Analyzing Terse Stories: Socialization Into the Academy

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Abstract: This paper is an ethnographic analysis of the experience of PhD students earning a doctoral degree in an AACSB accredited university in Atlantic Canada. The key findings of the analysis are the likely unanticipated requirement of graduate students to completely immerse themselves in the learning environment for four to six years mastering the theoretical foundations and research methodologies of their chosen fields. Students also spend substantial, and no less important, time learning how to be academics. This paper explains how these two processes are intertwined and how, through socialization, students can understand and succeed in their roles.

Key Words: doctoral students, learning environment, socialization

Introduction

The study of business education focuses strongly on MBA and undergraduate programs, as well as executive and continuing education, but tends to ignore our PhD programs and how our future faculty members are developed (Mitchell, 2007). As academic identity begins to develop during the PhD education, it is important for us to understand how that development takes place.

The authors of this paper completed the course component of a doctoral program as a cohort. Storytelling has been a deeply embedded and encompassing aspect of our PhD experience, from our first days in new student orientation to the present day, through

graduation of three of our members. In formal and informal story-telling episodes, new students are introduced to program expectations and images of success. Storytelling became an important way to build bonds amongst cohort members and students from other years, as we shared experiences that we turned into our own stories. Most importantly, we told stories to each other as a way to make sense of our new lives as academics (A. D. Brown, Humphreys, & Gurney, 2005).

Following in the reflexive tradition of Humphreys (2005), Learmonth and Humphreys (2012), and Vickers (2002), we are intrigued, as researchers, with the role storytelling played in our success. Drawing on Gabriel's (2000) own goals, and in response to Vickers's call for "those of us in academe… to write about what we know" (2002, p. 619), we ask what the stories of doctoral students, those stories both told and not told, tell us about the transformative nature of the doctoral school experience. Our status as insiders of the program and as participants in the study enables us to interpret the terse stories emerging from the study participants and sheds light on the role of researcher as a co-creator of narratives (Segercrantz, Tuori, & Vilen, 2008).

Our research, in which we invited all current and former students in the PhD program to respond to a set of questions about our PhD experiences, resulted in two main areas of analysis— empirical and methodological. In the first, we analyze the stories gleaned from participant responses as to the importance of the PhD experience in the socialization process of becoming an academic, and what the student stage of the socialization process entails. From a methodological perspective, we use our empirical data to examine the concept of the terse story (Boje, 1991), contested within the literature as to its validity as a story (Gabriel, 2000), analyzing its strength and value when both the researchers and the participants are deeply embedded in the research context. We demonstrate the value of the terse story found in written data where the shared past experiences of researcher and participant, the inclusion of the researcher as participant, and the iterative comparison of stories across several author/participants constitute the context for within which terse stories are developed and analyzed. This shared context enables the richness of interpretation of these terse stories.

Theoretical Foundations

Doctoral Education

Academics grow and develop throughout their careers. Akerlind (2005) posits that development progresses hierarchically through stages of becoming more productive and efficient in work output, achieving academic credibility and recognition for work, improving the quality and effectiveness of work, accumulating personal knowledge and skills, increasing the depth and sophistication of understanding in the field, and contributing to disciplinary growth and change. While Akerlind's (2005, 2008) studies start at the beginning of the formal academic career, academics begin their growth and development during their doctoral school years. It is during these years that potential future faculty begin to understand what a career in academia entails (Austin, 2002) and start to be socialized as an academic as well as a PhD student (Golde, 1998), while deciding whether or not to pursue academia as a career. They are in the early stages of Akerlind's (2005) first academic developmental stage of becoming more productive and efficient in work output. We have extended Akerlind's model by applying her framework in a detailed examination of this first stage.

Doctoral students, regardless of whether they come directly from their undergraduate or masters programs or from a career in industry, seem to lack an understanding of what, exactly, a doctoral education entails (Golde & Dore, 2001). The biggest area of frustration and confusion is the requisite transition from participating in a structured education environment to becoming an independent researcher (Gardner, 2008; Lovitts, 2008). Gardner (2008) identified three phases in the process toward independence for doctoral students: admission, integration, and candidacy. The integration phase, from beginning the program to attaining candidacy, includes coursework, social integration and relationship formation, selecting an advisor and a dissertation topic, and, for many, holding research or teaching assistant positions. This phase, while stretching students in terms of skills, knowledge, and endurance, retains the known educational context of guidance, structure, and clear, regular milestones.

The activities of the integration phase are intended to prepare students for the candidacy phase, when their primary focus is the independent research required to complete their dissertation. The literature and our own experience indicate that students struggle

with this independence and lack of structure, and miss the close relationships formed with peers during the integration phase. Many students find that the relationship that is the most important during the candidacy phase, their relationship with their faculty advisor, is the most difficult to form during integration and is not supportive enough to help them through candidacy (Gardner, 2008). Our own experience bears this out as we formed an informal organization within the formal academic program, drawing support from our cohort that culminated in writing this paper.

As might be expected of individuals who are choosing a career of research and teaching, PhD students are highly attuned to what is going on around them. They listen to formal conversations with faculty and other students and they pay close attention to casual, off-hand remarks and stories told for social and entertainment reasons. They also observe behaviours and take particular note of instances in which behaviours do not match messages (Austin, 2002). The process of becoming an academic is not smooth and automatic but rather involves conflict, exclusion, doubt, and frustration (Archer, 2008). In an effort to understand their environment and resolve this conflict, exclusion, doubt, and frustration, PhD students actively engage in storytelling—both telling and listening to stories. Such storytelling serves the individual needs of each student and also influences their interactions with others in the PhD program, and hence the organization itself.

