Chapter 8: Beginnings and Ends

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<u>Where are we now?</u>

We want to begin with a poem by Karin Oerlemans (2007, p28-29) about her doctoral experiences:

Today

Today
Searched seventeen journal articles
Read two books
Round 3 obscure references
Understood a new concept
And…

I wrote two hundred words today
The sun called me
To come and dance
And smell the roses
And asked my spirit to join the birds in wheeling and diving in the
azure sky
But I sat behind my computer screen
With my back to the window
So I would not heed its cry

I wrote two hundred words today
My friend called me
To come and relax
And do a coffee
And asked my soul to join the shoppers hunting bargains in the
lunch time throng
But I sat in my home office
With the phone off the hook

So I would not hear her call

I wrote two hundred words today
My children called me
To come and play
And build towers
And asked my body to join in the game of hide and seek and let's
pretend
But I sat at my desk
With the door closed tight
So I would not feel their joy

I wrote two hundred words today
My supervisor rang
And how I went
How did I go?
And wondered about the progress I made in the writing of my
endless theme
And I told her with pride
That I felt I'd achieved
'I'm really going along,
Today…'

As we complete this particular collection of 'evocative narratives' (Ellis and Bochner 2000, p744) we want to acknowledge the personal and individual nature of the experience of doing a doctorate and being a doctoral student. Like Sikes (2009) we know that using and promoting such a methodology is challenging for the espoused 'science' that the academy is built on. Nevertheless, as she goes onto argue:

> …auto/biographical approaches also remind us of the significance of the individuals, of the importance of the personal, without which the collective could not be. Herein lies their power to unsettle some of the foundations on which the academy is based! (169) So what Griffiths (2003) calls "little stories" are important because, "…it links voice to narrative by taking the particular perspective of an individual seriously: that is, the individual as situated in particular circumstances in all their complexity". But

we are also mindful of Griffith's alarm bell that: "telling one's story may help in self-realization but may also be an exercise in selfdelusion. Voice has to be treated with the same criticality as other autobiographical expressions…" (2003: 81-82).

Consequently in this final chapter we will both recognise the validity of the individual stories but also examine sameness and difference, and importantly we will give recognition to the bigger picture in which the reported lives have been lived and emplotted within this text.

Oerlemans shows how intense the doctoral process is, not least the choices made at the interface between life as a student and life in general. In this sense doing a doctorate is a personal journey, it is the individual who registers for the degree, who is allocated a supervisor, who writes the thesis, who goes through the viva and who is awarded the degree. Consequently, the doctorate is based on the capacity to exercise agency, to frame and carry out a research project, and to write it up in ways that show a contribution to knowledge that is of publishable standard. Progress can be rapid and slow, writing can flow and be of a dazzling standard and can be tortuous and bland – all in the same day. In the chapters Barbara talks about the final stressful rush to finish and print the text in the midst of teaching abroad and having painful toothache; while others talk about the complexity of interplaying family with work and study, where Jennifer talks about how she "wept silently" through the troubles in which her thesis writing was located. The thesis becomes and remains (even after graduation) a member of the family. So while much depends on agency, it is the structures that shape and control our capacity to exercise agency that matter, and a doctoral student cannot be successful without being able to juggle a range of demands on their time, not least partners and children who expect to be loved and cuddled. It is a long process that demands a huge amount of commitment from partner and family. At this point we could stop, as many books on 'how to do a PhD' focus a lot on the technical side of what needs to be done with advice on how to do it. However time management and having sufficient emotional intelligence to carry you through the tough times will only get you so far in thesis writing. We did not want to produce such a text, because for ourselves the actual technical delivery of the thesis is only one part of the story.

