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The Lived Experiences of Professional Clinical Psychologists who Recently Started a New Academic Career

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Abstract

Employing an adapted Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method, the experience of practicing Clinical Psychologists entering academia is explored. The article explores the recursive process between individual and institution as professional and academic identities develop in the context of a multiplicity of trajectories emerging at the intersection of professional and personal boundaries of identity, rhetoric and reality. The three authors, all of whom are practicing Clinical Psychologists new to academia and who constitute the focus of this study, engaged in a hermeneutic discussion regarding their experience. Exploration of the data gathered from this discussion using the adapted IPA methodology evidenced three central themes, namely: (1) The 'nuts and bolts' of academia; (2) Surviving versus thriving; and (3) It's always personal. These themes are discussed in the context of contemporary literature exploring the experiences of new academics in general and Clinical Psychologists entering academia in particular. The pharmakon (sic.) *that carts the Clinical Psychologists interviewed in the study from professional practice to academia is positioned in the context of an emergent meta-theme where the questions are asked: "What is good and what is not good?" and "who will teach us these things?" In the process of contextualizing, exploring and analyzing the emergent themes, the researchers/ participants gradually evidence a response that is less of an answer to the conundrum than it is a koan whereby the questions lose meaning as growth in identity has taken them to the point of the rhetorical response: "Need we ask anyone to tell us these things?"*

In Plato's (c. 360 BC/2002) the *Phaedrus*, Socrates meets Phaedrus on the outskirts of Athens where "sick with passion for hearing speeches" (p. 78) he engages with Phaedrus in a dialogue that spans a plethoric and diverse range of topics. Much of the dialogue centres on themes of madness, occult virtues, cryptic depths and divine inspiration, the ambivalence of which refuse to submit to analysis (Culler, 2003). It is Plato's only dialogue that places Socrates outside of Athens where operating through the seduction of the *pharmakon* (sic.) Socrates is drawn from his general, natural, habitual paths and laws (Culler, 2003) and placed at a crossroads of madness, wisdom, non-identity and inspiration. Before lying down to the dilemma, he laments that "a hungry animal can be driven by a dangling carrot or a bit of green stuff in front of it; similarly if you proffer me speeches bound in books I don't doubt that you can cart me all round Attica, and anywhere else you please" (Plato, c. 360 BC/2002, p. 80). Whether for the simple attraction to speeches bound in books or for some other *pharmakon* (sic.) concoction of madness, wisdom, non-identity and inspiration, the decision by Clinical Psychologists to leave their habitual paths and laws for the halls of academia results in singular dialogue and multiplicity of constructions. In this research article we examine this decision and reflect on our own experiences as

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Clinical Psychologists embarking on academic careers.

Review of Existing Literature

In their work *The Compleat Academic: A Career Guide* Darley, Zanna and Roediger (2004) reflect on the formal and informal processes of operation that are evident in academia in general and academic psychology in particular. They stressed the critical importance of the informal, usually unwritten, processes that go beyond the formal delimitations of department and faculty. Bootzin (2004) underscored the potential complexities and multiplicities that may confront Clinical Psychologists in academia in particular; emphasizing the "interactions at the boundaries and across subareas" (p. 329) as the crucial crossroads at which Clinical Psychologists in academia are able to flourish. In essence, his argument posits the necessity of managing a multiplicity of roles that undeniably stray from the general, natural, habitual paths and laws of the Clinical Psychologist in private practice. It is in this straying that Clinical Psychologists entering academia enjoin processes and challenges that are particular not only to new academic staff in general but specifically to the crossroads of their professional identities and interrelated psychological and academic responsibilities.

