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## Through the Looking Glass: publishing in peer-reviewed academic journals

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**ABSTRACT** This article considers some of the issues of power embedded in publishing in academic journals. It asks questions about the way in which individual scholars and researchers might be empowered within a hierarchical system in which getting funding and getting published are closely allied. Four concepts borrowed from diverse sources (creative power, the power of disbelief, power as freedom and decisive preference) act as running stitches through an auto/biographical account of the author's return to the academy after an absence of several years. Showing how the author exercised power as a PhD student, the author concludes on a polemical but somewhat speculative note as a scholar who has yet to find a home.

### **Introduction**

My contribution to the discussion about journal rankings that is taking place in this issue of *Power and Education* takes the form of an auto/biographical case study. This term is borrowed from Stanley (1992) and I use it because the slash stops the 'flow of the word which might have the effect of making the reader pause to consider issues of authorship' (Parker, 1998, p. 117). As such, it is essential for me to make transparent the particular perspective I am taking, but I find myself struggling to attach a label to myself that will assist you in understanding what that perspective might be. Firstly, although it appears that I have spent the past four years ensconced in the academy, beginning with a Master of Arts (MA) in Educational Research followed by doctoral research on the meaning and experience of higher education, I actually spent a good deal of my time either out 'in the field' or at home because of the valuable writing time that trekking from there to my institution would have consumed. However, it is a truism that taking up a position on the margins of academic life has limited the degree of *savoir faire* I have about the warp and weft that constitute the fabric of that life. Secondly, although I am now 'postdoctoral', the ink on my thesis is barely dry and so the title 'early career researcher' may be a little premature. To my mind, the 'early career' part of this descriptor is also misleading. I may be just off the blocks in my academic and research career, but I am fast approaching the home straight in terms of my career overall. Finally, the euphemism 'independent researcher', sometimes attached to those of us still seeking gainful and remunerated employment in research, hardly does here. It suggests a freedom of choice, a degree of confidence and an aura of glamour that is sadly lacking in my situation. It seems apposite, then, to say that I am writing from the perspective of a scholar-in-waiting or even of one in limbo. At any rate, I am writing from the perspective of a 50-something, freshly minted postdoctoral, would-be educational researcher, feminist and academic about my experience of publishing in journals, about how the existence and operation of journal rankings might have impacted on that, and about what this might mean to me in the future. This is not to say that I consider my experience idiosyncratic and, indeed, talking informally to some of my peers has confirmed that our experiences are different, but 'not so different that we do not recognize each

other' (Mahony & Zmroczek, 1997, p. 5). It does mean that I approach some common ground from a particular direction.

Concentrating on meaning and experience might be taken to suggest a tangential approach to the topic but, on the contrary, I am adhering strictly to the twin foci of this journal. I therefore start by outlining my understanding of power, both because that is helpful in its own right and in order to provide the context for the auto/biographical element of this article. I then address educational issues by relating my experience of publishing in academic journals, situating this activity as one of many practices that constitute and are described by being an academic. I also position this as a learning process, an educational experience. I am aware that emphasis on experiential learning here suggests that I take a 'constructivist' view of knowledge production. However, this would be to oversimplify my position because I am not persuaded that constructivist theory alone is sufficient. I take a 'ragpicking' (Delamont, 2004), 'bivalent' (Walker, 2003), 'both and' (Flyvbjerg, 2006) approach to theory. That said, I angle my discussion towards empowerment. Thus, I am less concerned about whether and how journal rankings influence research. I think it goes without saying that they do. I ask instead how, if at all, we are empowered to 'do it our way'. I have thus conceptualised power in a particular way, and this comprises four strands: creative power, the power of disbelief, power as freedom and decisive preference. These also act as running stitches through my auto/biographical account. In the final part of the article, I speculate, briefly, on the possible consequences of doing it my way.

Although personal experience is most often my starting point, I am usually mindful of the importance of not confusing the personal with the confessional or the revelatory (Stanley & Wise, 1993, p. 60), but in this case I have a confession that is germane to what follows. Before researching for this article, I had a vague idea about journal ranking but had not given a second thought to how this was accomplished nor to its impact on and translation into lived reality. It would be disingenuous of me to state that I had no idea about the prestige attached to particular journals, but it was a vague and general one that I did not pursue further. I will return to and expand on this point later, but the reason I consider it revelatory is that it leaves me vulnerable to the charge that I cannot be a serious player if I did not think to familiarise myself with the rules of the game (Bourdieu, 2003). I have written my account intentionally to trouble that assumption.

