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3. ARE YOU OLD ENOUGH TO BE IN ACADEMIA? YOU DON'T HAVE GREY HAIR

Constructions of Women in Academia

PRELUDE

Becoming a teacher educator is often filled with tension. In my case the tension is based on the identity of being a younger female in the academy. According to Connelly and Clandinin (1999), for a teacher, knowledge is entwined with identity. For a teacher educator, identity is interwoven with the lives and knowledge of teachers, children and youth (Clandinin, Downey, & Huber, 2009). In my role as a female academic, my identity of teacher educator is also constructed around my age.

In my previous career as a teacher, my age never entered conversations. Within the university, my age as a younger female academic appears a continual discussion point. Similar experiences have also been shared by academics in the United Kingdom (Archer, 2008).

In this chapter I share my experiences of entering the academy as a younger female. I share my flights of reflection based on a chronological development of a sense of resilience. In my final flights I share my coping strategies of collaboration and developing a strong sense of agency. I also offer advice to a younger version of myself and call upon women to share their stories to provide new meanings of understanding and support.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to give voice to my story on female age discrimination that is yet to be heard by the greater academic community. Only a handful of studies have focused on younger female academics (Archer, 2006; Davis & Petterson, 2005). My stories of experience are often secret and kept behind closed doors. This chapter however brings these stories to the forefront, providing a platform for stories to be shared. The strengths of my flights are the deeper understanding shared about the complexity of being a female in the academy. The stories I share are designed to illuminate personal thoughts and actions, and, at the same time show how I make sense of my relationships with others and their stance in the world (Bruner, 1986).

Context, process and relationship feature heavily in this self-study (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). Hamilton and Pinnegar (1998, p. 236) suggest self study "is the

study of one's self, one's actions, one's ideas, as well as the 'not self'". The six flights allow me to explore the autobiographical, historical and cultural landscapes that influence my identity. I draw on a conceptualization of identity as discursively produced and 'becoming' – yet also embodied and culturally entangled (Hesse, 2000) and produced within multi-layered structural inequalities (Archer & Francis, 2006).

Gladwell (2000) describes the tipping point as the moment of critical mass, the threshold, or the boiling point. While this chapter doesn't have the potential to create a tipping point, it shows glimpses of what could be, and encourages the continued sharing of stories that will challenge the status quo. Through such sharing, a cascade of sustained change can create a tipping point (Gladwell, 2000). Challenging the status quo also allows the grande narrative of females in the academy to be sufficiently displaced, with room created for alternative stories that conform to the status quo. These alternative stories provide an awareness of the moral and ethical dimensions of women in academia, making a significant moral and ethical consideration to the development of women's careers.

WHO AM I?

In this study I examine my career from a social constructionist perspective that emphasises the social processes by which people develop their social reality and knowledge about that reality in an ongoing way in interaction with others (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 1995; Cohen, Duberley & Mallon, 2004) My identity shapes all elements of my academic career. Aged in my 30s, I am still within my early career phase within the academy. In Australia, an early career academic is still within their first five years of academia since being awarded a Ph.D. (Hemmings, 2012; Hemmings. In other parts of the world, such as North America, the early career phase can span more than 10 years (Foote, 2010). Given the difference in definitions around the world, this can appear problematic when travelling to other institutions.

When I originally graduated from my Bachelor qualification, I vowed never to study again. After a number of years teaching I began to want more for my own understanding and decided to study a Master degree full time while working full time. I enjoyed the challenge. After a Master degree I decided to apply for a Ph.D. to continue my research pathway. My partner had previously completed a Ph.D. so I was aware of all the possible twists and turns during study.

During my Ph.D. studies I was offered a full-time tenured lecturing position. During this time I managed to fulfill the roles of working full time as an academic and studying full time to complete my Ph.D.. My working ethic was in overdrive as I completed both tasks. Various academic studies have noted the long working hours of academics, with work spilling into evenings and weekends (Archer, 2008). In my case I would work most weekends. Reay (2000) notes that early career researchers often have to work at double-pace to prove their capability.