Challenges to new academic staff in general

In her editorial for the *International Journal for Academic Development*, Taylor (2010) reflected on the collective call by contributors to examine the values, past experiences, and current practices that shape the diverse identities of development specialists and faculty members. She underscored the importance of dynamic and reciprocal interactions between staff with each other and the academic institutional policies and practice. It is arguably this dynamism that informs a leading interest in using reflexive processes within programmes for new academics (Kahn et al., 2008; Smith & Fernie, 2010). Kahn et al. (2008) reviewed research literature on approaches drawing on the use of reflection processes within programmes of initial professional education for new academic staff. These authors found that while attempts were made to structure such education within a manner that facilitated dynamic reciprocal interaction, there was a "potential gap between rhetoric and reality" (p. 170). The outcome of such a gap, within the context of a dynamic and reflexive process, has seen many researchers finding that a wide range of trajectories for new academics are strongly shaped by personal histories and individual experiences of negotiating their way into and across communities of practice. Jawitz (2007, 2009) conducted a number of studies into the experiences of new academic staff in a South African university. Many of his findings underscored both the multidirectional nature of trajectories of identity construction that characterise new academics, and the significant role of individual character and agency in determining those trajectories within the context of the academic community (Jawitz, 2007, 2009). These findings are echoed by numerous researchers such as Gravett and Petersen (2007), who investigated a sample of 20 new academics and found that the considerable changes, accommodations and developments in perceptions, expectations and identity were the function of a "highly individualized process" (p. 193). Their findings reaffirm three central considerations that permeate a general experience of new academics, namely:

1. There exist considerable complexities in terms of a variety of demands that new academic staff must negotiate in order to meet competing pressures of contemporary academia (Archer, 2008; Green & Myatt, 2011);
2. These negotiations are a function of a reciprocal recursive process between the individual and the institution;
3. There exist a multiplicity of trajectories that are a function of these recursive processes.

In addition to the generic challenges facing new academic staff there are a variety of demands that must be negotiated and the nature of the competing pressures are necessarily particular to both institutions and disciplines, especially in the case of staff entering academia from professional practice.

Challenges to Clinical Psychologists entering academia

Boyd (2010) reflected that new university lecturers entering academia from professional domains are often selected on requisites that are differentiated from traditional academic requirements that tend to focus exclusively on scholarship. In addition to these somewhat differing requisites, there are also different complexities, reciprocal tensions and potential trajectories. Boyd (2010), for instance, emphasized the considerable distinction in terms of the negotiation of what a lecturer should be for those entering universities with an already established professional identity.

Bootzin (2004) identified a number of complexities within the academic context that are particular to Clinical Psychologist academics. Within the broader ambit of research he noted the potential ethical considerations and research potentials born of access to psychological patients. Aligned with this access are the considerations pertaining to licensing as a Psychologist with the relevant regulatory board.

Contingent on locale and registration such licensing is the product of a variety of on-going requirements such as supervision and continuous professional development. In addition to their continued capacity as registered Clinical Psychologists, many continue to practice in their profession in conjunction with their academic commitments. Such professional practice may even be necessary for their continued role in academia, such as in the case of supervising and training student psychotherapists. These dual roles and responsibilities add a complexity that is unique to Clinical Psychologist academics. Bootzin (2004), for instance, drew attention to implicit challenges incumbent in the evaluative and reciprocal relationships between academic institutions and psychologists where faculty are typically evaluated on research, teaching, and service, and not on the maintenance and application of their scholarship.

In his contribution, Bootzin (2004) highlighted the considerable potentials, enjoyment and fulfilment that may arise for those who determine whether they are able to love "the multiple challenges of research, teaching, and practice" (p. 342). His sentiment echoes others such as Taylor and Martin (2004) and Roediger and Balota (2004) who similarly speak to the complex, and often unique, challenges of academia and the important contingency of new academics determining not only that such challenges suit them but also enjoining a recognition that the means through which that occurs is necessary idiographic.

