



Bipolar and a PhD Student? Two Years and Two Different Perspectives

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Abstract

This auto ethnography of being a female academic with bipolar disorder emerged from an interview about personal experiences during the first year of a doctoral program and a personal paper written about a social justice issue. This article first delves into the driving forces behind my struggles and successes during my first year as a doctoral student. Secondly, it addresses the new voice I found during my second year as a PhD student. Finally, I discuss how these voices interact, converging and diverging as a third voice emerges. This is auto ethnography of what having bipolar disorder can mean to a newly-diagnosed individual. It is an article of struggle, triumph, and many emotions in between.

Keywords

Bipolar disorder; Identity; Higher education; Perfectionism; Doctoral studies

Introduction

As a third-year doctoral student, I have encountered many challenges along my academic journey. The most difficult has been coping with bipolar disorder while working towards an advanced degree. Over my first two years of study, my self-perception has remained static in some ways yet has changed in others. Below are two perspectives I held during that time, converging, diverging, contradicting, encouraging, and disheartening, emotions swirling together on the page as they do in my thoughts, those of a bipolar mind.

Year one: The perfectionist's approach

I consider myself a perfectionist. When not in control of all facets of my life, I feel adrift, insecure and failing to live up to expectations. I consciously attribute the pressures I feel driving me towards perfectionism to external forces. I use my upbringing to mask the pressures I place on myself from within.

Words of the mother: As a child, I received frequent and overt messages from my mother about how I should strive to live. Unlike her, I was supposed to, as she said time and again, "Go to college, find a career and get the job I wanted before I got married because that's not what she did." Her words have lived inside me, growing to

overshadow my perception of self-worth, although I sometimes chose to ignore her inculcation. I said "Of course, I didn't listen to that. I got married before I finished my bachelor's..." Even though I strive to live up to my mother's expectations, I simultaneously refuse to follow her mandates. It may not shine clearly through in my interview, but the messages she instilled in me sounded less like suggestions and more like absolutes to which I must adhere.

In my words, "Of course, I didn't listen to that," I hide disparate feelings about myself and my past. My refusal to follow the path she prescribed contains defiance, determination, and resentment. Growing up, her manner and messages implied bitterness about putting her career on hold to raise me and my brother. Whenever she instructed me to delay getting married, I heard her discontent with her own life. As I said in my interview, "She was never able to pursue a degree beyond a Bachelor's because she was a stay-at-home mom taking care of two children because my dad was working full time at a university." Whenever she repeated "[You should] go to college, find a career, get the job [you want] before [you get] married because that's not what [I] did," my insecurity grew, my self-worth diminished, and resentment manifested. I heard that her life would have been better if I had never been born. Although it may sound extreme, I truly doubted all reasons for my existence. My subjective reality transformed into one of self-loathing; if my mother regretted having me, I could not perceive any rationale for loving myself.

I claim my mother's influence as a main factor motivating me to further my education because, as I said, "I always wanted to live out her dreams to show her that I can be the person she wanted me to be." Now, however, I see how I have used her words to excuse my drive for perfection. Beneath what I spoke lies the message I heard as I grew up: I fail to be good enough for her love. Also present stand my internalization and warping of this message. I think, and almost believe, I will never be good enough for my own love.

Yet, in defying my mother's wishes, I asserted my desire to and confidence in forging a path of my own devising. The resentment stemming from my perception that she regretted having me may have formed part of this catalyst. It appears there are two other components at work here: making my own decisions about the sequence my life ought to follow served to accomplish asserting my autonomy. It was a characteristic of my defiant nature and my determination to be my own person and make my own choices. I sought ownership of my life, to demonstrate my capability to achieve what my mother could not. I would not allow myself to repeat what she perceived as mistakes—getting married and having children before building a career—because I refused to ascribe to her perspective. This motivated, and continues to drive me, to further my education. I wish to earn a doctorate not only to let my mother live out her dreams through me, but also to prove her wrong. I desire to earn a PhD simultaneously to gain her approval and defy her opinion that marriage would derail any possibility of living out my dreams.

