

had been inculcated in me were supposed to empower me as a researcher and as a student. I did not feel particularly emboldened, however, all those times I sat staring at a blank computer screen and its accompanying partner in crime, the blinking cursor, as I prepared to revise yet another draft. My thesis group allowed me to expose my innermost demons, and I took full advantage of their willingness to listen. They helped me discard the idea that, as a graduate student, you have to pretend that everything in your life is perfectly fine.

My participation in the thesis group brought me back to a place I had been away from far too long as a graduate student. Working in conjunction with others in the group allowed me to rediscover what I enjoyed about being a student of Women's Studies: dialoging and brainstorming with my fellow students about the burning issues that affect us all.

I completed my thesis and we even collaborated on a session for the Canadian Women's Studies Association, which formed the basis of this article. I came full circle during the time I was living in St. John's. I no longer felt isolated because I adopted my thesis support group as my community, my home away from home. In October 2001, when I graduated with a Master of Women's Studies from Memorial, my supervisors commented that my voice in my work is very strong. I finally found the courage to take ownership of the thesis. My fellow students in the thesis support group enabled me to find my lost and silenced voice. Was I anxious about the prospect of letting go and moving on? I was, but I was also secure in the knowledge that I had formed lasting relationships with the women of my group that would extend beyond our time spent together as Women's Studies graduate students.

Stephanie Weisbart Bellini

A NEWFIE DAUGHTER WORKING THE ACADEMY

I picked up a copy of the *Wayves* newsletter (April 2001) from my neighborhood bookstore, and eagerly looked for my article.¹ The

front-page headline read: "Sister Stories Wanted by Newfoundland Researcher." I stopped in my tracks. I thought to myself, "Is this who I am? A Newfoundland researcher?"

The purpose of this narrative is to consider the role my thesis group played in helping me construct my identity as a "Newfoundland researcher."² As graduate students in the academy, members of my thesis group and I experienced a hierarchy of power relations in our "workplace" typical of that experienced by working-class laborers. We organized partly as a response to relations of power in our workplace. Our organizing was collective and political. Our actions as a group further heightened my awareness that the research I am doing was work, that I was a worker, and that members of my thesis group were my co-workers. All of us had worked with community-based women's groups and we were familiar with political organizing. Although I'm not sure we recognized it at the time, the thesis support group was organized partly as an attempt to counter the individualistic, middle-class, masculinized values our workplace espouses. At the centre of our collective actions was a challenge to a common assumption that a dichotomy exists between activism and academia. My thesis group has been a feminist learning ground for me in becoming a politically-strategic academic "worker."

Before I began my research, the thought of doing interviews terrified me. To illustrate ways in which my thesis group helped me sort through my fears, I will refer to my interviews with Faith, and my feelings about these interviews as recorded in my research journal.

Faith is a single mother in her mid-thirties. She works in the service industry to "make ends meet." Faith and I met in her home. The first interview was rich but difficult. After chatting with Faith, I wrote in my research journal about the contradictions and anxiety I experienced in the interview:

I find it hard being around poverty. It reminds me of too much . . . Her house and my presence in it provided a visual for the two worlds I feel torn between and a space that I have been [left] hanging [in].
(Fitzpatrick 2001a)

In my research journal I also wrote about my struggle to find a voice:

I was nervous that I would stumble trying to express myself. These days, these years, going through a class transition has made it hard for me to articulate myself—especially verbally...maybe this is where my fear of doing interviews is partly located. (Fitzpatrick 2001a)

For me, questions about voice are tied to a sense of homelessness I feel as a result of living outside the margins of the academy, and, as a lesbian, living outside the margins of my family of origin.

Throughout the entire research process I struggled to retain my multiple voices. I discussed these struggles with my thesis group, who also came from working class backgrounds. When I read the transcripts of my interviews, I realized that I was self-conscious of my "Newfoundland voice" and for a moment I struggled with the imposter complex (Gardner 1993). Many women academics from working-class backgrounds have written about their experiences of the imposter complex. I was afraid my supervisors would discover who I was: "a working class kid who managed to con everyone into believing I was smart enough" (Gardner 1993, 52). Would my supervisors, neither of them from Newfoundland, and others who saw my voice in print be inclined to stereotype me as another lazy, stupid Newfoundlander?³

At the same time that I was conscious of negotiating the Newfoundlander/non-Newfoundlander relationship with my supervisors, a number of the (Newfoundland) women I interviewed were negotiating their relationship with me, including their reactions to the possibility that I might not be a Newfoundlander. This information seemed especially important for women from working-class backgrounds who were expressing the popular view, which I grew up with, that people associated with Memorial are "come from aways" or "CFAs." People associated with Memorial are often referred to as "the crowd at the university." While I was chatting with Faith, her daughter came home and later in my research journal I wrote:

Faith introduced me to her daughter as a

woman "from the university." It drives me crazy [that I] can't get over this class thing. (Fitzpatrick 2001a)

When Faith introduced me, her tone made it clear that she was indicating she was not part of the university world. Suddenly, I was aware of being something that a "working-class Newfie girl" was not expected to become: "a knower." This awareness caused me anxiety and a sense of contradiction. In my past, I have felt like an "other" because of my status as a working-class Newfoundlander. I did not want Faith to feel she was an "other" to me.