Consideration of counsel to new academics to manage unique challenges in a unique manner facilitates insight into Darley et al.'s (2004) notion that there are both formal and informal processes of operation evident in academia. It is the formal processes, intimated by these authors to be relatively paltry, that may be understood to be those rather meagre attempts at formalizing multiple complexities in a recursive dynamic environment. The informal processes to which they attribute much import may be understood to be those that stray from the general, natural, habitual paths and laws into the crossroads where new academics, drawn by the *pharmakom* (sic.) of 'speeches bound in books', may find a madness, wisdom, non-identity and inspiration. A crossroads outside of the city at which a trajectory singular to each individual may embody the answer posed to Phaedrus by Pirsig (1974, iii): "And what is good Phaedrus, and what is not good – need we ask anyone to tell us these things?"

Method

In attempting to understand the good and not good in the lived experiences and practices of new academics we were immediately faced with the question of how to gain access to what presented itself (certainly from our perspectives) as a somewhat ethereal phenomenon existing outside of Athenean comforts. Although this project was undoubtedly phenomenological in nature, our initial overview of the field of phenomenological research left us feeling intimidated and confused. We questioned our stance and our assumptions: was our intention idiographic or general (Finlay, 2009)? Did we intend for our analysis to be descriptive or interpretive (Finlay, 2009)? How did our dual position as researchers/participants influence our assumptions about subjectivity? We searched for a method that would fit our intentions and found that although Giorgi and Giorgi (2008) had identified five branches of phenomenological psychology our research did not fit neatly into any one of the proffered categories. We realised that our research question did not fit neatly into a pre-existing category and that instead of simply adopting a research method we would have to engage with the field of phenomenology, allowing our question to determine our method rather than superimposing a pre-existing method on a question (Bengttson, 2013). Taking comfort in Spiegelberg's (1982) assertion that there are as many styles of phenomenology as there are phenomenologists (Spiegelberg, 1982) as well as in Mortari and Taozzi's (2010, p. 1) statement that "there is no place for phenomenological orthodoxy or for so-called purism" within phenomenological psychology, we thus set out to discover our own answer to Phaedrus's immortal question of what constitutes the good and the not good and how such things should be asked.

At a very basic level, phenomenological research involves rich description of lived experience as well as an openness on the part of the researcher (referred to as the phenomenological attitude) that allows information to emerge from the experience rather than being imposed onto the experience (Finlay, 2009). The rich description of lived experience in the context of this research was autobiographical in nature (see Finlay, 2012) as we used our own recorded experiences as the data for our further analysis. In this way, we adopted an approach that was almost Husserlian in nature as we made use of first person point of view in our analysis (Finlay, 2012). It was also Husserlian in nature as we intended to attempt to understand the basic structures underlying the phenomenon we were investigating (Finlay, 2009). However, we then started to diverge from classical Husserlian phenomenology as our intention was not simply to describe these structures, but we also intended to interpret them. As researcher/participants we found it impossible to simply describe our own experiences. Instead we found ourselves engaging in a constant process of interpretation which, we realised, spoke more to the descriptive tradition in phenomenological research, based on the hermeneutic work of Heidegger (1927/1996) and his followers

(Finlay, 2009). We therefore realised that our research spanned both traditions, Husserl and Heidegger, and was at once concerned with deep structure as well as with interpretation (Finlay, 2009).

Given this spanning of traditions we decided that the best approach would be to use an existing method but adapt it to suit the nuances of our research study. As this study was concerned with the quality and texture of our experiences (see Willig, 2008) we therefore felt that using an adapted form of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a branch of phenomenology psychology, would provide us with an initial methodological strategy that would allow us to approach data with an attitude of openness (Kruger, 1986). IPA is "interested in elucidating both that which appears and the manner in which it appears. It studies the subject's perspectives of their world; attempts to describe in detail the content and structure of the subject's consciousness, to grasp the qualitative diversity of their experiences and to explicate their essential meanings" (Willig, 2008, p. 53). However, in applying an IPA methodology we were confronted with the challenge of being simultaneously the researchers and the participants. We therefore made use of our own personal accounts, and supplemented the IPA methodology with an awareness of the difficulties inherent in our dual roles. We tried to avoid a self-indulgent and narcissistic presentation and attempted instead to focus on the actual experiences in terms of their ability to contribute to knowledge surrounding a phenomenon (Van Manen, 1990). What distinguishes our first person narrative from a simple coffee table conversation is the interpretive and multi-layered nature of our discussion.

