

Velvet Sleeves: A Letter of Lessons Learned in the Ivory Tower

Jenny A. Piazza and Pamela A. Richmond

Abstract: The manuscript is a narrative letter of reflective examination of lived experiences in academia. The letter is a qualitative approach using narrative writing to represent the lived experiences of two female professors from different disciplines and varied institutions as they learned to navigate working in higher education, with all its promises and compromises. It explains and describes events, conflicts and results of navigating the system in a letter format using the framework of a previously published qualitative study on bullying behavior in academia, and offers insightful analysis and critique of the system while explaining the unique benefits of working in academia. The letter opens up a reflective dialogue about academia as it exists in the proverbial ivory tower while demonstrating why the career is valued.

Keywords: relationships, bullying, ivory tower, assistant professor

Velvet Sleeves: A Letter of Lessons Learned in the Ivory Tower

The authors of this letter collectively have 35 years of experience within tenure-track positions in academia. These academic positions were geographically diverse at six, four-year institutions where tenure was earned. Both authors hold and have held varied positions on campus, within respective departments, or within the professional community. That includes, but is not limited to the following: teaching, advising, management of programs, supervision of student internships, shared governance, mentoring, mediation, and advisory boards. This narrative of the combined author experiences reflects the lived experiences of many academicians who entered before us, those who entered with us, and those currently joining us. Thematic findings from a phenomenological study of bullying among and between academicians in higher education (Sedivy-Benton, Strohschen, Cavazos & Boden-McGill, 2014) frame the authors' lived experiences. The six thematic findings italicized in the letter below include: "positionality, differences, jealousy, clandestine decision-making, accountability/leadership [leadership accountability] and blame the victim (Sedivy-Benton, et al, 2014, pp. 37-38). These six categories of experience highlight bullying tactics within academia upon which our letter is based.

Pithouse-Morgan, Khau, Masinga & van de Ruit (2012) state that "letter writing has been used as a qualitative method for self-reflexive, collaborative research by a number of scholars to generate data through which to reexamine their selves and their lived experience" (p. 43). The authors chose a letter

format in order "to strike a balance between acknowledging and honouring the problem, and highlighting the initiatives the person has taken in their efforts to free themselves from the effects of the problem" (Whittaker, 2009, p. 53). The following reflective letter aids in providing a balanced description of lived experiences in academia, the problems, responses to those problems, what should be known to help navigate the environment and what keeps academicians here. The hope is that this letter will open up a reflective dialogue about academia as it exists in the proverbial ivory tower.

Dear Future Colleagues:

So, you want to be a professor? We did too! With butterflies of excitement, we entered a doctoral program, seeking the knowledge and the freedom to independently think and choose our pedagogical path. We demonstrated our expertise through our dissertations and defenses, proving to ourselves that we had the freedom to think independently and assist with promoting critical thinking during formal and informal engagement with students. Ready to create risk-free classroom environments conducive to the development of professionals in our respective fields, there was eagerness to begin. We must admit the perks of faculty parking closer to the building, keys to our own offices, a plaque on the door and flexible scheduling made us feel like we had *arrived* at the threshold we worked so hard to cross.

Confident we were equipped to collaborate with our colleagues, students and the community, we entered the ivory tower of velvet sleeves. Quickly, we were submersed in the culture and emotional reality of academic status. **Positionality** slapped us in the face

with a covert hierarchical structure, where assistant professors were seen and not heard. We wish we could tell you how many times as assistant professors we were told, or heard another junior colleague being instructed overtly, to “learn the ropes” by observing and emulating colleagues with tenure. More than once, one of us was told “you have a lot of nerve speaking out as you do as a junior faculty member.” Or as a new faculty member, you may passively be told that “once you have been doing this as long as we have, you will understand.” We write to tell you this happened to us so that you may be forewarned that this may happen to you...will most likely happen to you, as this underground hierarchical system is still in place. We tell you this in hopes that you do not spend the emotional energy we did in trying to figure out the system existed.

While at the same time a young faculty voice is squelched as impertinent, if you do not speak up, you may be perceived as not asserting yourself in a manner worthy of tenure and promotion. We sat on promotion and tenure committees where a promotion was denied not on the person’s performance, rather on the basis of a bad fit for the campus. In actuality, the faculty member denied was passively avoiding political situations in an effort to remain neutral, believing this would result in job protection. We have more to say about promotion and tenure in a later section of this letter. Our example here is to illustrate what might happen to those who do not speak up.

