

Keeping Our Boots on the Ground: Independent scholars maintaining academic identities

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Introduction

The “challenge of non-university researchers” has still to be met. Nevertheless, research beyond traditional university structures is here to stay: indeed, in subjects where overheads are low and cutbacks are high, such as the humanities and social sciences, we could be on the verge of a new age of independent scholarship. While the academy is “rethinking,” independent scholars are busy doing (Cole, 2012, para. 12).

Background and Purpose

In the last two decades, global economic trends have impacted higher education at international, national, and state levels. Reduced investment in higher education has resulted in faculty layoffs, employment of short term and intermittent faculty and a contraction of the traditional trajectory of tenured faculty pathways (Bowden & Gonzalez, 2012). In the United States, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia, these changes resulted in increased numbers of part-time and adjunct academics who are peripheral to academic institutions (Basten, 2012; Bowden & Gonzalez, 2012). Tenure track positions are redesigned to meet specific 21st century market demands and educational innovations decentering the role of faculty in their own governance (Flaherty, 2016). Greater numbers of online degree offerings and packaged online courses designed for teaching greater numbers of students, refocuses teaching to the moderation of course analytics. As Herstein (2016, para.1) explained, in this model of the “Corporate University,” students are “customers,” education is a sellable commodity, and the professoriate is replaced by disposable

teaching staff with neither wages, nor benefits, nor job security (in other words, easily intimidated lackeys), whose only option is to cave and cavil to their corporate directors, or face the abyss of being independent.

As one sector of the “diversifying workforce” (Whitchurch, 2010, p. 245) in higher education, there is a need to embrace what it means to be positioned, valued, and legitimized as independent scholars. Researchers have explored the tensions, challenges, frustrations, and realities of being an academic experiencing the volatile shifts of the 21st century enterprise of higher education (Clegg, 2008; Churchman & King, 2009; Evans & Nixon, 2015; Gordon & Whitchurch, 2010, Henkel, 2010, Sutton, 2015). There is also increasing research that examines the careers, academic development and challenges faced by non-tenure-track instructors and research associates (Anderson, 2007; Basten, 2012; Feldman & Turnley, 2004; Goldman & Schmalz, 2012). What has been left under-examined, are the perspectives and experiences of those who attempt to maintain academic research work outside institutions (Knight, Baume, Tait & Yorke, 2007; Orlans, 2002) as independent scholars.

The phenomena of academics working outside the walls of institutions and making significant academic contributions is not new (Gross, 1993). In fact, PhD’s have been independent scholars as early as the 20th century (Pomata, 2013). Cole (2012) and Pomata (2013) identified that in the US, independent scholars became even more widespread as universities disgorged ever-increasing numbers of PhD

graduates onto a stagnant job market. In response, many highly trained researchers, who may have hoped for academic positions, become by choice or necessity freelance researchers. They work within non-academic organizations (Whitchurch, 2013) or “under their own steam to produce scholarly articles, books and discussion papers, without university administrators breathing down their necks or any chance of tenure” (Cole, 2012, para. 5). They continue to work because they have created a life as a scholar that they were later reluctant to change (National Coalition of Independent Scholars, 2016). Consequently, less boundary-laden forms of academic identity are emerging in the field of higher education (Whitchurch, 2009).

We address the “abyss of being independent” through a lens on academic identities as independent scholars in unique career trajectories. In this work, we represent the nuances and lived experiences of transferability in terms of the academic identity. We also frame and substantiate a new lens for independent scholars regardless of discipline who conduct ethical and meaningful research. Thus, our purpose is not to juxtapose our experiences to other academic disciplines, but rather share our journeys as independent scholars.

In 2010, Joyanne and Makini met at an American Educational Research Association (AERA) annual meeting. At that time, J was an assistant professor in the field of teacher education at a Caribbean university and M was a newly minted PhD in the field of education. They were intrigued by each other’s work on teacher development and vowed to work together to get some work completed for the 2011 AERA meeting. In 2011, by happenstance, Anne was present in a meeting at AERA 2011 that Joyanne attended. That meeting was the starting point of an experimental collaboration among women 14+ women who were early career academics, some of whom were on the tenure track. Makini was invited by J to join the group. The members of the newly formed group interrogated their experiences of informal peer mentoring for

career advancement as a focus of research between 2011 and 2016. The result was that the large group had several successful research and presentations at successive professional conferences based on peer-mentoring within the global network Adams et al., 2016; Agosto et al., 2016; Bristol, Adams & Johannessen, 2014; De Four-Babb, Pegg & Beck, 2015; Esnard et al., 2015; Thorsos, Johannessen, Beck & Nganga., 2016; Unterreiner, De Four-Babb, Kern, & Wu-Norman, 2015, Wu, Thorsos & Kern, 2016)

In time, each of our academic positions changed. In 2012, Joyanne resigned from her assistant professor position and has not worked full-time since. Anne resigned from a tenure track position, relocated as a research associate then educational consultant and since 2015, has been a learning specialist. Makini worked at a four-year institution as a Research Associate. In these new contexts, we remained engaged the research work within our global network. This collaborative experience continues to play an important role in helping us to maintain our academic identities.

