally adapted to our collaborative ethnographic inspired study:

(1) Familiarization with the data: We read and re-read the first dataset several times. During this phase, we wrote down our initial ideas about possible themes in the material. Given our phenomenological and interpretive stance, we felt 'unencumbered' as researchers and not concerned about identifying 'the truth'. This enabled us to look for recurring themes in the researchers' accounts.

(2) Based on the tentative ideas and themes emerging from step one, the second phase, involved systematically coding all interesting elements in the data. LL coded the first dataset, and then sent the dataset to HH, SL and AB, who did the same. In this way, we developed a rich variety of codes that were representative of the views of all of the researchers.

(3) Step three involved identifying themes among the numerous codes identified in the data. Guided by our research question, we identified five themes from the first dataset: connections and patterns; motivating factors; self-development; realizations; and experience of academia. All the researchers then wrote a new autoethnographic text (dataset 2) based on the above themes. This was done to facilitate new reflections and interpretations as well as provide even richer descriptions concerning the tentative themes identified in the first dataset.

(4) For the fourth step, LL coded dataset 2 before sending it to AB, SL and, finally, HH. This once again provided us with a new set of codes that were representative for all of the researchers. LL then carried out a preliminary thematic coding of the new themes. This resulted in the five themes being reduced to four, which were then sent to the other three researchers for feedback. This step gave each of us a comprehensive understanding of our relationship to the themes, enabling a more thoughtful and clearer dissemination of the themes we all perceived as important.

(5) In step five, the four final identified themes were named as: i. "The tensions within academia as a hierarchy"; ii. "The struggle to become an academic"; iii. "Finding meaning and satisfaction in a new career"; and iv. "Evolving a new identity".

(6) The sixth step involved the preparation of the written report, in this case the article. The writing process was an iterative one in which the first author, LL, assumed primary responsibility for the first drafts of the various sections before passing them on to the three other researchers for comments and feedback.

Ethical considerations

Autoethnography has the potential to reveal much more than simply the life details of individual participants. Since lived experiences can be considered the results of mutual relational and contextual influences, the use of CAE means that participants' narratives about their lived experiences bring other people into the frame, raising a number of important ethical issues.

One particular concern is the possibility that we might over-disclose leaving us feeling vulnerable or over-exposed. That the paper would be published in an arena where our colleagues could well read our accounts is something that moderated the level of disclosure. We helped and supported each other to ensure an appropriate degree of disclosure that felt right.

The research presented in this article has been guided by Norway's National Committee for Research Ethics Standards in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (2021). All potentially identifying information relating to persons other than the study's four researchers has been removed. We have also been transparent about every step taken, in respect of both data collection and the analysis process.

The findings of this study are the result of a large number of relational and contextual encounters. All the same, the experiences of the researchers are personal and revealing to some degree. However, all four of the study's researchers are accustomed to presenting professional experiences and personal views and opinions for research and teaching purposes, internal meetings, and during encounters with the media. We therefore believe that the personal integrity of the researchers has been respected.

Results

Our reflexive thematic analyses resulted in the identification of four themes: (1) "The tensions within academia as a hierarchy"; (2) "The struggle to become an academic"; (3) "Finding meaning and satisfaction in a new career"; and (4) "Evolving a new identity".

The tensions within academia as a hierarchy

All four authors of the article (hereafter referred to as "we") described experiencing academia as a distinctly hierarchical system, one where theoretical and research-based knowledge is valued highly, provided one has the right title. While professors clearly occupy the "throne" at the top, with associate professors just below them, lecturers and assistant professors are located much further down the hierarchy. As LL described it:

> Theoretical and professional knowledge is highly valued in academia, provided you have the right titles. However, lack of physical presence (due to research projects) was poorly understood and recognized by colleagues with lower formal competence. (LL)

This reflects considerable ambiguity within the system. On the one hand, employees in academia are encouraged to initiate research projects and produce large numbers of articles. On the other hand, the 'wheels' must be kept in motion regarding numerous campus-based teaching programmes. All these tasks mentioned are time-consuming and at times difficult to combine. It can therefore be difficult for employees to manoeuvre within a system with such conflicting expectations of its employees.

