Between Old and New: Cognitive Dissonance and the Politics of Research

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Abstract

In what ways does academic dissonance influence the conduct of research? Or rather what does it mean to convert from a research tradition that valorizes realism to one that emphasizes the rhizomatic, the postmodern, the (inter)subjective? In this narrative, I critically reflect on the challenges I encountered in transitioning as an academic from Ghana steeped in linguistics and education with an avid emphasis on post/positivism to becoming a doctoral student of interpretive inquiry as practiced in the humanities of an American university. The narrative draws inspiration from a recent pilot study I conducted to explore interactional rituals used among student editors of a college news bulletin. Based on a lessons-learnt approach, the paper is a modest contribution to studies on the politics of research, the objectivity/subjectivity debate, and research in cognitive dissonance.

Keywords: Cognitive Dissonance, Confessional Tale, Interpretive Inquiry Micro-Politics, Post-Positivism

All humanistic research is problematic, partisan, and political.

--H. G. Goodall (2000)

Two roads diverged in a wood, and

I— I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference.

--Robert Frost (1874–1963)

$\mathcal{W}$hen the renowned American poet Robert Frost in 1920 wrote *"The Road Not Taken"*, he knew too well that there comes a time when the most important decisions we must take come knocking hard on the doors of our hearts and minds. Sometimes these decisions are not either/or; instead they are wrapped in a labyrinth. And so is the path to academic excellence. In this narrative[1], I tell the story of my professional journey as an academic schooled in the traditions of social sciences (*i.e*. education) and linguistics during my undergraduate and postgraduate days in a large English-medium university in Ghana, West Africa, and then to my "conversion" into the humanities proper as a doctoral student in a leading research university in the United States. I discuss how the micropolitics privileged in these two research traditions interfered with each other, and increasingly obfuscated my transitioning into the techne and praxis of humanistic inquiry. I employ religious metaphors in an attempt to depict the avowed commitment and deep affection scholars in these radically different research traditions have for their respective fields.

Drawing on the lessons I have learnt in a recently conducted ethnographic research among student editors of a college news bulletin, I make forays into my internal struggles as first and foremost an academic and subsequently a doctoral student in a humanities department. In situating my storied self using Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory[2], I critically

engage how the clash between old versus new knowledge influenced the conduct of my fieldwork in a remarkably throbbing manner. I do so by providing first a vignette of my previous educational training and research epistemologies. This is followed by the efforts I am making to apostasize in engaging in humanistic interpretive research. Next I show how the dissonance in the course of transitioning significantly impacted on the conduct of the research I embarked on recently, both theoretically and methodologically. The practical implications of my confessions are discussed in the concluding section of this paper in the service of encouraging transdisciplinary and multidisciplinary studies. In the main, I argue that one of the most ignored areas of research on international students concerns the level of cognitive dissonance they experience as they transition from one academic domain to another field of study (cf. Diao, 2014; Hegarty, 2014; Kwadzo, 2014).

My Old Faith: Prior Tutelage and Epistemological Commitments

My commitment to post-positivistic research dates back to my tutelage in linguistics and educational psychology, following my graduation in 2007 from the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. I was baptized into error and contrastive analysis, grammatical correctness and competence, morphology, semantics, pragmatics, and teaching methodologies, given the second language learning context from which I hail. As faithful students, my colleagues and I studied the works of Bloomfield's (1933) *Language,* Quirk and Greenbaum's (1973) *Oxford English Grammar*, and Lyon's

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[1] Based on Van Maanen's (1988) typology, this work should be best conceived of as a confessional tale. As a genre, its significance lies in the author's ongoing self-reflexive processes as a doctoral student in contrast to being a narrative product of recently graduated researchers (*e.g*. Afful, 2008; Simpson-Cosimano, 2010; See also Frentz, 2014).

[2] The theory primarily intimates that if an individual holds two cognitions that are inconsistent with each

other, they try to rationalize them to reduce psychological discomfort (Festinger, 1957; Bem, 1967). For Egan et al. (2007) and Metin and Iktisadi (2011), dissonance arises from logical inconsistencies, and cultural mores.

