

GETTING INSIDE THE MIX!

(formally known as In the Mix!)

Karen Lambert, University of Western Sydney

It is the intention of this paper and my conference presentation to document the personal and research process by which my thesis is evolving from within a framework of invested interest, academic desire, fluidity and personal passion. I will also discuss ways in which I have managed to ‘keep the passion’ and excitement by immersing myself in a phenomenological personal process whilst still managing to conform to doctorate and academic requirements. I intend to illustrate this by providing a rough description of how I have engaged with my research through social theory and how this engagement and appreciation for and of theory has allowed me to further explore the potentialities of my project through the examination of various mixtures. Like my thesis, this is a work in progress, a constant and ongoing process of re-designing, re-constituting and re-conceptualising, hence the slight shift in my title.

The passionate journey

I started my doctoral programme in a Doctor of Education. I had completed 5 of the 8 required subjects when I decided that the structure of the thesis in this programme was too restrictive for where I wanted to go. At that stage I had been studying cross institutionally at the University of Western Sydney in a subject called *Sense of Place*. It was this subject, and my engagement with it and a place, plus my own personal ‘place’ at the time that led me to the Doctor of Philosophy idea. I basically found myself constricted on one hand by the Doctor of Education process but at the same time used it to evolve into another new direction. It is here within the Doctor of Philosophy (re)searching framework that I now feel comfortable to spread my physical education teacher wings into areas that I find very compelling, inspiring, personal and challenging. These new areas included: human and cultural geography, poststructural feminist theory, queer theory, and exciting ‘queer’ mixes of qualitative research methods around these emerging theoretical leanings. All a long way from the football field, but right in the middle of my own life field. In many ways I have been transformed through completing

the unit *Sense of Place* and challenged to search for ongoing meaning of my own lived experience by exploring theory and beginning to ask similar questions of others.

... I have managed to extract meanings and understandings about the nature of place and the so called 'human-environment interaction'. In addition I believe I have further developed an attachment to my places based on a greater awareness and appreciation of the human and non-human elements and social interactions that make up that place. Finally, and especially important for me and the reasons I was doing this subject in the first place, I think I have been able to further develop a sense of myself and where I may belong, or just be me. This is not fanciful, it is an honest feeling, a felt and conscious change that has manifest in many ways. From the simple, like putting a rainbow sticker on my car, to the more complex, like writing about my relationship breakdown and associated 'healing'. And crying a lot. I'm changing.

(Lambert 2002:9)

So the shift from Doctor of Education to Doctor of Philosophy seemed very reasonable to me. Through the Doctor of Education a self selected programme of study that had not only begun to teach me to research but also to search had engaged me. I had found a passion that went beyond subjects, universities and schools, and into lived human social experiences, including my own. Suddenly it appeared that everything that I had 'studied' and 'learned' (or maybe not-learned) in the past was actually quite useful in shaping a lens through which to view the world around me. It has been important from the outset for me to be able to frame my own experiences, values and assumptions into my project. I believe I have managed to do this via my choices in theory and method, and an attitude and disposition based on the appreciation of both objective and subjective experiences. Importantly, I have stayed passionate and kept ownership, and the following quote by Rosemarie Anderson (2000) reinforces that it is OK for me to think and work in such 'caring' and intuitive ways,

By loving what we study, we approach it tenderly. Such a compassionate knowing brings a softness to the way we ask our questions, set up our hypotheses, devise our instruments, conduct our investigations, analyze our data, construct our

theories, and speak to our readers or audience. Our loving approach brings the nature of the phenomenon studied alive to our senses. (p_)

I was firstly interested in this project from within myself, then later, I was interested in it for them (my participants), now, together, we are interested in creating a story of five lives so that others may possibly benefit from our collective and shared learning's and experiences, and so that systems, agencies and institutions can be potentially better positioned to engage with and approach some of the distinct social issues relating to sexuality. I had a dream, a vision and imagining that was based on personal and lived experiences. I had a desire to find out if others like me thought, felt, experienced and sensed in the same ways. And why and how? Was this to validate myself? Curiosity? Research? Desire to be the same, to be accepted and acceptable? To be a part of something bigger than me? I know I wanted to re-affirm myself and my uniqueness by asking questions about my people and my places, and my community, but I also want to give voice where there is too often silence. And I wanted to be able to do this creatively and flexibly, hence the early shift to a Doctor of Philosophy.