The level of participation and speaking your truth as a junior faculty member is a Catch 22, yet an even riskier third layer of professorial status was uncovered in our early time as professors. We wish we had been warned to watch out when we were placed on committees in which we found ourselves in the middle of a power struggle between tenured faculty. For instance, you could find yourself honored to be voted onto an executive committee by the esteemed faculty only to awaken to the realization that your ideas (which they all complimented you for having) were not the reason you made the committee. No, rather, a few faculty believed they had you in their pocket and could convince you to do their bidding. A great deal of time and energy can be wasted putting effort into something for which others do not believe you have

yet earned an opinion.

We could have saved ourselves so much time, shame and anguish if we had known our position within the ivory tower, that velvet sleeves do not earn you academic freedom; rather, time and possibly someone’s retirement will help you gain the status you need to be respected and heard. If you plan to become a professor, navigate your *positionality* carefully, friends. Find others whom you might trust and align with so that your agenda is carried in numbers. This might be your mentor, a respected senior faculty member taking you under their wing or a large group of new faculty banded together. Be resourceful and back yourself with sound research you can share in the moment.

While fumbling to uncover the issue we faced regarding our position within the system, we also learned quickly that *differences* matter, and there are some things, well, some things you just shouldn’t do or be. Even though, for years in your masters and doctoral studies, you have been learning how to treat others equitably, the very people you are learning this from are carving distinct differences for their faculty interactions, and you just shouldn’t. People’s *differences*...your differences...spawn inequities within the program, department and university settings, and drive wedges between collegiality.

After teaching a full load for two semesters, one of us took one week to complete our dissertation. After the dissertation defense, she learned she was pregnant. Pregnancy matters in higher education. When she told her chair she was pregnant, the chair said, “Is that what you did with the week I gave you to work on your dissertation?” This faculty member was also assigned to teach courses off campus; these classes were reassigned to another less qualified professor because “the university cannot be responsible for anything that might happen to the fetus if there were to be a car accident.” You just shouldn’t get pregnant.

Gender matters, again and again. Being hired All But Dissertation (ABD), one of us contractually understood that the dissertation had to be completed prior to receiving any raises. There were five new ABD hires, four women and one man. Of the five, only one (a woman) completed the requirements within the first year. When raises were awarded, the male that had not completed his dissertation was also

awarded. The explanation given by the administration for this breach in the contractual agreement was “he has a family to support.” Incidentally, the female was the sole supporter of a family of four. You just shouldn’t expect gender decisions to be fair.

What’s race got to do with it? Well, pretty much everything. In examination of racial differences, we have experienced discrimination used to covertly and overtly bully members of academia. We have witnessed or experienced a number of atrocities in this area. Both of us came into contact with new inexperienced hires being offered thousands of dollars more than we currently made at the time of their employment. In one case, administration falsely believed paying more for unseasoned faculty was acceptable; at risk of being held liable for reverse discrimination, the institution did rectify the situation. Conversely, we have witnessed colleagues of color struggle to be heard. In our experience, this is compounded when gender, religion, sexual orientation, size and age are an added characteristic difference. You just shouldn’t be different from the perceived norm.

Any one of us may find ourselves disabled at any point in our career. A colleague, C. Woodyard, (personal communication, August, 2014) specializing in the American Disabilities Act, said that when people use the term “disability,” they often think in terms of permanence and not temporary disability. It is sometimes the person who is temporarily disabled that finds themselves at risk of not knowing how to advocate for their own rights. This happened to one of us suffering from a severe injury, which took three years to recover from. A multitude of inappropriate communications occurred, from “others are doing your work for you” to “you can teach with [your injury], others have done it” to “we do not have the funding to accommodate you” to “you are milking the system” in an effort to get the faculty member to return to work prior to being released by a physician. All this came from the very academicians who teach classes on how to treat others with equity is surprising at least and alarming at best. You just shouldn’t need accommodations.

The lessons we wish to pass on to you in regard to *differences* include know the law, know your rights

and pick your battles. There are numerous “other” differences which separate and place people as targets of bullying. No matter the difference, help yourself and others by making sure that a diverse voice is not dropped during meetings. Find a colleague who echoes your ideas when they are passed over, and do the same for them. Remind the group, “so-and-so had a good idea, let’s revisit it.”

To survive as a new member of the ivory tower, you will need to pet your green-eyed monster. You have to keep your *jealousy* in check, while watching your back. Basically, you may be doing everything right, and because someone is promoted to their level of incompetency (Peter Principle), you may find yourself sabotaged because they are jealous of your competencies. The ear bent by those in power over you will attempt to define who you are, more than what you do, especially, if you are unaware it is happening.

