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Graduate Students' Construction of Researcher Identities Explored Through Discourse Analysis

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Date of publication: February 28th, 2016

Edition period: October 2015 - February 2016

To cite this article: Davis, C. A., & Lester, J. N. (2016). Graduate Students' Construction of Researcher Identities Explored Through Discourse Analysis. *Qualitative Research in Education*, 5(1), 49-76. doi:10.17583/qre.2016.1473

To link this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/qre.2016.1473>

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Graduate Students' Construction of Researcher Identities Explored Through Discourse Analysis

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(Received: 12 March 2015; Accepted: 20 November 2015; Published: 28 February 2016)

Abstract

While many research methods courses challenge students to make sense of their own researcher identities as they relate to research paradigms and perspectives, there is a lack of research that examines how students actually go about constructing these identities, particularly at the level of discourse. In this study, we attended to graduate students' talk in an introductory research methods course, taking note of how students used particular discursive resources to construct a research identity in online classroom discussions. We analyzed 93 discussion posts students were asked to make in response to a discussion board prompt after completing assigned readings related to research paradigms and researcher identity. We identified two discursive patterns through our analysis: 1) minimizing knowledge, and 2) justifying paradigmatic orientations. Our findings highlight how being asked to talk about one's research identity is a potentially fragile task, as evidenced by disclaimers of 'knowing', and justifications. We highlight implications for teaching research methodology, particularly qualitative methods courses.

Keywords: discourse analysis, research methods, qualitative research, researcher identity, online discussions, graduate education

Research around teaching research methods has pointed to the complexities of teaching such courses, particularly as they involve introducing new terminology, procedures and practices (Ball & Pelco, 2005) to students who may have limited exposure to and interest in the research process. The literature on teaching research methods has highlighted a tension between teaching research courses for students interested solely in the consumption of research versus the production of research (Hardcastle & Bisman, 2003). Moreover, there remains little consensus around what teaching research methods should actually entail (Early, 2014). Nonetheless, many research methods courses, particularly qualitative research methods courses, invite (and even require) students to make sense of their own research identities as they relate to research paradigms and perspectives. However, little research exists that examines how students actually go about doing this at the level of discourse. In other words, how do graduate students enrolled in an introductory research methods course discursively navigate their research identities? How do students go about constructing a research identity for themselves?

The above questions were the focus of our discourse analysis study, which was informed by discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1993) and conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992). We attended to the students' micro-level discourses, taking note of how they used particular discursive resources (e.g., hedges) to construct a research identity in online classroom discussions. By using discussion board posts from online classes, participants used only online talk, in written form, to accomplish various tasks. A number of studies of online support groups have drawn upon discourse analysis and discursive psychology specifically to explore questions such as how participants construct identities through talk, justify deviant or non-standard behaviors, and validate their membership in a group (e.g., Gavin, Rodham, & Poyer, 2008; Horne & Wiggins, 2009; Varga & Paulus, 2014); as of yet, however, no such study has examined how graduate students work up their research identities. Our aim, then, was to better understand how students go about displaying their orientations to research paradigms in their online talk.

Literature Review

There is a small, yet growing body of research that focuses on the place of student identity and research methods courses specifically in higher education. We have chosen to highlight that research here as it relates to transitioning to researcher, identifying with a research tradition, developing a research identity, and identity in online spaces.

Coryell et al. (2013) carried out a narrative analysis of doctoral students’ early experiences with learning how to carry out research. Specifically, the researchers collected the personal narratives of 24 doctoral students, all of who were enrolled in a mixed methods research course. They found that the students displayed anxieties in their stories, particularly around: “a) their role in the research, b) their ability to do the research, c) the learning process of becoming a researcher, and d) how to discern whether their research was, in fact, legitimate” (p. 372). The researchers suggested that emotions, such as anxiety, play a central role in early research experiences and highlighted the importance of supporting graduate students as their research identity unfolds.

Metz’s (2001) report on a seminar for an interdisciplinary group of doctoral students preparing for careers in educational research found when it came to identifying with a particular research tradition, students’ allegiances were closely connected to their social background, including their race/ethnicity, social class, and gender. Metz further noted that as the instructor of the seminar, it was necessary to acknowledge that social backgrounds played a role in how students identified with a research tradition. He used this knowledge to push students beyond their individual allegiances, asking them to “tolerate, even to appreciate ambiguity” different forms of research (p. 15).

