



Becoming “Member Enough”: The Experience of Feelings of Competence and Incompetence in the Process of Becoming a Professor

by Thomas Friedrich

Abstract

The graduate teaching assistant prepares to enter a classroom for the first time as its instructor beset by feelings of incompetence: indeed, learning to successfully display a professional identity is often a terrifying experience, such that promising novices may abandon it prematurely. This hermeneutic phenomenological study asks one female doctoral candidate the following question: What is the experience of feelings of competence and incompetence in the process of becoming a professor? The core finding of this interview-based study is the thematic demarcation of sequential stages in the participant’s experience of the process of becoming “member enough”. In the presentation of the findings, the identification of the central themes is validated with excerpts from the interview data, and their implications for the study of competence, the sociocultural study of identity development, and the mentoring of pre-service college faculty discussed.

What is the experience of feelings of competence and incompetence in the process of becoming a professor? In this study, “becoming” was taken to mean, broadly, the process faculty go through in developing a professional identity; of more specific concern here, however, is the developmental process that pre-service college faculty go through in completing their graduate school training.

We may fail to understand how these novices work toward competence for two main reasons. Firstly, there is dispute over whether competence is an acontextual or a context-specific skill. Although the dispute concerns whether or not there is a single competence or only multiple competences, it is used to keep alive the traditional view of competence as innate ability – an epistemologically untenable view because it rejects the experiential basis of learning – to stymie reform. Progressive research in psychology and education shows that competence taken as a sociocultural product is not only tenable but promotes

reform. The second reason we may fail to understand how novice faculty become competent is that there is little research that studies displays of competence in specific contexts by particular “kinds of people” (Gee, 1999). In the interest of promoting reform, then, it is important to ask what competence is understood as a product of social interaction, and it is important to study how becoming competent is lived in context, particularly by persons institutions marginalize, such as women teachers. To fulfil these ends, this study seeks to uncover the essence of one female graduate student’s feelings of competence and incompetence in becoming a professor.

Literature Review: What is competence? Why are additional context-specific studies of competence needed?

The view of competence as an individual’s ability to meet imposed outcomes was popularized in the 1970s and 1980s and remains popular today. “Competency-

based education” (CBE) blames incompetent teachers for students’ failure to achieve and suggests that the route to better learning outcomes is a traditional curriculum where students memorize basic skills. In challenging CBE, progressive researchers have publicized competence as assessable, effective engagement in mediated problem-solving activity to promote educational and social reform. This task was taken up in Short’s *Competence: Inquiries into its Meaning and Acquisition in Educational Settings* (1984). Johnson argues in this collection that CBE emphasizes “the development of intelligence ... [through] practice” as “the inculcation of a doctrine ... [or] technique”, not “a pattern of action” (1984, p. 41). Unfortunately, support for CBE – and hence competence understood as an individual’s ability to satisfy imposed outcomes – remains. For example, in *The Bases of Competence* (1998), Evers, Rush and Berdrow argue that competence and individual fulfilment of imposed outcomes are one and the same. In their view, higher education should thus facilitate a “match between what students learn in college programmes and what they need to know and be able to do in the workplace” (p. 3). Moreover, in order to be competent, students must learn “generic skills” as “the foundation for discipline-specific skill development and knowledge organization” (p. 4).

Progressive researchers have challenged this understanding of competence as an individual’s ability to meet imposed outcomes on the grounds that it is epistemologically untenable. Working in a socio-cultural tradition, they consider outcomes taken to be absolute as an “intellectualist” cover up, as one knows because one is a body in history using signs and tools so that one’s typical activities stop being natural “reflexes” and become ever more complex cultural “reactions” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 64). Competence, then, is a relationship between context and self, or, in the terms of competence motivation theory, “effective interaction with the environment” (Mulqueen, 1992, p. 9). While the urge to competence is universal, a “neurogenic” impulse to survive that “produces an interest in the environment beyond simply satisfying need or following instinct” (Mulqueen, 1992, p. 5), this interest is cultivated into planned activity through the use of what Vygotsky calls “mediational means” (Daniels, 2001). Each sign or tool is an “intermediate link between stimulus and response”, a “self-generated stimulus” whereby an actor becomes able to “control ... [his/her] behaviour from the outside”, first to solve problems relevant to him/her, and later in the internalized form of “inner speech” (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 46, 57). Furthermore, as purposeful activity, competence is not a “fossilized” effective reaction, but a playful one (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 68-69) where not “given intents, but the formation of better intents,

takes place” (Johnson, 1984, p. 61). This formation of a growing number of intents in competence, as it creates a “network of meanings actors within ... [a] situation give”, can be the activity of one or many engaged in what Aoki – again in Short’s *Competence* – describes as “communal venturing” (1984, p. 75).

