

Personal Statement

My Story

When I meet someone who is doing research, the first question I ask is, “Why are you researching this topic?” It never ceases to amaze me how often people’s answers are somehow rooted in some personal experience. Similar for me, my choice of research focus for this thesis was influenced by a personal experience. Since this personal experience provides both a context and subjective perspective that I need to acknowledge for my research, I will describe it here.

I graduated from university with a good grade point average and had filled my resume with evidence of my participation in numerous campus activities and accolades, such as student body vice president, new student orientation chairperson, vice president of my sorority (a student club affiliated with the National Panhellenic Association), homecoming queen, student leader of the year, and so on. I had repeatedly been told that I was going to be very successful when I graduated, and I never thought twice about the difficulty of getting a good job. Shortly after I completed my undergraduate degree in Broadcast Communication, I moved to Los Angeles, California to pursue my dream of working in the entertainment news industry. I knew the path to pursuing my goals might be a hard road, but I followed all the ‘right steps’ and had successfully completed a competitive internship at an international news programme the previous year, and thus believed that I would be able to get a job somewhere in this industry. Nevertheless, my expectations were not met, specifically in terms of jobs, friends, and moving to a new city. I struggled to find jobs that interested me and also met my salary expectations. I found myself applying for positions that were below my skill level which did not require a degree qualification, yet I was competing against other applicants who had Master’s qualifications. I also struggled personally during this time. Moving to a new place, meeting new people, and making friends were harder than at university. I shared an apartment that had a rent of \$2,100 per month, and my

savings account was dwindling fast. On top of all of this, I was emotionally distraught. I felt that I was a failure, that I had let myself down, and had not met the expectations of others.

My situation made me question many things. For example, “Is anyone else going through this?” “Why is it so hard to find a job?” “Why do I feel so lost and alone?” I wondered where I had gone wrong. I struggled to find my new place in the world and to emotionally understand what I was experiencing. I felt like I had spent twenty-two years preparing for my life after university, yet this ‘life’ was illusionary. Years of education, leadership training, and organisational experience still seemed to leave me feeling isolated and wondering what the next step of life would be.

I struggled for nearly a year before moving back to my hometown, where I began a job at my alma mater university. I worked in student services doing public relations, fundraising, and event planning. I was later promoted to working with student activities and leadership programmes. Soon, I became aware that students were experiencing similar situations to those I had experienced. I then decided to pursue a Master’s degree in Adult Education in order to further my qualifications for working with university students. For my Master’s thesis, I conducted a small scale quantitative study with final-year students and recent graduates through a ‘Senior Year Experience Needs Assessment Survey’. This survey assessed students’ and graduates’ career skills, practical life skills, and emotional preparedness for life after university. I compared the data on final-year students and graduates in these three areas to determine a need for a ‘Senior Year Experience Seminar’ that aimed to better prepare final-year students for their futures. The results indicated that there was a need for institutional support in this area of transition. Therefore, I determined that further research in this area was needed, and I decided to facilitate a formal, in-depth study on the post-university transition. This decision led to me pursuing my doctoral degree in Higher Education, exploring the transition experiences and perspectives of recent university graduates.

Connecting My Story to the Research

As a researcher, I believe it is impossible to separate myself and my previous experiences from the research, and I recognise that this results in some form of personal bias. I cannot ignore that my experiences have shaped how I view the world, and thus interpret data, but they have also helped to inform the approach I took to this study – encouraging people to talk and write about their experiences. Nevertheless, I recognise that this research is not about my experience, but that of the research participants, and I have had to constantly keep my experiences bracketed (Creswell, 2007).

I understand that each of the research participants' experiences have followed a different path from mine. Therefore, instead of seeking affirmation or similarities to my experiences within this transition, I sought their perspectives. I communicated the message to the participants that I believed there was 'enough importance to this transition' to make it worth researching, but I did not release any information about my personal struggles or triumphs related or unrelated to this transition. I was careful to not tell them my story, as I did not want them to feel or think that they needed to affirm or deny my experiences. I wanted their stories and their perspectives, and I did not want my story to skew how they communicated their lives to me. My previous experiences are the heart of what drives my passion for helping others and researching with people in transition, but I have aimed to do so without letting my personal biases influence the findings and outcomes. Specific strategies that I have used to ensure this are discussed throughout this thesis.

When I think about my study and its focus on the notion of transition, I cannot help but think of T.S. Eliot's poem *Four Quartets: Little Gidding*. This poem is the story of a journey. This metaphor of a journey relates to my study in many ways: the individuals who have participated in the study have embarked on their own journey in post-university pursuits; I, as a researcher, am on a journey to better

understand that which I am exploring; and I, as a doctoral student, am on a journey of self-exploration, growth, development, and change. I mention Elliot's poem here for his description of the journey's end.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, remembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning.

T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets: Little Gidding*, 1942

This portion of the poem communicates to me that the end of a journey is often the same place as the beginning. However, as one is transformed through the exploratory process, the final destination is perceived differently than what it was the first time, as it has been with this research journey. While I am still mindful that my initial, personal experience influences my view, along the way my ideas and perceptions of this transition have changed and progressed.

I have started this thesis with a personal statement in order to lay the foundation of this study. I believe this sets the tone for why I have explored what I have, recognises the potential for bias I may have, and focuses the lens by which I have viewed the project. Building from this, I address the focus, purpose, and context of the study in the following chapter.