Our experience is that highly ranked employees (especially professors and associate professors) often claim that their focal research area is crucial for academia in respect of meeting the research-based requirement for educational programmes. Those who spend the most time teaching (usually lecturers) employs a variation of the same argument, claiming that research is less relevant, and that delivering teaching programmes trumps everything. On this basis, some lecturers claim to have put the needs of the students 'before their own needs'. Such conflicting goals fuel constant tension between employees in the academic system. As expressed by (HH):

> There is a built-in tension in the system between education and research. Even as a research fellow, I have had the feeling that research work is generally considered a private affair and that it is perhaps selfish to focus on it. The research work must be justified, while the teaching work is automatically viewed as useful (HH).

This tension between "researchers" and "teachers" becomes a relational challenge that can lead to the two groups using polarized descriptions of one another. On the one hand, those handling the bulk of the teaching may be described as lacking "research-based expertise." On the other hand, those opting to devote more time to research (possibly for promotion-related purposes) may find themselves described as "selfish."

In our experience, management finds it more important to recruit people with the right titles than offer permanent positions to employees who have been teaching for several years. In practice, conducting research raises the status of both the researcher and the workplace, resulting in unspoken frustration among junior staff, who often feel that their knowledge is not valued. While lecturers often want to build their own expertise by carrying out their own research projects, in many cases they are not offered sufficient space and time to do so.

In academia, titles bring status and recognition for both employee and campus. It is crucial for educational institutions to have active researchers associated with its study programmes (Andresen, 2000; Boyer, 1990). This is essential both in order to meet expertise requirements and to be in a position to offer research-based education. However, this is not an unconditional good. Given current pressures on academics to get as many research articles published as possible, the results may not always be of high academic quality or value.

Prolific publication of articles by senior academics may lead management and colleagues to assess expertise as higher and broader than it is actually is. As LL notes,

> You may be one of the senior attendees of a research group meeting, but still feel like the most ignorant person in the room. However, in professional forums, the opinions of researchers are the ones most in demand – regardless of whether they actually have expertise in that field. (LL)

This creates tensions between employees, generating negative patterns which in due course leave researchers and lecturers on opposite sides, nursing polarized views of each other's work and tasks.

The struggle to become an academic

We arrived at certain shared conclusions, both positive and negative, regarding the process of becoming a researcher. For us all, in different ways, the process of becoming an academic has involved struggle.

Firstly, all of us described research as a stimulating activity that entails a combination of systematic thinking and empathy. Becoming a researcher involves mastering both these aspects. The systematic aspect involves maintaining an overview of the field of research, being able to document the work that has been done and reflecting critically on choices made. Of equal importance is the need to work with empathy in relation to the individuals and phenomena under study. SL spoke of using her ability to empathize in a different way than when working as a clinician. As a researcher, she was able to gain insights into the lifeworld of each participant without the follow-up responsibilities associated with clinical practice. Her reflections resulted in this vivid analogy:

> I can't help but think about Elias Lönnrot, who collected folklore to create a national work of epic poetry called the Kalevala, a very long time ago. He travelled around the country [Finland] with a backpack and wrote down stories from Finnish folklore. It may sound like a stretch, but I feel a bit like Lönnrot and that makes me tremendously proud. (SL)

The four of us agreed that research was an activity that could occasionally affect your sleep, family life and personal interests. In addition to prioritizing time for research at the expense of other activities, becoming a researcher also meant having to make difficult choices: for example, choosing temporary research positions with an uncertain future over more secure, higher paying jobs. In some instances, being a researcher might force a choice between adhering to one's personal and professional integrity or complying with the political agenda of a particular commissioning client.

Financial and practical pressures also attended the transition from paid employment to a research fellowship position. As HH noted, "I was forty years old with children, a spouse and a farm – and a job as a therapist – when I discovered that I wanted to be a researcher."