Doctoral study impacts on a person's life in ways that may not be fully apparent at the time. As a group of prospective authors for this book we got together, each told our story,

recognised differences and sameness, and the emerging themes. So in this book we have asked each other to do what Penny calls "memory work". In doing so we have not so much told the story of thesis production but how the thesis is located in our lives and the issues surrounding this. We think this matters. This is not to elicit sympathy or congratulations on getting through. The more we talk about this then the more the realities of knowledge production are opened up to scrutiny, and the more we can begin to understand the relationship between learning and life. There is much to be said about what knowledge and forms of knowing count and who are regarded as legitimate knowers. This is not about the sanctity of the new theory or the original piece of work, but whether we, in Bourdieu (1990) terms, know the game in play, whether we want to play it, can play it and want to change it. Not least because the stories are inflected with confidence reducing internal voices of 'can I do this' and 'should I be doing this'? This is particularly crucial as others will comment on our work both formally and informally, and even if they don't know what it is about, they will have a view and will give advice that can both enable but also deflate. This does not go away, as even though we have played the game and secured top of the tree positions in the HE hierarchy, like Gunter and Fitzgerald (2007) we recognise that while people may assume that we are now at the centre of things, in reality we continue to experience peripheral marginality. Consequently we intend to adopt Holland and Lave's (2001) approach to understanding narrative production to analyse the texts where we have emplotted a story of our experiences. In doing this we speak from a standpoint that there is no formal beginning or end, while registration and graduation may provide vivid and necessary organisational boundaries to a doctoral project and thesis, in

reality the antecedence of a study and ongoing trajectory from the study is a life's work. It lives in our pasts and our futures, and is deeply embodied. It is evident in our posture, our emotions, our language and our being.

What do we know about ourselves?

We take from Holland and Lave that who we are is never settled but is a social practice where "we 'author' the world and ourselves in that world" (2001:10). Consequently, the "history in person" (p5) idea is helpful because we recognise that our place within an institution such as a university through doctoral registration is not necessarily equivalent to our place as a person. The interplay between the two means that there are struggles as the two come together at the desk, in the making of choices and in understanding who we are. We have shaped the PhD process through who we are, as well as being shaped

by it. Our multiple responsibilities as student, partner, mother, employee, citizen, daughter, are not fixed categories into which we move during a day but are always in play, where our identities are dialogic (Holland and Lave 2001:9). Consequently, while Oerlemans (2007) image of the lone student at her desk making choices about study and other activities is a powerful one, and easily recognisable, it is our contention that the individualisation of the doctorate is by its very nature a social process. Holland and Lave (2001) talk about boundaries were we can attempt to live our lives separate from others, but we inevitably involve others with whom we present the self every day. There are power processes involved, where power can be exercised over us and with us and by us. We have all shown, to use Holland and Lave (2001), examples of "selves formed in and against uncomfortable practices that they cannot simply refuse" and "selves formed in and against practices that afford them privilege" (p18). So writers in this text have experienced both oppression and emancipation in their lives, and within the doctoral process this has sometimes been simultaneous where the dialogics of identity have been the place where individuals recall that conscious learning has happened. For example, Heidi talks about how racism prevented herself and her husband from getting jobs but how an academic gave her the opportunity to study for a doctorate with a studentship grant. So the chapters make visible the history within and about the person in ways that are not settled. While the stories are complete for the purpose of this book, they are not complete for the authors, as we all expect that we will continue to reveal aspects of the role of the doctorate in transforming our lives as we live our lives. The contexts in which we now live and will live will continue to help us to understand the role of intellectual work in enabling us to think and act differently and the same. There are a number of themes that we think are essential to engaging with this notion: not least how we came to be doing a PhD and how we did it.

All of us talk about the unexpected nature of finding ourselves registered for the PhD. There is strong evidence of coming from backgrounds where attending higher education was not normal and of routes into higher education that do not fit the linear patterns of education systems or the smiling faces looking out to us from university brochures and websites. There is a powerful emotional connection with study, where by studying gender Penny wanted to give something back after rebuilding her life; for Jennifer it was the opportunity to take her skills and knowledge as a teacher, trade union leader and activist forward through a post colonial study; for Barbara the lived contradictions of policy around educational inclusion and the standards agenda stimulated a focus on teachers who have children perceived as different; for Helen it is the intellectual and professional field that she

finds herself in that is the focus of study with a commitment to opening up the purposes and practices for scrutiny; Gloria makes her racialised identity both the object and subject of her project with a commitment to hand on an improved legacy for future generations; and, Heidi in conversation with Kate, outlines her work on the intersectionality of class, race and gender with a view to opening up analysis about institutionalised discrimination. Our studies are deeply located in personal experiences, both good and bad, and the passion for study comes from the interplay between who we are and what we read (and how we recognise silences).