Storytelling

The study of stories and storytelling within organizations is based on a wide ranging understanding of what, exactly, a 'story' is (Bird, 2007; Boje, 1991; Bruner, 1994; Gabriel, 1991; Hyde, 2008; Rindfleish, Sheridan, & Kjeldal, 2009; Watson, 2009; Whittle, Mueller, & Mangan, 2009). Stories as a unit of analysis run the gamut from small conversational snippets within a larger narrative to precisely defined interactions containing particular characteristics. Boje used "an exchange between two or more persons during which a past or anticipated experience was being referenced, recounted, interpreted, or challenged" (1991, p. 111) as an operational definition of a storytelling performance. Boje's broad definition of a story expands the number of available, analyzable interactions and moves the story away from crafted and scripted monologues of past or lived experiences (Georgakopoulou, 2006). Focus is put on everyday happenings, whether past, ongoing, future, or even hypothetical

events, that emerge through conversation. Eliciting stories as a research device with emphasis on the ongoing and mundane presents the possibility for rich findings, even in small snippets of one-sided accounts. The analysis of these snippets is enhanced by the interpretation made possible by the researchers' own experience of the studied milieu (Humphreys, 2005; Vickers, 2002). Reissman (2001) reminds us as well that stories found beyond the spoken word, in writing, diagrams, and photographs, are also potential subjects for analysis.

The researcher is encouraged to look beyond the simplicity of the story itself to the meanings and interpretations that the storyteller implicitly offers (Gabriel, 1991; Hyde, 2008). Stories can, at a surface level, entertain and educate us, but stories also play a role in the social construction of reality (Watson, 2009). If "stories often conceal as much as they reveal" (Gabriel, 1991, p. 858), then a simple surface-level reading of the story, while possibly entertaining, provides us with only a small amount of available information and ignores how we use stories to shape our identity (Watson, 2009) or clarify our Self-concept (Bruner, 1994). Why does an individual tell the particular stories that she tells? Why are certain events ignored, or glossed over, while others are given the focus? Bruner (1994) suggests that one of the criteria that guides how we choose what we tell involves our need to feel agentic within our own lives, and that agency is directed toward achieving our desires and expectancies. In our drive to reduce cognitive dissonance in our lived lives, we are comfortable ignoring glaring discontinuities as we tell others about ourselves. We also have a deep need to portray our risky decisions as successes.

We argue in this paper that the more embedded a researcher is in the context of the story, the more s/he is capable of seeing what has been concealed, and hence the deeper the analysis of the story becomes (Learmonth & Humphreys, 2012). The analysis is further deepened when the researcher also participates in the study and a dialogue emerges between different data points through the analysis process. Storytelling, or narrative research more generally, engages the 'lived' world, and all of its complex nuances, rather than an objective 'real' world (Rhodes & Brown, 2005). Adopting storytelling as our methodology immediately situates our paper in the subjective, and as such our presence in the world we are researching strengthens our ability to capture the complex nuance inherent in the stories. Furthermore, the greater the shared understanding between storytellers and their audience the more terse stories can

become (Boje, 1991). When telling a story to an audience embedded in the same social context, the storyteller is likely to abbreviate, gloss over, or replace particular sections of a story with a statement such as "it's the same old story", while other sections might be accentuated. The accentuated parts tell us what the storyteller is purposefully choosing to share with us (Boje, 1991). A terse story thus emerges when participants assume the context is well understood by the researcher.

There is some tension over the use of terse stories in storytelling research, indeed even the idea that terse stories are, in fact, stories. Gabriel (2000) and Boje (1991; Boje, Rosile, & Gardner, 2004) have debated whether or not terse stories are stories, or "little more than delicate fragments of sense" from which meaning has drained (Gabriel, 2000, p. 20-21). Gabriel (2000) argues that listeners may be unaware that a story is being told if they are unfamiliar with the coded signifiers that are used to shorten, accentuate, and gloss over various parts of any given story. Boje, Rosile, and Gardner (2004) submit that terse stories are not 'proper stories,' in that they lack narrative, but that terse stories still create actionable knowledge and exist in the storytelling space.

The stories we analyze in this paper are often terse, although never as terse as 'you know the story' or '9/11.' We submit that our participants wrote their stories for their audience, and that knowing how embedded the researchers are in the context under study, participants felt that terse stories were acceptable to convey their meanings. The risk that participants would tell stories they believed the researchers wanted to hear is not borne out in the data, as we shall illustrate below. There is a diversity of perspectives and interpretations of shared experiences. We entered the analysis already knowing the characters, the plot, the conflict, and the emotion. As a result, the narrative may be terse, but the stories themselves are incredibly meaningful.

Becoming an Academic

Learning through active participation in a social practice contributes to an individual's identity formation within his or her community (J. S. Brown & Duguid, 1991). "We become who we are through telling stories about our lives and living the stories we tell" (Bruner, 1994, p53). It can come as no surprise, then, that as we engage in the informal learning process of becoming academics, we tell stories. Stories can also be used to determine, in part, the extent

of integration between the student and the organization (Rhodes & Brown, 2005), in this case the organizations being both the specific PhD program and the institution of higher education at large. Through the very process of telling our own stories to others we change our individual and group identities (Bird, 2007; Rindfleish et al., 2009). At times, those identity changes result in the socialization of the storyteller into the group. Collective narratives, or stories, have also been used by groups and individuals to cope in high-load and high-complexity environments (A. D. Brown & Humphreys, 2003), characteristics that doctoral programs share. Our PhD education and our socialization into becoming an academic come together, and can be analyzed through, the stories we tell and hear. In this particular study, we propose a set of socialization stages that we developed through the analysis of terse stories and our own involvement in the program.

Context and Methodology

This paper is based on a case study of one management doctoral program, selected due to the experiences of the authors as students in the program. The students in this program have an average age of 38, with almost all coming to the program with an established career in a field outside of academia. Two of the 44 students in the program came from a Master's degree into the PhD, and only one of those students had limited experience in the world of work. All other students have work experience ranging from 2 to 30 years' worth. Most students bring some teaching experience to the program, and many manage extensive external obligations, including spouses, children, and full-time jobs, while enrolled. As a full-time program designed to accommodate working professionals, there are two separate two-month residential sessions encapsulating six of the eight required courses, three in each consecutive summer session. Completing three doctoral level courses in a condensed delivery model is an extremely intensive and stressful endeavor, adding to the existing stressors of family obligations, work commitments, and for many, physical separation from personal support networks.