(1969) *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*. We also meditated on the generative grammars of Noam Chomsky contained mainly in the 'sacred scriptures' of *Syntactic Structures* (1957) and *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965). Others such as Vygotsky (1978), Kachru (1990; 2006; Kachru *et al*., 2009), Stern (1983)*,* and a host of educational psychologists as Thorndike (1999), Skinner (1965), Pavlov (1960), and Piaget (1967) formed the superstructure of our pedagogy. But this exposure, although on hindsight laid a formidable foundation of learning in my home country, did not paint, in my view, the best panoramic scenery of scholarship in English linguistics I would love to have. I asked for more. The graduate school beckoned. In August 2008 right after national service, I enrolled in the Department of English's Master of Philosophy degree at my *alma mater*. I studied theoretical linguistics (grammar) best exemplified in the Chomskyan school coupled with phonetic and phonological theories, semantics, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis and qualitative research methods. The research methods stressed five research designs core to all qualitative studies: (*a*) phenomenology, (*b*) case study, (*c*) ethnography, and (*d*) grounded theory, and (*e*) mixed method, or so I thought. Per epistemological commitments, we were made to understand that the *telos* of qualitative inquiry is to capture the essences of phenomena[3] as best as we could, based on thick description and depth as opposed to breadth and the crunching of numbers. Although the department does not look down upon research based on descriptive/inferential statistics, it looks more favorably on the former. A blend of qualitative and quantitative research methods was also encouraged.

With respect to language studies, I strongly admired functional linguistics. In my scheme of things I reckoned that long before any civilizations became chirographic, language, for that matter speech, served as the material medium by and for which human communication thrived. Language was, in essence, known to its users long before it was theorized and sought to be reduced to mathematical formulae in the likes of Bloomfield's structuralism or Chomsky's universal grammar (UG) or government and binding theory (GBT). In fact, I found solace in the words of George Brown and Gillian Yule (1983) for whom the quintessence of language is the function it performs as "it cannot be restricted to linguistic forms independent of the purposes or the functions which those forms are designed to serve in human affairs" (p. 1). Thus I conceived of language, and still do, as a functional material as it holds in the gamut of sociolinguistics, (critical) discourse studies and systemic functional linguistics (Halliday & Hassan, 1983; Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Matthiesen, 2004). I consider too limiting the view that language is but a structured system of linguistic correlates as Bloomfield argued. My conception of language is pragmatic and dynamic. This is because language exists to help us to perceive, evaluate, and respond to the physical and social world around us. For me language is "a social currency by which humans trade to meet their communicative ends" (Coker, 2011: 1). This teleological apprehension of language in the lives of real people led me to explore, for my Master's thesis, the discursive motivations for texting on radio panel discussions in Ghana. The success of the research yielded a number of peer-

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[3] My use of the term "essences" is rather consistent with the Heideggerian imperative. In the opening chapter of *Being and Time,* Heidegger argues that the 'essence' of Dasein lies in its Existenz (Existenz here to be taken in a dynamic, active, future oriented sense). In the context of this paper, "essences" simply evokes a cline of phenomenological realities, authentic and inauthentic, I could possibly contemplate.

reviewed publications in *Mass Communicator* (2013a), *Journal of Media and Communication Studies* (2012), and *International Journal* of *Current Research in the Humanities* (2010). In most of my works I emphasized manifestations of the language used by real people in real life situations.

Evidently this 'discipleship' deeply affected my worldview of what constitutes knowledge and how it should be pursued and theorized. Although I learnt that there is no single reality, the emphasis, nonetheless, was on ascertaining 'reality' as lived by participants, or as is revealed by the phenomenon under study. For this reason, the claim that reality is co-shared, immutable, messy, or dialectically discernible appeared outlandish to me in my initial contact with the interpretive turn. What is more, to tell someone of my background to go outside there, and do research without having a set of definitive research questions or objectives may seem risible. "What will I find if I have no objective?" they may ponder. Indeed when I reflect upon my own publications, I realize how limited my claims ought to have been in view of the fact that I rarely engage in member checks, self-reflexivity, or focused on the messy (See Coker, 2010; 2011; 2012; 2013).

Given these prior intellectual commitments, I could say that I experienced some interesting academic dissonance between old and new information. In many instances, this clash threatened the very essence of my epistemological lineages. For example, which is true: a single immutable reality preached in the social sciences and conventional linguistics, or the fact that realities are contingent upon individual experiential knowing? I do not admit to have resolved this quandary, though in my own way, I am inclined to believe that we do research in order to obtain what I would call "a slice of reality". For me, our apprehension of reality and knowledge will, for the most part, remain partial, partisan, and political (Goodall, 2000). We cannot not be partisan. This is but one of the creeds of my new found faith.

