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Becoming Liberated in the Process of Researching and Writing about Liberation: A Scholarly Reflection of a Healing Process in a Doctoral Program

Falon N. Thacker
Georgia State University, thackerfalon@gmail.com

Becoming Liberated in the Process of Researching and Writing about Liberation: A Scholarly Reflection of a Healing Process in a Doctoral Program

Falon Thacker (University of Central Florida)

This article chronicles the process of researching and writing a dissertation about liberation and how it connects to my own experiences of liberation. Qualitative research involves a more personal connection between the researcher and the study (Hays & Singh, 2012) which allows for a more in depth understanding of the experiences of the participants and the researcher. This article provides a reflection of my journey that began in early childhood and through the doctoral process, connecting those experiences to the research process utilizing Pillow's (2003) four reflexive strategies. Reflecting on the method, theory, and findings, I make connections with personal experiences of liberation, healing and the process of research on multiculturalism, social justice and liberation.

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When I began the application process for a doctoral program, a mentor told me that throughout the doctoral journey, it was more important to focus on whom I wanted to become because of the doctoral experience than it was to focus on what job I wanted on the other side of the doctorate. As I engaged throughout the doctoral journey, I repeatedly replayed his words in my head. Through the experiences in the doctoral program and experiences in my life, I am in awe and often overwhelmed when I reflect on how my life and I, myself have changed over the course of those four years. I knew that qualitative research was often personal and researchers often choose their topics based on personal experiences and narratives (Hays & Singh, 2012). However, I did not realize how deeply personal, emotional, passionate, and liberated I would feel because of my dissertation research.

Utilizing the key constructs of privilege, oppression, waking up, and liberation, with collective memory work as the methodology and undergirded in the the theories of liberation and liberation psychology, the research question that guided my dissertation study was: How does the experience of waking up to injustice within a critical incident influence master's level counseling students to study multicultural and social justice competence in counseling? As outlined in the cycle of liberation, waking up is defined as an intrapersonal change in the core of someone about what they believe about themselves and the world (Harro, 2013). A critical incident is an experience in which an individual begins to see themselves differently in the world than they have before (Harro, 2013). Collective memory work is a feminist social constructionist method that strives to remove power differentials between the subject and object of research (Onyx & Small, 2001). In nature, collective memory work is a liberatory research method by which provides an opportunity for the participants to maintain a role in both generating and analyzing data throughout the research process (Haug & Carter, 1987). There are three phases to collective memory work: (a) participants write a story about a particular memory; (b) a focus group where participants reflect on the memories and stories written; and (c) the data generated from the focus group is further analyzed and theorized by the researcher (Onyx & Small, 2001).

I am a student affairs professional with a strong counselor identity. My dissertation research was centered in the field of counseling; however, I believe my research and the healing process is synonymous in student affairs. While my dissertation study primarily focused on research regarding critical incidents of waking up within graduate students, my experience as the researcher

captured its own set of findings. This article chronicles the journey of how my life experiences simultaneously intersected the process of my dissertation. Many individuals lose themselves in the process of writing a dissertation; a phenomenon that I have witnessed first-hand. However, while there were times throughout the process where it felt insurmountable, I healed. My hope is that by sharing the reflection of my deeply personal and vulnerable journey, I may inspire others to find themselves and provide hope that healing is possible and it is liberating.

The Reflexive Process and My Researcher Positionality

The method to reflecting on my healing process was through engaging in researcher reflexivity. This section will detail the various stages of my reflexive process and how my experiences both within and outside of my dissertation study were connected to my research. Researcher reflexivity serves as a process by which the researcher maintains a continual inner dialogue, a critical self-evaluation, and an active acknowledgment that their position and connection to the research may affect the process of the research as well as its outcome (Berger, 2015). As a researcher who did not share the same life experiences of my participants, it was even more important I spent time engaged in deep self-reflection in order to more accurately capture the experiences of the participants (Fawcett & Hearn, 2004). My process and reflection as the researcher was based on Pillow's (2003) four reflexive strategies: (a) reflexivity as recognition of self; (b) reflexivity as recognition of other; (c) reflexivity as truth; and (d) reflexivity as transcendence. These four strategies work together and provide the researcher with the tools to complete an effective personal evaluation and increased self-awareness (Pillow, 2003).