There is a single admission point in the spring of each year when students are admitted as a class cohort. Due to the significant amount of time spent together both in class and outside during the coursework sessions, class cohorts become focal points of shared experiences and interpersonal interactions. The balance of the year and the candidacy phase are spent in relative isolation, in the stu-

dent's work and home milieu, often geographically distant. This forced autonomy requires considerable effort and motivation for the students to complete the assigned work and maintain their participation in the program.

There are structured events for cohorts in the summer sessions, including an orientation in which new and continuing students are invited to share the story of why they chose the PhD and how they have managed to navigate the program to date. This session includes advice and tips from senior students and graduates based on their experiences. There are also specific sessions in the residency period that bring two cohorts together to share and "teach" program content to each other as a group, and students achieving candidacy are invited back as guest presenters on methodology. Informal spaces allocated for social exchanges and shared office space extend the story telling tradition in the program.

All 44 past and current doctoral students, spanning ten distinct class cohorts, were invited to participate in the study. Thirteen responded (five male and eight female) from seven cohorts. Participants were invited to write a story about their PhD student experiences. They were guided in the story writing by a series of five open-ended questions (for a list of the questions, see Appendix A). The questions were compiled based on a list of the critical aspects of our own PhD journeys, and were targeted toward eliciting the telling of significant experiences in their education. The research design sought to identify critical incidents (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p.83), and to trigger storytelling from these. The criticality of incidents is determined by the teller (Webster & Mertova, 2007) and such events can illustrate how people cope with change and transition (Strauss et al., 1973). Participants were asked to respond to two or three of the questions, and some answered all five. Responses were an average of 700 words in length. The use of questions and guidance in the preparation of written stories provides participants with a focus and an understanding of the study in which they are involved (Keats, 2009).

When we analyzed the responses we looked for stories within the answers to the questions. Although asked to provide stories, not all respondents provided what could be called a story in all of their responses. Some responses included chronological detailing of events, but lacked any element of plot and emotion. We were sensitive to Gabriel's (2000) definition of story so closely tied to plot and structure, and at the same time we were sensitive to the truncated aspect of the responses we received, where many participants

seemed to assume that students in the program shared a common understanding of the events being described. The themes that emerged from our analysis were found in responses across all the questions. There was a strong link between the first question and the first theme; however, the first theme also appears in responses to the other questions.

The use of written stories may pose a methodological concern, as the storytelling research generally makes use of oral stories gathered through observation or interviewing. The fact of having been written, rather than told orally, does not make a story any less a story. In fact, for most people, the word story connotes written text. Our use of written stories allowed for the analysis of multiple text types (Keats, 2009), as a key component of our analysis involved understanding the written stories in the context of the oral stories that we heard and told throughout our time as doctoral students. Participants told different stories in a guided, written format than they had in a spontaneous, oral format, which gives us insight into what is being glossed over and what has been retained as students make sense of their doctoral student experience.

Written stories provided continuity in data collection regardless of geographic location and the freedom of respondents to craft their stories asynchronously, both factors designed to increase responses. Additionally, the respondents should have felt a greater sense of anonymity, having the ability to choose language that masked identities of themselves and those within their stories. While we are analyzing how our intimate knowledge of the environment under study provides us with a greater ability to delve more deeply into the responses, we also acknowledge that participants may be reluctant to share potentially negative stories with people who know all of the story characters.

Each author also contributed to the data for this study (4 of the 13 participants). Two authors are male, two female. All of the authors are members of the same cohort. Like the other participants in this research, we provided written stories of our individual experiences around the topics within the open-ended questions. Our cohort reflects many of the characteristics of the population and the non-author participants: we are of mixed gender, we face varied marital and child rearing situations, our work experiences come from a number of different industries, public and private sectors, and some of us were full-time students while others continued to work full-time through their studies. We are a close-knit group of friends, and the data in this study reveals that other cohorts also

experienced close relationships of mutual support. The process of writing our own stories provides not only "commentary upon our academic lives" (Learmonth & Humphreys, 2012, p. 112), but also permits us to reflect more deeply on the research question. This requires some discussion about the reflexive nature of this project.

Reflexivity and Storytelling

Reflexivity is "the turning back of an inquiry or a theory or a text onto its own formative possibilities" (Macbeth, 2001, p. 36) and looking for "unseen [or] privileged relationships… between analyst and the world" (Macbeth, 2001, p. 38). When examining these formative possibilities, we note that the study itself was triggered, in part, by the first successful dissertation defense and subsequent graduation of one of the authors. In passing such a critical mile-stone, we felt the need to understand how we had made it to this point. This is significant because, as Platt notes, "[in] so far as the people one interviews are… members of the same restricted community, the interviewer is not anonymous but has a history and perceived characteristics some of which may be directly relevant to the research topic" (1981, p. 77).

Social science research has typically carried an expectation of a certain distance between subject and researcher, as this is thought to impart objectivity and legitimacy to the findings. In storytelling research, this would supposedly result in the storyteller speaking without undue influence from the researcher, while the researcher makes conclusions from a neutral position. Yet, storytelling research has not "been about the telling of the subject's story, rather, it was the social scientist's reading into the stories being performed and shaped through inquisition and interrogation events" (Boje, Luhman, & Baack, 1999, p. 343). Further, Morey and Luthans (1984) question the emic (subjective) and etic (objective) divide in organizational research, arguing that both perspectives are required to provide new insights. Our approach straddles the emic/etic divide. We participate as informants of stories (emic) as well as outside researchers making choices to categorize and order the subjects' world (etic). This balancing act is not unknown in organizational research. For example, Humphreys (2005) examines his own non-traditional academic career path in organization studies and uses his own stories as data in the self-analysis. Boje et al. (1999) include the researchers' stories of their struggles and feelings of doing storytelling research in the analysis of stories from an organiza-

tion. Given both empirical examples and theoretical calls for greater inclusion of the researcher in the analysis, this approach serves both needs. Vickers (2002) advocates writing as an insider; she claims texts produced from a neutral and disinterested voice are less interesting to read. Including the researchers' stories enriches our analysis and writing because our stories "allow for insights into processes, phenomena, and… group dynamics that others cannot witness" (p. 619). Furthermore, our role as insiders enriches our interpretation of the terse stories and sheds light on the role of researcher as co-creator of narratives (Segerrantz, Tuori, & Vilen, 2008) of graduate students.