Converting into the New Faith: The Epistemology of the Interpretive Turn

The interpretive research is increasingly conterminous with the aspiration of humanistic inquiry. It also resonates well with researchers committed to new or performance ethnography (Coffey, 1999; Goodall, 2000; Norman & Lincoln, 2011; Quarshie Smith, 2012). In one of his apocryphic writings, *Writing the New Ethnography*, Goodall (2000: 9) defined 'new' ethnography, and by extension all interpretive research, to mean "*creative stories* shaped out of a writer's *personal experiences* within a *culture* and addressed to *academic and public audiences"* (emphasis mine*)*. His definition is radically different from the ethnographies before this account in the sense that it brings center-stage, at least, four key notions. One, new ethnographic research entails the writing of creative stories. This means that it requires the personal investment and ingenuity of the researcher to make but not make up stories as data. The stories for the most part are evocative. Contrary to the nature of ethnography pursued in traditional anthropology, in particular, and social sciences, in general, with its focus on what Van Maanen (1988) terms "realist tales", the new ethnography takes a humanistic interpretive turn to doing ethnography.

Two, the new ethnographic philosophy valorizes personal experiences. Goodall tells us that it is not possible for the ethnographer to completely detach themselves and suspend their interest and experiences from the phenomenon they are investigating. Goodall (2000) refers to this personal investment as *voice*. This will include the researcher's and the voices of

the researched. As a phronetic praxis-based approach, research conducted in this paradigm places high premium on self-reflexivity. New ethnographers take as an article of faith that there is no interest in highlighting the authoritative voice or the correct version of reality. Rather, there is an interest in keeping all voices in play, regardless of the possibility that these may be in tension or contradictory. According to Daly (2007), to be self-reflexive in postmodern qualitative research is to be keenly attentive to matters of voice. She adds that for researchers, this is a matter of weighing their own voice in the cacophony of opinions, ideas, and perceptions expressed by other participating voices in the research. In a word, all new ethnographies qualitative research is problematic, partisan, and personal (Goodall, 2000). It is not linear; it is dialectical, iterative, messy, and surprising. Its beauty lies in the surprises of observations and findings the researcher may arrive at in ways hitherto unimagined. This is the product of a constant mind kept in self-reflexivity. I myself am witness to this.

Three, like its precursor traditional ethnography, the new ethnography focuses on understanding cultures. Perhaps where they part company is in the latter's avowal to a phenomenological, interpretive exploration of lived experiences of research participants in their own cultures. Finally, the new ethnography is not child's play. It is not an excuse for storytelling with no larger significances. Rather it is a serious business with academic commitment, and an emancipatory ethos. Most new ethnographic studies are critical in nature. I can add that they bear the rigor of a research methodology worth paying attention to.

The quality of the new ethnography design can be evaluated based on Tracy's (2010) eight "big tent" criteria. A parsimonious pedagogical tool, the model evinces that all quality qualitative researches need to pass the litmus tests of (*a*) worthy topic, (*b*) rich rigor, (*c*) sincerity, (*d*) credibility, (*e*) resonance, (*f*) significant contribution, (*g*) ethics, and (*h*) meaningful coherence. A *worthy topic,* she notes, is one that is marked by "educative authenticity" as it raises the level of awareness of the research community, and touches both heart and belly. Worthy topics, the author insists, are interesting, significant, and timely. So too, they are driven by *rich rigor*. If a topic is worthy, then, it must establish its rigor in the main by rich, sound, and thick descriptions. Phenomena ought to be described in "loving detail". In fact, rigorous descriptions of qualitative research are those that do not *satisfice.* They move "beyond convenience, opportunism, and the easy way out" (Tracy, 2010: 841) to make the taken for granted extraordinary and the extraordinary everyday. Rigorous studies, Tracy maintains, are also evaluated based on the number of pages of field notes, time spent at the field site(s), number of observation and interview hours, accuracy of transcription and number of pages of interview transcripts.