Similarly, Murakami-Ramalho, Piert, and Militello (2008) chronicled their individual and collective journeys of developing a research identity as graduate students of color. They noted, like Metz (2001), that social background laid the foundation for the construction of research identities. Along with this, Murakami-Ramalho, Piert and Militello (2008) also suggested that though graduate students only begin to develop their research identity upon entering graduate school, they do not enter an academic context as blank slates. The seeds, they argued, have already been planted through their personal background and life experiences and only

need to be cultivated. Graduate school, then, is a space for that cultivation and can provide students with the skills, language, and refinement to articulate their research identity. Yet, while a great deal of attention has been given to developing the attributes of graduates, or what is known as “work-ready skills” that presumably will make a graduate successful (Daniels & Brooker 2014, p. 67), far less attention has been given to “student identity and the shaping of graduates through graduate attributes” (p. 71). Daniels and Brooker suggested that graduate attributes and student identity are intertwined and that developing their identity is an area that students in higher education should be actively reflecting upon in order to understand the role they have in shaping it.

Research conducted in online spaces has been particularly relevant to this body of research. For instance, Delahunty (2012) considered how identity was constructed online through written texts posted to forums rather than in a physical space. Through her study, Delahunty found that post-graduate students were quick to position themselves in early forums using both their professional identity and credentials to develop and lay claim to their online identities. She began to develop a definition of identity formation in online contexts that included three broad, overlapping concepts. First, identity was presumed to be complex and to take on different appearances over time and space. Second, identity was believed to be socially formed, meaning it is “socially constructed in dialogue” and further shaped by the perceptions of self and other, personal values and experiences (Delahunty, 2012, p. 409). Finally, identity was thought to be constructed through language.

Similarly, Agee and Smith (2011) conducted a mixed methods study examining how doctoral level students made sense of asynchronous online discussions in a research methods course. These asynchronous discussions occurred in addition to the face-to-face component of the course, with the data analyzed including three online discussions and the 15 participating students’ self-evaluations. The researchers focused on identifying what they called “sociocognitive” tools (p. 303), such as argumentation structures and/or posing clarifying questions, and found that students oriented to online spaces as being a site for rich dialogue, with ample opportunity to draw upon a variety of tools and strategies for making sense of theoretical ideas and methods.

As discussed here, there is a growing body of discourse-oriented research that explores the ways in which university students go about negotiating their identities through talk and text. Discourse research has focused on a variety of university environments, including office hours (Limberg, 2007), blogs (Lester & Paulus, 2011; Paulus & Lester, 2013), face-to-face tutorials and small group discussions (Benwell & Stokoe, 2002, 2005; Cromdal, Tholander, & Aronsson, 2007), and textbook marginalia (Attenborough, 2011). Much of this research has pointed to how students delicately display their knowledge and even resist displaying ‘knowing’ and ‘learning’ for others. Furthermore, across much of this discourse-oriented research, there has been an explicit focus on how students go about ‘being students’ at the level of discourse. To date, however, relatively little research has examined how graduate students in research methods courses go about negotiating their research identities at the level of discourse, particularly when they are asked to do so in relationship to research paradigms. Thus, in this study, we explicitly considered how students went about negotiating their identities as researchers at the level of discourse.

Theoretical and Methodological Perspective

A discursive psychology perspective served as our theoretical and methodological lens (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Within a discursive psychology perspective, discourse is presumed to be the medium of human interaction (Potter, 2012). Within this perspective, it is assumed that language functions to *do* something, rather than simply representing an internal, mental state. A discursive psychology approach is thus one in which the analyst attends to how actions are accomplished in and through particular language choices, such as how people construct facts, account for their actions, and manage personal interests and stake (Edwards & Potter, 1993). Such an orientation fundamentally shapes how an analyst orients to language-based data and the analysis process, as it leads them to consider the social function of the language produced. Historically, discursive psychology has focused on respecifying psychological constructs, such as identity or memory, as discursive entities; that is, constructs made real in and through interaction (Hepburn & Wiggins, 2005; Lester, 2011, 2014). More particularly, a discursive psychology perspective views discourse as

being: 1) action-oriented, 2) constructed by and through the conversational features employed in a given interaction, and 3) situated within a particular interaction. As such, in carrying out this study, we oriented to the students' interactions on the discussion boards as being as *action-oriented* rather than *representative* of underlying cognitive or emotional states (Edwards & Potter, 1992).

