

FM REVIEW 2016 39 COMMENTS

COMMENTS TO EDITOR: This essay seeks to examine the tensions that can develop in maintaining roles of both researcher and clinician. As a narrative essay, it has several problems that are well-articulated by the reviewers, especially reviewer 1 who identifies perfectly where this essay falls short and how it can be improved. Because of the topic itself (which is quite intriguing and rarely addressed in a narrative essay) and because of the author's evident willingness to work on her submission (as indicated in her humble cover letter), she should have a chance to do a major revision.

COMMENTS TO AUTHOR: The tensions between researcher and clinician are complex; and when these are rolled into one person, there are many dilemmas to be explored. The topic you've chosen is a valuable one, and we are interested in an essay that approaches it from a personal perspective.

Nevertheless, there are significant problems with the essay that must be addressed. The most significant are contained in Reviewer 1's perceptive critique. As she rightly points out, the traditional positivist paradigm is only one approach to research; and many alternative models now exist (qualitative and participatory paradigms) that acknowledge the inevitability and desirability of having the subject more actively involved in the research.

The recommendation that the essay be recast from its present form, in which it sounds as though you are inventing a new research model, to a more personal one, in which you share your own journey of discovery, is excellent, and will make this a truer narrative essay. As all reviewers agree, the heart of your essay is your two stories. This is where your emphasis should lie.

Reviewer 2 is concerned with lack of focus, and this is a valid point as well. It seems to me that your main point is that in clinical research, there is often not the clear distinction between objectivity and subjectivity that we pretend. You make this point through the two stories in a way that is thoughtful and even at times moving. In the first, you make a choice to take a human action that may reverberate in unknown ways on your research. In the second, the low health literacy of a subject raises questions about her care and whether on a clinical level some sort of action is necessary. I like your awareness that such issues are "smoothed over" in the way we conceptualize and report results, but please try to clarify and focus the main points you want to communicate in each of these examples.

As you yourself suspected, there is no reason to inundate the reader with technical language from the social sciences. Using terms such as Hawthorne effect, "positivism," "ontological, epistemological, interpretivist paradigms," will likely not convey a great deal to many readers, and distract from your personal story.

You are also correct in thinking that this piece is long for a narrative essay. Please consider Reviewer 3's suggestion in making some cuts. The essay can handle being shortened without losing its main message.

Finally, as you yourself suspected, the title needs some reworking. It is too vague, and could refer to almost anything. I think that once you have refined the main point of the story you are telling, the right title will emerge.

In summary, if you frame this as a personal journey of discovery, in which you realize that even so-called positivist, objective clinical research is full of boundary-crossings and subjective complications, it will raise valuable questions that other clinician researchers will recognize and hopefully wrestle with. Just be sure that you present this as a personal insight about the need for greater honesty about the nature of clinical research, rather than the discovery of a new research paradigm.

COMMENTS TO EDITOR II: This essay about the "messiness" of clinical research is much improved in that it is a much better narrative essay. It now tells a personal story, instead of making pronouncements about research, and the writing style is more casual and less reliant on social science terminology. I suggest minor edits, as well as a reworking of the title, and the concluding sentence. This is an unusual and interesting topic for a narrative essay, and with a few minor changes it will make an excellent addition to the journal.

COMMENTS TO AUTHOR II: Thank you for your thoughtful responses to reviewer and assistant editor recommendations. You have done an impressive and meticulous job of editing. Your cuts served to highlight the narratives as well as reduce the manuscript to a more appropriate length. The tone of the essay is now much more personal and casual, again better suited to the style of the narrative essay. Thank you as well for focusing as well on your own personal struggles and discoveries, rather than attempting to generalize to research paradigms as a whole.

I have included some minor edits for your consideration. Two larger points have to do with the title and the final sentence. Although they are much improved, I'm still not certain they are what they should be.

The title seems a bit abstruse, and I worry that the term "ecological" (although you employ it correctly) may connote environmentalism rather than relationships between living things and their environments.

The last line is good, but I think it needs to explain more clearly why you "never question" the validity of clinical research. I've tried to link your convictions about research with the stories you've told. You may find a better way to do this.

The topic you've chosen will make a valuable contribution to the journal, and particularly to the narrative essay section. Researchers disclose the "messiness" of what they do too infrequently. We appreciate your openness and authenticity in sharing these stories.

COMMENTS TO EDITOR III: This essay uses two anecdotes, one touching, one troubling, to highlight the messy, uncontrollable, and "unscientific" aspects of clinical research. The author has done a meticulous job of reshaping the essay in a more personal direction, and eliminating the theorizing about alternative research paradigms that does not fit with a narrative essay.

The author asks the editorial staff to choose between the two titles she offers. I recommend we go with the title "The Beautiful Mess of Clinical Research." I also recommend that we accept this essay for publication.

COMMENTS TO AUTHOR III: Thank you for the minor reworking of this final iteration of your essay. As in clinical research, we can't control all the variables in writing, but attention to even small details guarantees the best possible outcome - which I believe you have achieved :-). I am recommending the second title, which I like quite a bit because it both critiques and celebrates clinical research. As for the last sentence, you nailed it. A vast improvement on my rather wordy suggestion. You've contributed an authentic, human essay that will elicit nods of recognition in other clinical researchers and, I hope, provoke some introspection and even soul-searching. Thank you.