Analyzing Terse Stories

Mindful of the context of the program and of our shared experiences, we did not treat the data as "objective facts" that were "wrenched from their context" (Boje, 2001). Our shared experiences with our participants gave greater meaning to the terse stories proffered than would be found in a more traditional researcher/participant setting. The question then becomes, how does this intimate knowledge on the part of the researchers further the research itself? In answer, we illustrate the value of the terse story through our analysis. All submitted stories were collected by one of the authors who then anonymized the data by removing the name of the storyteller and names from within the story. The remaining three authors only saw the anonymized data and did not know which stories had come from the other authors. Each of the four authors performed an individual analysis of the anonymized data. During this stage of the analysis we used a holistic-content interpretive model (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998), exploring the explicit meanings of the participants' responses to compile a set of stories. When looking for stories, we looked for instances when the participant recounted a past experience that involved some element of plot, problem-solving, or emotion. Sometimes an answer to a specific question involved multiple stories, other times there were none. We then analyzed our set of stories intertextually and through a categorical-content interpretive model (Lieblich et al., 1998), grouping the stories by theme, where the theme was generally a common meta-story.

Following the individual analysis, we merged our stories into one final set of six common, or meta-, stories. As would be expected, our individual analyses were not all the same. We started

with 44 participant responses in total, and ended with six common stories, four of which are stages in the socialization process. The process of creating our final set of stories was one of much discussion and debate. After developing our set of six common stories, we went back to each individual story that had been categorized, and re-analyzed it from a holistic-content interpretive model (Lieblich et al., 1998), this time exploring the implicit meaning. Our second analysis focused on the implicit messages of the stories, what was missing from the stories based on what we knew from our personal experience, and why, out of all of the possible stories that could be and have been told, these six were the common stories that emerged.

Results and Discussion

No story begins at the beginning. This is doubly true of terse story fragments, which are comparable to broken pottery shards or puzzle pieces that do not fit together coherently but are moved about until a plausible organization story emerges (Sintonen & Auvinen, cited in Boje 2001). Our analysis reveals common story fragments at distinct points in time: at the outset of the program, midway through, and at the end of the degree. A set of common stories emerged from the data and we present these stories as ways through which our academic identities begin to be formed. Six common stories were identified, and four of these stories can be seen as a series of stages in the socialization process of becoming an academic as a doctoral student. We present these stages in a chronological, or hierarchical, manner, with the intended beginning being the start of the PhD program. We posit, however, that this set of stages could be experienced at various points in the process of becoming an academic, such as when looking for, and starting, new jobs. The remaining two stories capture the relationships that students used throughout their doctoral studies to aid in their success, both technically and socially. Table 1 lists each of the common stories and its associated socialization stage. We discuss each stage/story in detail from the perspective of becoming an academic and our methodological use of terse stories.

What is Missing?

Before presenting our analysis, and the corresponding stories, it is important that we highlight that which is missing from the stories.

Participants knew that their audience has a detailed understanding of the way that the program works, so were able to tell their stories without explaining the formal structure of the program, the course content and structure, the comprehensive exam[1] demands and format, and without identifying key characters beyond a name or position. Any researcher conducting a storytelling-based study within an organization would take the time beforehand to gain familiarity with the structures and processes of that organization, and so our own experiences with the organization are not significantly different in that aspect. Where we do differ, though, is in our deep understanding of the emotions underlying each of those structural and/or procedural characteristics—the emotions that are a key characteristic of a story. We propose that, in fact, the majority of readers of this article, being academics themselves, feel a strong emotional connection to the stories being told because of their own doctoral experiences. Success in the PhD is not guaranteed; the overall dropout rate of PhD students is 40-50% (Lovitts, 2008). Thus when a participant refers to the accomplishment of having successfully defended his or her dissertation, with no further elaboration, we know the story that is inherent in that statement, where others outside of the academy would not.

Any group of high-achieving individuals placed in the intense, high-stakes environment of a PhD program is going to experience conflict. There will be conflict amongst students, conflict between students and faculty members, conflict between students and their external obligations and responsibilities, and conflict between academic organizations. Some conflict is on a personal level as students compete to be the top performer, other conflict is on a more philosophical level, as students and faculty debate competing ideas, paradigms, and theories. Conflict also exists on a professional level, as students find their expectations of an academic career differ from the reality (Austin, 2002). The very program itself has, in some ways, its foundation in conflict, as the vast majority of students enter the program as functional managerialists based on their previous training and work experience and go through two intensive coursework sections in which their paradigms of thought are questioned vehemently and new paradigms are introduced. Many participants thankfully credit certain faculty members with opening their eyes to a completely new world of management theory and thought. At the end of the process, that thanks is genuine, but the conflict that was engendered to reach that end is glossed over in the stories told for this study.

Conflict is noticeably downplayed in the collected stories. Many of the participants' stories involved belonging: belonging to a cohort, belonging to an organization, belonging to a profession. We do not question that belonging plays a key role in the socialization of an academic, through both personal experience and as shown in the literature (Akerlind, 2005, 2008; Gardner, 2008; Golde, 1998). What we do question, though, is that a set of 44 stories about key events in the doctoral experience can be as muted on the subject of conflict as our data is. Only three participants tell explicit stories about interpersonal conflict. This silencing of conflict is in direct contrast to the idea that "it hardly seems possible to imagine a worthwhile, telling story that does not entail conflict" (Gabriel, 2000, p. 119). Stories that are told and re-told tend to deal with misfortune and adversity, which is our experience with the stories we heard, and still hear, when with our PhD colleagues. The stories told for this study, however, are mainly positive, challenging us to explore them more deeply.