### **Concepts for Reading Power**

Levering et al (2009) remind us that there is no shortage of conceptualisations of and theories about power and its dissemination, what it means, how it works, what purposes it serves and how it is manifested narratively. I will therefore set out some of the key ideas that inform my understanding of power specific to the topic under discussion. It is not my intention to generalise or to engage with any particular theory of power, by which I mean I am not seeking to explain how particular relations of power arise or operate. I wish only to run some threads through my auto/biographical account which can be used to pull together the issues of power and education specific to my own experience.

#### *Creative Power*

I turn first to hooks (2000) to assist me in setting out my understanding of power. Whilst hooks' ideas map primarily onto feminist concerns about sexist oppression, they also describe a wider analytical space because she also addresses the difference between the kind of power that serves the aims of domination and control and that which is life-affirming. hooks calls the latter 'creative power'. For hooks, the distinction between oppressive and creative power lies in the value systems that underpin them, that inform how they are exercised and that are played out in particular relationships of power. I am not joining the debate about values in educational research here (Abraham, 2008; Gewirtz & Cribb, 2008; Hammersley, 2008). For me, it goes without saying that the values associated with creative power are different to those that are inherent in power that serves domination and oppression. The important point here is that these alternative value systems cannot be sited within a 'sentimental context' (hooks, 2000, p. 91), such as that in which women's

power is deemed to exist by dint of their essential powers of nurture. For hooks, political awareness and action are also integral to the project of redefinition.

*The Power of Disbelief*

hooks (2000, p. 93) also advocates exercising a 'power of disbelief' which, in its extreme manifestation, simply refuses to acknowledge 'prevailing notions of power [in order to] envision new perspectives'. Anchoring this treatment of power specifically in a consideration of journal ranking raises questions about how a neophyte academic might approach knowledge about where and what to publish and, thus, more generally about what and how to research. I will return to these questions later, but the following is an admittedly simplistic application of hooks' argument about the power of disbelief, intended only to give a flavour of how it might be used in analysis. Briefly, the power of journals to support and enhance academic reputations and to define what constitutes legitimate scholarship (if, indeed, it is the case that they do this) exists only because we believe it does. Disbelief leaves us free to act in accordance with our values and to publish in those journals most congruent with those. hooks' treatment of power is thus premised on the idea that creative power and the power of disbelief reject the status quo. They leave no room for compromise. They are not about working with or adapting existing power structures.

*Freedom*

Another concept important to the understanding of power that will run through my auto/biographical account, and to which I alluded above, is the notion of positive freedom – the freedom to be how we choose to be and to do what we have reason to value. Here, I am borrowing heavily ideas that are of central importance in the capability approach. It is not my intention to offer a full explication of the approach but to outline how the notion of freedom, as it is conceptualised within the capability approach, complements and takes forward the ideas I have taken from hooks. Nevertheless, to my mind, hooks' 'power of disbelief' and its articulation with the exercise of freedom connects to the capability approach, even though the latter is more usually associated with human development and with conditions of poverty and deprivation [1] than with the concerns attaching to academic publishing. Extending this framework so far beyond its original purpose is bound to make it creak and groan, and may make scholars of the approach wince. However, I considered it essential to animate the idea of freedom inherent in hooks' ideas and, for me, there is no better way to do so than to borrow from (rather than apply) concepts from the capability approach.

The philosophical lineage of the capability approach can be traced to Aristotle, but in its contemporary form it is associated with the economist Amartya Sen (1992, 1993, 1999) and with the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2000). According to Sen, capabilities are the substantive freedoms of an individual to achieve the beings and doings they value and have reason to value. These beings and doings are called 'functionings'. Nussbaum applies the notion of capabilities in a different way, seeing them as the specific freedoms which are constitutive of a life that is truly human. Lest we get bogged down in terminology, the important point here is that both Sen and Nussbaum mean positive freedoms (the freedom to) rather than negative freedoms (the freedom from). Thinking about hooks' power to disbelieve also reminded me that Sen (2004) sometimes uses freedom to mean power. Thus, for example, he talks about 'the power to participate in the social life of the community' (Sen, 1982, pp. 367-368). This is easily transposed into 'the freedom to participate in the social life of the community'. Moreover, it is this social aspect of power that must be emphasised here because neither Sen nor Nussbaum are prescriptive about the constitution of the good life, about what a person values. It is for individuals to decide this for themselves. This, of course, smacks of neo-liberal consumerism but, in fact, the individuals populating the capability approach are social beings, relational to others and to the conditions of their existence (Drèze & Sen, 1995), and individual agency is conceptualised within a context of social arrangements (Walker, 2006). Individuals may therefore choose to do something that does not benefit them directly, which might indeed endanger their own well-being if it is for a greater good. This is the 'ethical' rather than the neo-liberal individual (Robeyns, 2003).