So it was from this initial passion and enthusiasm that I began the search for an academic frame for my thesis and sought out various compelling theories, methodologies, and methods from which to design my doctorate. I began to locate and seek out the various leanings and positions that resonated with me personally and my emerging research design. At this stage I think that I'm beginning to get the mix right!

It seems timely to include a brief rundown of my thesis ideas at this stage. My research intends to explore the ways in which lesbians interact with, and develop a sense of, 'their places' and (them)selves. It further intends to explore the ways in which 'their places' may interact with them and possibly contribute to a sense of self, sense of belonging, sense of sexuality and sense of community. In short, I am asking questions around the possibility that place, sexuality and identity may be considered mutually constitutive. Through the use of sensuous life history interviews I will be exploring individual narratives of a number of critical moments, experiences or epiphanies in and of place(s)

that the participants identify as relating to their sexual identity formation (eg childhood, school, home, work, coming out, the street). I have framed the research within an ethnographical and phenomenological methodology and intend to employ poststructural feminist theory and queer theory approaches. The types of additional mixed mode research methods that I am using include: personal narratives, stories, poems and journals; photography and artwork; artefact collection; group biography; and participation in key events. Participants are five members of my *Gay Games* soccer team. I am using this group experience in time as my starting point from which each participant has individually sprung to discuss their identified critical moments.

Resonance

Whilst conceptualising and explaining the process of intuitive inquiry Rosemarie Anderson (2000) introduces the concept of sympathetic resonance as a process for reconceptualizing and re-enchanting research validity and design. She explains this idea via numerous examples of research that in some way has touched, attached or related to, or resonated with the reader, somewhat like a poem has the potential to do. She adds that *sympathetic* resonance is made possible if the researcher is able to design, listen and write in more compassionate ways, and more so, if the researcher can experience the research in deeply connected ways through the lenses of their own experiences, motivations and aspirations. This notion of an embodied perspective is appearing strongly in much of my findings. Some of the key terms, ideas and concepts that have sympathetically resonated with me from my readings are: place, sexuality, identity, sense, ethnography, phenomenology, queer theory, and poststructural feminist theory. From preliminary data analysis of my interviews I am also picking up themes and discourses around: bodies, difference, pain, wrong/right, and identity. Quite recently I have been drawn to the work of Judith Butler with regards to contingent identities, gender, performativity and melancholia (1991, 1993, 1997). In her work I have found some small fragments of text that have sounded in my head and motivated me to ask, to write and to read on.

Theory

The theoretical perspectives that were to emerge for me were clearly based upon me and my position in the world, life experiences and life views; my imaginings and dreams; my rough ideas about who I wanted to do this with; and who I was doing this for. Early on in the process I was hung up on my own beliefs about what ‘the PhD’ was and I was trying to use and apply theory and academic vigour to everything. I began to ask my supervisor and myself some basic but important questions. Simple things made me lose sleep at night, like is theory a framework, foundation or philosophy? Or is it a way of thinking or of doing? Could it be a way of being? I thought I needed to BE something (eg a feminist) and to wear a theory hat with IT written on the front and never take it off. How was I to know what I was? When could I stop reading about theory? Which hat would I wear, when and why?

Originally I was trying to base my work on theory and build a framework for action and upon which to hang my story, when in actual fact the ideas and methods had managed to immerse themselves in the theory. I was frustrated that I couldn’t decide ‘what I was’ and ‘how I was’. Identity based questions that I have had for years. I resolved that I didn’t have to BE anything, I just had to DO what I felt compelled to do. And that was listen.

Here I am drawn to a story conveyed by Kath Weston in her book, *Long slow burn* (1998). Weston quotes a warning from Esther Newton that “if you do too much queer theory you stop having sex.” Weston continues by relating a story about a gay identified man living in the 1930s who places his homosexuality within the context of other social mores and ideas of the time, including the commonly held belief that “masturbation makes you go blind.” At this time debate amongst his peers centred around the fact that if masturbation made you blind, how much could we get away with before we needed glasses? This begs the question, how much is too much, and when is it just not quite enough? Weston cleverly suggests that theory may in fact be just a form of intellectual masturbation, and to tell the truth this was precisely one of my initial responses to ideas around theory and it’s use in academic writing.