While the starting point is with ourselves, the self is validated through the intellectual tools and conceptualisations generated by study. Penny fell in love with sociology, Helen with Bourdieu, and Barbara with Foucault. The transformation in people's lives lies with the power of theory to stimulate theorising, to generate perspectives and to explain the situation we have found ourselves in. As Gloria notes, it is the back and forth between theories and data that is exciting. While we had all experienced and know about oppression, we now had a language, a voice and a platform from which to speak, and we now know that how power is operating in our lives is widespread and institutionalised. Power works through social practices, through what is done every day in ways that are assumed to be normal and accepted. This can be enabling, as all the writers show that they had opportunities that they grasped in most unexpected ways. People within the system, usually university teachers, suggested, encouraged and opened up study in ways that our story tellers had not previously realised could be for them. And yet, power can be debilitating through the impact of gender for Barbara and Penny, class for Helen, race for Jennifer and Gloria, and the interplay of all three for Heidi. This produces ways of knowing that are valid and can enable research to be lived and pedagogic. All talk of experiences of not fitting in, of being black in a white world, of being working class in a middle class university, and what this means for the construction of identity and self worth. Penny gives examples of the tensions and contradictions this generates, not least through how you come to see yourself as not a proper student or a fraud who will be quickly found out. Identity work is a risky business, and what the stories show is how silence is used to marginalise and how often this becomes a strategy for living in a world that you don't understand and where you may not be understood. Why we all decided to do something as unsafe and dangerous as a PhD with topics that challenged the legitimacy of existing structures is in many ways quite baffling. It cannot be clearly answered, there is much buried in the stories, but what does shout out is that there is a moment in time where

values, ideas, and sheer determination come into play with the structural opportunities that are generated.

What does it mean to have a doctorate?

We are all members of the academy. This is what the PhD has done for us. It is a validation of research competence by demonstrating technical proficiency and making an original contribution to knowledge. Credentials matter in the game of academy membership, where the knowledge production process has it is own rules, even mysteries, and we have learned to know this through our experiences – some positive, some negative. However, we also know this is a man's world: the cultures are masculine, with claims for rationality where much is actually about realpolitik. It is a classed, raced and aged world. While we women do climb the organisational ladder, and our PhD's have been a ticket to career development, we know that as game players our position remains tenuous. And, we may challenge the ladder not only because our ability to step onto it and climb it remains limited, but also because the social practices surrounding it can be alien. We are located in a troubled and troubling place, and drawing on Lather's (1991) analysis of how we can be situated both "within" and "against" (27). We are most definitely within the academy with all its privileges and aspirations, but by being there we are also changing the academy because we are against the ways in which people like us can be positioned.

We can understand this quite graphically through a theme that has emerged from within the stories. All the writers are intensely aware that as women they have experienced the conflation of biology with social practices, where as Connell (2002) states our bodies and our lives are categorised as 'pink' or 'blue' from birth. We talk about this through recognition of what it means to learn to be a good girl. Gloria talks about the "mask of being a good black girl", Penny talks about being the "good student", Jennifer talks about the complexity of being a 'good' mother, wife, daughter, sister, aunt and friend, while Barbara develops this by talking about becoming "good wives andmothers" in ways that are classed because a grammar school girl is good in ways that are different from the working class girls who would be good by becoming factory workers. Being good is not about achieving for the self through education but by marrying right, as Heidi shows it is about marrying a lawyer or a doctor. Being good for females means focusing on dress and grooming in order to be sexually attractive, but at the same time being passive. Waiting is

an essential feature. To be asked out, to be complemented, and to be allowed to participate. There is a lot of coping through waiting in the stories, and this links with the experience of being silenced and decisions to use silence in order to handle discrimination. Waiting is evident because socially acceptable lives were being played out through marriage, children, and low paid jobs. However, there is much in the stories that shows that we have had to rework what it means to be 'good' so that a number of us could break out of situations, such as unhappy and abusive relationships at home and/or at work. There are times when the coping and waiting stops. However, being good and being recognised (and praised for being good) does remain, as being awarded the PhD is an example of being a good girl as we have worked within the system and followed the rules, and we cope with being marginalised in spite of our credentials. Getting the work done is applicable to fieldwork as it is to housework.