Sen has further refined the concepts of freedom and achievement as follows (Nussbaum maintains this is unnecessary):

- Agency freedom: 'one's freedom to bring about achievements one values and which one attempts to produce' (Sen, 1992, p. 57).
- Agency achievement: the realisation of goals one has reason to pursue which need not be guided by one's own well-being (Sen, 1992, p. 56; a trenchant example in the context of the recent changes to the funding of higher education in the United Kingdom is taking part in a protest in which one might suffer physical harm).
- Well-being freedom: 'one's freedom to achieve those things that are constitutive of one's well-being' (Sen, 1992, p. 57).
- Well-being achievement: the well-being a person actually achieves (in relation to the well-being they are able to achieve).

### *Decisive Preference*

The final concept that will thread through my auto/biographical account is the notion of decisive preference. It builds on Sen's notion of capabilities in that it is the freedom/power to prefer. Pettit (2001) developed the idea of decisive preference in answer to Cohen (1993), who was critical of the capability approach because it seems to demand that the individual constantly chooses and takes action to realise those choices. Pettit (2001) countered this criticism by pointing out that decisive preference is more important to Sen than decisive choice. In other words, it is whether we are free to prefer that is important. This describes the difference between capabilities (the possible) and functionings (the realised). Decisive preference is thus more than just 'the satisfaction of preference' (Pettit, 2001, p. 3) because

it is important, not just that a person get what they are disposed to choose from among a given set of alternatives ... but also that this does not depend on their being lucky enough to want that particular alternative. (Pettit, 2001, p. 4)

Moreover, a person could simply adapt their preferences in such a way as to ensure satisfaction of that preference (Elster, 1983). In terms of positive freedom, preference must therefore be 'content-independent'. Preference may well be satisfied but it is not decisive if one's freedom to prefer is constrained. Preference must also be context-independent. A context-dependent preference also militates against the notion of positive freedom because it is 'decisive only so far as the person enjoys the gratuitous favour of certain others' (Pettit, 2001, p. 5). Freedom is constrained by the possibility that this favour may at any time be withdrawn.[2]

### **My Story**

Having outlined the concepts that are key to my understanding of power, I will move on now to an account of my experience of publishing in academic journals. I frame this as a learning process, an educational experience, although my actual experience was rather less smooth and linear than this account implies. Using an auto/biographical account also instantiates the kind of research I do and the kind of writing I try to get published – that is, narrative research which is conscious of its location and the way in which prevailing historical, political, social and cultural conditions are implicated in its production. I have also threaded the concepts of creative power, the power of disbelief, positive freedom and decisive preference as lines of running stitches through my story.

#### *Part One. The Rover Returns*

In September 2006, I re-entered the academy with some trepidation after an absence of 13 years. I was anxious about my ability to play the game after such a protracted interlude and, as I was fast approaching the age of 50, I felt somewhat conspicuous wearing the label 'student'. Before embarking on a PhD, I had to spend a year doing an MA in Educational Research because I was a prodigal daughter and had squandered the capital of an MA in Women's Studies which I had completed in 1993. Some initial resistance to this soon gave way to a feeling of gratitude because it

gave me the time to reorientate myself in the academy. It was not so much that academic life had changed beyond all recognition. Indeed, my confusion arose because it was tantalisingly familiar, the same – but different. I felt I had fallen down the rabbit hole or gone through the looking glass with Alice. I was perplexed that the furniture of academic endeavour seemed tilted and twisted. For example, learning seemed to have become transposed into ‘the student experience’, and education as an overarching good into a series of modules, an array of competences and a set of skills. My intention here is not to critique the modular structure of degree courses or the acquisition of skills and competences, but to highlight my confusion. It is clear to me now that I was, in fact, entering a sphere of the hyperreal (Baudrillard, 1993). ‘Hyperreality’ is the state where a familiar reality is replaced by simulacra or ‘insubstantial form[s] or semblance[s] of something, anything that has a superficial likeness to something else’.[3] I maintain that nowhere was this more pronounced than in relation to the requirement to publish.