This led us to reflect on the paucity of help offered to those whose life situations (single parents, people with a disability, and so on) added to the challenge of combining research with other obligations. Becoming a researcher requires not only personal motivation but also external support.

We see research as a landscape that is difficult to navigate and in which it is easy to feel overwhelmed and alone. Access to good mentors and contact with others is vital. Novice researchers, perhaps starting off from a lower level of formal education, may feel "threatened," particularly if they confront unrealistic expectations in terms of professional knowledge. Consequent feelings of inadequacy can undermine confidence and result in a loss of focus. As LL put it:

> I've spent a lot of time, well beyond the expected working hours, reading up on everything, including fields that are not within my expertise, so that I could fulfil what I consider unrealistic expectations from those around me in terms of my expertise. (LL)

Finding meaning and satisfaction in a new career

While none of us had anticipated a research career, all four of us expressed contentment in our new role and pride in our current research activities. What we found most appealing was not the status associated with being a researcher but the actual work of research. The joy of finding new connections and patterns motivates all of us: in AB's words, "getting stuck and then suddenly finding a solution is an intellectual orgasm."

We identified traits in ourselves that seemed to make us particularly suited to research work: curiosity, an unstoppable desire to learn new things; eagerness to understand how things are connected. We shared a sense of being in constant competition with ourselves, and of having a compelling desire to make the most of our abilities. We yearned to learn something new, to improve and push ourselves further. SL described it as: "Getting wiser and more knowledgeable has always been a kind of desire for me. I think it has to do with a kind of self-inflicted competition against yesterday's myself" (SL).

Since we had all previously held positions as therapists, we welcomed the opportunity to apply our practical experiences to our research activities and to communicate relevant research findings to those still in practice. We felt motivated to conduct research that could be applied in practice and offer users better services, and as such found feedback useful.

Overall, feedback and support from others were important motivating factors for us all. The enthusiastic, positive and generous responses we received from other professionals, both within Norway and from overseas, meant a great deal to all of us. On the basis of our discussions, we consider doctoral students to be particularly reliant on help and support from those around them, whether managers or supervisors. Praise and a pat on the back at relevant stages of the research were important, as were possibilities to learn, discuss, be challenged and challenge others. HH said, "I experienced it as of great importance to meet motivating and positive professionals who 'cheered me on'." As we see it, novice researchers are in particular need of such support. All of us had experienced periods of loneliness, along with periods of uncertainty and lack of faith in ourselves.

Discussion

Evolving a new identity

For all of us, the process of becoming a researcher affected our sense of identity. As described by LL, "I changed through newfound knowledge. New knowledge made me more critical and led to me to question 'accepted truths'." By choosing to pursue a career in research, we embarked on a process of self-development in which we became aware of the importance of being flexible, of realizing that it was not always possible to plan for all eventualities (more than one road leads to Rome). All of us described how working as part of a team contributed to self-development because it posed demands that were very different from those associated with working on individual projects. Self-development was also described as an ongoing process involving openness to learning new things and diving into new and unfamiliar waters.

All of us wrote and spoke of how our new knowledge made us more critical, causing us to question established truths, whether in respect of our research field or our own selves. We found that acquiring new knowledge strengthened our sense of curiosity and made us aware that this opportunity to learn new things was more important than the salary. Making progress resulted in greater self-confidence, albeit tempered by a reluctance to flaunt our status as researchers. SL put it thus:

> It is not often that I bring up my research activities when first introducing myself. I tend to introduce myself as a professional, a clinician, a therapist and, finally, as a doctoral researcher. But I mention this first when sending e-mails and am often introduced as a PhD student. I wonder when I will finally feel comfortable introducing myself as a researcher. Right now, I'm nowhere near that point. (SL)

The above quote captures the way in which all of us see, or identify, ourselves as researchers who have either completed a doctoral thesis or are still working on one. In the early stages of becoming a researcher, it was difficult for us to know who to identify with, and we occasionally experienced a sort of identity crisis. All of us found it helpful to socialize with others in the same situation and strive to learn more about how to conduct research. At times, we felt that our development was very slow or had stagnated. However, we experienced a feeling of childish pride when others praised or expressed appreciation of our research in progress.