We see that competence is effective activity purposeful for an actor or actors that takes place in context. Sociocultural researchers in education and psychology (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Daniels, 2001) are less clear, however, about whether competence is a general or a context-specific skill. Bronfenbrenner (2005) does not choose, arguing that competence is a developmental outcome of “knowledge and skills” that allow actors to “maintain ... control and integration of behaviour across a variety of settings” (p. 190). He nevertheless does admit that, from an “ecological” perspective on human development – which is what we must have if we accept that competence means “effective interaction with the environment” – “cognitive competence” must not be seen as “invariant across place and time”, but as “an achieved status” that involves “mastery of culturally defined, familiar activities in everyday life” and is evaluated within the “setting” in which it occurs (pp. 121-123). Competence may not be context-specific, but, as it can only be known through “investigations ... as it takes place in the real-life contexts of culture, subculture, or immediate setting” – which, according to Bronfenbrenner, are “comparatively rare” (p. 128) – it is practical to treat it as such. What competence research there is in settings such as particular schools, families, and so forth, has contributed to this “ecological” understanding of the phenomenon. For example, Daniels (2001) uses Bernstein’s (1977, 1981) “cultural transmission” model to study how school cultures shaped what counted as competence. He studied two schools’ classification practices, or the strength of the boundaries between categories, such as between disciplines, written genres, and so forth, its constituents promoted; in addition, he studied the schools’ framing practices, or “the control on communicative practices (selection, sequencing, pacing and criteria) in pedagogical relations, be they ... of parents and children or teacher/pupils” in these settings (Bernstein, 1981; in Daniels, 2001, p. 137)). Through this rigorous investigation of the schools’ classification and framing practices, Daniels found that students produced vastly different art projects, reflecting different senses of competence. In a traditional school, where teachers used direct instruction to make evaluation criteria explicit, students “were concerned with their identity in relation to pre-ordained goals and ... [saw] the products of schooling as being of paramount importance”, created highly standardized images, and

used clear labelling and a grid-like placement that made individual evaluation easy (Daniels, 2001, p. 168). By contrast, in a school with weaker classification and framing, students' projects were less standardized and more clustered, reflecting attention "to the pedagogy employed and relationships ... [among each other's] work" (p. 168). The point here is that what was understood as competence was a reflection of these specific schools, and that competence is thus context-specific.

Other research treats competence as a context-specific, effective activity purposeful for an actor or actors, while showing that additional work needs to be done to fully understand the phenomenon. Firstly, this research has treated competence as a part of other constructs (self-efficacy, self-esteem, social anxiety, and so forth) to locate incompetence not as an individual illness but as an adaptive activity in inequitable contexts. This research identifies competence as a meaningful phenomenon but leaves it undefined. The point that one's social position means that one may have differential access to competence is implied in Franzblau and Moore's (2001) work on self-efficacy, understood as "the confidence that one can control the outcome of one's behaviour" (p. 83). In this critique, the authors reject the view of low self-efficacy as individual illness, seeing it instead as a contextual effect in which others, institutions, and so forth are implicated. The same is true of competence. In other research on associated phenomena, Stravynski (2007) defines "social anxiety" as involving "a looming sense of danger accompanied by a heightened activation of the bodily mechanisms supporting defensive actions" (p. 6). His synthesis of research shows that, while social anxiety may involve "extended misuse of highly adaptive short-term defensive tactics", the tactics themselves are normal responses, the same responses people without social anxiety exhibit in the face of social threats, such as navigating the world of "group and institutional life, normally characterized by rivalry (as well as cooperation) and impersonal power relationships" (Stravynski, 2007, pp. 12 & 66). Like social anxiety, incompetence or ineffective, context-specific activity is not an individual illness but adaptive activity in inequitable contexts. As between the behaviour of those with and without social anxiety, research on social anxiety also suggests that there is no line between incompetence and competence. Still, because competence is not the phenomenon of interest in this work, what exactly it is in these settings remains unclear.