In this paper, we explore how we, all former faculty, have navigated, negotiated and maintained our academic identity as independent scholars engaged in academic research. Through autoethnography and narrative inquiry we articulate our selfhood as educators and academics to shed light on the ambivalence often assigned to the work of academics unaffiliated with traditional institutions. Our work contributes to the emerging body of literature on academic identity and provides insight into workforce shifts in higher education. Through our research work in the field of peer mentoring, we have managed to keep doing and growing as academics. We have managed to ‘keep our boots on the ground,’ and keep marching on as researchers, and in so doing keep our dreams of being academics alive. If we had not done so, we would have nothing left of our academic lives, a part of ourselves that we had invested so much in. Boots on the ground is not just about traditional notions of combat, but with regards to

our scholarly work, it is about marching forward to continue vitality as researchers due to the marginalized status assigned to an academic outside the institution.

Theoretical Underpinnings

As independent scholars, we grapple with the questions, what does it mean to be an academic? Who can “rightfully” claim the legitimized title of independent scholar? How are academic identities cultivated and sustained outside of the traditional brick and mortar structures of the academy? Our academic identities and trajectories are fluid and complex, shaped by our socio-cultural circles, the institutions we were educated in, and the professional paths we chose with our advanced degrees. Yet, we often find ourselves battling monolithic constructs of who is considered and legitimated as a scholar, particularly given our changing academic climate. In this section, we problematize these traditional ideologies and offer a more inclusive framework that advances independent scholars as academics.

Independent Scholars

The term ‘independent scholar’ was coined in the USA in the 1970s and 1980s, and used as an alternative to other constructs such as ‘private scholars,’ ‘freelance scholars,’ ‘non-affiliated scholars,’ or ‘self-reliant academics’ (Pomata, 2013, p. 198). Orlans (2002) suggested that in practice, an independent scholar is “anyone who believes he or she is one, and whom a professional association, granting agency, or library accepts as one” (p. 12). Others define independent scholars as people who do “serious intellectual work outside academe” (Gross, 1982, p. x). While they actively pursue knowledge in various disciplines, carry out research, present and publish scholarly work, they are not associated, supported, or financed by an academic institution (Allan, 2011; 2012; National Coalition of Independent Scholars, 2016; Orlans, 2002).

The National Coalition of Independent Scholars (NCIS), formed in the USA in 1989, also noted that some people become independent scholars after retiring from professorships or leaving tenured positions to devote more time to research. NCIS extends its membership to scholars who are not associated with academic institutions, adjunct faculty, people tangentially associated with academic institutions but who do not receive financial and/or research support for their scholarly activities, and unique individuals whose scholarly work proceeds successfully despite the lack of advanced degrees, or of any academic degree at all (National Coalition of Independent Scholars, 2016). The NCIS explained that an independent scholar status depends on a person’s peer-reviewed scholarly production, a criterion similar to that of a traditional tenure track scholar. Independent scholars are recognized internationally by the Canadian Academy of Independent Scholars, the Independent Scholars Association of Australia, and the Ronin Institute based in the United Kingdom.

A series of incidents may lead one to become an independent scholar. As Busse (2011) humorously suggested:

...one merely needs to defend one’s dissertation without a secure job prospect in sight. The next step, as affiliation privileges cease to exist, is to contend with university firewalls and forms where one suddenly has to define one’s identity beyond the clearly demarcated hierarchies of grad student, assistant, and associate professor. Continuing one’s job search into year two or three while teaching as adjunct instructor is generally accepted as merely a stepping stone (Busse 2011, para. 1, 2).

Independent scholars, at any phase of their professional status, are “free of institutional shackles” such as work agendas and publication deadlines. They pursue original work, based on their personal interests and are not constrained

by institutional requirements and pigeon-holes. Scholarly research then is in the direction of the pursuit of one's interests, love for learning and continued passion for knowledge (Gross, 1993; Orlans, 2002; Pomata, 2013, *The History Woman*, 2015). In so doing they "perform a service to scholarship and, at times, to society" (Orlans, 2002, p. 22). But that does not mean that for them this is leisurely, idle pursuits to fill time. As Busse (2011, para. 3) clarified, "I research instead of watching TV or reading a book; I write instead of meeting with friends or going shopping; I edit and do professional activities at the cost of my family time." Independent scholars thus advance knowledge and understanding of the issues they research, and continue to make contributions to their disciplines.

Still, misconceptions about independent scholars abound. Allan (2012) identified five misconceptions held about independent scholars: (i) the title independent scholar is a placeholder title for unemployed PhDs; (ii) independent scholars are crackpots; (iii) independent scholars are retired professors; (iv) academic publications are not open to independent scholars; and (v) that independent scholars are wannabe professors or failed academics. She countered these misconceptions by stating that most independent scholars are actively involved in research and/or may be otherwise employed and many integrate their scholarly work into their daily life. Additionally, published work for independent scholars is often peer reviewed and presented in various forums including international conferences.