Becoming a researcher is a process that involves considerable tensions and our findings develop a number of themes identified in Bager-Charleson et al's 2020 metasynthesis, particularly to do with a struggle to evolve new roles We concur with their findings that there is room for systemic improvements in postgraduate research to support diversity, access, and opportunity.

Making the shift from a professional field (in our case, therapy) and a job we had mastered to an activity where we had little, or no expertise presented us all with numerous challenges. All of us embarked on a personal journey from being a skilled, experienced practitioner to learning to be a researcher.

Professional fields that combine practical and theoretical knowledge (as in the case of therapy) require both clinical/practical and academic expertise. As a result, many people do not become researchers until relatively late in life. Our findings show that it is precisely the opportunity for further learning and self-development that is so appealing. However, those with a strong practitioner identity (social workers and family therapists, for instance) often find the transition to research confusing, isolating and stressful (Dow-Royer, 2010). For that reason, we wish to highlight the contextual nature of the specific tensions we experienced.

Built-in tensions

As novice researchers, we were aware of a significant 'polarization' between academic employees regarding the most important tasks of their institution. In our experience, employees primarily engaged in research argued that teaching should be subordinate to research-based knowledge, that research was therefore essential and perhaps the most important task of the institution. In contrast, those primarily engaged in teaching tended to regard research as an arena for self-assertion and egocentrism, with those involved in it having little interest in the "greater good." The tension between teaching and research has a long history in academia (Henningsson et al., 2018), and is not something experienced purely at the level of the individual. All the same, it has an impact on the climate and culture of academia. It can be difficult to get colleagues from both "sides" to head in the same direction.

Research undertaken in a range of different national settings (Reymert et al., 2020) suggests that research experience tends to be given a higher priority than teaching experience in the hiring practices of academia. This conforms with our own experience of academia, which we regard as a hierarchical

system where researchers (most often professors) occupy the top positions. Significantly, Norway emerges as one of several countries where teaching is ascribed a particularly low ranking (Reymert et al., 2020). This polarization between two "groups" makes academia a challenging landscape to reconnoitre, in many ways creating a Catch-22 situation where some colleagues will be unhappy whatever one's course of action. It is therefore appropriate to ask why a type of system is maintained that so clearly contributes to polarization, to the pitting of key actors against each other. Perhaps such tensions represent dichotomous understandings of the core tasks of academia?

Given the growing demand for research- and knowledge-based practice, research is set to become even more important. As the literature makes clear, in the current "performative" context of higher education (Archer, 2008; Gale, 2011), there is a pressing need for academics to engage in research. Strong institutional messages convey that teaching alone is no longer a sufficient basis on which academics can advance to tenure or promotion (Andresen, 2000; Boyer, 1990). Consequently, employees who retain a focus on teaching can be expected to come under mounting pressure to engage in research.

As four individuals who entered academia first and foremost because of our interest in research, we find this situation paradoxical. On the one hand, an institution's overall guidelines highlight the importance of research. On the other, colleagues' expectations are often associated with participation in teaching activities.

Conflicting expectations

The process of becoming researchers exposed us to these contradictions. The more 'egotistical' aspects of any pursuit of research seemed to be rewarded by the academic system, resulting in promotions, titles and points. Although none of us characterized titles such as associate professor or full professor as goals in themselves, we recognize that such titles offer considerable opportunities for self-development, including more time for research and greater access to research funding. For researchers, this can result in a conflict between pursuing their research interests, focusing on work that leads to self-development, and contributing sufficiently to teaching activities so as to earn the support of colleagues.