My thoughts about the requirement to publish are influenced by Stenhouse (1980), who saw the distinguishing feature of educational research as the necessity to hold it up to public scrutiny. I therefore saw getting into print as a way of letting other people know what I was up to as a researcher, a way of locating academic endeavour to the wider social world. From my vantage point, getting published also seemed an aspirational activity, representing that which I hoped to be – namely, a researcher and a scholar with something to say that other people wanted to hear. I wondered if I would ever produce anything of this sort and saw publication as a feather in one’s cap. Achieving published-author status was, to my mind, a mark of belonging to an academic community. Whatever other thoughts I had in this respect, I also knew that publishing work was not a choice, but a requirement. The edict to ‘publish or perish’ did not appear during my absence from the academy. It had been there before. Back in the seventies, I recall some significant pressure being exerted on a particular lecturer on my undergraduate course to publish, despite protestations about onerous teaching loads (I was in no position to judge the legitimacy of these claims and cannot comment further now). I heard some years later that this person left/was forced out of the department. *Plus ça change*, you may be thinking, and you would be partially right. Ideas of public duty, personal glory and institutional pressure have long informed academic publishing, but coming back after a relatively long absence, they seemed to have been given a new twist. From my vantage point, the aim of the game now seemed to be about amassing a heap of publications to be included in the Research Excellence Framework (or the Research Assessment Exercise, as it was then).[4]

Of course, publishing has never been an entirely altruistic endeavour. Establishing one’s credentials as an academic, building one’s reputation, or just the pleasure of seeing one’s name in print must also be included in the mix. These factors are still pertinent, but because future funding and publication records are now held in closer proximity, the publishing success of the individual has become the lifeblood of the institution, and certainly the department, in which he or she is located. Thus, academics still have a responsibility to publish. But now the reasons for doing so have less to do with one’s responsibility to ‘the public’ (and I appreciate this is a problematic notion) than to publishing itself. Publishing for its own sake, for building a list of publications, appears paramount. This circular logic is again a mark of the hyperreal. Moreover, the idea of public here has become institutionalised. Failure to publish reflects not only on the individual, but also on the department and the institution as a whole, and on its visible presence and reputation in the wider world.

During the first months of my return, I was reminded (rather more than I had anticipated) of the financial services industry, from which I had recently departed. Some of my wilderness years had been spent in the financial services sector – a brief sojourn, but it left a deep impression, which may be why I was sensitive to making links with the world of knowledge production. That notwithstanding, the term ‘financial adviser’ is a hyperreal descriptor if ever I heard one. It is the rare beast who earns a crust by giving financial advice, and most advisers know that their survival depends on selling financial products. Unfortunately, the products they are required to sell under the rules of ‘best advice’ may be precisely those no one wants. Few people are eager to buy life insurance, for example. They want to save or invest all their spare cash with a view to amassing even more, not throw money away on something they may never need. But the rule is ‘protection first’, and advisers have to know how to make life insurance desirable, selling peace of mind and the feeling of having done the right thing rather than policies. Therefore ‘schizophrenic’ – which I

am taking here to mean 'distortions of reality' – might be a better term to use to describe the academy to which I had returned.

That notwithstanding, I had held on to my desire to participate in academic life for a good many years, and I therefore tried to familiarise myself with the acts and the practices that constitute it in order to emulate the conduct required of participation. I am not stating that I was trying to become 'socialised' as a member of this world. Stanley & Wise (1993, p. 93), in their deconstruction and critique of socialisation, explain that it is the 'process by which children are transformed into social beings who have taken on particular norms and values, and know what kind of behaviours are expected of them'. Socialisation is therefore a recursive process because the socialised being perpetuates the norms, values and behaviours of the system of which these are part and into which they have become socialised. Thus, socialisation would have required a greater degree of involvement than I considered healthy. I wanted just enough *savoir faire* to enable me to keep a foothold in it.

This is not a personal and individualised position to take.[5] Quinn, for example, highlights the way in which women negotiate the spaces of higher education, maintaining that higher education is now a 'paradoxical space', not a male space, but not unproblematically female either:

Women are there, numerically, in universities all over the developed world, but closer inspection reveals that they remain marginalised in myriad ways ... Whilst a woman-dominated university is a significant cultural phobia, women look to the university to generate a vision of themselves as powerful, and to provide a protected space to think the unthinkable. (Quinn, 2003, p. 148)

However, Hey's contention challenges the idea embedded in Quinn's account that women do have the capability (the freedom, the power) to mould academic spaces in this way: 'The conditions of the contemporary academy put the ethical practice of feminism in extreme contradiction with the contrasting ethical practice and moral regulation of audit and accountability. Feminist academics live between these spaces' (Hey, 2004, p. 37). At the very least, I would argue that this is not creative power because creative power does not involve negotiation with or accommodation of existing structures, but a rejection of them.

