

Scholarly Personal Narratives: Soko Starobin



Thank you so much Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher for inviting me to participate and contribute to this Scholarly Personal Narrative research inquiry project. I am Soko Starobin, and I am honored to share my reflections, perspectives, and recent musings from becoming an observer of what is happening in education in a broad spectrum.

In this recording of my talk, or narrative speech, I will share my personal background, how I became an education researcher in the field of higher education in particular, and how I position myself in a space of equity in education. This is something that I deeply care about and pay attention to anywhere from kindergarten all the way to adult education, as you could imagine what we call as the P-20 educational spectrum. I've become more of the observer nowadays and I just wanted to share my perspectives and recent musings with you today.

So, as I said earlier, my name is Soko Starobin. I see myself as a humble education researcher and quiet activist. I say quiet activist who devotes to share a doorway, or I would say point of view, to many of you and others to view. And others to activate, validate and implement, designing, writing, presenting and practicing that will create equity in education in the real world. What do I mean by sharing a doorway for others to design and create? So, I see you, an education researcher, myself and other practitioners in the field as designers and creators. Lately, I've been contemplating and reflecting on the concept of solidarity and sovereignty. One, solidarity, represents togetherness or oneness perhaps. And the other, sovereignty, represents independency.

It seems they have the opposite meanings as I talk and being taught this way of dichotomy for a long time, they're opposite, solidarity and sovereignty. So, when I think about myself as an education researcher or a quiet activist, what I do, how I think in the real world, then I have to think of the meanings of these two words or the concepts. So, are they really opposite? I began to question myself and really deep down, I questioned myself as how do I position myself in a space of equity in education? Where do I fit in, where am I, what can I do, how do I behave, think, reflect, share and all that? So, I just wanted to share some of my thoughts around this concept of solidarity and sovereignty, and how I see education.

When I think of solidarity, it reminds me the notion of emotional solidarity. The notion of emotional solidarity is a framework originated in a work of Durkheim back in 1915, whereby the classical sociologists argued solidarity is forged through individuals possessing similar grief and behavior as a result of interacting with each other. When I read this definition, when I see emotional solidarity with one, I reflect on what happened in the Black Lives Matter and Me Too movements. Individuals connected through similar experiences, beliefs and behaviors as social media created the global connection and interaction. So, I felt or there's something emotionally connected. There might be a solidarity around this.

As we all know, I know emotions can drive us, including myself, to certain behavior. If I agree today, if I share this belief then I need to do X, Y, and Z or by doing so, it makes me feel good or righteous or justifies myself of doing something good or right. I've been seeing enough love, awareness and empowerment from those movements, the Black Lives Matter and Me Too movements. I was the beneficiary of those. At the same time, I observed unexpected or unwelcome consequences and behaviors that are fear-based. Giving too much empowerment, too much voice to those vulnerable populations created a fear to other majorities.

It also created defensive reactions and divisiveness. And I began to think, why the solidarities should bring people together. I thought I was reaching toward that, but unexpected consequences, it was huge divisiveness that I observed. And when I think about why this happened, then I see the same dichotomy of thinking when we study, or I study, and comprehend and present the notion of equity in education to the public not within my friends who shared the same values, behaviors and experiences, but someone who doesn't share my experiences with me.

Then, it came to me that for those of us that deeply care about the equity education there's got to be something beyond emotion or emotional solidarity, that bonds us together. Perhaps, through the scholarships we share, we create or something beyond that, something beyond two-dimensional things. What I mean by two dimensions is paper and pencil, which is represented in the academy, is published articles or the books. But I always thought there's got to be something beyond this two-dimensional thing. Going beyond the emotional solidarity, so what is it that bonds us together? So, I thought about that, and I thought about why am I doing this, or choosing to be educational researcher and why do I care because of my occupation, job, how I define in a society who I am because of the title that I got?

So, in 2016, I left the academy. I don't write and present as much as I used to, but I still devote myself to create equity in education. The mode of delivery of my service or offerings have shifted. As I said, I no longer write or peer review journals. I no longer teach at our research one institution. So, this is a good time to have to bring back a little bit for myself. As you might have picked up, I'm passionate about looking at or observing or studying equity in education in particular, the higher education context or the field of higher education, in particular the community college sector in higher education. I grew up in Japan and I was raised there until I completed my college and I moved to the United States to pursue higher education. So, I do have a lot of rooted cultural background in Japan. And in fact, my first language is Japanese.

I'm a mother. I'm also runner, musician, but there are many things that I can identify myself as. I studied higher education after completing my first college degree in Japan in an engineering college. Let me say that I grew up in a rural town. I was raised five minutes away from the Pacific Ocean in the main island of Japan, a very small agricultural town. And I had a choice after completing the local junior high school of going to the college bound local high school or taking a rigorous admission exam to go to engineering college, federally funded or nationally funded. I decided to jump into engineering college. At age 15, I left home. I lived in a residence, based in the engineering accelerated college at 15 for five years.