Many independent scholars face major challenges including: (i) access to library facilities (Bivens-Tatum, 2014); (ii) access to funding for research, especially research that requires institutional affiliation to access grants; and (iii) feelings or perceptions of failure prompted by misperceptions by others, including university affiliated academics, of independent scholars as "unemployed," "amateur," "goofy," "crackpot," "unhireable" (Allan, 2012; De Four-Babb et al.,

2015; Orlans, 2002; Pomata, 2013). Orlans (2002) characterized this misperception as being "less informed about new intellectual trends and funding agency interests, less experienced at writing proposals, less able to discuss them with informed colleagues, less likely to have prominent references" (Orlans, 2002, p. 22).

Both Pomata (2013) and Busse (2011) hint at the financial emotional dilemmas faced by independent researchers. Pomata (2013) researched the experiences of independent scholars among eminent, women historians. She concluded that: these women do not seem to have perceived their condition of outsiders, vis-à-vis academia only or mostly as a source of depreciation of their work and intellectual identity. They saw it as the means of preserving an autonomy and range of interests that an academic affiliation would not allow. Though the condition of the independent scholar was a cause of insecurity and frustration in their lives, it was also a powerful inner source of intellectual courage and freedom (Pomata, 2013, pp. 209–210).

Busse (2011, para. 2) affirmed that "staying an independent scholar is actually quite hard: it requires the continuing desire to do research without the non-monetary but nevertheless quite real remunerations university positions afford."

There is much research needed to be done on independent scholars. For example, how many independent scholars exist, what are their professional needs, and what policies best serve their interests (Orlans, 2002). Gender inequity is also a critical issue as it relates to the academy and in the spaces of independent research and scholarship activities, however, this is not a focus of our analysis. Although, these issues are critical to understanding the totality of the experience of the independent scholar, they are beyond the scope of this paper and are recommended for future research. However, through this paper, we propose to give insight into how independent scholars negotiate their academic identity.

Academic Identity

There is a growing literature focusing on the identities and experiences of academics in higher education institutions (Evans & Nixon, 2015; Gordon & Whitchurch, 2010). For example, Billot (2010) suggested that the question that is being asked more frequently as the roles and responsibilities of tertiary academic staff are disrupted and reframed, is “what makes an academic today and how does the academic perceive their working identity?” Traditional conceptions highlighted the ‘academic holy trinity’ of teaching, scholarship, and research (Nixon, 2015). Feather (2016) argued that “these activities can be viewed as ‘badges of office’ or symbols an academic may have that aid in constructing and proclaiming their identity” (Feather, 2016, p. 112). However, Feather’s (2010) definition belies the complexity of the term academic because it’s based on what academics do, rather than who they see themselves to be.

Individuals identify themselves as academics, in relation to an organization and as a member of the academic profession (Billot, 2010). In other words, academic identity is closely aligned to one’s professional identity. According to Billot (2010, p. 713), professional identity is underpinned by three concepts: (i) professional values (what I profess); (ii) professional location (the profession to which I belong); and professional role (my role within the institution). Furthermore, the nexus between teaching, scholarship and research will play an important part in the formation of academic identity (Feather, 2016). Academic identity is therefore intrinsically bound up with the values, beliefs and practices held in common with others of that affiliation (Billot, 2010).

Fitzmaurice (2013) argued that academics engage in an ongoing emotional and intellectual process of identity construction and deconstruction as they negotiate their professional identity in regard to their various roles. Through his research, Feather (2016) found that participants experienced difficulty in

defining the term academic identity because they struggled with the roots of where their identity lay. Consequently, academic identity is always under construction, dismantled, re-formed and so heterogeneous that people can no longer define the term. On the one hand, when viewed broadly, academic identity may be a function of community membership that is grounded in interactions between the individual and two key communities: first, the discipline and second, higher education as an institution (Henkel, 2005; Quigley, 2011). On the other hand, a narrower view of academic identity may be related to authenticity and success (Quigley, 2011).

To summarize, academic identity cannot be regarded as discrete subcategory; it is a “constitutive element of whatever it means to be a whole person engaged in academic work” (Nixon, 2015, p. 14). Academic identities are both personal and intimate, as well as public and institutional (Nixon, 2015). Academic identity is tied up with what you are committed to, what you value and what you strive for (Fitzmaurice, 2013). Thus, we agree that with Nixon’s (2015) statement that “academic identity is a bricolage, provisional and unfinished.

Academic Trajectory

Guzmán-Valenzuela & Cortés, (2013) defined an academic trajectory as “the space that academics can create and stretch to pursue their own academic projects” (p.3) and involves academics’ own hopes, concerns and practices. For most academics, their academic trajectory exists within the university (Strike, 2010). However, the transformation of higher education and its institutions within the last two decades, have made them more complex and differentiated spaces (Clegg, 2008; Whitchurch, 2013). Universities are “complex and disparate organizations where different constructions of ‘academic’ coexist” (Fitzmaurice, 2013, p. 613). Consequently, the nature and context of academic identity is undergoing change, and there is an increasing emphasis on the importance of the local context in developing an

understanding of the position of academic identities (Clegg, 2008).