Furthermore, contemporary discursive psychology often draws upon conversation analysis to make sense of the sequential organization of talk (Sacks, 1992). Conversation analysis is a methodological approach that examines the sequential organization of talk and considers how talk is designed to accomplish social actions. With close linkages to ethnomethodology, conversation analysis has been used widely to study everyday and institutional talk. It has also begun to be more broadly used in the study of online talk, as well as other digital domains (Giles, Stommel, Paulus, Lester, & Reed, 2015). Thus, in our study, our focus was shaped by many of the central principles of conversation analysis.

Method

We conducted a discourse analysis (Wood & Kroger, 2000) informed by a discursive psychology perspective (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) and conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992). The concept of discourse analysis builds on a social constructionist perspective where language is seen as constitutive of a social reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Language is structured into discourse and discourses have power implications in that they structure what one holds as true and what one acts upon (Ahl, 2002; Foucault, 1972); thus, discourses are not neutral. For us, discourse analysis involved asking questions about how language, at a given time and place, was used to build identity (Stokoe, 2012). Using this concept of discourse allowed us to explore the language taken up in online discussion boards and examine how those discourses functioned to produce graduate students' research identities.

Data included the content of online discussion posts made by students who were enrolled in a graduate level introductory educational research course at a regional southeastern university in the United States. This course was required for all master's level students and for all educational specialist and doctoral level students who had not had the course

requirement waived. The course served as an introduction to research and was intended to provide master’s level students with a comprehensive overview of topics related to research as it is applied in educational settings. It was the only required research course for the master’s degree. The overall goal of the course was to provide an introduction to empirical research and a variety of research approaches common in the field of education. Emphasis was placed on both quantitative and qualitative research methods, especially in regards to applied research in education.

This research involved no more than minimal risk to the participants, with no adverse affects on the rights and welfare of the participants. As such, the Institutional Review Board waived informed consent for this study. Nonetheless, all identifying information was removed from the discussion board data and no data was collected until students received their final grades for the class.

Materials and Procedure

Because our discourse analysis was informed by a discursive psychology and conversation analysis, the following three, broad analytic questions sensitized our analytic process (Potter, 2004): 1) What is the discourse functioning to do? 2) How is the discourse structured to do this? and 3) What discursive resources are being used to carry out this social action/activity?

Data for this study was collected across two academic terms, in which a total of 93 graduate students were enrolled in four classes – all of which were taught online by the same instructor. The first author was the instructor on record. All classes were taught entirely online. Of the 93 students, 85 were enrolled in a master’s degree program, five in an education specialists program, and three in a doctoral program. The specialist programs in which students were enrolled included: Middle Grades Education, School Psychology, Reading, and Educational Leadership. The doctoral programs in which students were enrolled included: Curriculum Studies and Educational Leadership. Table 1 represents enrollment by master’s degree and program for the remaining 85 students who were seeking master’s degrees. The master’s degree programs listed could be taken full-time or part-time but most students opted for part-time enrollment.

Table 1.
Student Enrollment by Master's Degree and Program

Program	<u>Degree</u>	
	MAT	M.Ed.
Middle Grades Education	1	
Secondary Education	5	
Math	1	
Business	1	
Spanish	2	
Higher Education Administration		25
Special Education		14
Early Childhood		13
School Counseling		7
Secondary Education		6
Educational Leadership		5
Middle Grades Education		4
Instructional Technology		1

Instruction for the course was provided through required readings, online course activities, and optional live synchronous online class sessions. Each week, discussion board posts were required. Students had to post their initial response to the prompt by Wednesday of each week. There were not a set number of posts or replies that students were required to make, but they were encouraged to participate actively and to dialogue with at least one of their classmates. Once a discussion board was opened, it remained

open for the duration of the course; though very few students ever returned to a discussion board once a new discussion board topic was posted/opened. The discussion boards were monitored each week by the instructor, and she served as an active facilitator (e.g., posing clarifying questions, asking for additional examples, providing examples, etc.).

In all of the course sections, during the first week, the students completed learning activities that provided an overview and familiarized them with the topic of educational research while the second week of the course, which is the focus of this study, centered on students locating themselves as a researchers. This meant exploring and gaining an understanding of research paradigms and corresponding epistemologies, ontologies, and methodologies that fit within each paradigm. As instructors of research methods courses, we believe introducing students to the philosophical underpinnings of research and providing them with the opportunity to explore their own epistemic and ontologic orientations is a central part of becoming a researcher and developing an understanding of the research process. Across our courses, we emphasize to students that their identity as a researcher is not fixed; rather it is fluid and will continue to unfold over time.