Pillow's Four Reflexive Strategies

Pillow (2003) describes the first reflexive strategy as recognition of self, which involves the researcher acknowledging their own capacity to be known and reflected upon. When I reflect on the four years in a doctoral program, I woke up in many ways both within the doctoral process and in my personal life. I recognized the consciousness-raising experiences and growth I experienced. This article provides insight into my growth of self and its impact on my research.

The second reflexive strategy Pillow (2003) described is the recognition of others. To conduct effective qualitative research, it is important to capture and understand the subject of research in a way that truly reflects their experiences (Pillow, 2003). This article also contains my personal reflection on the data collection and analysis process and the

ways in which I am connected to the participants' stories and their discussion in the focus group.

Pillow (2003) describes the third strategy as reflexivity of truth. This strategy reflects the idea that the researcher can communicate a form of truth throughout the research process. Participating in the process of reflexivity allows for increased validity (Hays & Singh, 2012). This article includes an examination of self, the stories of my participants, and the truth embedded in the findings of this study.

The fourth and final strategy is reflexivity as transcendence (Pillow, 2003). When the researcher allows for authentic self-examination as it connects to their research, a recognition of the truth and experiences of the participants, and the truth of the research findings, a wholeness forms (Pillow, 2003). Within the process of reflexivity, the researcher is able to move beyond their own subjectivity that allows for more representation of the research study (Pillow, 2003). This article provides a deep reflection on the process of the overall research in relation to the described strategies of reflexivity.

The Process of Becoming Self-Aware

As helpers, it is important we take action to learn about our own assumptions, biases, privileged identities, values, and beliefs (Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2016). Helpers must engage in ongoing self-evaluation because it is critical to discover strongly held values different from those of the community members we serve and determine how we navigate those differences (Goodman et al., 2004). Psychological oppression ensues from practices that result in various forms of injustice typically inflicted unintentionally by helpers who are genuinely interested in helping clients/students from diverse groups and backgrounds to realize new and untapped dimensions of their humanity (Duran, Firehammer & Gonzalez., 2008). Becoming self-aware of both my privileged and marginalized identities was a critical step to understanding my role as helper and begin my healing process.

The Intersectionality of my Gender and Career

My earliest memory of a career goal was to be a singer and a performer. For as long as I can remember, I have always loved and been inspired by music. However, I decided to ask my mother what my earliest career goal was that she could remember. When I prompted my mother with the question, "What is the first thing you can remember me saying I wanted to be when I grew up and how old was I?" Without hesitation my mother responded, "Oh. When you were four, you were determined to be a ninja turtle." I instantly burst into laughter because I

had no memory of this goal but remembered loving the ninja turtles and the recent live action film. I asked my mother, "Why in the world did I want to be a ninja turtle?" She again quickly replied and said, "Because you loved that they ate pizza and helped people." While this response also prompted laughter among us, I was also completely fascinated as to how this early childhood career goal, one that I could not even recollect, was parallel to my life in the present day. I had wanted to be a helper for longer than I could actually remember, am a helper today, and chose to pursue a terminal degree in a helping profession.

During a career development course, I started to become aware of how gender played a role in my career development and how internalized sexism has shaped how I view myself and molded my perfectionist complex. While it would take more time in my doctoral program and therapy to deeply understand and work through my internalized sexism, this class was the first time I woke up to the experiences with important men in my life and how their opinions and thoughts about my life choices influenced my career development choices.

Growing up in rural Appalachia, it is uncommon to be part of a family in which both of your parents went to college. I am privileged to be part of a family in which both of my parents graduated from college. In my high school class, many of my peers had no intention of going to college. However, I knew I was going to college as my parents did not give me a different option.

As it came time to apply for college, my family began to tell me that it was time to "get serious" about choosing a career path and a major for college. They told me that being a singer was not a real career goal and I needed to pick something like law or pharmacy. My high school class president recorded a video and asked all of us where we hoped to be in ten years when we came together for our first reunion. My response was, "I hope that in ten years, I will have been on American Idol and will have a singing career." I still believed I would become a performer. Despite this, I declared a political science major and decided to pursue law school. My family was happy with this decision because being an attorney was a good career. I was happy as long as they, particularly my father and grandfather, were happy with me.