Thus said, Tracy admonishes researchers to be both sincere and credible. While *sincerity*, for her, connotes the capacity of the qualitative researcher to exhibit traits of self-reflexivity, vulnerability, transparency (*i.e.* admission of biases), and data auditing, *credibility,* Tracy points out, enables researchers to be trustworthy as they also seek to achieve verisimilitude and plausibility of research findings. Three things to note: (*a*) crystallization and triangulation, (*b*) multivocality, and (*c*) member reflections over and above member checking as the latter resonates with positivistic undertones, she says. For Tracy, all of the above qualities should lead to one thing: the resonance and significant contribution of the work. *Resonance,* in her model, emphasizes

aesthetic merit, evocative writing, and formal generalizations as well as transferability such that it creates in the audience surprise and delight. It is that which makes the reader have the "O I see!" feeling. She calls it *significant contribution*. Significant contributions do not leave readers with a doubt concerning the larger significances of a particular study. The author also thoroughly discusses the place of ethics in sound, resonance-driven rich qualitative research. She argues that this type of studies must not only satisfy requirements of IRB-led procedural ethics, but must for good reasons contemplate on how to address issues of situational, relational, and exiting ethics. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) call them "ethically important moments" or simply micro-ethics.

The final criterion, *meaningful coherence*, is the degree to which we can say that the researcher has achieved the purpose for conducting the research, writes Tracy. It is properly understood in terms of how research findings flow from the objectives or research questions, and whether the theoretical frames employed in the study are in tandem with the position advanced in the study. However, this may not easily apply to new ethnographic, interpretive lenses. As is the case with auto ethnography especially, it is also possible to have research whose logic is more in its messiness, its trouble, more than in its aesthetic structure. There is a logic to this. Consider, as an example, a sensitive shattering narrative of an ailing mother's experience in raising her children in the wake of the global economic melt-down. Should her account be (re) presented chronologically, or should it be captured in the same way as the struggles this mother had to endure in eking out a living? Meaningful coherence, thus, is a function of a certain Darwinian logic that privileges linearity and progression of thought over

and above multilayered accounts, as though the latter bears no merit at all.

Interestingly, if there be anything that distinguishes new ethnographic research from say 'hard' positivistic quantitative research, for me, it is *rich rigor*. This is not to say that in statistical research rigor is tossed to the wind. Far from it! But essentially researchers will agree that the quality of thick description privileged in (new) ethnographic research is matchless. It is its *genius*. And when we look at the entire process of how this type of studies is validated—or rather made credible through the painstakingly conscious process of self-reflexivity and member reflections, one realizes this case all the more. Thick description, in fact, requires due diligence on the part of qualitative researchers as they are supposed to not only *tell* but more importantly to take on the difficult task of *describing* in loving detail the focus of their studies.

But there are moral dilemmas to deal with in doing new ethnography. Exactly twenty years ago, Fine (1993) noted that there is an underside to all work, and that "each job includes ways of doing things that would be inappropriate for those outside the guild to know" (p. 267). The only way out, he explained is to create illusions in order to maintain occupational ethos, although the same create a set of moral dilemmas. So like all other qualitative researchers, new ethnographers need to be weary of ten 'lies' they tell while on the field and dealing with research participants. One serious dilemma confronting the field is that of new ethnographers thinking of themselves as being kind, honest, and friendly. This dilemma arises from our faith in positionality, researcher stance, and self-reflexivity all in the service of being fair to our research participants. Nonetheless, the choices we make are already soaked in biases and political motivations, for while we want to achieve justice and fairness, we

also think of our larger audience whose primary occupation is to be very critical. Consider, for example Bucholtz (2000) "The Politics of Transcription". How should we represent our participants when we transcribe interview sessions with them? Do we represent their voices with all the linguistic breaches they commit, and/or utterances they may not have loved to come out in the public domain? In this case wherein lies our sincerity, openness, and friendship with them? Fine (1993) also said that we tell us because we do not represent in their honesty the real utterances of our participants. He argued that what we did best was to plagiarize by engaging in approximations, signposts, and mini-docudramas. "We make our informants sound like we think they sound, given our interpretations of who they 'really' are" (Fine, 1993: 278). In a word, the truth in Fine's work lies in the limits of what we can and cannot claim. This is where my research takes off. With the brief autobiography in mind, I now turn to my field site, and the relationships I maintained in immersing myself in the culture of my participants. I also discuss the politics of getting IRB approval. Having discussed the constitution of my old and new knowledge, I now turn to a discussion of what they interfered with each other in the research I conducted *in situ* among student journalists of college newspaper.