After I completed my Ph.D. my working habits continued with weekends. I began to feel a level of age discrimination. I decided to complete more study with another Master degree in a university space where I should strive and better myself (Archer, 2006). Coming from a working background I felt that it was difficult to pass into a 'classed space' such as the academy (Hey, 2003). My younger age appeared problematic.

My initial concern about age can be represented in Australian research. In Australian universities, over 46.1% of academic staff are aged 50 years and over (Hugo, 2008, p. 21). In teacher education, the field in which I work, 62.8% of academics are aged over 50 years (Hugo, 2008, p.21). According to a study by the Council for Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (CHASS), Hugo (2008, p.15) reports:

> It is clear that Generation X is substantially under-represented in the academic workforce compared with other professional areas and the workforce as a whole. There are also some substantial gender differences, among the older lecturing staff, [as] there are four men for every woman aged over 55.

Attrition rates are also high. Female academics in their late 20s and 30s rival that of academics at retiring age (Southwell, 2012; Varmvakinou, 2008). Given that large numbers of older academics are retiring and the rising of student enrolments (Hugo, 2005), It would seem significant to support new academics to build sustainability within the sector (Hemmings, 2012).

GENDER AND IDENTITY

Age appears a highly relevant characteristic in workforce recruitment, performance and performance evaluation (Perry & Parlamis, 2006). Research suggests that men and women experience age, ageing and ageism in different ways in organisations and management (Itzin & Phillipson, 1995; Ilmarinen, 2005). Some studies have highlighted that many women feel they are the wrong age for their career (Duncan & Loretto, 2004; Jyrkinen, 2013), with early mid-age women finding age discrimination a particular issue. Older women also perceive age discrimination. In a study by Jrykinen (2013), older women's knowledge was not valued in the same way as that of their male counterparts. Jyrkinen (2013) concluded that a patriarchal value system tended to exclude 'old people' when they are women.

Gender discrimination also emerges for women in the academy. Many earlier studies show how gendering processes in academia marginalise women and reduce their opportunities (Barry, Chandler, and Clark 2001; Goode and Bagilhole 1998; Margolis and Romero 1998; Prichard 1996; Thomas and Davies 2002; Valian 1998). While gender discrimination is now acknowledged in many institutions as an issue, the reproduction of certain traditions continues to create barriers for women and leadership opportunities.

Only a handful of studies have combined both gender and age when exploring discrimination against women in the workforce, termed by Carpenter (1996) as 'gendered ageism' or 'sexageism'. Gendered ageism is described as a process that

replicates and reproduces the existing gender order (Connell, 1987). Some studies have added appearance to age and gender. Under an intersectionality approach, Granleese and Sayer (2005) describes this as age, gender and 'lookism'. For example, in a United Kingdom study, women in higher education commented discrimination about their appearance alongside age and gender. Similarly in Finland (Jyrkinen, 2013) women's self-presentation of bodies and looks were subject to gendered ageism form an early career stage. Comments would be made about clothing and physical appearance. One form of discrimination identified by Jyrkinen (2013) was the treatment of women as 'girls' by male colleagues and supervisors. In work contexts, 'girling' is a derogatory word that is attached to other genderageist actions (Martin, 2006). Jyrkinen (2013, p. 5) describes the approach as:

> The 'girling phenomenon' is that of calling adult women 'girls' and treating them as such in a disparaging way. It can sometimes be a benignly-used reference made by older men about women that unintentionally infantilises women (in leisure time, such as 'How are you girls doing tonight?').

Intersectionality is an approach used to reconceptualise identities, deconstruct social categories and divisions, and explore multiple marginalisations (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality addresses the simultaneous existence and occurrence of multiple sociocultural categories, such as gender, race/ethnicity, age and class, and how they mutually construct, 'inter-act' and transform each other (Lykke, 2005). In this case it allows the exploration of my personal experiences in the academy as I move through multiple sociocultural categories. I align with the beliefs of Richardson and Loubier (2008, p. 143), that 'people live multiple, layered identities derived from social relations, history, and the operation of structured power.