### *Part Two. Learning the Ropes*

At this point in time, I had not been told about, nor had I investigated the standing of, various journals. Neither had I more than a basic understanding of where certain kinds of work might find a home, although here the titles of the journal provided some guidance. As I considered publishing to be an 'elite' activity, I did not consider that I, a lowly student on a taught MA course, could reasonably put myself in the running. When I was an undergraduate, one of my contemporaries published some work, but he was generally regarded as a genius and, on reflection, the impression that only geniuses got into print had stayed with me.

After completing my MA, I began research for a PhD. I felt I was well on the way to being able to emulate the conduct necessary for participation in academic life, which, in turn, would enable me to do things I love to do: read, research, talk to people about their lives, think and write. As I indicated earlier, I spend a good deal of time working at home, where three teenage sons and a large extended family with little understanding of the academy ('What is it you're doing again?') help me to maintain a critical distance between, and a critical stance to, my life in the academy and my life at home. On the other hand, this distancing also hinders my becoming sufficiently *au fait* with the minutiae of academic life. I am simply not around to participate in those informal debates that spring up from time to time; I do not run into people on the stairs often enough or chat with them while waiting for the kettle to boil; I have had little opportunity to eavesdrop on conversations and generally to imbibe the finer points of academic existence on a daily basis. However, it also keeps me from too great an involvement in the madness. Therefore, my place on the margins is simultaneously more and less powerful than if I was in the thick of things (hooks, 2000). I emphasise that point because I would not want the next part of my account to be read as idiosyncratic. I am foregrounding institutional structures and norms rather than individual 'natures' or propensities as central to the shaping of experience.

That said, no sooner was my MA dissertation on the shelf gathering dust than I was being encouraged to publish parts of it (and, indeed, one of those papers is still in press, which is another story). My supervisor made suggestions about where I might consider placing my papers and how I could ensure they met the criteria for inclusion. I followed her suggestions in all but one instance, and, in all but that one instance, my work was accepted for publication. I will return to the assistance my supervisor gave me later, but I want first to linger awhile over this exception because of the opportunity it furnished for reflection on the workings of journal publication (or perhaps 'speculation' is a better word here).

The reason I was given for the rejection of my paper – in a two-line email – was that it was 'not suitable' because its subject matter was 'too specialised'. I was advised to seek out a more specialised publication. Now, inexperienced I may be, but I was puzzled by several aspects of this response. In the first place, it was in no way commensurate with the time, effort and number of emails required to obtain it. Secondly, I am still none the wiser as to why my subject matter was considered too 'specialised', as there are any number of articles in past issues of this journal on the same topic – a fact I established when I was researching journals to get a feel for the kind of material that would be acceptable. Thirdly, although it is a peer-reviewed journal, I received no feedback from any reviewer. Of course, it may be that the reviews were so scathing that the decision was taken to spare my feelings. However, it took almost nine months before I received even this cursory response, so I am not persuaded my interests were at the top of the agenda here. I know that turning round an academic article for publication is akin to turning an oil tanker, but with the benefit of experience and hindsight, I consider this time delay at the extreme end of tardy. Although the following is an unsubstantiated assertion, I am left with the impression that the paper I submitted was simply lost (I had sent a hard copy) and that the person with whom I was corresponding (a PhD student) was too anxious or embarrassed to come clean about it, even though I would not have minded and could have re-sent the paper. Had I had more experience under my belt at that time, I might have asked more questions, particularly about the whereabouts of the peer reviews.

Relating my experience to one of my peers, I learned that they had submitted a paper which had been accepted for publication with only one very minor amendment. Prior to publication, their permission was sought for the paper to appear in another newer (less well-known, less prestigious) journal. Not wanting to jeopardise any chance of future publication, agreement was given. Only later did my colleague appreciate that our library did not subscribe to this journal. Initial euphoria gave way to deflation. I must emphasise that my motivation here is not revenge or to name and shame – indeed, I have taken pains to protect identities. Nor do I believe that any of us can 'tell it like it is'. We are all just theorists and interpreters of our experiences. But these two experiences were educational because they provided some insights into the rather pedestrian mechanisms used in the exercise of power, and thinking about them did enable greater understanding of how journal hierarchies are constructed and maintained. They also illustrate well the absence here of decisive preference and both the content- and context-dependent aspects of publishing in academic journals.