Back then, there was very few female students in college. My cohort on the 116 was selected and I was one of the eight females that year. The cohort before that was only two females on 160. So, as you can imagine, I was in the fish bowl among the male students, the age range from 15 to 20, it was something

else, it was quite an experience for me. And then also my fellow female students at that time, but there were no transfer opportunities or stopping the higher education back then in Japan. Well, it's still that way. I had to finish, or I would be a dropout. So, I completed the five-year program and I wanted to study a little bit more of the urban planning. And I decided to study one year in the US, at a higher education university.

So I came. I wanted to maximize my time studying and also interacting, getting the language and culture and everything else. So, I was very involved in student activities. I was fortunate to be hired as a resident assistant, so that saved me in terms of room and board. And I was able to stay until my master's degree and then I decided to go back to Japan and found that because of the reality of sexism and ageism in Japan, that I couldn't get a job there with a master's degree from United States. Even a telephone interview or any of the potential employers will ask right away, "How old are you?" And it is sexism that, in their point of view, I was too old because they thought that as soon as I get married or as soon as I have child and I'm going to quit the job, that they don't need late-20s or early-30s people females.

And then, also, I was way too educated compared to the other male counterparts. So, I decided to come back to the United States and said, "Okay, I'm just going to pursue a doctorate, go all the way." So, that's how I stayed in higher education and I wanted to stay in academy. I wanted to go through the PhD program and so forth. And the ways in which I was able to show that something that I can offer, or I can produce, is that I had to overcome my imposter syndrome of using English as a second language. So, what is my strength? I decided to jump onto the quantitative research methodology. I was very comfortable with numbers, equations, writing programs, those are the things that didn't really scare me at all coming from the engineering background.

So, I decided to define myself as that. And as much as I pay attention to the community college education and equity in education, that communication, the mode of delivery of my scholarship was through the traditional quantitative research methodology. I chose to pick a valuable such as what we all know from statistics class that age, gender, GPA, ACT scores and so forth. There is something numerically observed at the value, to do something or predicting some outcomes. And outcomes are also defined by the numeric value whether it's going to be retention, it's going to be your success ratio, it's going to be graduation rate, grades, always numeric. So, that was how I was trained as an education researcher and I made myself be comfortable in that and I was rewarded, I was seen as successful, my papers have been accepted to peer-reviewed journals and peer-reviewed conferences, and I was also fortunate to receive some external research grants because of that.

Then something happened, and I will share with you later that my decision to leave the academy came in 2016. Since then, today is March of 2020, I'd seen four years or so of the mode of the delivery of my scholarship or my service or how I see myself now is the offering has shifted. So, I'm no longer in research one or research-intensive institution. I used to work at Iowa State University as a tenured faculty member. I'm in a bit quiet place. In a space where I can reflect and contemplate. And yet, when I have an opportunity, I speak up just as I'm honoring this right moment to share my personal narrative with you. As I'm speaking now, I feel emotional solidarity with my friends and colleagues. Now, my head is recalling my life back as a tenured faculty member and how I interacted with my students and my colleagues, and fellow researchers who devoted their scholarship and time and service to create equity in education. Adding institutions in higher education, you might be working at a research university,

community college or pursuing a graduate degree in higher education. I'm in a different space, but I feel emotional solidarity with you, those who particularly devote a time to create equity in education. At the same time, I feel beyond our emotions now that I do have a space to reflect and observe my emotions. I have the capacity to do so. And you in particular, if you're working at an institution, we have professional responsibilities. We maximize of skills and talent to create equity in education, whether it's going to be writing, presenting, speaking, or producing something.

When we devote to something then rewards such as promotion, tenure or we are commissioned by professional organizations. The rewards given by others externally do not matter or at least for me now. Those things don't matter to me anymore. But I see our creativity in myself, in you. Your creativity and offerings matter more than pats on the back or how many publications, rewards and so forth. And I see that's beyond emotion, that is devotion. When I remove the rewards or outcome from what I do, that's devotion. Those of you whom I have the honor to share my past professional life and current personal life, I'm feeling and receiving every day your devotion. I see through your work. I see through your success and recognition and so forth.

My friends, my fellow colleagues and researchers, I see your devotion beyond it, so I just want to share devotional solidarity with you. Because I removed my emotions from external expectations and systems of reward and punishment as I was working in a research one institution then the punishment is not an evident thing. But if you don't publish enough then there will be punishment, which you probably have children, but anyways. So, there is a system of reward and punishment. When I remove that, my reflections and thoughts have been driven by my devotion, not the emotion, because emotion can be driven by those external things so easily, but when I removed that, then my thoughts, actions, and behaviors began to be driven by my devotion. My devotion to create equity in education.