The issue of interpretation is a key one within IPA. In turning people's experiences of everyday naïve description into psychological language, the problem of interpretation is present in every research step. As researchers and participants, we are always reflecting and interpreting (Kruger, 1986). The IPA method provides for a hermeneutic step that allows for the inclusion of interpretation in the research process. This is referred to as the double hermeneutic and is explained by Smith and Osborn (2008) as "the participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world" (p. 53). This approach broadly follows the philosophical approach of Heidegger (1927/1996) who asserted that the interpretation of human experience by the researcher cannot be untangled or 'bracketed' from his or her own descriptions. Allowing for a detailed analysis of the descriptions of being a new academic, the first step in the research process involved simply attempting to 'get inside each other's experiences' rather than imposing our own individual understandings of the phenomenon on the analysis (see Willig, 2008). This allowed for interpretations to grow recursively and iteratively. We attempted to make sense of the experiences by asking: What are experiences of professional psychologists when they become new academics and how are these experienced? Our approach allowed for an array of experiences to make themselves known. Our role as researchers was to facilitate an open process where the voices and viewpoints of each one of us as researcher/participant could become manifest in our findings (Gilgun, 1992; Rosenblatt & Fischer, 1993).

The process

As the methodology used in this study broadly followed the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method laid out by Smith and Osborn (2008) one of the key components of the study related to the inclusion of a small and relative homogenous sample that was accessed through a method that can be described as purposeful sampling (Osborne, 1994; Patton, 2002; Turner, 2010). With this in mind, we gathered as a group of three Clinical Psychologists who had recently started a new academic career, appointed as permanent members of staff at a large tertiary institution in South Africa. We then shared our experiences in relation to starting our new careers. We had varying levels of exposure both to private practice and to the academic setting prior to our appointment at this institution. Each of us had run a private practice (either fulltime or part-time) and as such had been involved in psychotherapy on a regular basis prior to our appointment. Within the South African context registration as a Clinical Psychologist requires the completion of a Master's degree in psychology (usually involving a focus on psychiatric diagnosis, psychometric assessment and psychotherapy as well as a mini-dissertation with a research focus) as well as the completion of a one year internship and one year of compulsory community service. Within the South African context, Clinical Psychologists traditionally work in psychiatric, assessment (such as neuropsychological assessment) as well as in private practice settings.

Despite our involvement in private practice, each of us had maintained some contact with academic institutions through guest lecturing, temporary appointment as lecturers and editing of journal articles. However, our appointment as permanent staff members marked our first engagement as fulltime academics. The institution at which we are appointed is a large university in the Gauteng province of South Africa that was founded as the result of the consolidation of several previous institutions. The University of Johannesburg offers both degree and diploma programmes and as such caters to a large body of students of varying academic levels and

abilities. We are between the ages of 30 and 40 years, two of us are female and one male.

Following numerous conversations and discussions regarding our experiences, we decided to formally record these experiences. In one and a half hours of focused discussion, an intense and deeply meaningful conversation evolved. This free sharing process in which we engaged could be described as a focus group that was aimed at exploring our experiences, but the discussion also reflected a certain level of sophistication. According to Fade (2004), this kind of focus group in IPA could also be viewed as three ideographic case studies. An open-ended, in-depth conversational approach was followed and each of us assumed a stance of curious facilitation (Turner, 2010). The hermeneutic nature of the group discussion iteratively and recursively took us to a deep level of exploration, closely resembling the layers of psychotherapeutic exploration. We made sense of each other's experiences whilst discussing them and at the same time reflecting our understandings which then deepened the conversation. What transpired became a free-flowing meaningful conversation rather than a stilted interview. It was obvious to each of us that our experience as Clinical Psychologists had allowed for the generation of a conversation that was multi-layered and that embraced a depth of experience. As such, although the recorded 90 minute conversation may appear to be an inadequate amount of data for analysis, it actually represents a high-level synthesis of many discussions and ideas and should be seen as the culmination of the research project rather than as the only item of data. The conversation was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The group discussion was conducted in a convenient setting, away from the office. We all kept notes to capture salient thoughts, reactions, remarks, ambiances, nuances, non-verbal information or anything relevant that we considered to be of value and that was not captured on the audio-record. Each of us checked the final transcription for accuracy prior to data analysis. We also scheduled a follow-up conversation two weeks after the initial conversation for enhanced understanding and clarification.