When the Old and New Clash: Experiencing Dissonance in a Recent Study

Although I was duly informed that doing research is a political activity (Goodall, 2000; Daly, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), this knowledge became a phenomenological reality during a recent pilot ethnographic study I conducted. Drawing inspiration from the 'new' wave of research in news production, I examined the interactional rituals of undergraduate student editors of

The Vibe[4] My prior contemplations of this research revolved around observations of the challenges the editors face, and what coping strategies they adopt in overcoming the difficulties associated with their work. However, given the dialectic and phonetic nature of interpretive ethnography, I realized that a focus on the entire gamut of the culture of this workplace would be much more productive. This 'shift' of attention was informed by my reflexive attitude to my data and research objective. The vignette below details how I felt on the first day of my first fieldwork.

It's 5 o'clock in the evening, and I'm heading straight away to my field site. I would be meeting with Gloria Holmes, editor in chief of *The Vibe,* a college newspaper bulletin. Trepid, livid and timid, I make way to my seat, even though Gloria is yet to introduce me to the rest of her colleagues. A burning sensation moves down my spine, at the same time I'm as cold as snowballs. In awe, I shut my eyes and offer sincere prayers to the Heavens.

I feel nervous because although the project was approved by the IRB of my institution, this did not mean that the girls cannot turn me down eventually, especially when the informed consent form promises them withdrawal from the research should they wish to do so. So even though the editors' meetings start at 5: 30 pm, I'm already seated close at the

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[4] This 5-month pilot study was conducted at *The Vibe*, using participant observation and informal semi-structured interview strategies. I explored the interactional rituals and interactional moves that characterize editorial meetings of the student journalists, and tentatively concluded that communication amongst the editors involves four basic rituals *viz. (a)* collaborating and brainstorming, *(b)* gifting and sharing, *(c)* humoring and laughing, and *(d)* keeping quiet.

entrance door of their office. I'm not happy at all, and in my wildest thought I begin to pity myself. Gloria. Bob. Cathy. Amy. One by one they drop in and exchange phatic communion with me. My adrenalin begins to give way to a sense of belonging and common purpose. Gloria introduces me, and then in a smilingly relaxed mood she tells me to continue, "Sure I'm Wincharles from Ghana, West Africa. I'm a graduate student interested in news work just like yourselves. But you know what, the best part is that I want to learn about it the way you do it. So I'm here to observe how you guys go about doing what you know best. I aim at understanding the challenges you go through in producing the news that we all read on campus, and what you do to overcome the difficulties you encounter in the course of your work. I have in my hands consent forms which I'll be grateful if you could read them meaningfully, and then append your signatures to confirm your voluntary participation in my research. I'll also be eternally grateful if one of you avails themselves to participate in an interview session with me. But this will take place in the course of my field work here. Thanks. Does anybody have a question?"

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So this is how it all began. But the more I got enmeshed in my field the more I realized the levels of difficulties that lay ahead. First there was the issue of what to observe. As a neophyte in the business of ethnography, I found it extremely difficult to write my fieldnotes. It was not the case that I had nothing to write. On the contrary there was too much to observe. This was in itself the problem. Again, my participants were so alive and full of energy with the job they do. And since the meetings last for not more than thirty minutes, they were marathon-like. They would hurry up in their presentations, and speak so fast that sometimes I could not keep pace with what was going on. One, I'm a Ghanaian with a Ghanaian accent such that I found it difficult sometimes to figure out what they were saying. Two, I also found it difficult to decipher the kinds of idioms they sometimes used in their conversations with one another. Although I could approximate and make out the meaning in context, given the evanescent property of speech, it was extremely difficult to capture all the essences of their conversations. Three, I considered it ethically inappropriate to ask them to repeat what they had said because I was just a participant observer. Four, I was a male among close to seven ladies, with the exception of Bob, their business manager. Anytime Bob came late or was absent I saw myself literally sweating in a fully air-conditioned room. When it happened that way, I would lose my "powers" of writing. I would be feigning to write although I knew so much that my notes were literally inchoate and largely incoherent.