Instruction regarding research paradigms included assigned readings, a live or recorded lecture (depending on if students attended the synchronous session), a short answer activity, and the discussion board posts used in this study. When discussing research paradigms, the students were given two book chapters (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998; Hatch, 2002) and one journal article (Krauss, 2005) to read related to research paradigms and three different models illustrating research paradigms and epistemologies to review before responding to the discussion board. All materials were distributed to students in limited quantity under the guidelines of Fair Use as outline in Section 107 of the US Copyright Act. Students responded to the following discussion board prompt:

The discussion board this week is a place for you to dialogue about research paradigms and the epistemological and ontological frameworks that support each paradigm. With which research paradigm do you most closely align and why? Also, what kinds of things are you most interested in researching? Does the paradigm with which you align allow for the kind of research you hope to

do? As someone new to educational research, how do you think the paradigm with which you identify will affect the type of study you might conduct? Be sure to comment thoughtfully and reflectively on your classmates' posts as well.

Each student made an initial post to this prompt and on average three comments in response to their peers. All of the posts and comments were collected, organized, and analyzed. It is not uncommon for researchers working with online discussion data to focus their analysis on the initial posts (see, for example, Lester & Paulus, 2011; Paulus & Lester, 2013; Varga & Paulus, 2014). Because our purpose was to capture how students began to develop their research identities, we wanted to see how they first oriented to this new phenomenon in response to the initial prompt. Therefore, we analyzed the 93 initial posts, which averaged 222 words each, as these posts were where the students talked *most* about their paradigmatic orientations and commitments. The analysis of the comments is the focus of a future study.

Data Analysis

The discussion posts were downloaded, sanitized, and put into a master Word document. We used Atlas.ti™ 7, a computer-assisted data analysis software package, to organize and systematically analyze the data. Our analysis began with an initial read of the discussion posts to familiarize ourselves with the data set and to note those sections of the data that we found most interesting and analytically relevant. As we engaged in open reading, we used the memoing feature in Atlas.ti™ to individually make both analytical and theoretical memos linked to key segments of the data. Our individual memos were then merged so that we could review one another's memos in relationship to the data set. We then moved to narrow the focus of our analysis, determining to focus only on the students' initial posts in response to the first question posed in the discussion board, "*With which research paradigm do you most closely align and why?*" This allowed us to more explicitly focus on how students went about negotiating their researcher identity.

Once we narrowed the focus of our analysis, our analytical process included: (a) repeating readings of the data, alongside ongoing memoing of

the data, (b) identification of broad discursive patterns and more micro discursive or conversational features (e.g., extreme case formulations, lexical choices, etc.), (c) generation of explanations as to how students used language to construct their research identities, and (d) selection of representative extracts to document our claims (Author, 2011). Throughout this process, we remained transparent and reflexive in our analytic process, and continually returned to our original research questions with each new discovery: How do graduate students enrolled in an introductory research methods course discursively navigate their research identities? and How do students go about constructing a research identity for themselves? For a four month period, we met bi-monthly via Skype™ or Adobe® Connect™ to discuss the analytic process and emergent findings. We also maintained a record of our ‘formal’ meeting notes and shared our thoughts and ideas weekly via email. Throughout, we reflected together on our how assumptions shaped the analysis process.

Results

Through our analysis, we identified two discursive patterns or social actions: 1) minimizing knowledge and 2) justifying paradigmatic orientations. We present each of these patterns in detail and include representative extracts from the data set. Aligning with a discourse approach to research (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), we discuss each extract by including a line-by-line analysis, thereby making our interpretation visible and open to reader evaluation (Antaki et al., 2003).

Minimizing Knowledge

Many DP studies of education discourse, have highlighted the ways in which students’ talk functions to minimize their status as knowledgeable (Benwell & Stokoe, 2002, 2005; Paulus & Lester, 2013). Benwell and Stokoe (2010), for instance, noted that students often “...work to produce a particular culture ... in which ‘being a student’ involves appearing detached from the academic endeavour,” wherein “students co-construct the discursive limits in which being ‘too clever’ is problematic” (p. 93–94). Similarly, within our dataset, we noted that the participants went about ‘being a student’ by beginning posts with hedges and/or distancing

themselves from knowing ‘too much’ or anything at all. Extract 1 illustrates this well.

Extract 1 (Student 6B)

After reading the 3 articles and looking at the charts, I still have no better grasp on the paradigms than I did when I started reading. Paradigm has not been part of my vernacular, with the exception of sitting through team building and psycho-self assessment workshops; the facilitator would frequently throw out “paradigm shift”.