There is a second strain of research on how competence is context-specific that is more important for this paper. Competent behaviour, as we have seen,

reflects contextual characteristics; it is also gender- and role-specific, reflecting inequitable social hierarchies that may be challenged and how competent persons arrive at an incomplete sense of becoming "member enough": a sense of liveable balance within and sharing a context with others (such as mentors, one's students, and so forth). This is implied by McCay and Keyes's (2002) research-based recommendations for how primary educators of children with learning disabilities in inclusive settings may cultivate these children's "social competence". They may describe social competence generally as "the ability of young children to successfully and appropriately carry out their interpersonal goals", but children with learning disabilities may require explicit training in and mastery of particular forms of competence to thrive in school. They may enjoy little autonomy at home, making "[t]eaching children to stand up in support of their beliefs" important; still, this "assertiveness must be tempered with [training] in social sensitivity" (McCay & Keyes, 2001/2002). Teachers' competence is described by Morais, Neves and Afonso (2005) as also involving an awareness of sharing a context with others and an arrival at balance that challenges oppressive social forces. In their work with Portuguese primary in-service teachers, Morais et al. note that practitioners are often encouraged to accept competence as having respect for official knowledge by ignoring interdisciplinary boundaries rather than reflectively perceiving different subject matters' epistemological ties. As Van Manen's (1984) hermeneutic work on teacher and pedagogic competence illustrates, teacher reflection on the contours of disciplinary knowledge and one's motivation to teach are necessary if, and validate how, competence is assessable, context-specific, effective engagement in activity purposeful for actors, in contexts, and for their other constituents. Teacher competence, understood as "knowing oneself", is reached through "recovering the grounds that provide for the possibility of our pedagogic concerns with children", grounds that include maintaining a "sense of joy" in life, embodying one's discipline, and having "hope for a child" (Van Manen, 1984, pp. 145, 146 & 150). Van Manen is arguing that teachers' competence may challenge oppressive social forces if it means arrival at a sense of balance within and a sense of sharing a context with others, including students – or becoming "member enough".

Progressive research on gendered competence confirms that it is effective, purposeful engagement in activity that reflects and may challenge inequitable social contexts. Riksen-Walraven's (1978, cited in Bronfenbrenner, 2005) parenting study revealed that Dutch notions of masculinity made the effects of an early childhood intervention undetectable in male

participants as adolescents. As female participants whose mothers gave them opportunities to pursue phenomena that interested them while also providing feedback on their choices often achieved more than their counterparts not exposed to the intervention, Riksen-Walraven (1978) suggested that girls may demonstrate competence in achievement at school when they have “extra high” levels of “competence motivation” and parents “willing to accept their daughters’ autonomy” (in Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 193). Mulqueen’s (1992) research on the common themes in the development of four women professionals’ experiences of becoming competent also reveals how contexts are inequitable and that competence involves achieving balance; however, in highlighting individual achievement, the sense of sharing a context with others is somewhat lost. She argues that competence is associated with masculinity and that, because this “filter of social biases” affects one’s “internal assessment of one’s competences”, women who pursue competence risk being labelled “masculine” or “relinquish” the chance at becoming competent (Mulqueen, 1992, pp. 7, 13). She argues that all of these women enjoyed a sense of themselves and were socially marginalized as being “different” even as pre-adolescents, but that this “sense of marginality ... [was] a source of strength”: the “roots of balancing” essential for achieving competence (Mulqueen, 1992, p. 184). Mulqueen affirms competence as assessable, effective engagement in purposeful mediated activity, as her participants in this interview-based study share stories of individually striving to be high-achieving “good girl[s]” while being supported by encouraging adults, particularly teachers (p. 80), and to make themselves more “assertive” while being mentored by faculty members while earning degrees in higher education (pp. 102, 107). For the participants, competence achieved as adults is described as “balancing” or

the integration of a diverse set of needs established by the individual. It is the flexible combination of roles, behaviours and interests regardless of their association with masculinity or femininity. (Mulqueen, 1992, p. 125)

Because competence is developed in inequitable contexts, becoming competent has gendered traits. Still, because research on gendered competence, like that on student and teacher competence, shows that reflective engagement means becoming “member enough” – or achieving a sense of balance and sharing a context within effective mediated activity – it seems that additional study of becoming competent for specific members of multiple categories, such as women graduate students training to be professors, is

merited. Also meriting such research is the fact that balancing, as part of becoming “member enough” – that is, a highly particular, sometimes oppressive but sustainable, deliberate, liberating state – can be understood only through rich description. Also, because the other part of becoming “member enough”, sharing a context with others, has been alluded to but underrepresented in empirical sociocultural competence research, the present study is merited.

Methodology

In order to uncover the essence of the experience of concern to this study, hermeneutic phenomenology (Van Manen, 1990) was used to look at one woman’s lived experience of feelings of competence and incompetence in the process of becoming a professor.