After transcribing our discussion, selecting the themes became a meta-hermeneutic endeavour where we made sense of our interpretations of our experiences during the group discussion. We were surprised at how our profession as psychotherapists influenced our discussion, which was distinctly interpretive in nature (like a continuous search for the meaning of what each of us had just shared). We used an adapted IPA method of analysis based on the well-known systematised steps that are densely described and clearly explained by Smith and Osborn (2008) in order to arrive at subordinate experiential themes in relation to the meanings that these experiences held for us. Finding meaning is central to IPA analysis and the aim is to make sense of the descriptions rather than measuring the frequencies of particular meaningful themes (Smith & Osborne, 2008). We first looked for themes by reading and re-reading the transcript in order to become familiar with the accounts. We then connected the themes by ordering them into clusters. We continued the analysis through further discussion that led to the construction of a master table of themes. The final step involved translating the themes into a meaningful narrative account. Our approach used intuition, reflection, description and interpretation to make sense of data (Kruger, 1986).

Trustworthiness

Triangulation is a popular and systematically rigorous way of establishing trustworthiness and enhances the validity of qualitative research (Giorgi, 1997; Smith, 2008). We triangulated our interpretation of data with each other during analysis, thus supplementing our views of the experiences and therefore adding multiple perspectives to the interpretation. In this way we obtained the broadest possible range of interpretations of a particular experience.

We were also transparent about how the findings of the study were reached, so that readers may be able to draw their own conclusions and interpret the findings justly (see Polit & Hungler, 1999). The data from the transcribed conversation is presented verbatim, although the names of colleagues have been removed where appropriate. In addition, certain swear words that were perhaps not suitable for inclusion in an academic publication have been omitted.

Ethical considerations

We did not need to obtain permission to conduct this research from a third party. We do not consider ourselves a vulnerable population. We all agreed on the information to be included in the final version of the article, including agreeing to forgo anonymity and acknowledge our identities as researchers and participants. We assisted each other in maintaining (and maintaining an awareness of) the boundaries of the dual roles of researcher and participant. Moreover, care was taken not to refer to nor quote colleagues in such a way as to either identify them or breach any potential confidentialities.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Analysis of the data resulted in the identification of three themes, each revolving around a particular component of the academic experience. In the discussion below each of these themes is presented separately, although there is actually considerable

overlap between the themes. In addition, reference is made to the relevant literature where appropriate. The section concludes with a consolidated discussion of the themes.

Theme 1: Role expectations – the 'nuts and bolts' of academia

Finding our way as new academics was clearly a priority in our discussion. Although all three of us had varying levels of exposure to academia before our formal appointment at the university, we all felt that this experience had not been enough to prepare us for the reality of the academic environment. As Graham said, "doing the nuts and bolts of academia" proved rather challenging for each of us. We had to learn to negotiate competing demands around lecturing, meetings, course coordination and research. This is evidenced in the following extracts from our conversation:

> *It's a wonderful system, but just to figure out how the system works and it was quite scary, I felt quite lost for a long time (L)*

> *... even though I am appointed as a lecturer and all that shows up on my job or work description is you know, lecture this, lecture that … it feels like I am not going to be evaluated by any of that stuff (C)*