The Peter Principle was breathing in the corners of the room during both our evaluation periods. Despite years of exceptional evaluations, peer reviews, administrative reviews, publications, quality teaching and sound service, Peter’s incompetents were unable to allow their jealousy to be put aside in an attempt to sabotage a career. The system is designed to protect from this, and sometimes that system works. Sometimes the system breeds jealousy because jealousy is about resources.

Hello! There is not enough money in higher education. Resources are fought for at every level. Inequitable allocation of resources breeds envy and competition. Many times resources are withheld in effort to make a competent person look incompetent. For example, a course needed extensive supplies, but no money was available. The supplies used during the time the course was taught were supplied by the professor or the guest speakers. Later, the course was given to a second professor. There was a vested interest by an administrator that the new professor be elevated to success within the course. Money magically appeared...lots of money...lots and lots of money.

Know your system and use the mechanisms set up to protect you, but most importantly, know yourself. Know your capabilities. Be always aware it is not just who or what you know, but how that person, or persons, in power regard you. Cultivate your

relationships carefully.

You think you've made it to the ivory tower. You think you've proven yourself, remember? So everyone is going to want your advice when making decisions. Why wouldn't they come to you for help making decisions? Well, basically, you are not involved in **clandestine decision-making**, and there is clandestine decision making.

More than one instance occurred in which a clandestine decision was made to change the nature of a course, and the colleague teaching the class was excluded from the meeting set up to redesign it. Another example; someone in power made the clandestine decision that faculty in certain disciplines earned more money than colleagues in other fields. Further, committees have been set up to make clandestine decisions on the selection of books for courses that the members are not even teaching. We recall an administrator, not teaching, arbitrarily making a clandestine decision to change the academic teaching schedule for the entire university without any known input. Clandestine decision-making, where not only are you not heard, but you are not seen...because you're not invited, can drive you crazy, and just when you think you have it figured out, you find out there's an entirely new unexplored level of crazy decision-making.

Clandestine decision-making is a powerful form of bullying. It is very covert. Take care of yourself. Have consideration for yourself and others. You are not your own boss, you are accountable. Act with integrity, and you will be able to defend your actions. Arm yourself with facts. Be certain who the players are and know their fit within the larger system. Again, pick your battles.

Now you are a professor; you are a leader. You have academic freedom. Academic freedom has consequences, or does it?

Leadership accountability can change like your underwear. You do change them every day, right, because daily you may be held **accountable** when others are not, and vice versa. You may pay for standing up for yourself when assigned an overload, for example. Team players do not complain and do not advocate for themselves. Advocating for yourself, in the example, is indeed hard to do when

you know everyone is working an overload. It is a cutthroat place, the ivory tower. Often, you will be in a situation where the person who made a clandestine decision places the blame on you to save what goes in *their* underwear.

Leadership accountability bullying can take place at any level of the ivory tower membership. In one of our institutions, an unpopular administrator was publicly chastised and belittled in a campus-wide social platform written by a faculty member. No one in administration intervened to stop the public humiliation. In fact, others publicly added to the discussion. Months later, the faculty member who was never held accountable for what he saw as acts of leadership was given a prestigious award by the administration. How's that for honor?

We repeat: Take care of yourself. Have consideration for yourself and others because the ivory tower needs you to work more than you should. It is not funded to have the resources necessary for you to thrive. You are not your own boss, you are accountable. Act with integrity, and you will be able to defend your actions. Don't expect fairness even when unfairness is blatantly obvious, but continuously strive for equity.

Blaming the victim, also known as gaslighting, is an attempt to bully a victim into thinking that what they say and do is insignificant, unworthy, and unvalued. Bullies do this by being dismissive and by reframing or slanting what is true. One of us remembers a colleague saying they were a pessimist in a situation where they were actually being a realist. In another situation, an administrator, when presented with ideas he was against, was known for saying to his faculty, "You actually think you can do that?" The message: what a fool you are for thinking that. Other ways you may find people with velvet sleeves dismissing you include: placing you on the meeting agenda, but never getting to your item, asking you to give input and being told your input is wrong, publicly asking others to "fix" a course with the professor of record sitting there, or being told you are not a good employee because you are not working the industry standard of 60 hours.

Gaslighting is often done to someone who is perceived as having too much status. So, celebrate here that someone thinks you have status! However, it is being done to usurp or undermine your credibility and your

belief in yourself. The important lesson here is that you need to recognize gaslighting, and learn to depersonalize the message. Recognize the flaws in the arguments or statements given, move on knowing you have educated reasons for what you do, think and say.