In this study, I am using a phenomenological approach, broadly, because my purpose is to seek out the meaning of the phenomenon of feelings of competence and incompetence in the process of a teacher’s becoming in order to understand what the phenomenon means. As Van Manen (1990) writes,

Lived experience is the starting point and end point of phenomenological research. The aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence – in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience. (p. 36)

This is a particular kind of understanding that stays close to the experience itself. A reader’s “reflexive re-living” does not involve carrying away certain “propositional statements”, or “translat[ing] ... [the meaning of an experience] into clearly defined concepts so as to dispel its mystery, but rather the object is to bring the mystery more fully into our presence” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 50). Through the themes I discover and the evocative narrative I construct of one teacher’s experience, I will capture the meaning of one teacher’s feelings of competence and incompetence in becoming a professor.

I am doing hermeneutic phenomenology in this study because I am concerned with the experience as it is lived. Coming from the perspective of descriptive phenomenology, Betti’s (1962, cited in Palmer, 1969) methodological concern with “formulat[ing] ... a foundational body of principles with which to interpret human action and objects” (Palmer, 1969, p.

56) will not, then, do for this study. Coming from a hermeneutic perspective, Gadamer's (in Palmer, 1969, p. 47) ontological concern with "what a thing is" is, by contrast, appropriate, as my aim is to steer away from my prejudices in order to get as close to my participant's becoming as a teacher as I can. In contrast to Betti's descriptive approach, which holds that an "objectively valid interpretation" (Palmer, 1969, p. 56) of a phenomenon can be reached, hermeneutic phenomenology shares the Gadamerian belief that the researcher cannot escape her/his subjectivity. In other words, a researcher using this approach must accept that it is impossible for her or him to perceive a phenomenon's invariant structure – its "essence" – as a transcendental ego. Still, in valuing the epoché principle, the researcher must rigorously "examine [her/his] biases and enhance ... [her/his] openness ... in all searches for and discoveries of knowledge" (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 61-62). That is to say, while I know that I cannot escape my own skin, my goal remains to understand the meaning of the experience as it is lived.

I am also doing hermeneutic phenomenology because its evocative approach can be particularly successful in making a phenomenon's meaning clear to readers. One feature of the evocative approach includes the presentation of findings as themes as opposed to an essential structure. In being as open to the experience-as-lived as possible, I know that I cannot fully reach its essence. As Van Manen (1990) writes, "*Theme formulation is at best a simplification ... [and once I] come up with a theme formulation ... [I] feel that it somehow falls short, that it is an inadequate summary of the notion*" (p. 87). At the same time, a "*Theme is the experience of focus, of meaning, of point*", and a theme is "*the form of capturing the phenomenon one tries to understand*" (p. 87). The use of these themes, therefore, will enable readers to stay particularly close to my participant's lived experience.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection consisted of one "long interview" (Moustakas, 1994) with the participant, Janis (a pseudonym, like all others in this article) – a white doctoral candidate in English Education at a large public research university in the American Midwest. With two US research universities' Education programmes having expressed interest in her as a potential hire, and at the time of data collection in a rapid effort to complete her qualitative thesis on US high school girls' literate identities, Janis had experienced the phenomenon of interest: the feelings of competence and incompetence in the process of becoming a professor. Our three hour interview was "an informal, interactive process ... [involving] open-

ended comments and questions" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114) where the participant shared her stories of the phenomenon while I invited her to thicken stories she had already told or to tell additional ones by asking her open-ended questions.

To analyze my interview with Janis, I used a modified version of Colaizzi's (1978) approach to data analysis. First having read the full transcript, I extracted "phrases or sentences that directly pertain to the experience" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 53). I then extracted the meaning of each transcript statement – the phrases/sentences selected – by transforming Janis's language into my own-as-researcher; I created a list of meaning statements; then, using a "zigzag" (Polkinghorne, p. 53) procedure – which involved going back not only to Janis's original language primarily, to the phrases or sentences identified, but also to others' written accounts – I produced the general themes of Janis's experience.

Results

Themes

The prospective professor moves back and forth between feelings of incompetence and competence to where the latter predominates as she learns disciplinary content. As she experiences this oscillation, she also learns how to become a member of a disciplinary community or context of English Education research and instruction – first for herself, and then to share that context with others (her students, fellow graduate students, and faculty). This process of feelings of becoming is a sequence of three developmental stages, each of which I present here as a theme.