What stood out for us about the role expectations in this new profession was the fact that so much of it was taken for granted by existing staff, as Carol stated: "somehow in academia people just assume you know". Initially, we all three identified our first experience of the academic environment as one of uncertainty and trying to find our way. However, on reading through the transcript following the interview what also stood out was the fact that although we all experienced this as challenging, it was also an experience that we were all able to absorb and overcome:

> *that gestalt has sort of closed for me, like doing the nuts and bolts of academia (G)*

> *it's the principle of still discovering the nuts and bolts here, even though it is obvious (L)*

Thus, although we all initially struggled to find our feet within the academic context, many of the difficulties we experienced were not that dissimilar to those experienced when starting any new endeavour, and we all agreed that this aspect of the experience was one that was relatively easy to integrate. The process we describe in this steps seems to be similar to Darley et al.'s (2004) concept of the formal and informal processes of operation within academia and academic psychology, with the 'nuts and bolts' representing the formal processes. Learning to negotiate these new rules and regulations forms part of the introduction into academia (Archer, 2008; Green & Myatt, 2011), but may be particularly relevant for Clinical Psychologists as they have to negotiate additional boundaries in terms of already pre-existing professional competencies relating to the practice of psychotherapy (Bootzin, 2004). In addition to these 'nuts and bolts' experiences, there were also aspects of the experience that were not easy to integrate, and these aspects contributed to the second theme, which we labelled 'Surviving and thriving'.

Theme 2: Surviving and thriving – 'what is unique about this job'

On a descriptive level this theme involved moving away from the practicalities of the academic life (i.e., the actual doing) towards the more intangible aspects of academia (i.e., being an academic). This is evidenced in the following extracts from our conversation:

> *So I suppose my experience now is that I am in a situation where I can compartmentalise the nuts and bolts of lecturing, which I couldn't do last year. It was awkward to me. So what I am trying to do harder now is to shift my energy to career development. Long term … I am more and more acutely aware of what I knew before but I didn't have an awareness … so the awareness is sinking in (G)*

> *One of the things that is unique to this that has not been my experience in other jobs, is the level of discretion I have over what I do. I would say that eighty percent of what I do is not structured or mandated by my boss. And that level of discretion, again, I suppose you get freedom which is then counter-pointed with responsibility, and that breeds anxiety for me (G)*

Based on the literature review, this theme would seem to relate to the informal processes identified by Darley et al. (2004). As we moved into the academic world, we became increasingly aware of our own responsibilities within this world, and of the sense that it was not enough to *be* in academia, and that we literally had to *become* academics. In this regard, we identified three things that impacted on our journey towards becoming academics: (1) The recognition of non-official but widely accepted hierarchies and rules; (2) the paradox of freedom; and (3) the importance of a thick-skin attitude. Each of these components is discussed below.

In relation to the non-official but widely accepted hierarchies and rules, we all felt that there were certain dynamics and politics within both the department and the faculty that we did not understand, and which made it difficult to function. This is illustrated in the following exchange:

> *There are other people, exactly the same job, exactly the same pay, but I don't … I view them as considerably senior to me. So there are a lot of these unwritten rules that are not obvious (G)*
>
> *Office allocations (L)*
>
> *The more senior the further down the corridor (G)*
>
> *If you started a little before, you get more choice (L)*
>
> *Unwritten hierarchies (G)*

Navigating these unofficial hierarchies created difficulties for each of us as we struggled to find our own niche within this setting. This reciprocal recursive process was also highlighted in the literature review (Jarwitz, 2007, 2009). This was further complicated by the fact that, as pointed out in the quote that begins this section, we were confronted with a vast amount of freedom in terms of how to act within our posts. As Larise stated, "we have freedom, but we are uncontained."