As with other initial posts, Student 6B began by making visible the activities that marked her identity as a student (‘reading the 3 articles and looking at the charts’). This discursive move illustrates how the participants oriented to the prompt as fundamentally institutional in scope – one in which they were asked to display their identity as a student. Further, Student 6B makes explicit that she “still” has “no better grasp on the paradigms”, minimizing her knowledge. She moved then to justify ‘not knowing’, stating that she was not familiar with such language (“not been part of my vernacular”). Typically, when people make claims of ‘not knowing’, they move to justify their lack of knowledge, avoiding the possibility of losing face or being positioned as incompetent (Goffman, 1967).

While some students explicitly made claims of having “no...grasp”, others made softer claims of ‘not knowing’, such as Student 20B.

Extract 2 (Student 20B, part I)

Upon first reading these various articles and learning about the different types of paradigms, I will admit, I felt a bit overwhelmed. I had no idea that there were so many ways in which to conduct research and for that matter, that they were classified.

Similar to Extract 1, Student 20B began by listing out what he had done, as a student (“reading these various articles and learning”). Then, the student moved to express feeling “overwhelmed”, perhaps functioning to minimize his claim to knowing much about paradigms. We were struck by how students began their posts by claiming not to “grasp” or feeling “overwhelmed” by the very idea of research paradigms and/or the “different

types of paradigms”. We interpreted this discursive move to act to minimize the students’ claims to knowing and distance them from having to account for the research paradigm(s) that they claimed to align with. Being a student is a fragile social act (Paulus & Lester, 2013), as you are typically being asked to show whether you ‘know’ something or not, a potentially face-threatening act. Thus, perhaps it is unsurprisingly that many of the participating students structured their posts to minimize the risk of being questioned or positioned as “wrong”.

Interestingly, immediately following a claim of ‘not knowing’, students often moved to align themselves with a particular paradigm(s). Extract 3, continues with Student 20B’s initial post.

Extract 3 (Student 20B, part II)

I, like most people, probably had their first experience with research as a positivist, when they learned about the scientific method and had to conduct a research project for their school science fair. For a while, I thought that this was the only kind of research that existed!

Here, Student 20B, claimed to have had experiences with positivist forms of research, positioning this as the norm (“like most people”). In many ways, this is structured like a script formulation – a statement presenting general knowledge that ‘everyone agrees with’ (Edwards, 1997). Across our data, we noted that the majority of the students presented research as something that ‘believably’ and ‘presumably’ was tightly connected to positivism. Thus, we were intrigued by the tight coupling that students made between their claims of the meaning of research in relation to positivism, and, as in the case of Extract 3, the “scientific method”. Nonetheless, few students stopped here. For instance, in Extract 3, Student 20B moved to clarify that he believed research was positivist “for a while”, implying that he now had a broader perspective. For many students, though, a broader perspective and understanding of research paradigms was aligned with the course readings and activities. Many students referred to “reflecting,” “pondering” or “re-reading”, as illustrated in Extract 4.

Extract 4 (Student 11B)

After much pondering, I would venture to classify myself as a Postpositivist / Constructivist. I believe that my life experience has taught me that the nature of reality is that “Reality exists but is never fully apprehended, only approximated” (Hatch, 2002). Which I interpret to mean; we never really get a full grasp of what life is all about, we just try to keep our heads above the water and enjoy the rainbow as we dog paddle.” I also agree with many of my fellow classmates in regards to the Constructivist view of the nature of reality, which implies that “multiple realities are constructed” (Hatch, 2002).

Student 11B began by indicating that her paradigm claim was preceded by “much pondering.” Knowledge around paradigms, then, was situated within an act that is often expected of graduate students – reflection. Further, while Student 11B did not claim ‘not to know’, she did ground her claim of “Postpositivist/Constructivist” in relation to “life experience”, as well as a verbatim quote drawn from the readings. Direct quotations often act to bolster one’s claim and minimize the risk of being questions as ‘not knowing’ or being uninformed. Positioning one’s knowledge in relation to a text is perhaps a ‘safe’ position, as the student is less likely to be critiqued and/or questioned as not knowing.

Justifying Paradigmatic Orientations

In addition to minimizing knowledge, there were two primary ways that students went about justifying the paradigms with which they claimed to align: (a) evoking membership categories, and (b) grounding claims in personal experiences.