We present each theme below and provide context and comparison between author and participants' perspective for each in turn.

Table 1. Common Stories and Stage of Socialization

The Story	The Stage
Why I'm here	decision to become an academic
I don't belong!	questioning personal capability; doubt
Do they think I'm good enough?	seeking external validation
Hey, I am a PhD student after all	Belonging
My cohort, my friends (or not)	initial support★
I need help	ongoing support★

★ The *initial support* and *ongoing support* stories capture the supportive relationships that are developed and nurtured throughout all four of the socialization stages.

Why I'm Here. The doctoral student experience does not start on the first day of classes, nor upon acceptance into the program, but with the decision to apply for a position. While many graduate students choose to pursue a PhD as the next logical step of their academic journey, students in business doctoral programs are often returning to academia from a number of years in the workforce. All of our thirteen study participants had been in the workforce for anywhere from two to twenty years before deciding to pursue a PhD. Eleven of the 13 participants responded to the question regarding their motivation to pursue the PhD, and all of the authors answered this question. Nine of the 11 respondents mentioned instrumental reasons related to career goals while 5 of 11 spoke of intellectual challenge. The stories of why doctoral students have chosen to pursue a PhD obviously differ among participants, but the telling of the story itself is common for all students. 'Why are you here?' is a commonly asked question among program members, and is an important question for both the initial introduction and relationship-building phases of the program. Some stories are simple—students needed a PhD to keep their job.

> I chose to do so because I have to in order to retain my current university employment. My university tends to (out of necessity) hire non-terminally qualified lecturers, some of whom catch the bug and desire to make a career out of it. I am one of these people. (P13)

Other stories, however, show the complex set of reasons for which some of the participants chose to leave their established careers and, essentially, start again in the field of academia. Absent from these stories, however, is discussion of doubt about whether or not the decision to pursue a PhD was the best decision, and discussion of any interpersonal conflict that ensued while making the decision—conflict with employers or family members who felt that pursuing a PhD was a bad idea.

> I chose to become a PhD student for four reasons. First, I had a lot of work experiences that I wanted to process somehow… there were very few people in Canada who had doctorates doing research in my field… I could capitalize on an area of research that few people were exploiting. Second,

my job wasn't really going anywhere, and I felt very demoralized and insignificant. I had tried a few times to 'get ahead' in my work by doing all the usual stuff… All of these things ended up resulting in nothing. I was really not in the right place in life. (third) I have spent more time in school than in work, and I've never particularly enjoyed 'working' in the 'real' world. I find that I can see through all the illusions and stereotypes, and I've always had a hard time working for the bottom line or outcome without questioning why. (P2)

The students who were pursuing their PhD so that they could continue teaching at the university level told terse stories in response to this question. The students who had returned to school for other reasons, including personal challenge, told much longer and more involved stories. The story about teaching, enjoying it, and then pursuing a PhD is a common story to which all PhD students and graduates can relate. Where there were other reasons that pushed, or drew, a student toward a PhD, more explanation, more storytelling, was necessary, because the audience was not embedded in their pre-PhD environment. A terse story would not work.

I Don't Belong! This theme emerged when participants told stories about first feeling like a PhD student (10 out of 13 responded, including all of the authors) as well as in stories about important people on their journey and key moments in their journey. There is no bifurcation of the data that indicates the authors are distinct in this regard. Common stories told by first year students include the strong feeling that they have made a terrible mistake and that they do not belong in a PhD program. These stories are also told by upper year students and graduates, as a way to provide guidance and advice for those first year students.

Throughout the first year, I felt very much like an impostor in danger of being found out at any moment. It was a very surreal experience, I was going through the motions, but I don't think I really got it. I first started feeling "real" around the first week of the second summer. We were in [faculty member's] class when I suddenly realized I knew what the ★&★^ he was talking about. It wasn't until comps when I had to re-visit everything from the first two years that it all came together and I felt like all the pieces came together. (P12)

Words like 'imposter' recur in the stories, along with expressions of not understanding the vocabulary and ritual of graduate research studies. Everyone has experienced a new situation of some sort—a new job, a new education program, a new place of residence—in which they have felt as though they had no idea what was going on nor what they should be doing. At that level, many people can understand this story. People who have completed a PhD understand the storyteller's reference to several aspects of the educational journey, however only those with direct knowledge of this program will understand the terse story represented by 'comps,' and also the initial orientation sessions that triggered a feeling of being in way over your head. What is critical to this story, though, and left unsaid by the storyteller, is that this particular individual, along with 42 of 44 students who enter the PhD program, had come from an academic background and work experience grounded in a managerialist perspective; they suddenly found themselves in a sociological, critical theory-based program rooted in an entirely new paradigm of thought. When she says she suddenly realized that she knew what her professor was talking about, she, to some extent, means it literally, as class discussions involved concepts such as discourse, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and constant references to Foucault. Standard fare for sociologists and those in the humanities, this is completely new ground for most finance, accounting, or marketing professionals! We were all going through the motions in our first set of courses, having little idea of what we were talking about, but trying to act like we knew it all. One author repeats the story using almost the same words as P12. It was an incredibly stressful and frustrating experience, involving much internal and external conflict, followed, for most, by a major breakthrough and great pride. This story is critical to the participant's success in becoming an academic, but potentially rather dull to those outside of the program itself.

In our analysis of the stories from the perspective of the socialization of doctoral students into academics, this story combined with our pre-existing understanding of the characters and emotions, speaks to both the frustrating stage of feeling strongly as though you do not belong in academia, followed by the realization that you are, in fact, slowly finding your way. This participant's story, which is representative of all of our participants, included feeling completely lost in a new sociological discipline, working through the frustration, the ignorance, and the conflict, sticking with the program when full of doubt, and achieving her first major

success—feeling that she was a PhD student.