Theme One: Becoming is purposeful, though ineffective, isolating activity

In the earliest stage, feelings of incompetence predominate as Janis engages in purposeful problem-solving activity ineffectively. She measures herself against those who are or appear more fluent with disciplinary content and displaying membership in the identity of being an English Education professor by publicly possessing an authoritative voice on and extending that content. At this stage, veterans seem complete in their becoming or impossible ideals. Feeling or looking nervous, feeling she can't "pipe in", the novice experiences feelings of isolation – being apart from, lonely among, or unrecognized by other experienced and/or prospective disciplinary members.

Theme Two: Becoming is belonging in purposeful, effective activity where veterans are seen by the novice as balancing multiple roles

In this middle stage, the prospective professor begins to feel an emergent sense of competence as, even without extensive preparation (e.g. for a professor-led lecture in a course for which she is a TA), she “just know[s]” and feels that she can publicly extend disciplinary content among novices and veterans, the latter being with whom she feels she now belongs. She assesses herself, and feels others assess her, as being “authoritative enough”, or having a voice beyond that of the “typical” novice of her own students. Also, she begins to see that veteran faculty are only “member enough”. That is, she sees that veterans are people who gradually become more competent with content and as members; additionally, she sees that veterans are also different “kinds of people” (Gee, 1999) – unfinished, with multiple identities (they are professors *and* mothers, spouses, and so on). She is effectively, playfully engaging in the purposeful activity of becoming a competent professor. She is, additionally, sharing a disciplinary context with her superiors, but she isn’t balancing or flexibly integrating “a diverse set of needs established by the individual” by combining a broad range of “roles, behaviours, and interests” (Mulqueen, 1992, p. 125). For now, that remains the province of her professors.

Theme Three: Becoming is purposeful, effective activity where the novice balances and shares a context with others

The prospective professor feels a developed sense of competence in this late stage, where she arrives at the sense that she indeed is or will be able to be “member enough”. She knows she will only gradually become more competent with handling disciplinary content and displaying membership. Able to balance and share a disciplinary context with others, Janis feels she is and will be able to be different kinds of people who realize progress, despite a persistent sense that life’s possibilities could derail her efforts.

Throughout this sequence of stages, the prospective professor forms and revises her idea of what a professor is. From the early to the late stage, this idea is at first distant, then close; first simple, then complex; and first a matter of being fully competent in handling a discipline’s content, then of becoming gradually more competent with it. She herself begins to balance, to share a context with others she knows are, like her, hopeful works-in-progress. Friend, woman, and prospective professor all, Janis will forever be becoming “member enough”.

Participant Narratives for Each Theme

Janis provides concrete descriptions for each of the themes articulated above.

Theme One: Becoming is purposeful, though ineffective, isolating activity

At the start of this becoming, the prospective professor has yet to learn disciplinary content and to display membership in her disciplinary community for herself, for and with others. Even when beginning to oscillate toward competence, Janis points to the isolation experienced by describing what is not one moment but a layering of several office meetings with two intimate veterans – her advisor, Sam Barratt, and one of her committee members. In these meetings, Janis is joined by a peer, Chad Vickers, with whom she worked as a sort of “twin” throughout much of her programme, paired as they were as assistants in a study conducted by Sam. In this montage of meetings, the scene does not change: Janis is in Sam’s office with Sam, Chad and another professor, and she is trying both to speak authoritatively on disciplinary content and to demonstrate membership. What stands out is how she experiences a lack of recognition as a member by her professors while Chad receives it. And, while she is gradually learning content, she still does not know – as these office meetings show – how to get it out. She shares that

I often picture myself sitting in Sam’s [her advisor’s] office with Carey [another professor] and Chad and realizing feeling for the first time that there was some gender stuff at play in my life. ... [Sam] was constantly ... [saying] “Chad, Chad” ... [urging him to contribute to the dialogue] and not with me. ... So for a while I did try to pipe in things but wasn’t all that successful. And then as I started really learning in my programme, really reading things, then I started feeling even more frustrated in some sense because I had all of the ideas going on in my head ... I would read things in books and go like “Yeah, that’s right. That makes perfect sense with that research” – but I wasn’t able to get it out yet. And you know I’d never really had that experience where your brain is working so hard on stuff ... and you literally cannot get it to come out of your mouth.

Chad gets recognition here, while Janis does not. She is silent at first because she feels she lacks disciplinary content and knowledge of how to demonstrate membership, while the latter seems to

come easily to Chad. It may, of course, also be that Chad, as a male among males, signifies competence easily here – and that Sam and Carey are unintentionally enabling it. For Janis, competence is emergent here, and yet, as she sits in the office, alone and voiceless, she feels ineffective.