When a series of experiences led me to learn that law school was also not a passion area of mine, I told my family I had learned about student affairs and wanted to pursue that instead. I vividly remember a conversation with my father who told me, "Law school was probably not a good choice. You might have ended up being the breadwinner for you and your husband and he may

not be okay with that. Have you thought about being a kindergarten teacher?" I remember telling my father that I did not care about making more money than my husband and feeling very confused about the entire conversation.

Fast-forward to my master's graduation and my father wrote in my graduation card, "you are now more educated than I am." Similar to my memory in college, I was not quite sure what he meant by his statement and felt confused by his words. However, I felt resolved because I had finally found something that I loved doing. Up until pursuing my master's degree, I had only loved singing/performing and I had finally found something that put me at peace of giving up my lifelong dream of singing and performing.

My teenage years and most of my 20s were characterized by making choices for my career that made the men in my life happy; albeit my dad, husband or first professional supervisor at work. I found myself often wrestling with a deep internal conflict of wondering if they will be proud of my choices and praise me for my decisions yet wishing I did not care. The process of resolving this conflict became a deep emotional burden that overwhelmed me at every major decision I had to make. Discovering these deep roots of internalized sexism came in the early semesters of coursework in the doctoral program. Learning about sexism and the messages women receive from men and connecting these messages to my own stories and my own memories of confusion were painful and overwhelming. I realized that in choosing how I pursued the doctorate was even a part of my mess. I worked to make starting a doctoral program and educational journey easy on my husband and minimally impact his doctoral experience and future career. I made sure that he understood the plan would be to establish roots with his career post-doctorate and I would follow; I was proud of myself for finding a way to make it all work. Nonetheless, I finally woke up to the injustices of the sexism I had faced and began the process of unlearning.

The Intersectionality of my Whiteness and Career

Waking up is not a singular moment; it is cyclical process that can occur at any point and within various contexts (Harro, 2013). My experience in my first professional position at Georgia State University (GSU) was an also an experience in which I woke up rather quickly to my privileged identities, particularly my racial identity as a White woman. When I began working at GSU, I experienced culture shock in a way like never before. My previous life and educational experiences were mostly White spaces. At GSU, on my very first day

of work, I became one of, and often, the only White person in the room. I felt my master's education prepared for me everything I needed during the first year of my new position except for one. Although my graduate program had a diversity course and I became aware of White privilege and other identities that were different from my own, it was not integrated throughout the curriculum nor was I challenged to think differently in my graduate assistantship.

Within my first two weeks of work, I realized I was unprepared to work with mostly Black students who were untrusting and unsure of a White, southern woman who suddenly became their boss. I remember feeling scared, overwhelmed, and incredibly out of place. There were days during the first few weeks of my new job that I would come home and cry. There were other times I would cry in the middle of a training session and I even once cried in the dining hall. I became so emotionally overwhelmed that I could not hold myself together and the slightest moment triggered my emotions. In the beginning weeks, I could not put my finger on why my students distrusted and despised me, until one day, a fellow colleague of color said, "Honey, to most of them, all they see is a White woman who represents every bad experience they have ever had with a White person and you just need to accept that." I was forced to examine my White privilege immediately in my new position. Many years later, I have an understanding and awareness of my White privilege in a way that allows me to be successful with students who are different from me. Although graduate school could not have fully prepared me for this experience, it required more intentional preparation and training than what was in the curriculum.

During the first year, I experienced a lot of emotional turmoil. The usage of the word turmoil sounds dramatic; but it was a dramatic time in my life. There were a lot of tears, questions, self-degradation, reflection, and conversations with my colleagues who were White and of color that offered multiple perspectives. It was not just about my feelings, it was also about the oppression, inequities, and challenges I saw my students facing on daily basis. The pursuit of higher education should not require young adults to risk their basic livelihood on a daily basis and I had become a regular witness of such an experience. After attending two relatively privileged institutions, I was exposed to a campus in which students were dealing with injustices in ways I had never seen before in college.

These experiences motivated me to pursue my next degree with an emphasis in social justice as my master's degree did not

adequately prepare me to work with culturally diverse communities. I was linked to my dissertation research because I felt strongly about the lack of multicultural and social justice competence training in my master's program and felt compelled to explore multicultural and social justice competence in graduate preparation programs. I have seen and felt how oppression and the inequities of our society do not allow marginalized communities to thrive in schools. I believe this has to change; and as members of a helping profession, we must take on this responsibility.