Further, academic identities can be developed formally and informally inside the institution, and informally within mentoring networks (De Four-Babb, Pegg & Beck, 2015). For the independent scholar, the notion of academic identity evolves in a self-created professional pathway as opposed to the institutional or traditional pathway or already established norm. The trajectory of the independent scholars who work outside or at the margins of academia, pursuing their research interests independently, is quite different, for a variety of reasons, including choice (Pomata, 2013). We sometimes negotiate our trajectory within the third space as our place.

In this paper, we begin to interrogate the notion of what it means to be an academic as an independent scholar beyond 'place' or location in an educational system (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2004) and suggest the notion of an independent scholar as an added way of thinking about being an academic. While independent scholars are situated within the changing landscape of higher education, their identity is being constructed outside of traditional institutional affiliations. Given these conditions, we seek to provide deeper understandings and insights into being a professional independent scholar. In the next section, we describe our methodology and describe the data collection and analysis methods used in this study.

Methodology

In conducting our research, we employed a blend of autoethnography (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner's, 2010; Hughes, Pennington, & Makris, 2012), collaborative dialogue (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013), and narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; McMullen & Braithwaite, 2013). These methods support our understanding "that multiple realities exist and that data reflect the researcher's and the participant's mutual constructions, concerns, (and)... situated experiential realities" (McMullen & Braithwaite,

2013, p. 95). Our blended approach reflected our position in that at any one time, we were both researcher and participant in this study. Our aim of this research is to make sense of the independent scholar, through the lenses of our experiences (Chang, 2013).

Ellis, et. al. (2010) described autoethnographic research as a method of "process and product" (2010, para. 9) in which the processes for the examination of autobiographical phenomena and experiences are the source of study. We used our personal experiences as independent scholars as primary material (Chang, 2013) and examined them within the cultural context of the academy. We foregrounded our points of view, and drew upon personal narratives to bear witness to our insider experiences as independent scholars (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013).

The use of narrative inquiry complemented our capacity to reflect on the complexities and ambiguities of our knowledge and personal stories. Our narratives enabled us to focus our attention on the "social, institutional and cultural practices" that shaped our narratives and the construction of personal and organizational identity (McMullen & Braithwaite, 2013, p. 93–94). We used our narratives to engage in a back-and-forth movement between experiencing and examining, and observing and reflecting on the meanings gathered from our experiences (Wamsted, 2012). We engaged in collaborative dialogue: writing, then probing, reflection, sharing with meaning making. This process is referred to by Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez (2013) as collaborative autoethnography, which "focuses on self-interrogation but does so collectively and cooperatively within a team of researchers" (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013, p. 21).

The use of autoethnography, narrative inquiry and collaborative dialogue helped us to uncover the meanings in our stories as independent scholars within the social and cultural contexts that inform them (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013). Through these

methods we were able to “take an active, scientific and systematic view of personal experience in relation to cultural groups identified by the researcher as similar to the ‘self’ [i.e., independent scholars] or as others [i.e., traditional academics affiliated with institutions] who differ from the self” (p. 209). In so doing, we could make sense of our ‘lived experiences’ (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and in writing our stories include the complexities of these experiences as sources of data.

Data Collection

We scheduled and conducted five Skype meetings for our collaborative dialogues and inquiry process. Before each of the five meetings, we each drafted an initial narrative that was prompted by the reflective questions listed in Table 1 below. Each set of questions, except the first, was generated from themes that arose during our previous collaborative dialogue. We uploaded our written narratives into an electronic folder in Google Drive. In this ‘cloud space’ we captured written thinking on academic identities and lived experiences as independent scholars that became our data. We then each took turns reading our journal entries in our voices aloud on Skype. Simultaneously, the other two used the comments tools on Google Docs to document questions and reflective responses. These memo notes using Google docs comments function offered an additional tool for ‘real time’ commentary and to document our collective insights. This allowed us to follow the processes set forth in Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang (2010) to allow one of our narratives to stir another’s memory, offer questions and unsettle assumptions. Through these participant researcher processes we documented our collaborative dialogue and thinking to extend meaning across narratives and progressively develop shared understandings of lived experiences navigating our professional lives.