This paradox of freedom is the second sub-theme within the "surviving and thriving" theme. We find ourselves in a situation where we are ultimately responsible for our own development: "With that freedom, we are managing our own careers" (Graham). Thus, we are expected to not only discover the rules ("the nuts and bolts") and the unwritten rules (which Darley et al., 2004, referred to as the informal processes), but we are also expected to discover how to position ourselves within the space provided so that we are able to function in a way that optimises our own success. This enormous responsibility, coupled with the lack of clear direction leads to a sense of anxiety (as Graham states: "I suppose you get freedom counter-pointed with responsibility and that breeds anxiety for me"). However, it is also this same freedom that attracts us to academia:

> *That freedom appeals to me tremendously. And that benefit is often worth the price of the anxiety and being part of an institution of authority (which is how I term it). It defines a weird reality (G)*

Perhaps it is ultimately this "weird reality" that defines our experience of academia at this point in time. There appears to be some internal logic to it, but we have not yet 'cracked' that code, so to speak. The literature review highlighted this process of trying to make sense of the rules of the academic institution in relation to personal and professional identity (Kahn et al., 2008; Smith & Fernie, 2010; Taylor, 2010). As we engage in this learning process we find ourselves in a space where we are perpetually struggling to make sense of a seemingly endless set of rules:

> *I am very scared that when I get my first publication and then I realize but there is a whole other hierarchy of rules out there, of where to publish, who you should be publishing with, what you should publish, how many times your publication is cited … there are tiers and layers to this thing! (C)*

This sense of confusion, of being unbounded and uncontained, serves as the final sub-theme within this theme, that of having an academically 'thick-skin':

> *It makes me think of a piece of advice A gave me when I started here. He said, there's one thing you need in order to succeed in academia … it is a thick skin! If a coordinator says … you should have done this, then say OK, if your publication is rejected, then say OK and move on (L)*

This concept, of having to be robust to exist within this environment, may relate to Bootzin's (2004) comments regarding the role of the Clinical Psychologist within academia. Within academia, Clinical Psychologists are expected to negotiate a new role that incorporates both a professional and an academic identity. This idea of identity formation is carried forward strongly into the final theme identified below, the idea that "it is always personal".

Theme 3: It's always personal – 'this is personal for me'

This final theme underlies the themes discussed previously as it speaks to the reasons why we decided to take the plunge into academia. For each one of us, the idea of being an academic has a certain allure:

> *I accepted the job offer because I had always wanted to work in academia - - the mystique – the height of sophistication, intellectualism … I had this image in my mind of what an academic is like, even though I am not like that at all … something of that still remains (G).*

It's like flirting with the romantic. It's not reality based … It's almost a childhood fantasy (L)

Thus, in some ways working in academia is a very personal decision, based on an image of ourselves as intellectual beings. We have therefore invested a lot of our identity in this profession, and this creates anxiety:

Part of my anxiety around this is that for the first time in my life I am taking a job personally. I am so identified with this part of myself. This is personal for me. (C)

*Can I maybe just say how it is personal for me? My salary can be four times what it currently is. So it becomes personal for me when I say to my husband: 'This is what I want to do'. In other words: I choose this. I want to do this, I like it, I am not doing it for the pay. Hence, it becomes very personal for me when I do it for a s*** salary, it's a lot of hard work, and hence my personal identity is invested in it (L)*

This investment of personal identity is problematic for each of us, as we are investing in a career and a profession that we are unsure of, and which makes us feel anxious and uncertain.

I feel very insecure (C)

I remember how I thought of my under-graduate lecturers. I thought they were these … (C)
Doyens (G)

This anxiety is contrasted to our feelings of competence in our alternative professional personas, as Clinical Psychologists:

Because coming out of practice, I felt quite competent and I knew what I was doing there. Now it feels a bit like starting again (G)

Also coming in from a successful private practice … people asked me stuff … and I was involved with Master's professional training, so I was seen as the expert there (L)

I did private practice for the whole of the first year and I have only recently given it up … and there's two things I like about private practice: The one I liked was the money, I pretty much doubled my salary by doing that. The other thing I like was that it was an area of my professional life where I felt supremely confident and that counter-balanced the academic insecurity for me. And to let that go has taken me almost a year. And it is more a confidence than a fiscal thing (G).