Do They Think I'm Good Enough? Continuing in the integration phase, in their efforts to fit themselves into the doctoral school environment participants often relied on external validation as an indication of their progress and/or success. This theme is reflected in responses to several of the guiding questions. Strong validation seems to come from faculty involved with the program, as students look to them for evaluation and support both inside and outside of the formal classroom and supervisor structures. Grades were assigned for papers and courses, but grades on coursework were not a sufficient indicator as to whether or not a student was becoming an academic. The stakes in a PhD program are high, and students were not willing to continue with the program if their chances of success were slim. The need for validation starts in the early days of the program, as students question their decision to pursue a PhD, and continues through to the end, as the ultimate validation comes in the form of a PhD awarded by the university, the faculty, and experts in the student's field of study. These stories of achieving validation and approbation from faculty are told by students in order to compare effort, progress, and reward.

> I think I realized in the most grown up way I have ever realized anything in my life, that these people were gathered here because of me. And more than just me; because of some ideas that I had… These ideas were different, unique, and other people found them interesting. I don't know that it made me feel like a student (other than the obvious hierarchy around the table, me being the junior member) as much as it made me feel like a researcher. (P8)

> I had not bargained on the incredible boost of self-esteem and self-confidence I have received. Maybe it is like the Wizard of Oz—I feel like the tin man [sic] who now believes that she has a brain because someone gave me the paper to prove it! (P11)

Absent from the stories again, but certainly present in the actuality, was the conflict inherent in looking to others for validation. Students did not always receive the validation they were looking for. Grades were not always as high as expected, feedback was not always positive, and not all students felt that they were welcomed into the collective group of pre-academics. Perhaps one of the

most important sources of validation, and of conflict, is the dissertation supervisor. Finding, and changing supervisors is glossed over with terse stories like "the individual who eventually became my new supervisor" (P1), which does not convey to the uninitiated the angst of incompatibility between student and thesis supervisor, nor the dilemma of seeking new support and guidance mid-program. Finally, there are a few terse stories of conflict within the cohort during the process of fitting in and seeking acceptance.

> The first time we met was in the welcoming meeting. I didn't know anybody, and so I felt quite alone. I was nervous because I didn't rehearse the introduction of self to the group during the (preschool events).... the first class with the cohort was a key event... I felt that I was being evaluated or tested, and I didn't quite feel that I was part of the group. (P2)

As first year students, we were told many stories about the point in the first residency section when we would receive a letter from the faculty addressing the areas in which we were falling short as PhD students. The story of the letter was told often, told dramatically, and was scary for new students, and the event itself became a seminal event in our education, afterward referred to as "the letter." Only one participant related it to us as part of the study. Many stories present the program as one in which all students are welcomed with open arms, and competition is minimal. In addition to P2's comments, above, one participant was open about her feelings of being excluded from the main group.

> We also seemed to feel a little left out of the main body of the PhD program, that perhaps there was a hierarchy of students within the program and that we were not a part of the "in crowd". Simple things... seemed to highlight this separation that we felt between ourselves and other cohort members and faculty. (P5)

Hey, I am a PhD Student After All. As all study participants, at the point of the study, had either graduated or were still active in the program, the stories of feeling that they did not belong had counterpoint stories in which students recounted those events or experiences that led them to believe that they did, after all, belong. In other cases, students came to the realization based on their

growing comfort with the program and the content, and their increasing awareness that their fellow students were experiencing, or had experienced, the same doubts. All respondents provided stories supporting this theme. Students are here telling stories of the successful stages of identity formation as academics, and through those stories are providing informal or incidental learning opportunities for students who are still struggling. In general, this time of a positive burgeoning academic identity occurred during the integration phase (Gardner, 2008) of their education. The following excerpt illustrates the role played by the structure of the program in shaping this phase.

> When I returned for my second year of studies, I found that I had indeed learned quite a bit. I was able to help some of the newer students move through the exact same feelings as I had just one year earlier, as those ahead of me had done. I didn't know it all; in fact, I knew very little. But I realized that most people within the program knew a little but tended to act as if they knew more than they did, hiding behind jargon and nonsense…. It was at that point that I began to feel like a PhD student and that I was 'on' the path. (P6)

The student matures as an academic partly though separation and reflection induced by the long period of isolation between academic coursework, and partly as a function of being a senior student and bearing the burden of perpetuating the storytelling tradition as an orientation device for the incoming cohort.

My Cohort, My Friends (or Not). The intensive nature of the program under study and its single annual intake leads to highly defined cohort units. Over the history of the program, some cohorts have quickly bonded into organizational sub-units that provided friendship and support for their cohort members. Other cohorts have had friendships form within them, without a strong bonding as an entire unit, and yet others have struggled with intense competition, internal fighting, and animosity. Stories told about cohorts for this study were overwhelmingly positive, with only three negative cohort stories related. The stories we heard, and re-told, however, throughout our doctoral experience were generally the negative stories—the stories where extreme conflict occurred between cohort members, and the repercussions of that conflict. The following stories illustrate the balance that students attempted to negotiate between supportive cohort relationships,

and the understanding that at a fundamental level academia is about conflict in the form of debate around ideas.

> First, there would be my cohort members. I had some great personal struggles throughout the program and without such a supportive and wonderful group of people I would not have stayed. They encouraged me, argued with me and helped better me as a person and as a student. This group of people came from very different backgrounds but that did not matter. We never had to agree with each other's opinions, but we did respect them. The level of debate that we achieved without offence to one another was tremendous. We were open to one another. These individuals have truly become four of the most important people in my life. I would say they are my family. (P1)

> … one of my cohort members immediately challenged me (I didn't even get beyond the first 3 sentences before she interrupted me!) There was always this tension, for me anyway, between engaging in fruitful academic debate, and ruthlessly stabbing someone in the back. In other words, you want to be able to debate ideas, but you don't want to make it more difficult for your cohort colleague who may be on the spot giving a seminar. (P2)

As authors from a single cohort, we had often felt that our group was unique in the positive, supportive community we developed through the program. Other students had remarked on this internal collegiality. We were somewhat surprised to hear that other cohorts also saw themselves as special and supportive, in contrast to the oral stories we heard while on campus. Our experience validates the stories of other participants, and also reshapes our understanding of our own time in the program and the program structure's impact on this important aspect of socialization.