Table 1 Reflective Questions and Discussion Topics of Each Meeting

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|--------------------------|---|
| Collaborative Dialogue 1 | What does it mean to be an academic operating outside of an institution? What benefits/challenges to being in this position? Where are we now, where would we like to be? Why do we call ourselves ‘independent scholars’? |
| Collaborative Dialogue 2 | How does branding a career and our professional progression to now shape how we see ourselves as independent scholars? |
| Collaborative Dialogue 3 | What are our stories around a sense of power, failure and privilege? Why with all this privilege of we recognize with being an ‘outsider’ do we find ourselves experiencing a sense of grief? |
| Collaborative Dialogue 4 | How can we heal the woundedness of loss (that we may at time feel) and creating new stories? How can we tap into the core of what we do that aligns with who we are? |
| Collaborative Dialogue 5 | How do we sustain our resilience through our membership with CYF as a source of intellectual, social and emotional capital? |

Making Sense of Our Stories as Independent Scholars

In the following sections, we present our findings by first offering short excerpts of our narratives generated through our collaborative dialogues followed by a discussion of our themes. Our stories reveal that our identities are dynamic and emerge from our personal and geopolitical contexts, constructed over time (Billot, 2010). They also align with what Clegg (2008, p. 329) explained about identity as being “part of the lived complexity of a person’s project and their ways of being in those sites which are constituted as being part of the academic.” In this light, our stories share our ways of being in the world as independent scholars.

Joyanne’s Story

Joyanne completed her doctorate in 2004 and worked as an assistant professor for almost four years on contract at a new university in the Caribbean. She taught in the Bachelor of Education program and was responsible for setting up the practicum requirements for undergraduate teacher education students. She left this position when her husband’s job was relocated to North Africa. While there, she worked as an adjunct professor at an American university teaching in the Masters of Education and Post-Graduate Professional Educator

programs. Civil unrest in the country caused her family to be relocated to the United Kingdom. While in the UK, she completed a full-time MBA at a regional university. She described her journey to independent scholar status as follows:

When I was six, I knew that I wanted to teach and work at a university. At 17, I decided I would be a secondary teacher and teach Geography. At 22, I realized that dream, and worked for 6 years before getting married and leaving the job and the professional life that I knew behind. I used the time to gain a Master of Education degree in the hope that I would become a vice principal and then principal—a dream that I later had to relinquish when I again left teaching and moved to England. By then I was at the end of my doctoral degree and recognized that teacher education could be my new professional career.

When I went back [home], I returned to high school teaching but worked on developing my teacher educator capabilities. When the opportunity came to move into teacher education, I readily made the jump. I became an assistant professor working in the field of teacher education. Then after 3.5 years, that career came to a screeching halt when I moved to [the north African country] as an expat. “Expatriate wife” was my new title, one that I was in no way comfortable with... I accepted the post of adjunct assistant professor and that worked well until we were evacuated and then I became a retired assistant professor. “Retired? But you look so young!” people would say. I would smile and coyly reply, “Thanks, but I am of the age to be retired.” Then I took on the title of full-time MBA student. And now, I adopt educational consultant, independent scholar and retired assistant professor.

Anne’s Story

Anne completed her doctorate degree followed by academic positions in teacher education at a private university and a regional

state university in the deep south. The achievement gained by obtaining a research associate position at an ivy league research center resulted in a move west. A year later, she relocated to the southwest working remote on two consulting projects. One was writing a policy paper with state stakeholders and the other PD curriculum development for an urban school district to be digitally delivered. These opportunities offered new ways of understanding how a depth and breadth of knowledge could be transferrable in new ways. The desire to continue to work with college students prevailed. This led to a new variation of a career and a position as a learning specialist in a large athletic department with student athletes. It was here that a revitalization of spirit and new ideas on education and scholarship took place. Each of these transitions entailed learning new cultural and political norms, extensive research activity and sense of loss that was bittersweet inside the transitions. She wrote in her journal:

There is both a relief, a woundedness and a liberation outside of my former institutional positions I long for a sense of belonging, ritual (graduation, project completion, creative autonomy in teaching planning and practices, engagement with students) ... Who was I and what was my identity if not defined by a faculty title? I was a researcher, published scholar and highly knowledgeable of education policies, systems and politics. Is this a ‘place’ I want to be? Where was meaning in the achievements of status if my joy was being siphoned? A new way of practicing my knowledge ... At the heart of my professional passions was teaching and college age students. I sought new thinking, new ways of viewing my abilities and uncertainties and found a new position veering from a traditional route yet affiliated with a university setting. It’s odd to experience and be near but not in the academic side per se In a very different space of athletics and sport, among celebrity personas and highly paid (beyond academic positions) coaching talents was a contrast. This is theatre mixed with education supports and a decreased intensity of pressures. So much of my thinking tied to a traditional

academic role... my curiosities and continued desire for more learning is leading me to lengthen my research agenda. I found a niche ... and yet working with students I continue to be a voice for and advocate for a consciousness about students' sociocultural contexts and their educational experiences. But I continue to ask: What is my professional identity and my personal association to being an academic?