But it was Weston who reminded me that theory is not a new phenomenon, nor is it the property of the academia. We all theorise daily about our worlds, our action, and our lives. Based on this, Weston suggests that the question is not whether to do theory OR who owns theory, BUT rather “what kind of theory do ‘we’ want to do? And who occupies themselves with which sort of theory?” (p143). When I was starting to really delve into theory I found it useful to pinpoint concepts that were making sense to me (*what* was resonating) and then asked *why* they made sense, and then *how* I may find them applicable to my project. I found it equally as useful to ask why I didn’t like particular notions or concepts. In this way I was becoming more critical of the aspects of theory that were applicable to me at the same time as developing a strong understanding of why I was compelled to these ideas, and not others. There is still much of this critical analysis to be done if my thesis work is to be able to stand up to the criticisms and critiques of others. The following two paragraphs briefly display an example of this process when I first began to consider the value of notions around queer theory and poststructural feminist theory. I have found that my critiques of these theories are becoming much more sophisticated as I read more into and around each, and collect some data to apply to these epistemological views and in so doing trying to find my theoretical mix.

It cannot be denied that any contemporary study delving into the lives of lesbians or gay men would certainly need to acknowledge and consider **queer theory**, but I am not convinced that all the aspects of queer theory will be applicable to my project. I am aware of its limitations and exclusions, especially its white, middle-class gay male politics. In this project I believe queer theory will allow me to articulate fluid sexualities as it will allow me to: question heteronormativity; examine and exploit incoherencies within our lived experiences and learned practices; articulate fluid sexualities, sex, gender and desire; position and derive meanings from our individual and collective experiences of ‘sexuality’, and place our experiences within the broader queer and social context. It may also allow me to analyse in terms of the politics of resistance and place. I intend to continue the tradition of contesting notions of the term ‘queer’, for example, queer can be related to sex, gender and sexual desire; can be a noun, adjective or verb; is defined against heterosexuality; is not heterosexuality; includes gay men, lesbians, transsexuals,

transgender, hermaphrodites, sadomasochism, and any other transgressive, not 'normal', not heterosexual desires and practices (Gamson, 2000; Jagose, 1998; Spargo, 2000). I am finding queer an elastic and aggressive term that has the potential to resist established models and allow me fluidity within my research. I therefore intend to use the term queer as a verb both in terms of theory and methodology, specifically as a process of 'acting up', 'bucking the system' and 'thinking outside the square'. It is hoped that the concept of queer as proposed in this project, will be able to get inside and outside the stories and lived experiences of lesbians and search for meanings and will enrich stories of feelings around sexuality, place and community.

Personally I am a little frustrated with aspects of **poststructural theory** because I also possess some opposing humanist ideas around self and identity. The focus on language leaves me wondering about the tangible and felt experiences like sexuality, place and senses of these things. I also think that identity and how one describes one's identities *does* matter, unlike some slants in poststructural theory. On the other hand, it would clearly be naïve of me to assume that we have all formed our identities in the same ways from the same lived experiences, so poststructural feminist theory will help me to deconstruct these experiences and interpret the meanings that have come from them within each individuals context and also in relation to each other, over time. Poststructuralism questions, deconstructs, and destabilises notions of self, identity, power and knowledge within the breathing socio-cultural and political climate of our postmodern world (Macdonald, Kirk, Metzler, Nilges & Wright, 2002). I therefore believe that in this project poststructural feminist theory will allow me to critique and deconstruct discourse, identity, difference, the social world and the very theories that I am applying.

I believe that my chosen theoretical perspectives, methodologies and methods will allow me to develop, adapt and adjust my methods according to the stories and experiences of the participants and in so doing create a richer picture of their lives. I favour this variety in my theoretical choices because I believe that each offers me a discrete and distinct perspective with regards to methods, data collection and data analysis, which I acknowledge I need to explore in much greater detail in the design process.

Methods

By conceptualising and adopting a grounded approach to social theory I have opened up my research approach to data collection and analysis as well. I have chosen a variety of ways in which to (re)present my participants thereby allowing them to construct their own stories as richly as they desire. These methods include sensuous life history interviews, artwork, photography, journals, music, poetry and story writing. All these methods offer alternative points of discourse within a notoriously discursive area, and echo my continued desire to engage the participants in the sensual experiences of the project thus enabling me to resonate with their stories and to listen, read and write in a more embodied, passionate and compassionate way.

Reflection, immersion and going blind?