Before I conclude this part of my educational story, I want to comment on my supervisor's success in identifying where I could find a home for my papers. I realised, of course, that she must know something I did not and I am not sure why I did not ask her about the criteria informing her decisions about where to publish. Perhaps it was because I knew that she had been publishing in journals for almost 30 years and I made an assumption that her knowledge was gleaned through experience alone. But this does not serve to explain why I did not research the subject independently. A friend informed me that she went on a course for that very purpose ('one of *those* courses'). Why was I unaware such courses existed? Why did I not do anything even as simple as a Google search? I am unable, from this distance, to offer an explanation for my (in)actions. I do not recall making a conscious decision to keep myself in a state of ignorance. A positive interpretation here, and one congruent with my determination not to be sucked into the madness, would be that I was exercising the power to disbelieve and exercising my creative power by refusing to legitimate the existence of hierarchical publishing systems through knowledge of them. A less affirmative interpretation would be that it expresses my awareness of an absence of decisive preference and manifests a lack of confidence, which I touched on above when talking about my view of publishing as an elite activity. The salient point here is that disentangling the underlying power

issues that motivate all our actions (doing nothing is also an action) is a delicate operation and may result only in myriad loose threads.

*Part Three. Finding My Feet ...*

At the beginning of 2009, I took part in a project which led to the production of a videonarrative about my doctoral 'journey'.<sup>[6]</sup> On completion, four participants, including the project leader, collaborated on a paper – the outcome of a reflexive appraisal of our participation in the project and of our videonarratives. The title of the paper, “‘I did it my way’: voice, visuality and identity in doctoral students’ reflexive videonarratives on their doctoral research journeys’ (Taylor et al, in press), perfectly expresses the outcome of our critical engagement with our learning. Prior to watching my own videonarrative, I was unaware of how important it was to me to ‘do’ my PhD in a particular way. This is not the place to tell this story, but for reasons that became apparent to me while watching myself, it was clear that my approach to my studies was rooted in and informed by fidelity to my values, and was shaped by the particular circumstances in which I had resumed my studies. This influenced my actions to such an extent that, had I compromised, I doubt I would have been able to sustain the commitment required to complete my studies. A considerable part of that commitment was to narrative research, or, more particularly, to the importance of stories in the production of knowledge and to troubling ‘normal assumptions of what is “known” by intellectuals in general, and sociologists in particular’ (Goodson & Sikes, 2001, p. 7), and to asking questions from the perspective of those usually ‘acted upon’ rather than from that of ‘powerful constituencies within the social and economic order’ (Goodson & Sikes, 2001, p. 8).

Taking part in the project was, for me, an epiphanic moment, the point at which one undergoes a conceptual revolution that ‘permit[s] the transition from inadequate to newly constituted paradigms’ (McGettigan, 1998). It led me to construe my (in)actions, the way I was doing my life in the academy in general and my interpretation of specific academic practices such as doing research and publishing in journals, as powerful along the four dimensions of power I outlined at the start of this article. In particular, I heard and saw my story as the exercise of agency freedom and the manifestation of agency achievement. Agency freedom is not about self-indulgence and agency achievement is not a way of saying that you have got your own way, that you have succeeded in imposing your will in a battle for power and legitimacy. The capability approach does not admit these ‘bad’ interpretations because it is not simply a ‘primary informational space’ (Alkire, 2008, p. 29). It is a broad space, its parameters described by values and principles that foreclose on negative construals of power. At this point, I understood creative power in an emotionally cognitive way (Nussbaum, 2001) – how creative power could be exercised. This required confidence in, rather than apologies for, my intention to do feminist research with an ethical aim, a moral purpose and a reflexive impetus.

*... or Skating on Thin Ice?*

I cannot state that this epiphanic moment was immediately translated into action. It is one thing to know and quite another to act on that knowledge. My crunch time came when ‘writing up’ my thesis. I had to make a decision about whether to continue ‘doing it my way’ or whether to structure my thesis in the time-honoured way. To my mind, there is nothing inherently better than a thesis that does not follow convention. Creative power challenges the status quo but it does so by expanding possible modes of expression, not shrinking them. Positive freedom cannot ensue from the restriction of other freedoms, and establishing the new at the expense of the old is nothing other than perpetuating the power hierarchies that one claims to challenge. The salient point here is whether I was empowered or constrained, and whether I was able to exercise decisive preference. My thinking was informed by a previous experience which I set out in a paragraph I deleted from the final iteration of my thesis:

I have been in the position once before where straying from the path of academic convention ended in tears (mine, copious ones, accompanied by loud sobs). Back in October 1991, days before giving birth to my second son, I handed in a dissertation entitled ‘Why Do Women Have Children?’ for a Master’s in Women’s Studies. I had used a narrative approach but was asked to

resubmit it, to 'add' a chapter on methodology, do a literature review and generally present it in a conventional format. I felt all the things that were asked for were already embedded in the narrative and to do as required would be akin to a disembowelling. Moreover, as feminist researchers we had been encouraged to challenge 'malestream' methods of knowledge production. I felt I had been stupid to take this to heart. Therefore I started again from scratch and did an empirical study, structuring my work in a more conventional way ... I think the advice to resubmit sound. I did need to have another look and to think things through more thoroughly and with a greater degree of criticality, but had my work been assessed on its own terms using criteria appropriate to assessing narrative research, I believe I could have worked on my dissertation rather than feeling forced to start again. As it was, I handed in a second, conventionally structured piece of writing eighteen months later, literally one minute before the deadline of the very last extension I could be granted ... I did not mention any of this in the replacement dissertation, however, other than to say I had not originally planned to do an empirical study.

It is one thing to start a dissertation from scratch and quite another to be in the same position with a thesis, but, once again, I recognised that if I did not do it my way, I would be unlikely to complete it.

Nevertheless, this exercise of creative power did not feel empowering. It felt risky. So great was my fear, so pressing the need to be 'understood', that both my examiners reported feeling that I overprescribed their role and that of readers in general. I was asked to reflect further on this point and, in particular, to address my patent lack of trust in the reader. I am reluctant to talk about being 'damaged' by my previous experience, but I do not think it stretches the imagination to trace the lineage of this lack of trust to it.

Now that it is all done and dusted, I have no regrets about sticking to my guns (How would I have felt if things had not gone as smoothly?) and am relieved that my examiners assessed my work on its own terms, whatever doubts they may have had about taking such an approach (I produced an arts-based, 'patchwork' text that sought to collapse disciplinary and methodological categories). However, unsurprisingly, no suggestions were made about where I might publish parts of my thesis, or any indication given that any of it was worthy of publication anywhere. I recognise myself that much of it hovers on the margins of suitability for most academic journals. I also suspect that most of the journals sympathetic to my aims will not score highly for impact and, concomitantly, for prestige, and that this will have a different kind of impact on me. I am doubly glad I did it my way because my doctoral research may well be my last sustained involvement with the academic world. In a competitive market and gloomy economic climate, it is no surprise that my way does not intersect with many other routes. I need to think hard and think fast about how I am to proceed, which will no doubt entail clarity about the degree to which I am empowered.

### **Tightening the Threads**

I return now to pull tight the threads running through the account I have given above in order to make explicit my understanding of the power issues inherent in journal publishing in general, and journal ranking in particular. Whilst I focus on each strand discretely, this is for purposes of comprehension, because none would be understood in the same ways without the presence of the others. I am aware that the way I have chosen to treat power in this article (foregrounding empowerment) has necessarily led to a more upbeat consideration of the degree of power scholars enjoy along these axes. Thus, what follows is both a summary of the arguments that inhere in my account so far and a tempering of them.

#### *Creative Power*

The notion of creative power as life-affirming means that publishing in journals should bring to authors a sense of achievement and fulfilment. As an academic, you have had something to say that others consider worthy of an airing and an audience. However, the existence of a hierarchy of importance militates against this because it cannot help but influence decisions about where and what to publish. In this sense, creative power is always already compromised. How do we know

what decisions we might reach if left to our own devices? This is the case even for those of us who are able to meet the demands of the 'better' journals without too much soul-searching. Publishing in order to establish and maintain academic reputations is not a recent phenomenon, nor is the pressure to 'publish or perish'. However, linking institutional funding to publication records through the Research Excellence Framework introduces a circularity of purpose. Publishing academic work – arguably one of a number of core activities through which scholars become recognised as scholarly – thus spirals into the sphere of the hyperreal. Life-affirming creativity and the hyperreal make for incompatible bedfellows because the latter demands concrete action transformative of 'lived realities'. It is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to gain a foothold on the hyperreal, let alone to mount a challenge. What often happens, I would argue, is compliance of the sort I experienced when working in the financial services industry.

#### *The Power of Disbelief*

Paradoxically, and lest all appears to be lost, hyperreality facilitates the exercise of the power of disbelief simply because in this realm there is little of substance to believe in anyway. Whilst I am intentionally avoiding citing particular journals, searching for journals I thought might house my own work was not an arduous task. As a would-be academic, I also take heart from the growing number of those in senior positions who are widening the parameters of what is considered scholarly. I take heart also from the way in which feminism, which was on the margins of mainstream academic endeavour when I did my MA at the start of the 1990s, has now established epistemological, methodological and ethical principles which resonate beyond feminist academic endeavour. Perhaps the key here, as in all good jokes, is timing. Time will also impart the effectiveness of exercising this power or whether it would be wiser to establish my academic credentials before rejecting the basis on which those are earned.