It is imperative for graduate students to understand how privilege and oppression influence the work of a helper. I did not fully understand this until my first job. In the doctoral program, I acquired language to talk about multiculturalism and social justice in a way that was not taught to me in my master's program. I am mindful of my Whiteness and White privilege and how it influenced the study, similarly to the way I must consider my White privilege at work. Being White in my setting requires me to have a constant self-awareness, particularly as it relates to what I say, how I say it, and to whom I am speaking. Furthermore, this self-awareness was not exclusive from my research; I was mindful of my space, language, and approach to my research when interacting with my participants.

I have witnessed many well-intentioned White folks, myself included, perpetuate the cycles of oppression. As helpers we are looked to and taught to be interventionists, leaders, and the persons our students and clients can turn to "pick people up when they are down." However, we are often the ones pushing individuals down because we lack multicultural and social justice competency training and unknowingly and ignorantly do more harm than help. At times, this has left me frustrated and angry at my White peers. Because I had a strong reaction to my own lack of multicultural and social justice competence training, I have found myself making assumptions about other White folks' multicultural and social justice competence. I was cognizant of this during the study as the majority of my participants were White women. I was conscious to consistently reflect on my reactions, bias, thoughts, and feelings so as to not make assumptions about my participants.

It was also important for me to reflect on my racial identity development throughout the process of my dissertation study. Helms (1995) identified *pseudo-independence,* when aspiring allies attempt to separate themselves from privileged groups by their ally efforts. I felt myself existing in this space before and I was careful to not operate within this context during the study, especially while engaging with my mostly White participants. In the study, I strived for *autonomy* in order to be a truly effective ally and continually

sought to understand my own oppressive socialization as a means of liberation and understand the complexity of the intersecting nature of all forms of oppression for both participants of color and White participants (Edwards, 2006).

Throughout the study, I reminded myself I was once a graduate student who had no knowledge of privilege and oppression. I remained reflective of how my own consciousness-raising experiences influenced my decision to study counseling through the lens of multiculturalism and social justice. My intrinsic motivation to add to the research landscape regarding the influence of the experiences of waking up to injustices of graduate students is rooted in my own experiences of love, liberation, and growth. My aspiration was that the findings of my dissertation research advanced the work of multicultural and social justice competency training in graduate preparation programs.

The Process of the Research Study

During the first semester of doctoral coursework, I was introduced to the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCCs). The MSJCCs are aspirational standards for the mental health profession and they provide a framework that acknowledge the different ways identity, marginalization, and privilege intersect (Ratts, 2017). At the core of the competencies are multicultural and social justice praxis; the assumption that counselors should use strategies and techniques that align with client's cultural background and their work should promote social justice (Ratts, 2017). I found myself fascinated with the framework and took every opportunity in coursework to study and write about the competencies. In reflection, I was searching for a way to reconcile my frustration and guilt with my lack of multicultural and social justice training; I was searching for guidance on how to grow and learn as a helper.

By the third year of my doctoral studies, my knowledge and understanding of the competencies and my own subjectivity had grown into a love for multiculturalism, social justice, liberation and a commitment to study the influence of waking up in critical incidents with graduate students. My goal included conducting research that would help educators understand the importance of exploring and facilitating consciousness-raising experiences inside and outside of the classroom; just as the experiences I had inside and outside of the classroom influenced me. I felt compelled to explore how moments of waking up and critical incidents influence graduate students' decisions to study multiculturalism and social justice in counseling.

Reflection of Methodological Choice

Once I determined what my overall topic would be, I began to consider the various methodologies I could use to study the experiences of waking up in critical incidents. I remembered reading an article about a constructivist methodology called collective memory work. The study focused on the stories and memories of women who remembered being treated differently for wearing a hijab, post September 11, 2001. It was saddening to read how 9/11 changed the lives of these women and the discrimination they faced. It was also powerful to read how the women found community and support in one another as they were finally in a space where they could understand each other's experiences, were not alone, and were *liberated*. I too wanted this experience for my participants. I wanted to understand their experiences of waking up in critical incidents but I also wanted my research to be an act of social justice, for them to find community in one another and to feel liberated through the research process.