My identity is based within the notion of being a teacher educator. For a teacher educator, identity is interwoven with the lives and knowledge of teachers, children and youth (Clandinin, Downey & Huber, 2009). From this conceptualisation, we can consider teachers' personal practical knowledge; that is, the experiential, moral, emotional, embodied knowledge teachers hold and express in their classroom practices (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). Understanding teachers' knowledge allows us to develop a narrative understanding about the context in which teachers live and work. Those living as teacher educators live on a continual shifting social landscape. The shifting landscapes continually shape teacher knowledge and teachers' identities as they live out their stories. Clandinin, Downey and Huber (2009, p. 142) explain the complexity of teachers shifting landscapes, noting, "we simultaneously consider our shifting landscapes as teacher educators and the kinds of spaces we might collaboratively shape with teachers as they attempt to sustain their stories to live by as they work in schools". From this realisation, Clandinin, Downey and Huber (2009) suggest that such storied spaces also hold the potential for sustaining the identity of teacher educators. As a teacher educator I am aware of the larger society plot lines that ripple through schools and universities, influencing the contexts and people (Geertz, 1995).

MY FLIGHTS

In sharing my own narrative, I engage in six flights of reflection that explore my own perceptions and experiences. My journey into teacher education is constructed from "a metaphorical three-dimensional inquiry space" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50) and is an engagement with my "story as data" (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 7). It enables me (the author) to capture and communicate the emotional nature of my lived experience as well as capturing the dynamic nature of these lived experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The flights I undertake have not generated an academic, distant, third-person, objective voice (Elijah, 2004; Tynan & Garbett, 2007). Similar to Tynan & Garbett (2007) I have found that reviewers of this approach often ask for more theory and less of personal stories. Striking a balance is difficult but it is hoped that my story of the lived reality in the academy may provide benefit to others.

In each of the flights you will see enablers and barriers to my academic confidence. Towards the final flight I also change my overall understanding of myself as my confidence grows and I become more resilient.

GENERAL FLIGHT

The first flight describes my initial entry into the academy. It highlights the construction of female academics by others, and introduces the concept of a 'golden age' in academia. My isolation becomes evident to the reader.

When I first entered into the academy I realised I was the youngest person in the Faculty of Education. It was initially strange sitting in meetings without anyone of a similar age. I was initially scared to speak. While others spoke about their past in the academy as a 'golden age', I could not pass comment. In a study by Archer (2008), similar findings were also made by younger academics reflecting on their older colleagues. Archer (2008) suggests identity construction for experienced academics is influenced by generational dimensions. In her study, she noted that many of the younger academics questioned the construct of a 'golden age' and talked about human nature to romanticize the past. This became evident to me during many conversations.

During my first week, I would eat my lunch in the staff room. Every day I was told that students were not allowed to eat their lunch in the staff lounge. It appeared that while I had the mental capability to work in the academy, my physical appearance was seen as 'too young'. The construction of a female academic by these commenters appeared someone who was older.

It was difficult to find common ground for every day discussion in the academy. While older staff talked about retirement, my working life was beginning. I was often told 'I had a lot to learn', and that the institution 'may not treat you as well as in the golden age'. I began to realise the extent of my isolation. Sometimes I would go to work and talk to no one for the entire day. While I wanted to complain to my

friends I couldn't. Many of my friends had studied Ph.D.s but were not offered the same changes for entry into the academy.

FLIGHT UPWARDS

My second flight provides an experience of false hope, in which I believe that my age does not contribute to my embodied identity. By being praised for success, I began to question if my age construction was my own creation of insecurity.

Two months after my tenured appointment I secured a large amount of consultancy for the university and an external research grant. The flow on from securing substantial amounts of money during my first two months of a continuous appointment was huge. All of a sudden I was encouraged to engage with the university media and promote my success. I was invited to functions that were usually exclusive for successful researchers. I was now eligible to join research institutes within the university. I was invited to lunch with the university leaders. I was treated a little differently. For a short space of time, I felt like my age did not matter. I had a step on the ladder as an early career academic (Hemmings, 2012). My confidence improved and I began to think about my research career.