Makini's Story

Makini graduated from a prestigious research-intensive institution in education. While in graduate school, she got married and made the decision to stay in the city where her husband works as a tenured professor. This decision has led her to sacrifice career pursuits outside of her geographical area. Her area in social foundations of education has particularly been affected by the shrinking and highly competitive job market. As a result, she held various one-year appointments and adjunct positions at varying colleges. She now works as a Research Associate and Education Consultant, and is involved in various community task force agendas related to education, equity, and race in her city. Makini narrated:

I am an Afro-Caribbean first generation scholar. I was the first in my family to obtain a Masters and PhD. I went straight through school. I completed BA at 21, a MS at 22, and the Ph.D. at 30. My family saw me as a career student. Higher education became a part of my identity. I spent many years navigating the culture at predominantly white institutions, and dedicated my non-dissertation work to helping undergraduate students of color navigate and successfully graduate college. Although I was fortunate to have completed my schooling at a young age, I had very few years of experience as a classroom teacher. After leaving graduate school, I was a theorist and educational researcher, ready to take on the task of assistant professor. After all, for eight years, I was groomed to conduct research, present, write, and engage in scholarly activity by some of the most

accomplished scholars. When my expectations did not become a fruition, I felt I had lost since my identity since much of who I am was intertwined with higher education. Research and scholarly work was what I knew well. To leave academia and my work as an educator seemed like a foreign body...unnatural, but in order to survive and earn a living, I had to think outside the box, be creative, and learn how to leverage my skillsets outside of academic spaces.

Through our stories and reflections on the theoretical frame of our research, we are able to make sense of what it means to be an independent scholar. Our sense making is a juxtaposition of theory and the constructs of independent scholars, academic identity and academic trajectory as a lens for the insights we gained through our narrative research. The themes of affirming our professional identities as independent scholars and maintaining our academic identity further illustrate how we negotiate being independent scholars and how academic identities can be thought of more holistically with regard to the world of academia.

Affirming our Professional Identities as Independent Scholars

In analysing our narratives, collaborative dialogues and memo notes of our discussions, we were guided by and sought to answer the following questions: How did we come to characterize ourselves as independent scholars? How does this compare to the research on independent scholars? How does our experience refute the misconceptions about independent scholars?

In terms of our academic trajectories, each of us attained a doctoral degree and pursued full-time academic positions in a school of education. Coupled with life challenges, including keeping a family intact and migration shifted us from maintaining these positions. No longer did we fit into the defined hierarchy of grad student,

assistant or associate professor, and at that point, our university “affiliation privileges ceased to exist” (Busse, 2011). We chose to continue our scholarly work outside of the academy (De Four-Babb et al., 2015) by identifying ourselves as independent scholars as a way to maintain our academic identity.

We are independent scholars because we maintain an active, collaborative research agenda, publish our research in peer-reviewed journals, participate in community service, and lead professional development sessions to teachers. In academia, these commitments are considered the ‘holy trinity’ of the academic landscape, where faculty are expected to teach, conduct scholarship, and provide service to the university. Thus, the term independent scholar legitimizes our place at the academic table as it identifies our continued level of productivity and engagement as educators in the academic arena although we not affiliated with a university or on an academic tenure track. However, our realities are such that we must straddle two worlds, having one foot on the margins of academia (through active research and scholarship), while having the other in the broader community (through our engagements as education consultants).

Misconceptions about independent scholars discussed earlier, revolve around perceptions of who independent scholars are, what they should be called, and the validity of what they do. We acknowledge the challenges that independent scholars face, but counter the misconceptions based on our lived experiences. As the academy continues to grow and produce new scholars, more academics have met increasing challenges finding positions in traditional academic institutions. Many of these scholars, like ourselves, have continued to produce research despite not holding a traditional research or tenure track position. We make the case, acknowledge, and affirm independent scholars as viable professional academics. Through our research and in our presentation discussions, it is clear that *naming* ourselves as independent scholars is critical to dispelling any

misconceptions about the professional credibility and intellectual contributions that are made through our work. It is in this naming that we also empower ourselves. Our work reflects the rigor and integrity in our continued research, publications, and presentations at national and international peer reviewed conferences.

As independent scholars, we have the freedom to step into various spaces with social and cultural competency and with the language / literacy of the academic institution. We can wear multiple hats that can be multi-faceted. This gives us the freedom to activate the dynamics of our identity and shine in any new space that we occupy. For example, our collaborative dialogue on personal branding led Joyanne to consider how to take her brand to a new level. After our meeting, she journaled:

*So, I got myself some business cards.
They have my name, qualifications and
the words Educational Consultant and
Coach to describe what I do. I know my
brand: hardworking, social and keen to
help others develop. I certainly hope
that my brand shines through all I do.*

This same discussion inspired Makini to develop a website, create a representative logo, and crystalize her personal brand as researcher, diversity education consultant, and public speaker. She also focused on revamping her curriculum vita and LinkedIn profile. Anne also re-branded her LinkedIn profile. The intentional branding of our multifaceted talents developed *within* academia was aimed at the transferability of skills for new ways of marketing ourselves to the broader education community.

Although independent scholars are often siloed (isolated), there are networks that offer ways of connecting and interconnecting, but independent scholars can be integrated into other traditional groups. For us, our global network of academics has decreased our intellectual poverty (De Four-Babb et al., 2015) and reduced our isolation. One aspect of our mentoring

experience that has helped to reduce the isolation is our opportunity to work with a variety of other women in the group, including new academics on the tenure track, tenured academics, and those near retirement. Our work is driven by the synergy and care (Thorsos, Johannessen, Beck, & Nganga, 2016) of the group that reflects the African proverb “together we go further.” Our affiliation with Curve-Y-FRiENDS (C-Y-F), a global network of women scholars, provides social capital (Esnard et al., 2015), because it enables us to maintain our independent identity through collaboration with other academics across the globe.