Collective memory work gave me the outlet and opportunity to engage with my participants throughout the research process more than other traditional research methods (Onyx and Small, 2001). When we made it through the first story and they began to get into a flow of the research process, I watched them become confident in their reflection and analysis. Without me or my co-researcher's prompting, they began to make connections across the stories and how their individual experiences were also reflective of larger contexts. Their ability to speak about their appreciation for the space to be together and reminder of their collective goal and purpose as counselor trainees reflected the essence of collective memory work as well as the importance of this research.

Reflection of Theoretical Choice

Choosing my theoretical frameworks of liberation psychology and liberation to inform collective memory work and my research was a simple choice. Liberation psychology and the cycle of liberation helps us understand how memories of waking up within critical incidents influence counselor trainees' decision to study multiculturalism and social justice in counseling – primarily because the goal of liberation psychology is the development of a critical consciousness (Martín-Baró, 1994). Additionally, liberation psychology highlights the importance of recovering historical memory of oppressed communities and the connection of these memories to commitment to liberation and critical transformation (Martín-Baró, 1994).

My personal experience of waking up within a critical incident, the typical entry point of the cycle of liberation, gave me the language and a framework to understand my

own process of liberation and commitment to a critical transformation. Second, the premise of liberation psychology that systems of oppression have an impact on mental health aligned with my own philosophy of why counselors need to understand and embody multiculturalism, social justice and liberation in their practice; liberation psychology recognizes a counselor's responsibility to possess multicultural and social justice competence. Liberation psychology's call to action of counselors to be prepared to advocate on behalf of and with their clients is a call I answered and wanted to illustrate through my research.

Martín-Baró (1991) suggested that critical consciousness "is not simply becoming aware of a certain fact but rather it is a process of change" (p. 227). To become conscious of reality is to become aware of, and involved in, a process of continual discovery and action related to "truth." The experience of becoming aware and engaged in a process of change was a salient part of my multicultural and social justice competence development. It was through my classroom experiences and the consciousness-raising experiences my professors created in order for me to understand my own liberatory experiences of waking up that I became passionate about multicultural and social justice competence. Thus, the principles of liberation psychology were a natural fit for my study.

Additionally, the way liberation psychology connected well to my study involved study the phases of collective memory work. Through rediscovering historical memory, de-ideologizing understandings of cultural truths, discovering the virtues of the people, and applying this knowledge to specific contexts and lived experiences through problematization, the process of critical consciousness emerges and is maintained (Martín-Baró, 1994). Participants in the study engaged in these principles of liberation psychology through the experience of writing their stories and participating in the focus group. The methodology and theories used in this study collectively coupled with my experiences and the participants' created the cohesion I desired for my research.

Throughout the process, the frameworks of liberation psychology and the cycle of liberation served as a reminder that all my participants' memories included memories of liberation—even if they lacked the language to describe it that way in the moment. In the focus group, the participants essentially described moving through the cycle of liberation beginning with their memory of waking up to discussing their learned understanding and responsibilities as future school counselors. The participants discussed their understanding of systemic issues their students are facing and how they know as school

counselors it is their responsibility to look beyond behavioral issues or narratives they receive from teachers and other administrators. They reflected on their new beliefs that they are responsible for understanding someone's truth and lived experiences and then advocating with and on behalf of them.

When I began data analysis, I was not sure how I would integrate and synthesize the various data points of the stories, the focus group, my co-researcher's notes and observations, the memory facilitation notes, and my own researcher notes. I was anxious that my themes might not align with what I anticipated from reading literature and my own experience. I had to work to remove my own bias with this subjectivity and remind myself the participants were part of the research team and their stories and discussion held the themes. As the researcher, I needed to synthesize and articulate the data to reflect the participants' voices.

Reflection of Findings

When initially reviewing the various data points, re-reading, and listening to the stories and discussion of my participants, I noticed four broad themes that were repetitive through the data and particularly within the focus group discussion. After further reflection and analysis of the data, I came to recognize that some of the themes were not exclusive of each other and were inherently connected. Therefore, I identified two major themes in the findings, recognizing injustices and experiences of privilege and oppression. For example, although experiences of privilege and oppression were two separate broad themes, it would not make sense nor be consistent with the literature to separate experiences of privilege and oppression (Crethar, Rivera & Nash, 2008). However, it was important to spend time highlighting through the focus group data how these constructs are related and how they influenced participants to study multiculturalism and social justice in counseling, yet it was also important to show the ways in which the participants experienced these constructs differently.