For all four participants in this study, the self-development associated with research was central to achieving a sense of security in their new researcher role. But all of us were aware of an increase in expectations from colleagues and some questioning of our competence. Our initial lack of confidence and tendency to be self-critical of our own efforts thus became exacerbated by unreasonably lofty expectations from colleagues. The path to security in the role of researcher appears to involve considerable conflict between internal and external expectations and polarizing perceptions from within the institution. We would argue that such conflict can ultimately lead to relational challenges which can both poison the work environment and cut into time and effort that could have been used more constructively. As we see it, conflicts and bad blood between colleagues do not necessarily derive from individuals' inadequate adaptability or interpersonal skills; rather they are the result of the way academia is organized.

Why is the academic arena structured in a way that nourishes and reinforces tension? While there is clearly no simple answer, a number of factors and interests appear to be involved (Beerkens, 2018). In the Norwegian context, for example, attempts are being made to raise the status of teaching by providing incentives to engage in self-development in both teaching and research (Storting parliamentary report 16, 2016-2017). However, it seems unlikely that such incentives will provide a solution to the well-established distinction between teaching and research; such an approach may only enhance competitive feelings, encouraging some to take up the incentives while leaving others to do the "routine work". This could create a new hierarchy instead of promoting better integration (Andresen, 2000; Boyer, 1990). If an emphasis is placed on strengthening teaching, there is the risk that this may take place at the expense of research. However, if the institutional focus is redirected towards assessing how expertise can be shared and capitalized on, this might enable everyone to paddle in the same direction.

At times we wondered if the tensions we experienced as novice researchers were simply a passing phenomenon. However, the emotional impact of conducting research is supported by several studies (i.e., Smith, 2021; McQueeney & Lavelle, 2017). Honesty and frankness regarding one's own feelings and experiences may be helpful to other aspiring researchers (McQueeney & Lavelle, 2017).

Rigged for researchers?

In Norway, rising numbers of students are embarking on doctoral programmes (Statistics Norway, 2020). It is by no means certain that, in future, the current conflict between those who engage primarily in teaching and those for whom research is their primary activity will continue. Tensions may primarily revolve around how individuals with research competence divide their time between teaching and research. Since teaching is essential to the short-term operations of an academic institution, research tends to be simply a balancing item in practice. The question then is whether those emerging from doctoral research with a strong desire to continue along the research path will settle for a virtually full-time teaching

position. How will this impact their motivation? Will the work actually fulfil their expectations and dreams?

Our findings suggest that lifelong curiosity plays a crucial role in the process of becoming a researcher. As we progressed along the path to becoming researchers, we experienced a high degree of learning and self-development. However, if after earning our degrees we were to find ourselves consigned to largely routine work rather than given opportunities to conduct further research, this would likely undermine our motivation. Once again, the situation appears paradoxical. On the one hand, research degree courses provide academic institutions with highly motivated employees. But on the other hand, motivation suffers in a situation where institutions cannot provide such employees with sufficient space and time for the pursuit of their research interests. Despite these problems and contradictions, we – as novice researchers – were able to forge productive relationships, often with more experienced researchers, and on this basis to make good use of the considerable opportunities for learning and self-development. We would argue that for researchers-in-the-making, establishing contact with those already experienced in the field of research is essential. All of us had positive experiences associated with the people around us, and this contributed to both our learning and well-being.

However, this leads us to pose the question: What about those who are not so fortunate? Do academic institutions have adequate routines and structures in place to identify and support PhD candidates who may not be receiving the professional support they need? While the situation doubtless varies, it is possible that novice researchers within in a large and complex system often find themselves left to their own devices.

Adjusting to new roles

All four participants in this study experienced multiple challenges during the transition from being an experienced therapist to becoming a researcher. The shift required adjustments on many levels.

To begin with, transition involved moving from a high-status position in practice (where the individual feels secure in their role) to a lowly place in the academic research hierarchy (where the individual feels insecure about everything).

Transition also exposes the individual to different expectations. For example, the therapist role entails familiarization with clients' problems and the expectation of follow-up. In comparison, the researcher's role is the more limited one of collecting data or "stories" (as one participant described it). However, as Mitchell (2021, p. 60) notes, there are also some parallels: for example, feeling anxious about missing out on asking the right questions; asking too many questions; missing something important; and invoking shame.