Indeed the first weeks of enmeshment in my field were regrettably shallow. Reflecting on this period, I realize how realist the first three weeks of my field notes had been. Even though I was neither detached from nor disinterested in my research, my sense of what constitutes 'research' still weighed on me. It simply would not leave; it clouded my sense of judgment, reporting, and observing what was going on each time I was with my participants. For the first three weeks, I realized that I overly focused on capturing the stories, actions, and experiences of my participants in fact *verbatim*. But as weeks progressed and I was becoming very confident in my fieldnote writing skills, it was quite easy to reflect upon the things I observed, and began to question my mode of inquiry. From the fourth to the sixth week, I raised a number of questions about what I was witnessing, and how I was immersing myself very deeply into the culture of my

participants. My participants and I could talk so much that sometimes they requested to offer me some of the candies and cookies they shared as part of their rituals. Interestingly in the seventh and eighth weeks of fieldwork the fatigue of the students (it was close to finals) also affected me. I was also tired. This fatigue, coupled with the fact that sometimes their meetings lasted for less than 15 minutes, to some extent, affected how much notes I could write. For example, below is all that I wrote on the penultimate week of my fieldwork.

5: 27 pm. All members are present. But Gloria says that it's going to be a pretty much short meeting. "I guess we'll start: section updates" she says. Many members say they have little to report about. Gloria says there's no pictorial updates. But Amy reads her reports. This is the first time she does. She does this so happily. The sports editor talks about her reports and how things are getting better. She also speaks about reporting men's basket ball game. It's Elsa's turn. She's writing about a proposal, and do a story about winter-driving. "I just e-mailed some photos about that", she says. Sasha speaks of Huskies requirements and Experience Tech fee. The opinion editor says that this week she's resigning this semester and that none of her writers is interested in the position.

Gloria: Tell your friends to get interested. Tell your friends to get interested. It's opinion editing or writing. So it's not so hard.

Bob: Nil sent me an e-mail that he's not gonna be here anyway.

The house now discusses his absence.

Gloria: He was very vague and did not have any detail.

Bob: Told him to let me know so I could know how to distribute the papers.

Amy & Gloria: That's on campus.

Amy: [while standing] I recall he said she'd got nothing.

Bob: My meeting with them is pretty promising. Half-page ad for the bookstore. We'll have to work in conjunction to develop with similar colors.

Amy: When do they want to start?

Bob: Maybe next week. Not a big deal even if they've got pictorials.

Gloria: I'll do Rushdie's updates. He's got the pictures though they're not the best.

Members take turns to have a look at the pictures. There's a mixed feeling.

Bob: We can change the sizes. Last week I had no ideas of what he was talking about, but this is pretty clear now. He also wants us to give him approval to rework the Facebook page. He also thinks that our comics are not funny, and that we should replace them.

Silence prevails for a while. Meanwhile Amy has stuck her bag at her back, zipped up her dress, and has put her hands in her pullover. Is she ready to leave? They also discuss the possibility of putting newspapers at the Bam Hall. They also discuss the issue of breaking news on their website. Gloria also wants to find out what makes breaking news in Horrron. She also reminds the house that they have to know that nobody gets paid for content

on the website, and that they would have to contact Jeremiah to find out what gets into that. She concludes by asking as usual, "Does anybody have something else to say? O all staff meeting at Fisher 1: 33 pm. Let's call it a night." But Amy gives an excuse and says that period will inconvenience her. So far only Megan and the observer are out. But Bob, Elsa, and Amy are looking at pictures on the computer screen of Bob. They're laughing, and Amy is looking at the pictures on the computer while Gloria is talking about the excuse.

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There were times when I felt like a total stranger, an imposter, an intruder. There were times I felt my presence was not needful. I felt like I should know better to allow them proceed with their meetings, especially during times they had guests in their midst. Upon my conversation with Gloria, she told me that the guests—a young man in his early forties, and a lady in her mid-fifties—were persons from the Administration of the University, and were but supervising or observing the progress of their work. Yes I sometimes felt a sharp sensation through my spine as if to tell myself, "Why can't you allow today to pass you by? Aren't you distracting them?" Nonetheless, their love for me was encouraging. They sometimes handed over to me their seats so I could feel comfortable to make my notes. This, Elsa did most of the time. There was plenty of laughter anytime I came around and greeted. I love my field site, and may have also been biased by the fact that almost all my participants were female. In the absence of Bob, sometimes I felt uncomfortable being in all-ladies meetings all the same.