During this time I began to question if "lookism" (Granleese & Sayer, 2005) existed. I was no longer marginalized by my physical appearance but rather my academic capability. Or that is what I thought…

My answer came quickly. On a Thursday afternoon I was involved in an intense research meeting with older academics to develop a new research grant application. On Friday morning I wore jeans to work and worked in the café. An older academic from the previous day walked around my table. "Good luck with your assignment- there are only two weeks until the end of semester", he said. He didn't recognize me. I was constructed as a 'student'. Again the concept of 'lookism' (Granleese & Sayer, 2005) dominated my appearance to others.

FLIGHT DOWNWARD

My flight downward has created tears, confusion and anxiety. It provides examples of how my biological age and appearance dominates other people's constructions of who I am. Again representations of being a student overshadow my actual role as an academic. My biological appearance in an intersectionality approach dominates through the concept of 'lookism' (Granleese & Sayer, 2005). My confidence decreased after each experience.

While I was lucky to have a continuous appointment, my age often appeared problematic to others. Before I spoke people would often judge me as inexperienced. For example, at a conference I had just given an interesting presentation on my current funded research project. At the end of my presentation I was happy to have an audience member ask a question. I nodded for them to ask their question, happy

that someone might be interested in my research. They took a deep breath and spoke "It is good research but are you old enough to do this?" I was confused. "What do you mean?" I asked. "Well you don't have grey hair. This is research for those with grey hair", they stated. I gave a fake laugh, trying to defuse the situation and bring the presentation to a close. I have also been asked about what wrinkle cream I use and how I stay looking 'so young'.

I am often mistaken for a student. I remember turning up to mark the university final for the two minute thesis competition. When I tried to enter the judges area I was told students were not allowed, only the judges. I had to show my staff card to show I was in fact an academic. I made my way to the judging area and sat down. I could see others around me, including the audience confused.

The library staff would also perceive me as a student. When I would request a book from another country, I was informed staff were only allowed to borrow. I would again need to show my staff card as proof of my employment as an academic. Similar to Jyrkinen's (2013) study, my self-presentation of body and looks were subject to a form of ageism.

My low confidence was created by personal perceptions. Research self-efficacy (or confidence) plays an important part in an academic's career (Blackburn & Lawrence, 1995). Akerlind (2007) notes that successful academics not only build up a range of research skills, they have the confidence to apply these skills in an appropriate and meaningful fashion. While I had adequate research skills, I was still learning the confidence of how to apply and communicate others not confidence, I needed extra support for my confidence.

FLIGHT TO SIDELINE

My next flight explores my strategies to improve my self-presentation and the concept of 'lookism'. Initially I thought I could make myself look older by wearing business clothes and engage in 'power dressing'. I soon realised that this was not who I was and in a suit I still looked young.

I began to reflect on my own situation and questioned what it meant to be a younger female in the academy. There was nothing wrong with me- I was achieving excellence in research and teaching. I was on editorial boards and being invited for keynotes. I was also asked to engage in visiting scholar positions in other countries. I realised I did not need to change a thing. The situation was external to me. I couldn't change the perceptions of others but I could create coping strategies to deal with comments. I would always have to deal with constructs of age, gender and 'lookism' (Granleese & Sayer, 2005).

A female professor also gave some exceptional advice- "Once I was young like you at conferences and thought who were all of these old women in the room. Now I am one of the old women in the room!". We shared a laugh and a smile. Her journey was similar to mine. This event changed my mindset and spurred me on

to greater things. Hemmings (2010) found similar single events when interviewing early career academics. Single events provided a vote of confidence and appeared to positively influence the construction of researcher identities.

Mentoring is viewed as a means for developing confidence in the academy. Stenova (2009) writes how one-to-one mentoring is an effective approach for those employed in the social sciences and humanities. My above experience was an informal mentoring experience, but it managed to support my confidence. Poole and Bornholt (1998) advocate that procedural know-how is needed in early stages of an academic's career and that various experts need to be sourced to provide information and model practice. From my meeting with the female professor, I was supported from both.