It was also important to recognize how the participants were experiencing the participation in the study as its own critical incident while discussing their memories of waking up that were critical incidents that influenced them to study multiculturalism and social justice in counseling. While the participants did not have the language to articulate this experience as I just did—they became aware and articulated in the focus group that they were surprised about what they learned about each other during the group and the importance of understanding the experiences of each other as they move through their graduate program together.

My Privilege in the Research Study

Crethar, et al. (2008) defined privilege as the numerous systemic and unmerited benefits within the culture for members of dominant groups. Many areas of privilege existed throughout the process of this research. As a heterosexual, cisgender, White woman, my experiences of waking up and critical incidents are likely different from the experiences of people of color, specifically women of color who hold multiple intersecting marginalized identities. Most of my experiences and the experiences of my mostly White women participants were rooted in waking up to experiences of privilege while the peoples' of color memories and experiences were rooted in waking up to the experiences of oppression.

Experiencing Moments of Waking Up while Researching and Writing

The four years in a doctoral program were comprised of a series of moments of waking up and experiencing critical incidents. Almost instantly after beginning the program, I realized how my pursuit to be the perfect daughter, sister, wife, and employee was deeply rooted in the many messages I received about my womanhood, body, career, and what was expected of me from the important men in my life. Throughout those four years, I gradually gave myself permission to live authentically as the woman I desired to be, outside of the confines of the opinions and desires of men. I grew in understanding who I am and learned to love myself for who I am and not who the men in my life want me to be. While I continue to struggle with the role of men in my life, the research empowered me to make decisions and choices that are for me and only me. One of those decisions included the decision to end my marriage, which I am not sure I would have ever done without the experience in the doctoral program. Additionally, I am not sure I would have ever been able to write publicly and authentically about this experience without the experiences of the program, the support I received from my faculty, classmates, and my own therapist.

During my third year of the program, I visited a therapist for the first time in my life almost every week for about eleven months. I estimate I engaged in about 40 sessions of therapy while beginning to write my dissertation and moving through the process of ending my marriage. Through the experience of therapy, I had countless moments of waking up related to all aspects of my life including this research process. My therapist often encouraged me to view writing my dissertation and preparing for prospectus as a coping mechanism and not a barrier. She challenged me to find how this process could be

liberating for me while also writing about liberation.

There were many weeks when I was so emotionally drained and incapable of viewing the doctoral process as anything but a barrier. Not being able to shift my mindset, my therapist then asked me to give myself permission to be okay with needing to take some time to regroup and step away from what felt like the insurmountable goal of beginning my dissertation. Once I gave myself that permission, I felt a sense of relief and growth that I would move through this and find my own liberation through writing.

Eventually, I began writing and I felt liberated that I had grown in my journey and that I was ready to write while still navigating the difficult circumstances of ending my marriage. I vividly remember sitting at my laptop and feeling proud of myself for the self-work I had done and investing in myself to begin the final steps of the doctoral process. I had accomplished so much already, both within the program and in my personal life; I knew in that moment that this was only the beginning of a research study that would validate, shape, and mold me into the scholar-practitioner-advocate I am today.

Love, Liberation and Growth

When I began the doctoral journey, I was a newlywed. When I officially started the program, we had been married for one year and one month. My partner was also a doctoral student and had been a full time doctoral student for about three years. I thought starting a doctoral program while my husband had three years left of his six-year degree was a great idea because he would understand what I was experiencing although he was studying biomedical sciences and I was studying counseling.

I thought that while my love grew in my marriage that we would also grow together as scholars. We would be able to both challenge and support one another to keep pushing through the tough times of being doctoral students. He was experiencing all of the “firsts” and “steps” of a doctoral degree before I was, so he would be a great support to me when my turn came around. He would then finish his degree, about a year before me and he would begin job searching and would likely relocate our family of our dog and us. That would leave me in my final year of dissertating and likely create a scenario where he would finally have a full time job in which I could then quit my own full time job and focus solely on being a doctoral student when it mattered most: writing the dissertation. We could continue to seamlessly grow professionally together, without interrupting the growth of the love in our marriage outside of our educational and professional experiences and goals. I convinced myself that if

we stuck to this plan, everything would gracefully fall into place

Although the plan for my husband's and my love to grow alongside our educational journey's did not come to fruition, the plan I worked so hard to perfectly craft, I found myself in a place where I had grown to love myself, my educational was journey was flourishing, and I was finally making choices for *myself.* For the first time in my life, I made a major life decision without consulting a man in my life. I chose to study my research topic without their opinions and without their approval. Love, liberation, and growth have characterized those four years of my life and participating and engaging in my dissertation research about liberation and growth were consistent reminders of my own progress.