Evoking membership categories

Sacks (1992) noted that certain categories are associated with particular knowledge, with one’s membership with a particular category being associated with the ‘right’ to speak about a topic and/or hold some type of privileged knowledge. For instance, as a category ‘medicine’ holds the knowledge to ‘cure.’ Informed by Sacks’ (1992) and Stokoe’s (2012) work on membership categories, we took note of how the participants evoked

particular categories when building up and justifying their research identities. This was particularly true when the participants went about describing their paradigm, with this choice often bound to a particular category (e.g., classroom teacher, scientist, etc.).

The categories students primarily evoked included two particular concepts of membership categorization set forth by Stokoe (2012). First, category-bound activities which are described as specific activities or actions linked to a particular category, and second, standardized relational pairs which include pairs of categories that carry obligations in relation to one another. Extract 5 illustrates the use of both category-bound activities and standardized relational pairs.

Extract 5 (Student 18A)

As a classroom teacher, I identified with the critical paradigm because I am a STRONG advocate for my students and want them to be this for themselves as well. As this is my main battle in the classroom, I did have a pull towards this paradigm.

In this example, Student 18A categorized his position as a critical researcher by connecting the category of “critical” with the action of “advocating” for students, indicating that what he knows about the critical paradigm can be explained through the action of advocacy. This is also tightly coupled with the standardized relational pair of teacher and student. Categorizing himself as a teacher carries with it the duty of advocating for students. This categorization illuminated for us how the Student 18A orients to research (through his professional identity) and how that orientation was categorized (made familiar) to the student.

Similar to Extract 5, Student 9B uses category-bound activities and relational pairs to justify her position as a researcher.

Extract 6 (Student 9B)

I have finally decided that I believe I “fit” into the postpositivist mindset. I believe this because as a scientist (Biology major), I value very strict data collection and analysis. I understand that when I am observing someone's perspectives, that it must be done in a very disciplined way.

Unlike Student 18A, who readily identified as a teacher and then connected that to his researcher identity, Student 9B began by stating her position as a researcher and subsequently connected that to her position as a scientist and the action of “strict data collection and analysis.” Further, she began this extract by indicating that her positioning was something that she “finally decided” upon, suggesting that she had taken much time to come to this decision. Like the majority of the participating students, Student 9B made evident the time and even challenge of determining where you “fit” in relation to research paradigms.

Much like Student 9B, in Extract 7, Student 2C justified his position in a similar familiar fashion, stating his position as a researcher by connecting that paradigm to his background knowledge in math and science.

Extract 7 (Student 2C)

After reading the article, I have come to the assumption that I am most closely aligned with the postpositivist paradigm. I have a mathematical/scientific background and approach at looking at things, so I felt like this approach was most like me. I feel like although there is reality, that there are still things out there that you will never know until they happen. When I research something, I feel like I am objective about what I am being presented with.

In both Extract 6 and 7, “science” is used by both students to categorize themselves within a particular research paradigm, justifying their positions as post-positivists. It is also important to note how Student 9B used language such as “finally decided” and “...fit into the post-positivist mindset” to justify her position, which is similar to how Student 2C used the phrase “come to the assumption that I am...” Such discursive choices were used across the data set, perhaps highlighting the way in which the students oriented to this institutional task – one that they were required to respond to. For some of the students, they explicitly mentioned how difficult it was to navigate the feeling of being pressured or even forced to “fit” themselves within one particular paradigm. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, 18 of the students identified with multiple paradigms.

As represented in Extracts 5, 6 and 7, we were struck by the manner in which the participating students made tight connections between particular research paradigms and identity categories such as “critical and advocate”

and “post-positivist and scientist.” Eight students identified with the critical/feminist paradigm and eleven with the post-positivist paradigm. We interpreted these students’ use of membership categorization as being one way by which they came to make sense of a fairly unfamiliar topic (research paradigms) in relation to something more familiar (specific membership categories). In other words, if they could categorize it, they could claim to ‘hold understanding’ and justify their claims.

Grounding claims in personal experience

While using membership categories as a means to justify the paradigms with which they aligned was common, students also justified their positions in relation to personal and professional experiences. The majority of the students used personal and professional experiences to justify their positions, yet their justifying claims often made evident misconceptions and misunderstandings, particularly as it related to the constructivist paradigm.

Student 1D steeped his research identity in his personal and professional experience as shown in Extract 8.