FLIGHT OF PERSEVERATION

My fifth flight explores coping strategies I have initiated to strengthen my resilience. This includes creating informal supportive networks. This technique is reported in the literature by younger female academics (Archer, 2008) as a way of surviving the academy.

My informal support network was created in 2010. After attending a conference, I had finally found another early career academic who was prepared to collaborate and had similar experience to me. We were both considered 'young' to be in the academy. We met for coffee after our presentations and started to realise the synergies between our research interests and passions. Finally I found someone who was like me who wanted to achieve the same goals for their research! My mind started buzzing.

Over the next year our ideas started to converge. We worked together on a book chapter that lead to a co-authored book. This lead to another co-authored book where we realised we could easily work together and support one another. We shared similar goals and expectations. We began to work together on research grants and find other isolated like-minded young researchers. We realised that by working together collaboratively from our institutions across Australia, we could strengthen our research potential. Not long after our first cross-institutional submission we began to see success with competitive grant schemes. As early career researchers we realised we had the potential and strength to produce quality grant applications that could be funded. LaRocco and Bruns (2006) suggest such genuine relationships with colleagues at other universities is also one way younger academics can demonstrate autonomy and professional standing.

Female academic collaboration appears an important coping strategy in the literature. Kochan and Mullen (2003, p. 161) discovered in a study of prolific female academics that an 'ethic' of collaboration developed where women created their own "value system which honours collaboration that helps keep them afloat during difficult times". Debowski (2006) also argues that building research networks helps younger academics boost credibility in their field of research and generate further

onfidence in their ability. Collaboration for early career academics may also "be prudent in uncertain times as higher education reform advances in higher education contexts" (Tynan & Garbett, 2007, p. 423).

FINAL FLIGHT AND WHERE TO NEXT?

Feminist writers such as Aronsen and Swanson (1991) argue that graduate women should not simply aim for career success in terms of the current system. Rather the goal for women should be to redefine academic authority. While I cannot change an entire system, I realise I am able to redefine the behaviours around me and model the behaviours I consider appropriate.

In my final flight I realise the importance to model professional relationships and conversations that are devoid of discrimination. Archer (2008) found younger female academics acting similar ways in her study. While I cannot change the beliefs of those who have come before me, I can shape and model those coming into the academy after me through active mentoring and engaging in support groups for early career researchers. It is important that we share our stories to develop new meanings and understanding of what is means to be a female within the academy. Such stories are short but they can provide substantial change. Discussing the stories through retellings also allows different interpretations to be shared to help analyse and develop strategies for people in similar situations. Hafernik and colleagues (1997, p. 31) state that by "extending the circle of researchers, we broaden the perspectives and add voices to the field".

I would also suggest to my former self to seek out other female academics who are of similar age. The research literature suggests that early career academics who are collegial and have 'corridor conversations' with colleagues may contribute to professional identity development (Baker Sweitzer, 2009; Mann et al., 2007), leading to a reduction in isolation. It is these relationships that provide supportive mechanisms for all parts of academic life. They provide opportunities to again share stories and construct and deconstruct meaning. Stories also provide opportunities to share different perspectives and viewpoints as a shared meaning in created. Shared meaning can create new understandings of age, gender and 'lookism' for female academics.

CONCLUSION

If Australian universities are to find and retain new academic staff, more support is needed for younger academics. Support can include collaboration, mentoring and 'corridor conversations'. Australian universities could simply benefit from listening to stories from younger staff members.

The self-disclosure shared in this chapter provides insights into my experience of navigating the complexity of academia as a younger female. The chapter has shared my coping strategies in dealing with 'lookism'. I have been able to reflect on the importance of building collaborations with colleagues of similar age and the

importance of sharing stories with one another to help develop new understandings and perspectives. The sharing stories are also two-fold. Not only does the listener learn about coping strategies, the teller also learns different ways of interpretation of the meaning of the story through continuous retelling to better understand the situation.

In the future it is hoped that the academic community is more accepting of females of all ages and appearances. Through active modeling of how to treat one another, women can enact change in their immediate world. An active approach also allows the support of confidence for future research endeavors. While it is impossible to challenge an entire system, it is possible to bring about small change in the world.

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