It's an area of supreme confidence and competence – and I'm not yet willing to give up this identity for the new academic identity where I feel supremely incompetent – why would I? (C)

Part of our difficulty in finding our feet as new academics appears to be the sense that in doing so we are being forced to give up an alternative, and perhaps more comfortable, identity. In addition, as Boyd (2010) pointed out, this competence served as a criterion for our selection into academia but is now no longer considered relevant to our continued practice as academics. We are therefore continually negotiating the boundaries of our professional, academic and personal identities. As Larise says, "We are in a different position to other non-professional academics. We've got many options. We are standing with a foot in each door, academic life and professional life". According to Bootzin (2004), this negotiation of identities is a unique factor that influences the career trajectories of academic Clinical Psychologists. Kahn et al. (2008) emphasised that each individual academic has to find his or her own path towards an academic identity. Our findings suggest, in keeping with research reported by Jawitz (2007, 2009), that the construction of an identity as a new academic is multifaceted and involves individual trajectories based on previous experience (see also Gravett & Petersen, 2007)

Consolidated discussion of themes

Each of the three themes described above speaks to a different aspect of our experience of becoming academics. The first theme speaks to the practicalities of the situation and of learning how to navigate in a new world with new rules. The second theme speaks to moving beyond simple navigation towards an immersion in the world through gaining an understanding of what it means to not just work in academia, but to be an academic. The final theme speaks to the personal nature of this process – to the idea that the decision to embark on the academic journey is not a simple one but rather one that involves a process through which we begin to incorporate the academic-self and the professional-self into a new identity. In the end, it is Graham's comment that academia is "a weird reality" that seems to sum up our current experiences. Learning to navigate within this "weird reality" leaves us unsettled, uncertain and anxious. However, it also feeds the allure and mystique that drew us to academia in the first place. There is always a sense that there is something more to be discovered,

something more to know, that there is territory that is yet to be discovered.

The themes discussed in this section are generally supported by the information contained in the literature review. In particular, Bootzin (2004) stressed the potential for considerable enjoyment and fulfilment with academia if the complex and unique challenges are embraced and if the academic is willing to find a way in which to make sense of this confusing reality (Roediger & Balota, 2004; Taylor & Martin, 2004). What our themes contribute to the existing literature is an awareness of the nuanced nature of the experience of becoming new academics, as well as a sense that the process moves beyond a simple understanding of the 'nuts and bolts' of academia towards a point at which our identities have expanded to include a picture of ourselves as academics.

Conclusion

When we accepted the opportunity to step outside of our professional role as Clinical Psychologists to embark on a career in academia, each of us made a decision to leave 'Athens' (the safe, known city) and instead place ourselves at a crossroads. We have been lured by the offer of "speeches bound in books" (Plato, C. 360BC/2002, p. 80) and have left our general, natural, habitual paths and laws (Culler, 2003). As mentioned in the opening to this article, Socrates' conversation with Phaedrus touches on topics such as madness, wisdom, non-identity and inspiration. This article, in its own way, has touched on similar topics. The decision to leave a safe career path and venture forward into the unknown could be construed as either madness or wisdom. This move has threatened our identities and allowed us to move towards a place and sense of non-identity. Our phenomenological analysis of our conversation yielded rich insight into the experience of becoming academics in relation to our pre-existing professional identities. At this point, it seems fitting to consider both our own future growth as academics as well as the experience of writing this article, a process which undoubtedly forms part of our growth as new academics. In closing, therefore, it seems fitting to return to Plato (c. 360BC/2008, p. 42) who wrote:

> And what is written well and what is written badly – need we ask Lysias or any other poet or orator who ever wrote or will write either a political or other work, in meter or out of meter, poet or prose writer, to teach us this?

In the end, it seems that the only way to evaluate the correctness or incorrectness of our decision to join the world of academia (or, to be more specific, our decision to write this article) is to allow ourselves to evaluate this based on our own criteria and our own experience of growth. As we move forward in our academic careers we will continue to evaluate this process.

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