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From Academics to Change Agents in a Gender Equity Initiative

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FIRST PERSON RESEARCH

An Autoethnographic Perspective on the Messy Business of Change

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Holman Jones (2005) notes that autoethnography in social science research can offer stories that reveal intimate and complex emotions and that can be "important to understanding and theorizing the relationship among self, power and culture" (p. 767). Autoethnographic stories can initiate sensemaking and identity processes by connecting the personal to the cultural in ways that are both empowering and resistant to authoritative claims (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). These stories can also be influential by shedding light on the phenomena under study in ways that are more nuanced and practical than is possible through other, more traditional, research methods.

In their First Person Research article, "From Academics to Change Agents in a Gender Equity Initiative," professors Sonia M. Goltz and Patty Sotirin have used autoethnography to write an important article that offers thoughtful insights into what they have experienced and learned as women faculty-turned-change-agents in the development of a National Science Foundation (NSF)-funded program to raise awareness of gender bias at their male-dominated, technology-oriented university. From the perspective of the change agents themselves, the article touches on the deeply gendered and complex aspects of change management that are frequently missing from an often stepwise literature that can be simplistic, formulaic, and, indeed, highly gendered in its assumptions.

In the next two paragraphs, each of the authors of this introduction shares the effect this article has had on them. Michael writes as a white male at a similar technology-oriented university with similar issues. Joy writes as a white female at a different Michigan university.

From Michael: I experienced the article as insightful, reflexive, and courageous: Once published, I plan to use it in my change management course for MBAs and to show it to my colleagues across the university. Thankfully, it offers no simple solutions or pat answers. As Goltz and Sotirin note in

their conclusion, their reflexive engagement with the process of change at their university has revealed "the complex, contrary, tenuous, yet often painful nature of change (Spicer & Levay, 2012, p. 284) . . . as [the authors] became more and more aware of the complexities and fragilities of [their] assumptions, efforts, alliances, and effectivities." I am grateful that they have captured the messy business of organizational change in a way that is so honest, accessible, and transparent.

From Joy: I am struck by the potent yet vulnerable position Goltz and Sotirin are in as leaders of a change initiative that asks faculty members to reflect on likely uncomfortable aspects of their university culture: As the article authors note, they become a "lightning rod" for frustrations and anxieties about anything related to their program, including but not limited to accusations and defensiveness related to gender inequity at science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) institutions; the proliferation of top-down, unfunded change initiatives; and perceived encroachment on precious faculty time that ought better be used on research than on participating in an online seminar to learn "apple pie and 'Boy Scout principles.'" I appreciate their descriptions of the tensions, and how even seemingly good pieces such as the university seeking data to brag about the success of its program can harbor dark undersides—specifically that these authors have sold out their true feminist principles and been co-opted as a piece of the institutional machinery. The authors' autoethnographic approach demonstrates careful self-reflection, as they consider their own shortcomings along with those within their broader system. I appreciate their willingness to share their story and give other potential change leaders a window on to this experience. And it's not just for women.

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