I Need Help. Within the doctoral program itself, participants told stories about the strong levels of support that they received from their cohorts or fellow students from other years and from faculty. In many cases, the cohort provided an exceptionally strong support system for participants, but where cohort bonding did not occur and as students moved past the intensive coursework stage, participants still found support networks within the program. Pseudo-sibling relationships also appeared, with students farther on the

journey telling old stories and providing materials and support to others as those who have been there already. Many of the relationships that were developed outside of the cohort held the most importance during the candidacy phase of the doctorate (Gardner, 2008).

> Once courses ended and our cohort dispersed, both geographically and academically… others in the PhD program joined my support network. I had excellent support throughout comprehensive exams from upper year students, and I had a thesis support network with students who were in the same stages of the dissertation as I was. My advisor and other faculty members also became integral to both getting my dissertation done, and learning how to become a faculty member, in terms of publishing, conferences, research, and finding jobs. (P7)

> I really did feel like my thesis had emerged as the result of a lot of support from my professors, supervisor, committee, cohort and other PhD students from various cohorts who helped me. For example, I attended a 'coffee club' for two years during my thesis writing made up of students interested in discourse analysis. This little group did mock defenses with me, and each other member, before our defenses. We also read each other's work and gave feedback. And, just as importantly, drank coffee together once a week and talked about our work, plans, dreams, challenges, etc. (P4)

Support networks were key for participants in navigating their doctoral education and forming their identities as academics. An individual's support network became a key resource in defining success and identifying unsuccessful behaviours in others. These same networks that developed to support individuals through their degree also form a strong backbone of the doctoral program itself. On those occasions when current and graduated program members do meet in person, networks are renewed and many, many stories are told and re-told.

Where is the Conflict?

If interpersonal conflict was such an integral aspect of the PhD experience, why is it suppressed in participants' stories? Our research

design may have precluded stories of this form of conflict. Students who experienced extreme conflict or who were part of dysfunctional cohorts may never have been fully socialized into the PhD program, and therefore may not have chosen to participate in the study. One of the strengths of our approach, that we, as researchers, were deeply embedded in the environment under study, is also a limitation. Participants may have purposely avoided relating stories of conflict for fear of speaking negatively about someone who is a friend of the researcher(s). In asking for written stories, we may have received truncated versions, as there was no immediate feedback for storytellers to encourage them to delve more deeply. Despite these potential limitations, terse stories of conflict do still appear in the data, sometimes couched in gentle terms as counterpoints to positive stories: "I have heard stories of screaming matches" and "I sat in on a class with one cohort where the tension in the room was overwhelming" (P1). These terse stories appear within the story of meeting the challenges of the program as a cohort and "ensur[ing] we were all looked after" (P2).

Methodological implications taken into consideration, though, do not completely account for the conflict that was such an integral part of the process itself is missing from the stories of that process. The stories collected in this study, including the stories from our own cohort, are different than the stories we heard and told while we were in the thick of the PhD program. As individuals who are embedded in the context of the program, we know that in the absence of active conflict to talk about when students gathered, there was an avidly repeated collective lore involving stories of extreme conflict that had occurred in the past: "…my knowledge of other cohorts is limited. I have heard many stories, but have only experienced… a few" (P1). Have participants taken poetic license, silencing events of interpersonal conflict that interfere with their chosen storyline of belonging and success (Gabriel, 2004b)?

People tell stories in an attempt to reduce cognitive dissonance (Bruner, 1994) and to "make sense of different events that we experience" (Gabriel, 2004a, p. 2). We contend that doctoral school is an organizational setting where confusion, rupture, and change occurs for students, and so it is reasonable to conclude that they will respond to this situation by trying to bring order to this new environment. This organizing process may be attempted through labeling and categorizing the disorganized and seemingly unmanageable flow of experience until things begin to make sense. The organizational literature is filled with examples of people attempt-

ing to understand what is, or has been, happening to them during periods of extreme change or crisis (c.f. Kayes, 2004; Stensaker & Falkenberg, 2007; Weick, 1988, 1993), and during non-crisis 'normal' times (c.f. A. D. Brown & Jones, 2000; McCabe & Dutton, 1993; Oliver & Roos, 2003).

The stories gathered for this study differ from those told in the immediate education environment. Doctoral students in the midst of the intensity of the experience tell the stories, with all the related emotions, that are immediately applicable. When a student receives an unexpectedly poor grade, stories about the faculty member who assigned the grade are told. When a student struggles to work with a difficult peer, she hears stories about other difficult students. For this study, on the other hand, students were asked to tell their stories outside of the immediacy of the environment, and had time to reflect on what was important, and what they wanted to say. Participants wanted to tell the stories about the people who helped them toward success in a positive way—stories that we do not often get the chance to tell. The participants synthesized their experience to distill specific lessons and messages in their stories. In this process, the stories become terse. These terse stories are re-contextualized through the analysis of individuals who shared and understand the organization context. Not only are terse stories nonlinear and sometimes incoherent, they are also collective (Boje et al., 2004). We can use stories to stop time and process experiences. The stories still emerge, through analysis, as phases of development because the organization structure of the PhD program contributes to the story space as well. We have used terse stories to stitch together a narrative of the development of an academic.