And what was I observing? What was I jotting down? In my frustration, I would expend my energies in an attempt to write down verbatim every single word I

heard during the meetings. This was difficult. My participants usually engaged in 'minidramas'. So it was far from the case that I could follow their speeches and utterances one after the other. Sometimes, I would try to do a thick description of the conditions and elements surrounding a particular case, and then quickly one of the participants would continue with yet another different thing. Sometimes, I tried to describe in loving detail the scene of the editorial meetings—in this case the office of *The Vibe*. But this could not be properly done as the meetings were too hot for my handling. Here is an illustration.

The office comprises seven seats and four Dell and three Samsung computers, a telephone, a microwave, and four huge drawers. There are also some brochures of the Vibe newspapers, slots for staff. The editor in chief says that the organization plans to purchase a vehicle. Displayed on the wall are the awards the Vibe has received and their institutional affiliation: They are a proud member of the Associated Press. They take a lot of time to discuss the distribution network of their production. Why is this so? Gloria then moves on:

There's another thing on the agenda: Pay-roll. It's been insane. Basically it's been trial periods. We're not allowed to that anymore. No pay for voluntary work. Be a member of staff to receive a pay check.

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As can be seen, my accounts were sometimes bereft of thick descriptions. For the most part they were realist in the sense that no matter how much I tried to involve

myself in the notes, I ended up writing the stories mainly from the perspective of my participants. But while this is commendable,

I reckon that it may have to do with my linguistic and social science training. The effect they weighed on me was so strong to dismiss. But my advisor encouraged me a great deal. She was always reminding me to take it easy and focus on capturing nuances of meaning.

Worse still, I was already obsessed with news work. I fixated over getting findings relatable to or different from the observations I made in an article published in *International Journal of Communication and Media Studies* (Coker, 2013b). I claimed that the internal news epistemes of a given media culture heavily influence its news framing. I argued that this view recognizes that different media organizations proffer and live by different media cultures. My review of the literature also revealed that normative standards and universal definitions of objectivity are problematic, and observed that they are overtly Anglo-American, and reinforce Western hegemonies. I also noticed that such criteria hardly account for cultural dependent factors that shape and constrain the production of news in cultures outside of the West. As I pointed out little did I know that much ethnography of newsroom is conducted with the view to finding out the "real". Meanwhile, scholars have in the process paid little attention to the lived experiences of the people who make the news. Admittedly, my prior knowledge of news work clouded my abilities to see through the dense layers of experiences I wanted to study among my research participants.

Throughout the fieldwork, I focused on identifying the internal news epistemes characterizing work at *The Vibe*. And so when I was observing my participants or interviewing them, my mind would always play tricks on me to ascertain such things as the types of news values that guide work in this students' organization. It is interesting

that I even presented a paper I titled "A Road Less Traveled: Friending as an Emerging Concept in News work" at the departmental colloquium on the subject. Yet I had no inkling I was focusing too much on the surface structures of my research, neither did I realize that I was not fully engaging the possibilities of examining the ordinary, taken-for-granted aspects of my research. In a word, I was not undertaking a truly humanistic interpretive research. In fact, my prior contemplations of this study affected everything in the research. They affected its rationale (including the research question), the theoretical framework, epistemological and methodological commitments. As you can see, these positions negatively affected the interpretive analysis of my data. In what I called *friending*, I narrowly limited my analysis to an exploration of how principles of relevance, interest, and impact help student editors to redefine the news in a way that makes news work at *The Vibe* unique from what is known in the canonical literature. I talked about friending as involving a set of performative acts by which the students accomplish their work. This was indeed too limiting!

So what changed? Under the abler supervision of my advisor, I stepped back from this theorization of my data. In fact I backed off. This was at the dying embers of the game! The semester was quickly rolling away. There were two more weeks to go! What could I achieve? What could I do then? What could I say or write? Perplexed, frustrated, and sorrowful, I had never been in such a state of shock. But as I backed off from the stress my research was giving me, I began to really understand what scholars in the field meant when they said that field work is no child's play. I clearly made sense of their admonitions in the likes of "Go into the field with no presuppositions. In fact, do not even read the literature. Do not set forth with any research objectives or research questions". My advisor's mantra was "Wait,

you don't know yet". However radical these cautionary tales may sound, these are the best things to do on the field. On hindsight how I realize how quick I could interpret my data by just glancing through a few pages of my field notes! This was my temptation the price of which I duly paid.