We would characterise our transition as a period of adjustment, a re-development process towards the goal of becoming productive scholars. Demanding new skills and attitudes, this process was often experienced as challenging. Such transition challenges may be exacerbated in vocationally oriented disciplines such as nursing (Smith & Boyd, 2012), education (Boyd, 2010), and occupational therapy (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2009). Here, novice academics may enter research with strong professional expertise while lacking higher educational qualifications. Loyalty to the practical field can remain strong at first, with such researchers motivated by the desire to give something back. However, individuals may soon become conscious of what is a completely different professional focus. Whereas in the field of therapy, there is appreciation for a job performed within a given framework on behalf of users, research revolves around the individual researcher. Alternative routes for the development of an academic identity are therefore required in respect of new researchers originating from these vocationally oriented disciplines if they are to survive in the current competitive higher education climate (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2009).

Strengths and limitations of the study

We consider one of the strengths of this collaborative research is the fact that the four of us constituted a purposefully sampled group of people with lived experiences of becoming researchers. All four researchers were involved in all phases of the process of analysis, thereby enhancing reflexivity and the inclusion of multiple perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2020). We would argue that we have demonstrated sensitivity throughout the study, and that our inclusion of extensive quotations has reinforced the robustness and transparency of our findings.

At the same time, it could be considered a limitation that the four researchers involved in the study came from broadly similar backgrounds. Further research along similar lines would add nuance to our findings and broaden the range of researchers' lived experiences. Such research might also explore a range of organizational settings, from highly prestigious elite universities to technical and vocational institutions. We would anticipate considerable variations, both within and across national boundaries (for example, the Western Norway University of Applied Science, where three of us are employed, is regarded as having a less competitive ethos than some other Norwegian universities (Lorås, 2020). The Norwegian welfare state also provides some security for those who do not succeed in their academic careers: financial and practical support is available to those who have to, or wish

to, change their employment. Perhaps even more importantly, making a change of career if things are not going well is socially accepted in Norway, where much value is placed on an individual's right to self-realization and independence.

Collaborative autoethnography can be characterized as full or concurrent collaboration (Ngunjiri, Hernandez & Chang, 2010). A strength of this study is that full collaboration was achieved at every stage. As such, the results are truly a product of co-construction. However, this in turn raises questions, including the extent to which co-construction may encourage researchers to lean in the same direction. It should be added that all of us were new to our mixed role of participant-researcher role, and our inexperience may have influenced the results in ways of which we are not fully aware.

Finally, given its small number of participants and its qualitative epistemology, this study does not claim to offer generalizable findings. Nevertheless, we would argue that findings from a small study like this can be transferable to other contexts, at least to some degree. We hope that readers who are embarking on their own academic journeys may find our insights supportive, reassuring, and relevant.

Implications for practice

Our study underlines the importance, for doctoral students and new academics, of receiving support from more experienced researchers. For those transitioning to research from professional practice, the demands are particularly onerous. In such cases, academic institutions need to give serious thought to providing adequate support.

Our research also supports the findings of other studies regarding the ongoing contradictions between teaching and research in academia. In such a context, flexible structures and collaborative approaches which enable academic employees to increase their research skills and competence are to be recommended. Institutions need to provide employees with sufficient time and space for them to undertake research alongside their teaching responsibilities.

Concluding Comments

Within academia, employees' research output appears to outweigh all their other activities (Hamann, 2019; Levander et al., 2019; Van den Brink & Benchop, 2011). Our collaborative research project to explore and make sense of our shifting practitioner-research identities has highlighted some of the tensions and contradictions created by this emphasis. The fact that teaching tasks tend to fall disproportionately on junior staff with less formal research competence creates tensions that require resolution.

Our study has also shed light on the demanding nature of embarking on a research career. Those making such a transition confront the high expectations of senior academics together with demands on their spare time and personal life. All the same, research positions open up important new opportunities for self-development. All four participants in this study found the process of becoming a researcher meaningful and rewarding.

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