In moments occurring in the early stage, Janis appears to imagine that a full, complete becoming is an ideal that must come about. In another early moment, she introduces herself at an academic conference to a non-intimate veteran professor whom she has met before. This marks an attempt to assume membership Janis is in some respects ready for, familiar as she is with this researcher's scholarship. The ideal of complete becoming is here in the deference that Janis brings to her interaction with the professor, Gail Potter. The terror of approaching Gail is made worse for Janis, however, as Gail does not recognize her initially. Janis describes this interaction as follows:

[W]e started to go to these little Critical Discourse Analysis meetings and ... [people] like Gail Potter ... and [other] big people [were at them]. ... [So] I met Gail Potter again last May without Chad when I went to the CDA conference and we were in this awkward social situation ... in a small hotel and ... there's somebody pouring wine ... I had no one to talk to but Sam ... So there I was, wanting to get drunk desperately. ... I go for the wine, and Gail Potter is standing there, and I'm thinking "I have to turn around and introduce myself to her. I have to." And it is taking every bit of strength that I have in my body to do it because I'm terrified of talking to her. I want to sound smart. ... I finally turned around and said "Hi, Dr. Potter. My name's Janis DeKoenig. I work with Sam Barratt". And she goes "Oh, nice to meet you." And of course we've met before ... [but] she has no memory of me. And then she says, "Oh yeah. You mean you work with Chad." So she knows Chad. ... It was a really big letdown.

Clearly, this moment is particularly crushing for Janis given that Gail seems so complete. The challenge of displaying membership is here for Janis, with feelings of loneliness and nervousness haunting her attempts to approach Gail in the reception room. Adding to Janis's isolation, when Gail does recognize Janis, is the fact that Gail starts talking about Chad as a novice with an authoritative voice – an association that leaves Janis feeling like a novice without one. These interventions show that becoming begins as

purposeful, ineffective and therefore isolating activity.

Theme Two: Becoming is belonging in purposeful, effective activity where veterans are seen by the novice as balancing multiple roles.

In the middle stage, where becoming is effective belonging in activity where veterans are seen as incomplete, feelings of competence begin to surface. Whereas recognition of Janis's authority by veteran others, peer others, and by herself is lacking in early, isolating moments, in middle ones of belonging it is there, and in a particular form: Janis perceives herself, and is perceived by others, as having a voice that is "authoritative enough". While she is not perceived by her MEd students as being the best source on applications of theory to classroom practice, they turn to her for advice on the design of lesson plans. In addition, she wins a dissertation award – a recognition that her work is important to the field of English Education and exceeds the quality of other students. From this vantage of feeling and being recognized as "authoritative enough", Janis displays competence understood as assessed, effective engagement in purposeful activity in a context. But, while Janis can see that her professors have become only "member enough", she has not achieved "her own balance" yet (Mulqueen, 1992, p. 69). Still, in a departure from her perspective on veterans in early moments, she now sees veterans as incomplete multiple "kinds of people". Janis knows that veterans, like herself, are forever stretched between feelings of competence and incompetence. One middle moment comes at another academic conference; in this hotel encounter and subsequent dinner experience, Janis's move from loneliness to "being with" members is evident, and along with it her status as becoming "authoritative enough" and theirs, as veterans, as becoming "member enough". She shares:

Because I was still in this period of "I can't talk like a real [academic," I was] standing there around this pool at this conference, but I don't know if I should go up and stand by [a large group of veterans]. ... Then, I ran into [Professor] Barbara Goshen, who is ... a friend of my friend, Nora, so for some reason I didn't picture her as a professor who I should shmooze with ... [yet] ... she's an English Ed person at [another university]. ... I just said, "Barbara, I'm Nora's friend Janis ...". And she's like "Oh my God." ... We're chatting on and on, and she was maybe a little bit drunk maybe, and ... she was like "Well, come to dinner, and here are all my

friends.” ... I almost said “Oh, I changed my mind,” but then I went and I had such a great time. ... It was a moment where I realized professors are regular people, you know? And that maybe I was someone who could do this. ... [S]o that was ... [a] moment of feeling competent in a situation where I had felt really incompetent.

Complete becoming, complete competence: these, as ideals, seem to wither away in this moment. First recognized as Nora’s friend by Barbara at the pool, she is also recognized as “authoritative enough” by being invited along to dinner. She is aligned with this group; she knows what to do, to say, “chatting on and on”. Her incompleteness as a novice, she also comes to see, is present in a related way among these veterans: Barbara is professor and friend and woman, and she and her friends are “regular people”. These veterans are more competent than Janis, yes, but they and she are nevertheless all professors becoming – unfinished professionals with multiple identities stretched between the possibility of progress and the possibility of none, but growing, still.