What interests us is that even though we have legal rights that protect us from abuse and enable us to gain access to study and to work, it is still the case that problems in everyday lives remain. Rusch and Marshall (2006) are helpful here because they talk about "gender filters" which are how people handle gender issues in organisations (university, workplace, home), where:

> …the filters appear as reactions or responses to situations where gender equity is a subtext. The responses, based either on explicit reasoning or tacit assumptions, express a value position for gender equity. (2006:232)

There are eight filters grouped into three: first, filters that are based on anger that such an issue should be raised alongside denial that it exists; second, filters where there is recognition of the problem and claims to support equity can be made but when issues arise then behaviours and decisions are not consistent with this; and, third, filters where events as "defining" and "teachable" moments can lead to learning and change, not least by people who operate as the "outsider within" as a respected colleague but who can "navigate gendered interactions" (p243).

Our chapters show evidence of experiencing anger and denial regarding how we have come to be dialogic in our identities, and there is evidence of how painful this can be, not least through experiencing colonising and decolonising processes. As Barbara shows, as women our roles have been defined by the state through how welfare and family are

conceptualised, and the state has had to concede the need to establish rights to change such approaches. Nevertheless as Heidi shows denial was evident in her own parents, where her mother hid in the cupboard when her grandfather came to visit so that his white daughter-in-law was invisible. Helen talks about denying her right to have a voice. Gloria tells the story of how her best friend referred to children who pushed into the dinner queue as "those ignorant black bastards", but then denied that this included Gloria who herself denied that she was wanting to be seen as acceptable by white teachers and friends. The second set of filters operate in ways that are subtle and can be contradictory, but do ensure that gendered practices continue. For example, Heidi describes how the grant and no fee system enabled her to go to university, so that she could afford to study and not worry about getting a part time job or accumulating debt. She recognises that for a short period of time there were opportunities for people like herself to go onto further study and to make a contribution to society. This has now gone. So while the commitment to access and the rhetoric of widening participation is evident in government policy, the actual practices necessary to achieve this have been removed.

The third set of filters hold possibilities for change because they can "disrupt the institutionalized practices, highlight equity as an important value, and frequently modify conduct" (p239). It seems to us that the stories have more evidence of this within them, not least because over time the writers have come to understand the other filters, and are working towards such understandings as past tense experiences. Having learned to be outsiders, often with a sense of being inferior and doing inferior things, then what the stories illuminate is how we have learned to be proud of who we are, and how we can work within and against to create the teachable moments. As Penny shows, we can translate our achievements in our personal life into our academic life, and vice versa. Such productive activism has often to be subtle and considered, we get it right and we get it wrong. Jennifer talks about how new programmes in the Caribbean have been developed, students graduated and the University has not collapsed or had its mission damaged, quite the reverse. Gloria examines her emergent realisations about her identities, and how through her practice she can create her own culture. Barbara talks about how she realised that the texts she was using did not speak to her, and how through her research she has sought to make a contribution to how issues of social justice are researched. Helen identifies how through her work on field mapping and conceptualisation she has been able to give recognition to thinking that is outside of the mainstream. Nevertheless as Heidi shows, how you live this contradictory life is constantly challenging, not least because

there may be many teachable moments amongst family and friends which may not always be welcome. Being singled out as different by your own community is problematic, not least as Penny shows the burden of being a role model can weigh heavy.

What comes next?

The simple answer to this is that life is what comes next. While we have achieved a lot in our lives, and we are not alone in acknowledging such accomplishments, we are mindful that the constant interplay between structure and agency means that while we seek to establish our agendas it remains the case that we are always being scripted and judged. Academia may seem to be as fixed as the buildings that house us, but as Jennifer notes it remains contested for lots of reasons. Neoliberal cultures and associated managerialism continue to challenge our values and seek to make us into knowledge brokers who must compete in the market or be redundant. We have read the books and lived the experience of performance targets, and we know the damage this continues to do to our lives where Heidi links it to her illness. Penny notes the greediness of work and home, and our experiences confirm Blackmore and Sach's (2007) analysis of the way in which we are 'outsiders' in what should be our own world but isn't:

> …as new immigrants they are inside, but as managers, remain on the outskirts of the culture, while bringing priorities. As women, they are 'strangers in a familiar world, dominated by men. Their gender leads to a range of cultural processes of assimilation, ghettoization, and positioning as the 'other'. (p22)

Audit systems can run counter to productive research cultures, and so as Heidi notes you have "to stay on top of the food chain" and this is perpetuated by endemic concerns about ability, achievement and distinction. Indeed, we might ask if this book will be returned in the Research Excellence Framework in 2013, and if so will it be graded at 4*, 3*, 2*, 1* or unclassified. Such are our lives that we have to take this seriously, but such is our commitment to challenging the boundaries that we will continue to publish what matters and not just what can be counted.

We are not the only people who want to ask serious questions about women in the academy, and like Mahony and Zmroczek (1997a) we aim to keep the issues alive. There

is much in their edited collection about working class women that resonates with the stories we have written. They identify how class remains a feature in lives but it is also a source of pride, and how "authors write of their feelings of anger and guilt at being part of the academy, at the same time as being excited by intellectual work" (Mahony and Zmroczek 1997b: 5). We have found that the issues our stories raise generate similar positions: we are held back but go forward, we are made to feel inferior but we continue to feel secure. Indeed how this is studied and theorised is central to our agenda as well, not least the complexities of the scholarship within the academy regarding identity and recognition. Fraser (2001) illuminates these matters where she argues for a politics of recognition based on justice or "participatory parity" (33), and so the claims made in these stories for recognition are relevant to meeting her test: first, "that the institutionalization of the majority cultural norms denies them participatory parity" (p35), and in our stories there is much to confirm that this has been the case, and while there have been important legal cases there remain structural (women paid less than men for the same job; fewer women and black professors) and cultural (the rules of the game) injustices. Second, "that the practices whose recognition they seek do not themselves deny participatory parity – to some group members as well as to non-members" (p35), and in our stories there is evidence of just how complex this is, particularly how the studies, careers and personal lives are about the individual as a social and socialising person. Furthermore, while we are a group of authors in this book, we are not a social group, but instead the intersectionality in our lives is such that we need to look beyond being biologically women in order to examine who we are and how our lives may or may not have impacted on others.

It seems to us that we have tried to enable others to join the journey with us, or take advantage of the opportunities created by our activity. We do not claim this to be special, but instead our lives have been rather ordinary in many ways, but there are examples of how people who have written about their lives here (and who are reading this) who have achieved new ways of doing things that have brought advantage to others. We will probably never know if others have been disadvantaged as a result, and it would be helpful to our learning process if such stories were made available. What we are saying is that this book could be portrayed as the stories of the privileged few who have broken through and got their recognition through a doctorate. It seems that we have learned the rules of the game and used them to write the stories and have them published. This reading of the stories could be made through a retrospective claim of success, but we have positioned ourselves as people who did not set out to do that, where success is open

to interpretation, and where we could have been elsewhere and very happy being there. The struggle for what Fraser calls "participatory parity" is about lived lives that were and are complex, there has been planning and there has been serendipity, but importantly there has been a personal experience that has been storied in ways that demonstrate how the person takes and creates opportunities, and deals with adversity, or doesn't. And, how values developed through family life and just sheer living have helped to shape what has been done, what might have been done, and what might happen next.

Consequently, we want to begin from a position of equity, where we are worthy to be in the academy and we can filter the difficult encounters through how we define and act on those moments. This is what will fill our lives and work as we move on, not least because it is optimistic and connects with our sense of agency that has been revealed through these stories. We hope that others will be encouraged to write their stories, and we need more studies about what it means to be a man in a man's world, to be white in a white world, to be middle class in a middle class world, to be heterosexual in a heterosexual world. While we women may often be a fish out of water in the academy, what we don't know enough about is what it means to be "a 'fish in water'" because "it does not feel the weight of the water, and it takes the world about itself for granted" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p127). Such a project would be illuminating by generating teachable moments for us all. In thinking about such projects and engaging with change agendas that seek to enable lives rather than produce audit data, we take sustenance from Arendt (2000a, p181) who states: "without action, without the capacity to start something new and thus articulate the new beginning that comes into the world with the birth of each human being, the life of man, spent between birth and death, would indeed be doomed beyond salvation".

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