Emotions as imperfection: Another facet of my upbringing that pervades my need for perfectionism presents in how emotions were treated in my family. My parents modeled how I ought to behave: sublimating my emotions in favor of putting forward a face of stability and contentment. The public arena was a place for

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Received: May 25, 2016 Accepted: June 13, 2016 Published: June 18, 2016

exuding pleasantness, often feigned, a manner I struggle and strive to maintain in academia, no matter how I feel beneath the surface. None of the stresses of doctoral study should manifest in emotions at school. As stands evident in how I perceived my mother's discontent, home was a place for expressing anger and frustration, but never positive feelings or one's sadness. Only anger was permitted. Words of support and encouragement did not emerge, as comes through in my statement: "I feel like my family...is supportive though they don't always vocalize it. I like to pretend at least they are very supportive of me".

Here, referring to my parents, I acknowledge the lack of overt support I perceive from them. Putting my negative feelings about this behind a façade of positive terminology when I said "I feel like my family...is supportive though they don't always vocalize it," I perpetuate the messages of my youth. I suppress how I honestly feel, disappointed, hurt, and yearning for their approval, in favor of keeping contentment at the forefront. When speaking these words, I smiled. I put forth the image they would prefer instead of allowing my genuine feelings to surface even though they peek through when I say "I like to pretend at least..." My facial expressions and word choice result from my parents' disapproval of past expressions of my true feelings about our relationship.

This also manifests in my professional veneer. Fear pervades my time at school: fear that what I perceive as my true self will emerge and taint my reputation. I consider school a place for maintaining composure, not a place for showing my emotions. As I said in my interview, "Last semester I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder... it's an obstacle in that I sometimes struggle with my emotions and it interferes with my work here." I strive to build a strong professional reputation. When my emotions surface, I fear I will fall in the estimation of faculty and colleagues, which I expressed by saying "Sometimes, I feel like I can't handle things properly or that I'm not handling them as well as I should be because I'm not always able to regulate my emotions as much as I would like to."

In these moments, I hear my mother, who refuses to accept my mental illness. I remember how she raised me to pretend I have no sadness or emotional struggles. I constantly fear my emotions will cause me to fall in the estimation of my peers and professors, which I said in my interview: "It's still difficult at times for me to feel like I'm doing a good job when I'm on the verge of a breakdown in the middle of class, which has happened several times."

I have yet to tell my mother about my recent diagnosis, yet I have told nearly every faculty member in the program; in my interview, I said "Most of them know about my struggles with my bipolar...so that's very helpful to know that I can go to faculty with concerns and that their door is always open." I seek approval from my professors, which rings clear through my words "I feel like I've made a positive impression on the entire faculty that I've had encounters with...that's very important to me. I want to have a solid professional reputation." Yet, I find myself able to share with them what I dare not share with my parents. School, not home, has become a place for expressing me openly. Perhaps the supportiveness I perceive from my professors renders them surrogate parental figures. I take long to impress them much like I take year to earn the approval of my family.

Nevertheless, this stands at odds with my fear of showing emotion at work and school, which could be yet another symptom of fighting for an impeccable reputation. If revealing what my mother would deem unacceptable feelings led to her disapproval, maybe my surrogate family—my professors and peers—will respond the same

way. I walk a tightrope daily, pursuing what I consider the ideal balance of professionalism and allowing my emotions to speak. This exacting standard, as I have discussed with my counselor, sets me up for failure. I cannot be perfect. I cannot be unemotional. I can only be me, imperfect, yet strong, which I stated is "something that I don't always see, so [my counselor is] helping me become more aware of how capable I can be."