Extract 8 (Student 1D)

I believe I am part of a product of my environment. Quantitative data is the most highly regarded data in my workplace. Whether it's improving program offerings or support services to students or increasing efficiencies within the division, quantitative data is respected as the end all be all... I am the Assessment Coordinator for our Division (in Student Affairs), and after reviewing my work for the past year, I realized that all instruments I created for units were quantitative so I am naturally accustomed to the Positivist/Postpositivist paradigm.

Here, Student 1D began by indicating that he was a product of his environment. This claim was followed by his indication that “quantitative data is most highly regarded in [his] workplace.” Thus, he situated his knowledge of research paradigms not necessarily in what he may have found important in the course readings, but in relation to what was presumably commonplace within his professional community. Such a claim is one that no one can challenge, as Student 1D was the only one who had

access to this information. In talk and text, personal experiences often function to ground a speaker's claims as being valid, as the speaker/writer is positioned as reporting 'facts' that only he observed (Barnes et al., 2001; Carranza Marquez, 2010). Further, as noted previously in relation to membership categories, this particular instance of personal experience also incorporated relational pairs, drawing connections between the research paradigm and experience, for example, "quantitative and positivist/post-positivist".

Each justification of a research paradigm brought with it a list of terms, definitions and associations that in many ways proffered a particular perspective. This was of interest as it most often related to the students' description of constructivism. The largest number of students, approximately 39, claimed to identify with the constructivist paradigm. Based on our analysis of the students justifying claims, we noted that there were two rationales offered in relation to this focus on constructivism: (a) many students enrolled in these courses were educators where constructivist teaching practices were taught and often presumed to be synonymous with a constructivist research paradigm, and (b) using the linear models the students were given to visually orient to research paradigms (Appendix A), constructivism fell in the middle and may have been viewed as the "safe choice" for some students. In other words, students most often linked their experience as educators to the idea of constructivism, as illustrated in Extracts 9 and 10.

Extract 9 (Student 21A, part I)

Perusing and reading the various paradigms there is a minimal part of each integrated into my teaching, but the main focus tends to be a emphasis on the workshop model that must be implemented into the classroom structure for all academic subjects-Constructivist tends fit the best. In many ways I see each of these paradigms in my inclusion classroom, because of the innumerable components of how each can benefit the different personalities of the thirty students sitting in the class. It is my main goal to discover how each student learns, and scaffold to meet the needs to establish academic success. Understanding and acknowledging experiences, and how those experiences affect the learning is the main emphasis.

In Extract 9, Student 21A’s followed the common pattern of justifying his position by evoking the membership category (“each integrated into my teaching”) of a teacher, while also drawing on personal experience (“in my inclusion classroom”). Here, though, we also see the move to connect the membership category of “constructivist” to “teaching” and the “classroom.” The notion of constructivism, then, is located within the framework of classroom teaching.

Constructivism as a cognitive theory comes from the work of Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and John Dewey. The basic premise is that constructing meaning is learning. The idea is that knowledge is constructed by the learner and that learning is made up of complex knowledge structures of which the learner takes in and constructs individual meaning from. Educators are expected to focus on the learner in thinking about learning rather than on the subject to be taught and to acknowledge that there is no knowledge independent of the meaning attributed to experience and constructed by the learner. As an educational theory, constructivism is focused on the growth of active learners through the construction and reorganization of cognitive structures. Students are not passive recipients of information but actively connect information with previously assimilated knowledge and make it their own. As a research paradigm that includes epistemic and ontologic orientations, constructivism disconnects from objectivity, assumes there is no universal reality and assumes there are multiple realities able to be constructed by human beings who experience a phenomenon of interest. In addition, constructivist philosophy recognizes interpretation as a crucial element in the meaning making process (Savin-Baden & Howell, 2013).

In part II of Student 21A’s response (Extract 10), the student’s orientation to constructivism became evident. In an attempt to relate the research paradigm to personal experience, Student 21A drew on constructivism as a theoretical construct rather than as a philosophical construct.

Extract 10 (Student 21A, part II)

In the classroom I am asking the students to continuously reflect based on the previous (background knowledge), the new (core curriculum), and how each is changing the belief on the concrete skill. It is my goal as the teacher to assist each student in the

thought process of discarding unnecessary information/data to figure the relevant skill to build the basic skill base. A Constructivist view within a classroom is controlling the teaching through a number of diverse methods and practices.