At this point in our correspondence, you may be wondering why we are still in academia. You might even be thinking that we are bitter, or our experiences have soured us into using this forum to complain. On the contrary, we love our jobs. We love the students. We love teaching, the research and the service aspects of our profession. With the ending of this letter, our hope is to also inform you of the four main reasons (relationships, teaching, research and service) we have stayed and why we value our velvet sleeves.

Relationships

Through the combined 35 years we have been in academia, we have chosen employment within institutions where teaching is the primary focus of performance; therefore, students have always been the driving force. The students we teach are amazing; watching students grow catches us on fire. There is a thrilling energy surrounding students as they use critical thinking skills while grappling with content that requires them to create new schema. Mentoring students throughout their educational journey to graduation is rewarded with welcoming them as budding colleagues. This in turn leads to ongoing relationships within the community as practitioners, and in the profession, as they return to school to advance their education. Relationships: the most significant reason we stay.

After we arrived to the ivory tower, the relationships we developed with the people we are in this with have led to special friendships outside of our velvet sleeves. Our colleagues and friends, who are authentic, provide valuable feedback and support, believe in us during trials and tribulations, and make us laugh at ourselves and situations, are invaluable. Relationships with these special individuals remind us to make light of the bullying behaviors that no doubt exist in our work setting, and advocate for us to use what we know about social justice. They remind us to use humor, sarcasm and truth to understand what we may feel we have no control

over, just as we have employed throughout our letter to you. Without sarcasm and humor, one might end up in jail, or so our friends tell us.

Teaching

Curriculum development is exciting. Taking a subject that students may not like and creating a focus of inquiry so strong that students fall in love with the content and want to continue to pursue it, is just one aspect of teaching that turns us on. Academic freedom within the classroom allows us to teach the way we believe people learn, applying our personal pedagogies. Teaching affords us our voice, our voice in the academic arena. Yes, *you have arrived* when you get to do this!

Research

Being in an environment where people are continually generating ideas, disagreeing and testing hypotheses, is invigorating. Daily situations arise that offer opportunity for investigation. The opportunities often invite collaboration from different disciplines, the community, and students to explore a topic through different venues. Research *after you have arrived* may become a lifelong professional achievement. You are going to love the energy and ideas you have the chance to uncover.

Service

You've arrived...you are the expert in the field, and your contributions may be welcomed. You get to serve; oh, do you get to serve. But the nice aspect about service is that you pick and choose the areas that matter to you, the things close to your heart. Because there is service to the department, college, university, community and broader profession, there is a wide variety to select from for professional gratification. Also, and extremely rewarding, you may find yourself involved in professional development in an area you may have never pursued to provide a service for a group you serve. For example, we became certified mediators in an effort to serve the university in their shared governance. In addition, we became certified restorative justice facilitators in an effort to serve the community in which we live and teach. Neither of us set out in our careers to be mediators or restorative justice facilitators; however, we could not imagine our professional lives without this stimulating work.

In closing, dear future colleagues, when you believe you have arrived after you have defended your dissertation and received employment as a professor only to find that not only have you not arrived, but you are back on the bottom, remember the six themes of bullying and how to circumnavigate the bully. When you traverse the velvet sleeves with your own velvet sleeves, you will receive all the benefits that relationships, teaching, research and service present. You achieve what you set out to accomplish when you decided to work in the ivory tower. We hope that this letter helps you to find your voice, and that you will pay it forward. The ivory tower does glow. You're going to love it!

Wishing you all the best in your future endeavors,

Pam & Jenny

References

Pithouse-Morgan, K., Khau, M., Masinga, L., and van de Ruit, C. (2012). Letters to those who dare to feel: Using reference letter-writing to explore the emotionality of research. *The International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 11(1), 40-56.

Sedivy-Benton, A., Strohschen, G., Cavazos, N. and Boden-McGill, C. (2014). Good ol' boys, mean girls, and tyrants: A phenomenological study of the lived experiences and survival strategies of bullied women adult educators. *Adult Learning*, 26(1), 35-41. doi: 10.1177/1045159514558411

Whittaker, R. (2009). Narrative explorations in clinical health psychology. *The International Journal of Therapy and Community Work*, 2, 48-58. <http://www.theinstituteofnarrativetherapy.com/Narrative%20explorations%20in%20clinical%20health%20psychology.pdf>

About the Authors: Jenny A. Piazza, Ed.D., Associate Professor, Colorado State University-Pueblo (jenny.piazza@csupueblo.edu) and Pamela A. Richmond, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Colorado State University-Pueblo (pam.richmond@csupueblo.edu).

Editor's Note: The authors wish the reader to know that the order of the authors was alphabetical, as each was an equal contributor to the research and text.