Self-ownership: In spite of my fear of failure and imperfection by unleashing my emotional side, I seek ownership of my true self—to uncover the most secret components of my identity. I long to accept these parts of my past and present even though they strain against my perception of the perfect self: "I feel like I'm working towards... not stigmatizing myself and not hiding [my diagnosis with bipolar], owning that it's a part of who I am."

Identities past and present: I wish for healing by speaking openly about my struggles as a woman who is bipolar. I suspect speaking these hidden words—words that I have used to self-stigmatize—will release my shame. I hope for the emergence of a less exacting self if I uncover what I perceive the darkest parts of my identity. I take long to let go of my perfectionism as I repeat these truths. I am beginning to envision this as my cure.

I have yet to exorcise my insecurities, yet I also find I believe in my capabilities: in my interview, I said "Well, five years from now I will have completed the program." Here, I do not posit what might be. I state what I will accomplish—words of strength, confidence, and belief in my abilities. I have faith I can, and will, succeed in my career and make some difference in the lives of others through my work as a teacher and researcher in developmental literacy; as I said, "[Within five years] I will hopefully have contributed to the body of research in the use of graphic novels in developmental writing and reading as well as how that might foster motivation and student success." Underneath the surface, where I often do not acknowledge it, I see my strength and potential, evident when I said "I want to forge ahead and really...make a foundation for future research in that field." Analyzing my words has led me to hope I can embrace these beliefs and discard my perception of my perfect, unemotional self.

Possibility for resolution: Part of this process may be turning more to my faith. In the past, I have opened myself to believing God will lead me down the right path if I allow it. This comes through in my words:

I thought to myself that maybe this was just my sign, what I was supposed to do [working in developmental education]. I believed very strongly that things happen for a reason and so if you are open to it your sign will come. That was my sign.

This is yet another part of myself I often subliminate beneath my drive for perfection. Perhaps through interweaving my faith, belief in my abilities, and ownership of who I am, I can release the pressures I place on myself and know I am good enough to love myself.

I am a perfectionist. I struggle to own my identity. I take long to transform how I see myself. I see my potential. Ultimately, I hope to integrate the positive aspects of my personality and overcome my self-defeating thoughts, for this may be the path to loving and accepting who I am.

Year two: The advocate's approach

As I began the second year of my PhD program, a new voice emerged. A strong voice, slightly embittered, but was determined. It

was the voice of an advocate, of one who had taken ownership of her identity as a woman with bipolar.

Only I can call me crazy: In the eighth grade, a classmate accused me of making the gun threat at our school. Because I dressed in dark clothing, I wasn't "normal," I cried a lot, because I was somewhat of a loner. That same year, a rumor spread that I threatened to stab a fellow student in Home Economics class. He had taunted me endlessly all class period. I had had enough. Suddenly, I found myself shouting "leave me alone." Because I was cutting apples with a small paring knife, I must have been wielding the knife at him. I must have been ready to try to kill him. I must have been ready to snap at any moment. After all, I was the "crazy" girl.

At age thirteen, I started cutting my forearms and legs. My friends did, too. I was finally an insider among a group of similarly suicidal, depressed, self-loathing girls. We shared tips for hiding our self-mutilation from others, like wearing knee socks or long-sleeved shirts year round. Even though we formed a small community, we still were outsiders in the larger school culture. Our non-cutting friends would shame us with looks of disdain if they found our scars. We had to produce believable reasons for them at the drop of a hat. Nobody believed, but still, nobody responded to our silent cries for help.

At age fifteen, I reached out to my mother, asking what she thought about me going on antidepressants. She scoffed in response. Why would I need that? What would I possibly have to be depressed about? Later that year, in a fit of crying, I shoved my freshly bloodied wrists in her face. "Do you still think I'm not depressed?" I screamed between sobs. Only then, reluctantly, did she take me to the doctor. The message was clear: mental illness did not exist in our family. It was not supposed to exist. I was supposed to feel ashamed. And I did.