But I did not throw in the towel. No my advisor would not permit it! I think my week-long soul searching exercise helped. So while the seconds were gradually ticking for stop work and paper submission, I reprinted my field notes and interview transcripts. With no units of analysis in mind nor any remembrance of work done yester yore—for I had cried my heart out—I began to go through my data again and again. I coded every single word, phrase, clause, sentence, and utterance very meticulously and clinically, based on emerging patterns of course with reference to my research question. One, here, two, there some coding categories were emerging. "But not too fast this time; nothing could pull a trick on me. Once bitten twice shy? Not likely," I would soliloquize. And so gradually I went through my data. I also took the pain to add as illustrations excerpts from the field notes that elucidated the points I was making. It was becoming quite interesting. I think I was now getting at the reasons I may have glossed so much over my data. As I was going through my data, I realized that I had previously written my data analysis like a scientific article. Arcane. Canine. Bony. These descriptors best explain how they looked like. There was little of showing. Regrettably, there rather was too much telling. Too much telling there was! It seems my post-positivistic self had resuscitated. It would not leave my corporeal presence. It would not allow me to live the new life I have found in the humanities. And so when I shook the dust away, and the scales fell off my eyes, I'm glad to tell you that I was able to do my very best. *Cui bono*? Any merits?

Negotiating the Political Boundaries of Research

With the passing of time I realize that my success in the research I undertook cannot be attributed to exceptional brilliance. Rather I learnt to overcome the dissonance between my prior tutelage and my new academic life by negotiating first and foremost with my academic advisor, and then learning of the demands my new research paradigm placed on me. Once I was told that to excel in academia is to be keenly aware of the politics of research (Edu-Buandoh, 2010, personal communication). This negotiation involves the recognition epistemological commitments privileged in each research tradition and its sub-fields. For example, I have come to appreciate that doing research, especially from the perspective of interpretive ethnography requires a great deal of metis. One of its most distinguishing features is that it is dialectical and iterative. Through self-reflexivity, interpretive inquiry compels the researcher to go back and forth in the progress of their research in a way that may not have ever been envisaged in the natural or social sciences. There research is linear or at least cyclical. It begins with a research question, research objective, or hypothesis. This leads to the mode of inquiry which must yield well defined set of results. But I have come to appreciate the verity of humanistic research all the more, for I myself was once a disciple of post-positive research.

Now I believe in the poststructuralist interpretive properties of research. I believe in the messy. I believe in the rhizomatic. I believe there always will be lines of flight. There are no binaries. Now I have come to realize that anytime a researcher embarks on a piece of research, there are a number of biases, personal motivations, and interests (also known as *extraneous variables* among natural and social scientists) that affect the design of their research. These interests can

best be checked through the researcher's constant engagement in self-reflexivity. For me the greatest lesson I have learnt is to remain open to the endless array of possibilities my field site can offer. I have also learnt, albeit very painfully, that research, and I must stress interpretive research, is truly problematic, partisan, and political. How many of us neophytes could truly understand what such intepretivists as Goodall (2000) and Denzin and Lincoln (2011) meant had they not have lived experiences of their own? In a word, it is interesting that I have had my own lived experiences in being a student ethnographer while studying the lived experiences of others.

Finally ….

This confessional tale sheds light on the micro-politics involved in transitioning from one research tradition to another, or conducting inter-/trans-disciplinary studies. Often stories of the difficulties involved in such an exercise rarely add up to the scholarly canons. With the rise of the mixed method research design popularized by Creswell (2003), such stories stand the risk of not being told because the research community might think that doing research from two or more epistemological lineages is not only possible but desirable. But while this is neatly true, it does not in any way negate the nature of politics involved in the techne and praxis of doing research, especially from the perspective of transitioning from a post-postivistic realist realm to a humanistic interpretive framework.

From the perspective of intercultural communication and international studies, this paper troubles existing works on the rhetoric of alterity and difference. While a number of scholars repeatedly assert that international students' levels of stress in host countries such as the United States, England,

France, Australia, Canada, and Italy may be due to factors that are usually cultural (Diao, 2014; Grayson, 2014; Kwadzo, 2014), only few have argued that one of their most troubling experiences may rather be due to the cognitive dissonance they encounter in transitioning from one field of study to another. Thus too often, researchers are too quick to blame the frustrations of international students on cultural and emotional imbalances. It's time this phenomenon is critically examined by stakeholders: college administrators and researchers.

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