Here, Student 21A positions his alignment with constructivism in relationship to their everyday classroom experiences. Similar to other participants, Student 21A lists an activity (“continuously reflect”) that he asks his students to complete, which presumably makes evident a commitment to “constructivism.” The student concludes with a script formulation regarding “a constructivist view”, stating that this view is “controlling the teaching”. Script formulations are generic claims that are presented much like common knowledge or something that ‘everyone’ presumably knows or agrees upon (Edwards, 1997). Such formulations are often used to build a case for a particular claim. In this case, Student 21A is perhaps making evident that he ‘knows’ through experience what “constructivism” is, while simultaneously justifying his alignment with this paradigm. Despite this discursive work, here, like many of other participants, Student 21A positions himself with a version of “constructivism” that is located within his everyday practice.

Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that many of the participants, the majority of whom were trained educators, chose constructivism as a research paradigm, but from the perspective of educational theory. Many educators have studied educational foundations, which include philosophies of education, and many have been exposed to educational theory. That exposure might draw an educator towards the constructivist paradigm because it is a word that is familiar, bringing with it terms and associations that the students felt they could easily justify. However, this justification was made explicit through the display of confusion between the theoretical and philosophical orientations to constructivism.

Discussion

Overall, our findings highlight how being asked to talk about one’s research identity is a potentially fragile task, as evidenced by disclaimers of ‘knowing’, and one that evokes justifications and connections to students’ everyday lives. Similar to other discourse studies, (e.g., Attenborough,

2011; Benwell & Stokoe, 2010), our findings point to the tension between taking up an academic identity, in this case a researcher identity, and being just an average graduate student ‘who doesn’t know much.’ Overall, the inherent complexities of constructing and navigating a researcher identity were noted. Similar to our findings, previous research has pointed to the delicate task of navigating a student identity, which most research methods courses implicitly or explicitly position as a core outcome. Thus, the findings from our study are particularly useful for instructors who teach introductory research courses, as these findings provide instructors with considerations for course design particularly as students go about the task of constructing their researcher identities.

As we consider the potential implications of our findings, particularly as faculty members who teach both introductory research methods courses and qualitative research courses, we acknowledge the need to examine how we introduce students to research paradigms in the classroom. In our experience, many students who enter graduate school do so with prior knowledge, professional experience, and different personal goals. This can make developing a research identity a difficult challenge, particularly for students who enter with extensive professional experience, as they may begin to find themselves in a place where they are oriented to as novices in the research world but experts in their profession, leading them to a new and challenging territory (Murakami-Ramalho, Militello, & Piert, 2013). As Attenborough (2011) pointed out, there is a delicate balance of navigating a newfound identity and guiding students through this process. Identity work, particularly when linked to displaying what you know, can be inherently risky for some students, and brings with it the potential for losing face in front of peers (Paulus & Lester, 2013). An example of this is the way students in this study worked to minimize their knowledge prior to making any claims to a particular paradigmatic orientation or research identity. It is important, then, that instructors who teach research courses reconsider how students are asked to negotiate and label their research identities, recognizing that the very task itself may be fragile and potentially face threatening. Instructors may need to participate in facilitating interactions with students that allows them to feel safe in exploring unfamiliar ideas and identities.

How students are introduced to research paradigms will likely shape how they orient to the topic and begin to make meaning of it. Historically,

paradigm charts in linear formats, much like the ones presented as part of the task presented to the students in this study, have been used in research classes to help students map the field and begin to consider where their epistemic and ontologic orientations may lay. Yet, we wonder whether the trouble with these types of models is that they give the impression that (as most linear models do) categories move in a particular direction from best to worst, most popular to least popular, oldest to newest, and so on, with the middle being somewhat of a neutral ground or safe spot. As our findings highlights, many students often drew upon concepts linked to the most familiar aspects of their work-lives. With this knowledge, instructors of research methods courses may find it fruitful to present research paradigms in relationship to connections with students' everyday lives and position them as being far more fluid and dynamic (in contrast to linear models). For example, instructors may incorporate examples from students' daily lives directly into their discussions of various research paradigms.

Further, there are certainly no tidy researcher categories; so reconsidering how we choose to present research paradigms to students is something that has the potential to change the way students take up the task of talking about their researcher identities. We agree with Lather (2006) that there is a need to restructure educational research classes as a space that first "requires work at the level of basic assumptions about the world and the knowledge we might have of it" building toward a space that advocates for teaching in such a way that helps students understand aporias and the complexities of researcher identities (p. 48). Perhaps then students can begin to understand their identities as less fixed, less technical, and more fluid and dialogical.

Acknowledgment

Dr. Antonio P. Gutierrez, Department of Curriculum, Foundations & Reading, Georgia Southern University (translation)

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