The plans I developed s to finish and move through the program clearly did not come to fruition. I am reminded of something I often tell students when I am coaching them through changing their major or choosing a different career path than what their parents chose:

> I have learned throughout my life that every time I make a plan to attempt to control the outcome of my future, it usually never works. You never know what opportunities you might miss out on because you wouldn't allow yourself to open different doors.

My own advice and experience continues to be true and I am learning to trust myself as much as my students do. The doctoral process helped me learn to trust myself and be confident in my own voice and decisions.

Recommendations for Future and Current Graduate Students

The process of earning a doctoral degree is often isolating. It is an individual process, particularly during the dissertation writing and research stage. I own and am aware that because of this uniqueness and my identities, the recommendations in this section may not apply to everyone. My healing process will not be your healing process; you must find healing in your own way.

First, I encourage every student to approach the doctoral process with an authentic openness to learning. Be willing to leave your ego at the door. Listen and hear those around you, particularly those with marginalized identities and individuals who are different from you. Be willing to understand, explore and acknowledge your privilege, bias and oppressive behaviors. Be willing to change how you see yourself in relation to how you interact with those around you and in your communities.

Second, consider how your research process can be healing. Often the research topics we choose are deeply personal (Hays and Singh, 2012). Many of those ideas come

from experiences that have caused us harm and grief. Reflect on the research topics and interests that you are drawn to. Ask yourself, why is this important to me? How can studying this topic not only contribute to knowledge but how can I heal from understanding more as well?

Lastly, do not be afraid to ask for help. For those of us who choose a terminal degree, we are likely used to success. There will be many times throughout the doctoral process where you feel like you may never be able to achieve the success of earning the degree. I encourage you to find community within and outside of the process with those who are willing to support you at your best and your worst. Do not be afraid to lean others in your cohorts or classes, do not be afraid to seek out a therapist and mostly important do not be afraid so much, that you lose yourself in the process. Without the support of individuals in my various communities, I would not have healed in the process of completing the degree.

Conclusion

In four years, much can change. In my four years, a lot *did* change. Four years later, I am constantly reminded of the wise words of my mentor who told me to focus on who I wanted to be, rather than what I wanted to be. The truth is, I had no idea who I would become during this process. I had no idea I would become a woman liberated from the injustices of a lifetime of sexism; a woman who would have the skills to evaluate her Whiteness and White privilege; a woman who discovered the language of love and liberation and how having this language allowed me to craft a research topic in which was both deeply personal and needed in scholarship and literature. Lastly, I had no idea that in year three of the program, I would find myself in the midst of an unraveling marriage and my plan to be a full-time student and follow my husband to his next destination would cease to exist.

As I am on the other side of the doctoral journey, I am excited and look forward to the opportunities to use my skills to create authentic consciousness-raising experiences for individuals in the fields of counseling and student affairs. I am thankful for my support systems who encouraged me to not give up on myself and the process of writing a dissertation and helping me find resiliency in the most difficult time in my life. I am thankful for the opportunity to graduate from a program that gave me the language and tools I needed to liberate myself in coursework, my research, and my life. Healing is ongoing and I still have much work to do. My doctoral program and my research held and grounded me in a time of great fear, change, and growth. I healed and you can too.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY & CONTACT INFORMATION

Falon Thacker, Ph.D. is the Associate Director of Residence Life and Education at the University of Central Florida. She holds a Doctor of Philosophy in Counseling and Student Personnel Services with a graduate certificate in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion from the University of Georgia. She also holds a Master of Education in Student Personnel in Higher Education from the University of Florida and a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from the University of Kentucky. Her research focuses on the utilization of liberation frameworks and theories in the implementation of multicultural and social justice competency training in graduate preparation programs for master's and doctoral students.

Email: falon.thacker@ucf.edu