This global network is comprised of two key pre-existing peer-mentoring groups and a third peer group of individuals who were previously unaffiliated: (a) the Caribbean Educators Research Initiative (CURVE), (b) the Female Researchers in Education, Networking and Dialogue (FRiENDs) and (c) the “Y,” representing the Spanish word for *and*, as well as a set of individual members who were neither CURVE nor FRiENDS members (Thorsos, Johannessen, Beck & Nganga, 2016, p. 58). It is through this combined C-Y-F network that we continue to invest in our intellectual growth through our research and engagement with other professionals in the academy.

We keep our boots on the ground as independent scholars by maintaining an active academic agenda, which includes active scholarship pursuits and service in the broader community as education consultants. We research and write because we enjoy these activities and value our contribution to various bodies of research. This involvement requires internal self-discipline, ongoing research, invigoration of new ideas and being intentional in our curiosity to continue to learn and contribute to knowledge bases.

Maintaining our Academic Identity

In this section, we explain how our unique trajectories, including our involvement in C-Y-F, influenced our academic identity and helped us to

build resilience. There are varying levels of resilience that we employ as independent scholars. Our positions are complex, carrying with it highs and lows as we tread new waters as participants in a fast-evolving landscape. On the one hand, we feel privileged to join the ranks those who identify as independent scholars (Pomata, 2013). There is freedom in being an independent scholar, particularly for J who is supported financially by her spouse. The absence of tenure track or job pressure is at times empowering and liberating because it allows us to focus on the research work we enjoy without university restraints. Joyanne writes,

How can I not see my current position as powerful? I control my time, the research I do, the things I want to get involved with. I am not limited, restricted or dancing to the drum of any institutional requirements. When I go on conferences, I pay my own way, do my own thing. In that, I have power.

For Anne, while performing consulting work, the freedom to engage in freelance scholarship (Pomata, 2013) was liberating because there were no academic department pressures, teaching schedule, or tenure time clock with which to adhere. She explained: “*There is both a relief, a liberation and a bittersweetness outside of my former institutional positions (tenure and research center) in a consultant role.*”

While there is power and liberation in our work outside the academy, we also sometimes grieve the loss of participating in the academic cadre of the university. We sometimes miss engaging in intellectual spaces of teaching and learning from the rich critical exchange of dialogue with our students. We sometimes enter an emotional slippery slope of feeling a sense of loss and failure, despite our accomplishments. M addresses this point by writing,

I read somewhere that Ph.D.'s feel a sense of failure when they don't do what the academy groomed them to do. We were groomed in

research institutions to publish, conduct research, write well, teach. So when we don't do these things after graduation, we feel like we are failures for not attaining said positions, or accomplishing these tasks.

Although it is not uncommon for scholars to feel a sense of failure, we pushed each other to interrogate these internal battles and challenge the origins of self-defeating and deficit thoughts. Through our discussions and journal reflections, we learned that navigating social spaces and defining (which often feels like defending) what we do can be emotionally charging. For instance, while sharing our stories in a SKYPE call, we all nodded our heads in agreement, laughed, and said "Yes!" to the common experience of attending an international conference on research in education as an independent scholar. Often within the first few minutes of meeting someone, the inevitable question gets asked, "so what do you do?" In these spaces, stating our position as an independent scholar is rarely validated or recognized causing us to lament the days of our tenure at the university. Joyanne wrote,

I sometimes mourn the loss of the sense of belonging that I had as a full-time employee with an academic institution. This becomes more acute when I am asked where do I work. There is little privilege in saying that I do not work. I never use the term unemployed, although I am.

Anne similarly stated this narrative in her journal:

Dovetailing into a sense of failure occurs when I find myself focused on having worked so hard to obtain a degree, the invested time, and sweat equity into the demands and professional growth/development multiple moves . . . and the perceptions of others who interpret the meaning of those moves. As a former faculty career mentor, this feeling emerges when colleagues with whom I have been affiliated with prior to my current professional position asks the question of 'so

what do you do?' or 'why are you in this current position'?

It is sometimes difficult to attend social or networking events knowing that the question will arise. Although we have a prepared 15-30 second 'elevator speeches' ready to respond to the "what do you do" question, we can't help but notice the difference in responses when we say, 'independent scholar.' For those unfamiliar with the term, the response is often a nod followed by a puzzled look. Some inquirers will ask a follow up question like, "...so you maintain research without monetary compensation or credit towards tenure?" while those outside of academia would liken our position to that of a "career" or "glorified" student (both of which M has been called).