#### *Freedom*

It is obvious, but still worth pointing out, that no one is entirely free to publish wherever they want. Feminist journals would not be interested in publishing work that ignores feminist perspectives, for example. However, in these concluding remarks, I wish to tip the balance the other way. By sticking to my guns, I may well have shot myself in the foot. Acting in line with my values (or, in the terms of the capability approach, achieving functioning capability) may militate against the achievement of an academic career. My refusal to 'play the game' may understandably be taken to mean a desire not to join in at all, rather than to apply my own rules to it. There is, after all, no small measure of hubris in taking such a stance. Nonetheless, agency achievement – the freedom to do that which one values but which may ultimately not serve your best interests – is a fundamental element of my understanding of freedom. It is this which remains paramount for me, regardless of the existence of hierarchies of importance in the world of academic publishing and their potential influence on what is regarded as legitimate scholarship.

#### *Decisive Preference*

It might seem that my ability to do it my way was a manifestation of the exercise of decisive preference. However, my preferences can be understood as context-dependent here in that they were underpinned by the economic freedom provided by an Economic and Social Research Council studentship. Now that I am no longer in receipt of this funding, the content dependency of my preferences has also been made manifest. Thus, for example, whilst my interest is in higher education, or graduates more specifically, I have not yet published in any journal specific to that area of interest, highly ranked or otherwise. The reason I have not done so is because I needed first to establish what kind of researcher/academic I wanted to be, what were the values and principles underpinning my conduct and what actions made me (un)comfortable. I did this through writing and publishing on topics outside the immediate parameters of my thesis. Now that this funding has ceased, economic necessity is a more prominent factor in my decisions about what and where to publish. I am no longer in the dark about journal rankings, the bases on which they are made and

their influence on the establishment of academic reputations. I am aware that if I wish to continue researching in this area (which I do), it would be wise to disseminate some of my findings through well-regarded channels. This seems only common sense. However, it also highlights the powerful influence of journal publication in the constitution of academic identities.

### Concluding Comments

The problem with telling stories is that one is vulnerable to the charge of telling tales. Focusing on those aspects of my academic life that provide some of the clearest instances and illustrations of issues of power within the relatively constrained parameters of this journal article militates against inclusion of nuance, gradation and variation, and can come across as simply getting things off my chest. It was not my intention here to critique the processes by which the reputation of various journals is established. I think it goes without saying that these are not neutral processes but are saturated with the values that inform judgements about what constitutes 'good research'. I am not glossing over the fact that the existence of a hierarchy of importance and of an elite tranche of academic journals does have consequences for research, for researchers and, thus, for education. But nor did I wish to address power from this platform. To do so would be reinforcing the idea that there is nowhere else to stand, and my aim in relating an auto/biographical story was to instantiate how creative power can establish a fresh basis on which to proceed. Of course, this kind of work is not guaranteed publication, but papers that challenge the status quo and push the boundaries of what is deemed scholarly do get published. As the case of autoethnographic research shows, for example, such work gets published and becomes influential even in the teeth of the fiercest criticism, such as that by Delamont (2009). I see the growth in importance of autoethnographic research as a trenchant example of the exercise of the four strands of power I outlined at the start of this article. The power to set the agenda does not rest entirely in the hands of others. At the risk of taking a polemical turn, creative power must nonetheless be uncompromising because otherwise it will be perpetually undermined by existing power structures. It therefore involves personal, emotional as well as political and intellectual investments with no guarantee that they will yield a commensurate return.

### Notes

- [1] See <http://www.capabilityapproach.com/index.php>
- [2] In my PhD thesis, I used this concept with reference to widening participation policy, the very term articulating content and context dependency and the absence of decisive preference for some groups.
- [3] See <http://www.tripiparanormal.com/Glossary.html>
- [4] The Research Excellence Framework is the new system for assessing the quality of research in higher education institutions in the United Kingdom (see <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/research/ref/>). The previous system was the Research Assessment Exercise.
- [5] Goodson & Sikes (2001, p. 88) see individualisation and personalisation as the mark of life stories. Stories that contextualise and politicise are, in their view, life histories.
- [6] The first part of this videonarrative is available for viewing at <http://www.phoenixrising-mindingthegaps.blogspot.com/>

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