As I got older, I went on and off different medications, through a slew of therapists, and survived a suicide attempt. One night, when I was afraid I would hurt myself, I asked my college boyfriend to take me to the psych ward; I planned to commit myself. Instead of taking me there to get the help I wanted—and needed, desperately—he tried to drive the hundred miles to my parents' house. He didn't believe me. He said I'd be better off with my family. I had to lie, asserting I was doing better and wouldn't hurt myself, before he turned around and brought me back to my dorm.

Years later, I started dating my future husband. When we would fight, I'd leave without explanation. He told me I was being "overly dramatic" and using my emotions to manipulate him. When I didn't leave, when I stayed and tried to share my feelings with him, I got the same response. I was "acting crazy." My emotions were not given legitimacy; they were trifles blown out of proportion, tricks to elicit the response I wanted from him. This pattern persisted for seven years, five of which were after we married.

When I started treating my anxiety and depression two years into our marriage, I had side effects from taking Paxil. I gained weight. I wasn't interested in anything sexual. He asked me if I "really" needed to take the medication. Wasn't fulfilling his sexual needs more important than my perceived need to treat my mental illness? Once again, I felt shame, Guilt. That something was wrong with me and I would never be a normal human being. I became afraid my husband would leave me for someone less crazy.

At age twenty-eight, I was diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder. It took months of various mixtures of medications to find the right balance to keep me relatively stable. During that time, I struggled to

regulate my moods. I had periods of extreme depression followed by periods of mania. My husband asked me if I shouldn't just quit taking the medication. Did I really need it, anyway? It wasn't "fixing" the problem, he said.

I am not a problem to be fixed. I am not broken. True, I will never be "normal." I will never have perfectly regulated moods. I will never be free of episodes of depression or mania. Nevertheless, my emotions are legitimate; they are a part of who I am, and who I am is not fundamentally broken. I am no more flawed than any other person.

I refuse to be stigmatized for being bipolar. For most of my life, I've allowed others to label me, to place me in a box, to shame me for being myself. I allowed them the power to influence how I viewed myself. Now, at age thirty, I have taken the power back. I speak openly about my diagnosis and what it means to be a young woman who happens to be bipolar. Yet even when I try to remove the stigma I and others have placed on myself, I still feel the gaze of judgment. I have been laughed at when mentioning that I have to carry a bag of medications and a pill cutter with me everywhere I go. I know the words behind that laughter, behind the judgmental, dubious looks: she's crazy. I've heard and felt those words for more than half of my life. I used to allow them to affect how I felt about myself. While this tendency still lingers, instead of shame, I feel outrage when people try to stigmatize me.

Without understanding what it means to live as a person with bipolar, you do not have the right to call me crazy. Only I and those sharing my diagnosis are allowed to call me crazy. Every day, through my words and actions, I work to re-appropriate that word. It would be racist for me to call a Black woman the N-word. It would be homophobic for me to call a gay man a fag. It would be insensitive to call someone in a wheelchair a cripple. Why, then, is it not discriminatory to call someone with mental illness crazy? What makes me different may not be visible, but it exists nonetheless. I own my bipolar the way others might own their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or religious affiliation. It is central to my identity. I am but one voice among the bipolar community, and I do not presume to speak for all of us, but when you talk to or about me, please remember that only I can call me crazy.

Year three: Voices at odds

Both of these women are me. Although I like to think I have moved beyond the perfectionist's voice that held primacy during year one, I still hear both versions of myself arguing. Somewhere within the fight, a smaller voice has begun to emerge. It calls for reconciliation, a kind of reunion that never existed. These three voices, among others, vie for attention. I vacillate from one state to the next, one voice to the next, from a woman empowered by her identity to one who struggles with it. I am claiming the third voice, even though all co-exist; it urges me to forge ahead, to shed the insecurities of the perfectionist and the anger of the advocate, and to find ways to support other college students diagnosed with mental illnesses. This is the voice I wish to present to the world: the passionate, empathetic voice of an activist. It speaks quietly, but I hope its volume will swell with time.

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