Conclusion

Every story told is situated in a context greater than the story itself, existing in a web of stories through which the storyteller must navigate and select what s/he feels is the best story for the given moment (Boje, 2001). While participants were directed in the stories they told by the specific questions posed, the questions were broad in nature and were designed to allow participants to select stories that held particular resonance. The stories that we received are important to the people who told them, and through their telling we can gain an understanding of those doctoral school experiences that were, and have remained, vivid. Our small study of a single doctoral program adds to our greater understanding of the socialization

process that pre-academics go through, building on the existing literature on academic development and identity formation (Akerlind, 2005, 2008; Austin, 2002; Gardner, 2008). The common stories identified, *why I am here, I don't belong!, do they think I'm good enough?, and hey, I am a PhD student after all,* map closely to Golde's (1998) four key questions asked by PhD students as they socialize themselves to the doctoral program and the academic world: Can I do this? Do I want to be a graduate student? Do I want to do this work? and Is this the right choice? The remaining two stories, that deal with the interpersonal relationships and support networks built while students show ways in which students deal with the isolation and confusion of the candidacy stage of their education (Gardner, 2008).

There can be no doubt that conflict exists in the high pressure, high stakes world of doctoral programs. It is interesting that people in our study chose to gloss over interpersonal conflict within the program, and also to remain silent on their possible conflict with individuals external to the program, spouses, family, and friends, who were not part of the intense experience of this doctoral program, and yet who were integral to the students' doctoral experience (as evidenced in the acknowledgments written for dissertations). Conflict is not totally absent from these stories, however. After all, "conflict is to storytelling what sound is to music" (McKee, 1997, p. 210). Where conflict appears in the stories of these students, it is portrayed in terms of an internal struggle to reshape individual identity and to belong to a culture, the broader group composing the program, as well as the broader academy. Rindfleish et al. (2009) illustrate the way conflict in storytelling is used for specific purposes. In this case, internal conflict is used to illustrate the success of individuals in becoming full members of a new profession.

As authors, we lived the experience of the doctoral program under examination; we co-created it with other participants in the study and with the broader population of the program as a whole. We created frames for analysis of these experiences that corresponded to our own experience. We challenged each other to broaden our perspective of the program. We could not easily disregard dissonant stories from other participants nor privilege similar stories that may have come from a co-author because we could not distinguish the stories based on the teller's identity. This context reduces the risk inherent in autoethnography of privileging one version or interpretation over another.

The paper itself is a story—a story of discovery. We used stories to help us understand and to reflect on aspects of discovery on the path to becoming an academic. We also need, as participants in the academic organization, to portray stories of success. The epic story of hurdles overcome and victory achieved is evident in not only the data collected, but also in our interpretation and analysis of the data. Although we have chosen to explore our own professional development as academics, this approach could also be useful in any other organization or occupation that requires a formative phase and stages of acceptance.

From a methodological perspective, we illustrate the power of the terse story when both the storyteller and the audience are deeply embedded in the storytelling space. When both teller and listener draw on shared experience, a terse story contains considerable amounts of plot, character, emotion, and problem-solving. Our discussion of the noted glossing over of interpersonal conflict in the stories also illustrates that it is possible to uncover much hidden as well as overt meaning in terse stories. We have broadened the use of terse stories in research by exploring written stories and by including an autoethnographic approach to the study.

Humphreys (2005) calls for autoethnographic vignettes in all qualitative research texts. We have woven our own texts as research participants into the study, and into the analysis of that data. By so doing, we extend the notion of the autoethnographic voice to one that interacts with the other voices in the storytelling space of the study, and provides context to the terse stories found there. Coming full circle to an organization studies perspective, this final terse story shows how the terse story itself becomes woven into the fabric of the organization: "We have certain jokes that keep cropping up in conversation" (P5).

The joke to which the participant refers relates to one person's difficulty in grasping the punch line of jokes told during seminar discussions, and the reaction of classmates and colleagues. Classmates made a small sign that read "joke" which they raised anytime they thought their colleague might miss the punch line of a subsequent story. This sign has taken on a life of its own in the program, and is used repeatedly in classroom, conference, and social settings, beyond the originating cohort. It becomes a reminder of those PhD moments that involved camaraderie and laughter.

The value of the terse story lies in the fact that people are telling stories all the time, and when they are telling these stories to others who are embedded in the same context, the stories are often terse.

For researchers who are also embedded in the context, and who understand the untold aspects of the terse story, there is suddenly a myriad of stories available to be analyzed. While our stories were solicited, think of a research situation in which stories are being observed, or overheard, if you will. Researchers embedded in the world as it is lived by those being studied can recognize and understand unsolicited terse stories as they are told in the course of everyday life. In this way researchers learn what stories are important to the individuals being studied, rather than what stories the researcher thinks will/should be important. While some terse stories are terse because they have lost significance over time (Gabriel, 2000), others are terse for the exact opposite reason—they hold such import and emotion that all it takes is a sentence or two for that meaning and emotion to be shared (Boje et al., 2004). Some of these stories help to hold together the very organization. The terse story "office chats" (P3) refers to incredible bonding and intellectually rich exchanges between students in their early days of the program, memories of which sustain students through much lonelier times in the dissertation writing stage. We can learn much about an organization through the terse stories that are told, and a researcher who is embedded within the context has a much greater ability to understand the full significance of the stories—including the stories themselves, and the context around when and why they are told at a specific time. Researchers become a bridge between cultures with their ability to parse and explain the significance of terse stories.

Future research could include the use of terse stories in ethnographic research, where the researcher is deeply embedded in the environment and is hearing the stories in their natural context. Specific to the area of doctoral student socialization, but applicable to many organization settings, the stories told by authority figures such as faculty could be analyzed in terms of the reason for faculty telling the story, the ways in which students absorb and use the stories, and the stories that are not told. Individuals in positions of authority can use stories to create and sustain a hegemonic discourse (Gabriel, 2004b). In what ways do the stories we hear as PhD students begin embedding us into the discourse of being an academic, and how do we in turn change the nature of the academy though our storytelling once we are admitted as full members?

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Appendix A. Storytelling Guides

1. Why did you choose to become a PhD student?
2. Who were some of the key players in your PhD journey?
3. At what point in time did you feel you were truly a PhD student?
4. Could you describe the key events or transition moments that you experienced within your PhD cohort?
5. Could you tell me about one important success you have had as a PhD student?

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Endnotes

[1] Comprehensive exams, or comps, are undertaken by North American PhD students, following their course work and preceding their dissertation work.