My thesis group gave us, as feminist researchers, a space to talk about ways to do knowledge as "working-class women knowers." All of us were engaged in interview-based research and we discussed our struggles to retain our multiple voices throughout the process. Moreover, speaking in thesis group meetings allowed us to "practice" our multiple voices, and negotiate our multiple identities in a safe environment. The meetings also provided us with an opportunity to adjust our views of work in order to think of ourselves as workers.⁴

I often struggle to explain to my father that the academic work I am doing is indeed work. Every Saturday morning my father picks me up to go to the grocery store. When I get in the car, our conversation goes something like this:

"You look tired, Dad. What have you been working on this week?"

"I was jacking up the cabin so I can put in a concrete foundation."

"You need to remember you are 70 now. I'm tired too."

"What do you have to be tired about, gallivanting around?"

"Dad, I did work this week. I'm tired just in a different kind of way. I feel tired in my brain just like you feel tired in your body."

"I know girl. I'm just kidding. I understand."

Did you talk to your supervisors lately?"

My father supports my efforts to "get an education." However, like many other members of the working classes, my father finds it hard to shake off the assumption that real work involves manual labor or efforts that produce concrete results. Spending my time "doing knowledge" is not "concrete," nor is it associated with a profession he has had the opportunity to learn anything about - until now. Notably, the concept that I have supervisors is something that my father can relate to, and he regularly asks about their evaluations of my work.

As I write this narrative I become aware of a note of anxiety running through it, my own anxiety and that of others. One clear example of such anxiety was my hesitation to commit to a research topic. After my interviews were underway, one of my supervisors acknowledged her admiration for me because I persevered until I found a research topic I felt comfortable with. It never struck me until after we spoke that what I had persevered through was not a search to find a research topic, but rather it was a search to find a space from which I felt comfortable to do research in the first place. I wasn't as scared that I couldn't "do knowledge," as I was scared that I could. Not only did I know I could "do knowledge" but I knew that I wanted to and that I enjoyed it. However, I was aware of the power relations I would need to negotiate if I took up the challenge to do knowledge. I would be entering territory implicitly forbidden to a Newfoundland working girl, a "nobody." Like other women academics from working-class backgrounds, I felt anxious knowing that I would need to ask questions that might sometimes challenge the "somebods." This thesis group created such a space.

In short, the thesis group helped me relearn two old lessons feminism taught me long ago. First: The personal is political. And second (a lesson I was tricked into forgetting with my transition to graduate school): Doing knowledge is not a mystery. To mystify "the doing of knowledge" is only a way to endow oneself with power. The "truth" is: everyone "does knowledge" in their lives. After all, I majored in Women's Studies in my undergraduate program and continued with

Women's Studies in my graduate program because I wanted to learn about how women did knowledge every day. Being an academic means that a person's paid work formalizes the process of "doing knowledge." To demystify this process, for me, means to reveal the inherent power that comes with the institutionalization of this process, and to hold the intellectual class accountable for this production.

Our thesis group is a network of co-workers who have built a research community. Members of my thesis group are my companions on the margins as I learn how to be the kind of researcher I would like to be, and how to enjoy what I am doing every step of the way.

Laura Fitzpatrick

ENDNOTES

1. *Wayves* is a monthly newspaper for members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities in Atlantic Canada.
2. My understanding of these links has been informed by a rich literature on the middle class nature of universities and more specifically by a rich literature on women's experiences in universities as they negotiate gender, class, race, and sexuality: including Bannerji, Carty, Dehli, Heald, & McKenna 1991; Fay & Tokarczyk 1993; Mintz & Rothblum 1997; Putnam, Kidd, Dorman & Moore 1995; Rich 1979; Stanley 1997.
3. Helen Fogwill Porter has explored changes in her own identity as she moved from the internalized oppression to recognition of herself as a Newfoundland writer: "... growing up I felt I couldn't be a writer and a Newfoundlander. I thought they were mutually exclusive. ..." (Porter 1998, 39).
4. Many women academics from working-class backgrounds have written about having to remind themselves and some of their working class families, that "doing knowledge" is work (Fay & Tokarczyk 1993).

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