It appears that daily I am looking through the lens of my research as I watch and participate in the world. I have sat on mountains and lakes, and in castles around the world and thought about thinking, and the ways that I personally see and participate in and with the world. I watch people and wonder how they view their worlds. Through this process of self reflection and immersion in others (people and places) I have managed to keep my passion and enthusiasm. I wonder is all this just a part of being a new researcher and reading, or the result of looking out beyond my research project? I tend to think it is the latter because if I cannot conceptualise my dreams, passions and imaginings beyond this structured process what purpose will it have to others? I am acutely aware of the need for doctoral research to make an original contribution to human knowledge and from my already privileged position I regularly ask myself ‘why am I doing this again?’ The thesis must stand up to both external and internal scrutiny and if I am continually reflecting upon ‘who this is for’ then I am placing my own reflective and critical gaze upon it regularly. I have found it useful to journal any questions, ideas or issues as they arise, and to develop an ongoing routine of both personal and process based reflection. I am hopeful that this additional collection of ‘data’ will also be able to contribute to the overall thesis.

Now I'm asking where to next? And how do I stop? Where do I stop? How do I manage the things that I have? What do I do with all the boxes of articles I just keep photocopying and archiving? I have resolved that framing the process in terms of completion dates and small, achievable milestones to be very useful on this point. This is not an imposition, but rather, a goal and a direction, and importantly a way of managing my project whilst still being able to work, be productive and creative, and play. In short, have a life. The sorts of milestones I have set are both concrete and practical (in terms of supervision and PhDs), and abstract and exploratory (in terms of allowing me intellectual freedom), these little milestones, and a little extra advice appear below.

- a) *Develop a refined and thoughtfully directive research proposal.* This process helped me to make the thesis material and real. It required me to start to refine my imaginings and dreams into a word limit and conceptual design, and to then be able to present it to peers coherently. In short, I needed to know what I was talking about.
- b) *Set interview dates and collect real data.* After my theory dilemmas I was a little lost and floaty, starting the interview process has grounded me again, and therefore grounded my research processes. It has also allowed me to humanise my participants and to really think about what it is I want to talk to them about.
- c) *Negotiate a realistic and believable timeline.* This includes: regular supervisor meetings; setting realistic and achievable personal and research goals; and, a commitment to productivity, plus talking to others about my imaginings.
- d) *Don't get hung up on research questions, or even thesis titles.* I have found that sometimes these just emerge and shift, and that it's OK if they do. Just write them down as you go along. Allowing a fluid and variable approach to the overall research design provides greater opportunity for intuitive thinking and creative philosophising.
- e) *Don't go blind.* But read, think and write at the same time as collecting data. This includes formal and informal opportunities and conversations and is a great way in which to frame your thinking and present ideas to others for feedback and just to say them out loud.

- f) *Analyse data as it comes forth and be a reflective listener of it.* For me each piece of data will have some potential new twists and avenues of inquiry. How will I see them, how will I now frame them? Where should I read now? What should I ask or do next time?
- g) *Be reflective.* Continually reflect upon readings, thinking and methods, and narrow focuses when and where appropriate. For example, I think that I need to read more about theory and become more critical of them, but do I need to do that now? Where are my energies best suited now?
- h) *Have a life.* Take regular breaks, speak to different people, ask silly questions, do the things you normally do. On occasion go a distance back from your work, it's amazing the clarity and inspiration that can come from looking at the whole scene instead of little parts (eg like chapters!). Try to participate in the world in which your research is occurring and ask questions about it. This is a kind of immersion in the social dimension and living out and in the ethnography.
- i) *Keep an open mind.* Permit and encourage intuitive 'things' to surface by living, breathing, talking, listening, writing, reading and reflecting (to yourself and others). It is surprising how much 'copy' coffee with friends can add to the picture!
- j) *Record.* Always carry a pen and paper or tape recorder. Importantly, however silly, write everything down.

I have found that a commitment to these small things have allowed me to stay grounded but at the same time expansive and inquisitive, and to my supervisor's satisfaction, productive.

At the outset of my thesis process I had a number of objectives that centred on allowing voice and keeping the participants human whilst engaging in a personal adventure of intuitive inquiry. I desperately want to continue to convey their individual and collective humour and beliefs, and to provide an environment and opportunity to express and share their lived experiences and personal meanings with me, and later others. Of course, as with most theses, I want to change the world. Quite recently I learned that this may not actually happen, and that a PhD is more about the research process than the findings. I am

not deterred by this fact, I kind of knew it all along, both my ownership of my thesis and my engagement with it, plus the fact that I worked in a university, had led me to completely understand and accept this concept and a reality of postgraduate study. I quietly intend to finish in minimum time, and even believe that I may still change the world ... eventually.

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