Theme Three: Becoming is purposeful, effective activity where the novice balances and shares a context with others

In the late stage, where Janis herself becomes “member enough”, there is a narrowing between her own position as a novice who is “authoritative enough” and who these and other veterans are as unfinished, varied folk. As she begins to consider interactions between her professional and domestic aspirations, we can see her balancing, or establishing her own set of diverse needs, and sharing a context with others. This is complex but manageable, vital “member enough”-ness. In one late moment, Janis shows she has learned to balance by considering the interactions between her plans to become an English Education professor and desire to be a mother. She describes how she will be able to manage both roles and their demands:

[I] just decided if I am 30, if I’m going to have children, it’s going to be pre-tenure years, and I don’t care. You know ... I will make it work on both sides ... I feel like you’re supposed to choose ... and ... I guess I kind of refuse. ... I feel more calculated than most women are about when ... I should have children ... [W]hen I got this assistantship ... there’s always been talk ... in the last couple years about “Oh, yeah, you should have a baby when you’re getting your doctor’s degree”. And I was kind of

“that’s a bad idea”. And then when I got the fellowship, people started saying, “Hey, you should really ... [have a baby] here.” And I was saying things like “No, ’cause I don’t want to be pregnant at my interviews. Right?” And that was the main thing [that] would have held me back. I kind of do want to have a baby, but I don’t want to be pregnant in my interviews. ... [T]hen I feel like planning out a calendar, you know? If I got pregnant in August ... then at the end of May, I could have a couple months off where I could go back to work; I wouldn’t have to take leave. Right? I think about stuff like that ... I don’t like to think about being that calculated ... [but] I’m a planner. ... [I]t helps me feel like ... I can do this.

This dilemma that – were she a man – would probably be a non-thought or, if expressed publicly, experienced by Janis or others as a sign of being a supportive partner, is a considerable one. Still, pulled by friends in the direction of having children as soon as possible, and pulled by her professional community toward presenting the image of childless professional dedication, Janis refuses to make an either/or decision. She wants to, and must be able to, manage both; she feels she can “do this”. By thumbing through others’ comments, asking questions that seem more directed at herself – “you know?” and “right?” – she knows her complex plan will require competence and be accompanied, here and there, by incompetence. Can she “do this”? She must. She is balancing now – establishing progressively “better intents” or a playfully generated, growing “network of [ever richer] meanings” (Aoki, 1984, p. 75; Johnson, 1984, p. 61).

In another story where Janis shows she is “member enough” in effective activity, she emphasizes how she has come to share a context with unfinished others. As Janis comes closer to becoming a professor, taking up this role becomes an increasingly complex thing. Describing one professor’s job talk, Janis revises her idea that “a professor is a professor is a professor” – a thing fully become, a portrait of complete competence – and sees, instead, that a gradual move toward increasing competence is instead the rule:

... [A]nother moment where my ... instinct was to feel incompetent but then something switched was ... [when] I ... [went] to see some job talks at the U last year. I saw Toni Fedder’s talk which was just very polished and smooth; ... people asked her some nasty ... questions about it, and that made me incredibly nervous. But then I went to

see another candidate who we didn't hire but ... was very good in Social Studies [S]he was clearly nervous. She did a really good job answering the questions. Her study wasn't very complex, but she did a nice job. I wasn't sure, you know: "Did she do a good job? Is that what was expected? Or was I expected to do something like what Toni did?" ... [Later on, Janis was speaking with a programme veteran professor about this matter, and she said] that it's expected ... that Toni be more confident. She's been on all of these big ... committees ... and she'd already been a professor for a couple of years. Yeah, that was normal. She should be like that, applying for an associate job. And she said, "That would do [well] ... for someone coming in to be an assistant professor." She was like, "She did a good job. And you'll do that kind of job, too." And then it sort of hit me: being an assistant professor, you're not supposed to look like ... really experienced people [Y]ou don't need to know every single thing in your discipline when you're coming in as an assistant professor. ... I didn't know that. I always pictured that a professor is a professor is a professor ...

How competent does a professor have to be? Clearly, there is no idea of what a professor is here, as she can be polished and nervous, associate and assistant "material", competent – and incompetent – to varying degrees. Janis, like the Social Studies candidate, will not reach a final moment of becoming; she will not be beyond doubting her competence or wondering whether her assignments to her students could not perhaps be more supportive of their learning. The closer she gets to becoming a professor, competence and incompetence remain, in part, as the increasing complexity of her idea of what a professor is.