And of course, I'm a human. I'm full of emotions still. My emotions actually driving crazy every time, every day. They have fear, anxiety, and impulsive syndrome pile up on top of me all the time. When that happens to me, I dig up my potential to make an offering even if it's a tiny small dust. My devotion to equity in education. I'm simply focusing on this moment we call now so repeating the process of being in and out of the state of being driven by my emotions piling up and digging up my devotion. So, I'm just simply repeating this process. Right now, I have a fear of communicating, speaking, narrating in English, which is a second language to me. I fear that I still have an accent. What if I speak with the wrong grammar, I still have a lot of fear of all those years, living in the United States or living as a professional scholar or educator. For so many years, I still have a lack of confidence around that, it piles up every day. But, I know when to dig it out the potentials that I can create something. So, as long as I am aware of each moment, I'm scared right now, I'm afraid. I'm lacking my confidence right now, but here let me do that something that I'm comfortable with. As long as I'm aware of each moment, I'm okay. I'm okay. And now, I just want to pause for a minute, I think that I have to dig out my little confidence here. As I said earlier, I still have my fear and anxiety around this. So, I just want to pause myself to put myself together and to recall the concept of sovereignty. As I mentioned earlier, I used to think solidarity, the togetherness, the unity and the sovereignty independence as a different theme or the opposite things. For a long time, I neglected to recognize and give permission to have my own sovereignty at multiple levels. It's not just my physical self, my sovereignty, but my cognitive emotional and spiritual sovereignty.

One of my favorite spiritual teachers said we have three brains, one is the head brain and the hurt brain and the gut brain. The head brain is cognitive, we process things and we rationalize, we analyze. And I spend a lot of time to nurture and protect my head brain. And perhaps, I gave too much of a sovereignty independency to the head brain. My hurt brain is more emotionally driven. When I became upset, sad, yes, all those anxieties, fear, impulsive syndrome piled up. I just let that pile up and then crashed my physical sovereignty, physical self. I allowed myself to do that. I gave too much of my cognitive sovereignty. Spiritual sovereignty, I don't think I had any thoughts around that when I was in a system of punishment and rewards.

Spiritual sovereignty is defined as gut brain by one of my favorite spiritual teachers. Gut brain, that's something so intuitive. And we all know that gut brain telling us or telling me at least, for me. The sovereignty of that, I didn't recognize it. To protect myself from the emotional pileup and so forth I used to do, and I still do. I'm pretty confident I am great at creating a physical space or a physical sovereignty from myself. I'm a runner, I can go for a trail run for two, three hours just by myself, listening to the sound of nature and my footsteps. I don't need to carry iPhone to listen to music or distract me, or anything. I am just as happy to listen to my footsteps. But, when it comes down to recognizing the sovereignty of my emotional and spiritual side, I had to have some event to wake me up. That event happened actually. It came in 2015. I think I mentioned earlier and to come back. So here I come back and share with you.

So, it took me a life event to awake my cognitive and emotional sovereignty or spiritual sovereignty. I will share an excerpt with you really quick. In 2015, I thought I was doing well at work professionally. Physically I was strong I was training for... I forgot, I think I was training for a half marathon or a marathon. I felt really good. I thought I was strong physically and good, but I was diagnosed with an early stage of breast cancer, that was a shock. I didn't know where that coming from. None of my family member had had one, I was in a total shock. One day, after the series of the treatments and the surgical treatments and everything else, I had to go through the radiation treatment for three weeks, every day. One day, it was about to be my turn, the nurse told me that it was a slight delay. I had to wait for a few more minutes and I saw three men with tool boxes came out of the treatment room. And a nurse came along and then they also told me and assured that, "No problem, we'll be ready for you soon. It's just that the machine failed this morning and those gentlemen came and fixed it and you're the first one up so don't worry, everything will be fine." At that moment, I froze said, "Oh, the machine wasn't working properly and yes, I suppose it's fixed, but I'm the first one to go after that mechanical failure." The moment I thought about well, what if the fixing is not properly working. I'm going to be all by myself with the middle room on the colder platform and receiving radiation, what if. It was an awakening moment. I never thought anything like this in my life. But, I had to go in, I suppose. At that point, I thought I had to go in. So, my name was called, I changed, we had a thin gown and I had to surrender myself.

The moment I surrendered myself physically, emotionally, cognitively, all of that, nothing mattered. My title, institution, how many publications I had, how many research grants I had, none of it. Just me on that cold platform waiting for the radiation to zip through my chest. That's the first time I felt mortality. Nothing mattered. Then, from that point, how I think and feel has shifted. It doesn't matter how I worry about the outcomes or meeting somebody's expectations. None of that matters. I felt the sovereignty. I'm the only one. I was, I was by myself in a metal room. I was the one. And I didn't have anything, just

me. I see that as that was me, that was complete me, nothing to add and nothing that's perfect as who I was. Nothing more, nothing less. Just as I exist right now.

I don't have a particular title, any affiliations or anything. This is my complete self. Thus, I see that as my sovereignty. That makes me alone or marginalized. I used to think that way, the more I add my layers of uniqueness or characters, I'm Japanese, I studied at engineering college and so forth. I created a linear pyramid. First, I'm human, I'm the 50% of the humans being female and educated at this level and so forth and so forth. As I do that in a linear format, I felt more isolated or marginalized. That's the way I used to think. Now that I see myself, yes, I have all those layers of things that perhaps, that creates me, but I trust that I'm complete as who I am. And then if I create something that's very unique, and I'm going to be a perfect creator of something. So, if I'm going to be a creator, a very unique distinctive creator of something to advance equity in education, that's great. I respect, I honor my sovereignty. I'm not alone because I feel devotion of others, someone like you.