On the other hand, we receive a different response when we can attach our work to an established institution. In these latter instances, many are easily able to make sense of what we do through a quick cognitive process of sorting and classifying. Their responses, in these cases, are often a head nod, smile, and the simple "oh, okay. Nice". These responses demonstrate recognition, understanding, and a subconscious approval of the work we do. We can only postulate the reasons for these varied responses. While some are uncertain on the meaning of the term, we believe many inherently subscribe to the structural hierarchy within the academy that holds a high regard for those in established tenured positions. When we encounter individuals with these inherent and unconscious biases, we can't help but feel the sting and psychosocial jab towards our professional identities. It is also in these instances where we miss the days of attaching our work and affiliation to an academic post in the institution.

In those moments of self-questioning and self-doubt, we used dialogue to encourage each other to appreciate our status as independent scholars. As C-Y-F members, we see mentoring as rooted in the reasons for sustaining who we are as academic women, and intentionally created a

welcoming space of self-healing and acceptance. We encouraged each other to enjoy these daily moments by tapping into the things we love, appreciating the work we do, and giving back to the communities in which we live. While taking these self-preservation teachings into account, Joyanne wrote,

It is in these times that I remind myself that these quiet periods are preparation for what is to come. That I should enjoy my free time! So many others would like to be in this position.

Makini similarly wrote,

There is a spiritual quote that says, "in your darkest times, you think you are buried, but instead, you might be rooted for greater things." What an awesome perspective on recognizing our importance, to bloom where we are planted and to stop and smell the roses.

We recognize there is benefit of being an independent scholar, but at times can share the experiences of loss of the invested time building careers on tenure tracks that is not immediately recognized in academic spaces and new career pathways. In these instances, our SKYPE discussions became mentoring sessions of healing and resiliency. We reminded each other to stay resilient, keep current, and innovative in the work we do. We shared insights on emotional resilience that is needed to sustain the sometimes career psycho-social emotional balance as an independent scholar.

For Anne, C-Y-F provided an academic community of support that aided her transition on a career path away from tenure track, to research associate, to her current position as a learning specialist in an athletic department. Anne wrote:

I had the recognition that an identity as an academic/independent scholar has to come from an internalized identity of my construction. My C-Y-F community offers me greater insights into this identity. I am

known in this community of support. Here, I can interrogate my professional identity in a space with women whom I have the sacred echoes of history in being known . . . being grounded and offers a source of vitality to be who I am with value and status.

Also, our involvement with the C-Y-F mentoring network allows us to maintain our academic identities through an active publication record (Adams et al., 2016; Agosto et al., 2016; Bristol et al., 2014; De Four-Babb et al., 2015; Esnard et al., 2015; Thorsos et al., 2016; Unterreiner et al. & Wu-Norman, 2015, Wu et al., 2016). In J's words, "the C-Y-F network has been like a drip-feed [lifeline] to academia." In this vein, the network has allowed us to maintain our involvement of research and scholarship through collaborative writing projects.

Although engaging in scholarship through C-Y-F has allowed us to build intellectual and social capital (Esnard et al., 2015) by obtaining scholarly status quo achievements, we also recognize the importance of an established network (Unterreiner et al., 2015). We mentored each other on professional branding, and articulated the knowledge and competencies we bring to our work as consultants on research projects and policy papers, and facilitators in educator professional development, curriculum, and teacher training. Throughout, we supported each other to align our identities and highlight skillsets that were both valuable in academe and that are now applicable in our individual professional roles and communities.

Conclusion

We have renewed our knowledge in this work that identities are neither static or time specific, but continually changing as we continue to make meaning of the 'academic self' (Billot, 2010; p. 711-712) within and outside of the academic arena. These narrative experiences of independent scholars offer hope to others and how they might also launch a pathway for their own work in the face of greater changes ahead in

academic institutions. At this time, traditional routes for academic careers were once clearly laid out now are more nuanced and complex as the enterprise of academia re-invents itself. As a result of the shifting trends in the higher education landscape, it is possible that independent scholars will make up a larger part of the workforce as more degree holders find fewer academic or tenure-track positions available. This economic and professional conundrum will lead many to seek opportunities outside of the academy. Yet, the narratives of this growing body of academics in non-traditional spaces have been largely ignored in the research literature (Anderson, 2007). In an attempt to create a more comprehensive view of the experiences and scholarly practices of these academics, our study provides important insights into the professional experiences and the psychosocial journeys of three independent scholars who are not affiliated with or in an academic role at a university. We provide insight into the ambivalent and sometimes invalidated spaces we occupy.

Independent scholars bring a wealth of intellectual and knowledge capital, and come with competitive skill sets as researchers. They cultivate an acute understanding of how to problem solve using evidenced based approaches. We assert that there is great potential for innovation and transformation as independent scholars make key contributions within, alongside, and independent of traditional contexts. The inclusion of their experiences and contributions shifts the knowledge base into new directions and away from academic settings as the source of knowledge capital.

In this paper, we framed possibilities, ways to conduct inquiry and extend the work that keeps our academic identities as independent scholars flourishing. Future work in this area can address the nuanced influences of race, class, and gender on independent scholar identity. This area of research will continue to inform our understanding of how other independent scholars keep their boots on the ground.

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