Discussion: Implications of This Study

Janis's experience of feelings of competence and incompetence in the process of becoming a professor is indicative of her efforts to struggle toward growth – a process at the beginning imagined as one that would ultimately become complete, which, in the end, reveals itself as unfinalizable. While incompetence is rare as she reaches late moments, the dilemma of having a child and working as a professor remains – and it is one she believes she can face, though a dilemma nevertheless. She must be able to do it, arrive at balance and share contexts with others in becoming "member enough".

This phenomenological study of the experience of feelings of competence and incompetence in the process of becoming a professor has implications for people interested in the study of competence, people interested in the sociocultural study of identity development, and, also, pre-service college faculty and those who train them.

In terms of the sociocultural study of competence, there are a number of relevant findings. Firstly, competence in this study is observed as assessable, effective engagement in purposeful mediated activity in a context; it therefore makes sociocultural research on competence as lived in specific contexts less "rare" (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 128). Secondly, the issue of whether competence is acontextual or context-specific may remain unsettled, but this study suggests that "balancing" may be common in varied settings and among persons of different genders, ages, social roles, cultural backgrounds, and so forth. Thirdly, this study shows how the context-specific study of competence avoids the possibility of anti-reformist views such as competence understood as an inner gift or masculine behaviour. For example, in this study we see competence as involving the widening pursuit of "better intents" (Johnson, 1984, p. 61) taking shape in actors who are becoming "member enough". Janis is seen here joining and creating resistant publics: educational researchers promoting literacy learning understood as analyzing discourse to promote social change, female academics, and more. Fourthly, purposefulness, the sense that activity is in alignment with one's goals, is shown here to be the doorway to the achievement of competence – driving Janis toward competence when she thinks she is perceived to be, or perceives herself as being, incompetent; enabling her to accept that becoming only "member enough" is enough, a balancing of purposes and sharing of contexts that results from and enables her to continue establishing "better intents". Finally, we see further evidence here of how competence is not an individual activity, and how one woman shares the context with not only those who once became or are becoming professors like she too is, but also, in some way, her past, present and future students.

In terms of identity development, this study affirms the widely-accepted view that identity is a dynamic, emancipatory construct wherein normative roles can be resisted and revised by subjects who take up alternative ways of being. While some question identity's emancipatory value on the grounds that it balkanizes marginalized groups whose collective struggle is needed to resist social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1998), I do not. In our era of flexible production and invented communities where

traditional status groups have eroded to leave behind smaller, more local “zelizer circuits” of material activity (such as the owners of hardware stores in a city neighbourhood, clerical workers in a university building, and so forth) (Collins, 2000), the “micro-physics of power” (Foucault, 1979) people resistantly enact at the level of the body is an indispensable emancipatory tool. It becomes important today to understand what identity as a construct looks like in specific settings for specific persons – and to work for progressive change beyond those instances by uncovering what identity looks like across settings and persons. This study contributes to scholarship on the shape of identity construction, such as that of Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998), who argue that early identity displays involve repetition of rules and codes and later displays improvisation on those systems. This study complicates this repetition-to-improvisation design for the construction of identity; while Janis’s experience affirms that one never gets past improvisation, later displays can be bright affirmations of cultural progress and dark reminders of devouring nature, and the transition from early to late experiences has an oscillatory shape. This study, in contributing to shared knowledge on the construction of identity, aims to afford space for emancipatory identity displays.

As for pre-service college faculty and those who train them, this study represents an often isolating,

sometimes terrifying experience many pre-service faculty undergo and that those who train them need to guide them through. Janis’s stories are instructive on their own, creating potential for teacher-student or student-student dialogue on a painful, isolating and lasting experience. Clearly, incompetence remains a part of both novice and veteran teachers’ lived experiences.

Responding to the need for quality teachers at all higher education institutions, this research frustrates a proposition that prematurely turns some novices with promise away from teaching – if a novice cannot display competence early on, she may begin to think that she cannot learn to take it on effectively with additional experience either. It is the belief of this researcher that the decision to become a faculty member is one best made on the basis of teaching and research experiences, and that this decision should not be a “yes/no” matter but one based on deliberate inquiry over time. Furthermore, it is such deliberate inquiry upon the part of novice teachers that, in the opinion of this researcher, positions them to become veteran agents of emancipation in their classrooms to come. For, if these novice teachers are able to carry into those sites rich, resistant, non-normative images of who teachers can be in their classrooms, their students may enjoy a similarly rich field of identity possibilities.

About the Author



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