TITLE PAGE

1

BOOK REVIEW: CONTEMPORARY BRITISH AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Contemporary British Autoethnography
Nigel P. Short, Lydia Turner, and Alec Grant (Eds.)
Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2013

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> I would argue that autoethnography has ethical value over other forms of research which
>
> might take an 'arrogant' position of 'telling the truth' or informing people of 'facts', to me it
>
> feels a bit like art. I'll put it out there and you can make of it what you will
>
> (Turner, Chapter 14, p.227)

The editors make the claim that 'Autoethnography is a contemporary qualitative research

methodology, demanding unusually rigorous, multi-layered levels of researcher reflexivity, given

that the researcher/s and the researched are normally the same people' (Grant, Short & Turner,

Chapter 1, p.1). However, they also offer the caveat that as a methodological approach,

autoethnography is 'not for the fainthearted' (ibid, p.11).

In terms of philosophical underpinnings, epistemological and ontological stance, autoethnography is

a postmodern, poststructuralist, feminist methodology (McLeod, 2011; Reed-Danahay, 1997), which

challenges and critiques the knowledge claims of not only positivist, quantitative research but also

much traditional qualitative research. Autoethnographers reject the notion of objectivity and

researcher neutrality in any research into human behaviour, choosing instead to embrace the role of

a 'feeling, culturally engaged and vulnerable observer and teller of creative, evocative stories'

(Grant, Short & Turner, Chapter 1, p.3). Subjectivity is used consciously to inform the research

process alongside 'rigorous cultural interrogation and analysis' (ibid, p.2).

In its simplest terms, autoethnography can be described as a combination of autobiography (the writer telling his or her own story) and ethnography (writing about a group of people) (Reed-Danahay, 1997). It has its origins in anthropology and ethnography and arose in part out of 'debates about representation (by whom and about whom)' (ibid, p.1). In particular, autoethnography rejects 'binaries such as: self/other, inner/outer, public private, individual/society' (Sparkes, 2002) and the notion of a unitary self, favouring instead the concept of multiple selves and 'the self within a social context' (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p.9).

A common theme of autoethnography is boundary-crossing, both in terms of the researcher as 'insider and outsider' (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p.17) and in blurring boundaries between research and creative writing (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The creative elements of autoethnography are important features of both knowledge creation and dissemination of knowledge. Poetry, narrative, dramatization and visual methods of representation can all be harnessed in autoethnography to evoke the lived experience, to show rather than to tell (Etherington, 2004; Muncey, 2010).

The high level of subjectivity of autoethnography demands an equally high level of researcher reflexivity (Chapter 1), a continual process of exploring what I, as researcher, have done, and why I have done it, writing my bias and my subjective self into the research process. Sparkes (2001, p.210) refers to the inclusion of our 'vulnerable selves' and Etherington (2004, p.36) describes the sensation of being 'partially naked' in the research. Such vulnerable research can feel uncomfortable both for the researcher and the reader (McLeod, 2001, p.4); there are ample demonstrations of this here.

Contemporary British Autoethnography is part of a series of books on educational research which explore the 'interface between professional knowledge and professional lives' (Grant, Short & Turner, Chapter 1, p.11). As a methodology, autoethnography is mostly associated with the social

sciences, especially education, but is also increasingly used in mental health research. Autoethnography is also valuable for other forms of psychological research when the question is "What is an experience like?" rather than questions of how much or how many, or which experience leads to what psychological outcome. The methodology is also associated with challenging the prevailing discourse and giving voice to marginalized discourses (Harper & Thompson, 2012; Reed-Danahay, 1997) so is particularly relevant for exploring the experience of feeling marginalized or stigmatized because of a mental health diagnosis (Harper & Thompson, 2012). Autoethnography's rejection of truths and certainty is a comfortable fit for a humanistic counsellor, used to taking a non-expert position and working with the subjective realities of clients.

The introduction (Chapter 1: 'Storying life and lives') and concluding thoughts (Chapter 15: 'Coda') bookend 13 chapters, each of which is an example of autoethnographic writing. The introduction sets out autoethnography's stall, offering some definitions of autoethnography, tracing its historical roots and placing it in context. It explores the themes of the personal as political, the politics of subjectivism, functions of autoethnography, voice, institutional resistance to autoethnography, and risks, thus providing a concise introduction to the methodology for the complete beginner, and in the process, introducing the reader to many of the significant writers of autoethnography.

It is hard to categorise what the themes of the chapters are, as most of the chapters are 'about' more than one thing; Short (Chapter 7), for example, juxtaposes pieces of writing about his experience as a mental health inpatient with descriptions of his travels in Albania. Other chapters touch on subjects as diverse as ethics, collaborative writing, psychotherapy, education, mental health/nursing, sports, neo-liberalism in academic life, and the challenge of combining academic life and motherhood. As well as the explicit themes of the chapters, each explores issues central to autoethnography. These include: the reliability or otherwise of memory (p.123); questions about

knowing and the creation of knowledge (p.146); identity (p.147) and the multiple and culturally situated self: in Chapter 14, for example, Turner writes, 'Dear reader, I'm going to tell you about me(s), about me(s) in my culture(s), the present, the past, the pain' (p 222).

For the novice autoethnographer, there are some useful explorations of reflection and reflexivity in research, and the distinction between these (p.236); ethical considerations, including relational ethics, and balancing the risk to self or others with the 'greater good' to be achieved by the research (p.207, p.208, p.213). Ways of evaluating autoethnography are also covered, including the distinction between autobiography or memoir and autoethnography (p.233), the relationship between the writer and the reader (p.234) and the reader's role as 'co-creator' of autoethnography (p.237).

Various types of autoethnographic writing are demonstrated in the chapters:

- Reflexive/reflective first person (Short, Chapter 11)

- Creative/narrative (Gilbourne & Marshall, Chapter 10)

- Poetry (Turner, Chapter 14)

- Dramatization (Moriarty, Chapter 5)

- The use of photographs and art (Short, Chapters 7 & 11)

- Zooming in and out, backwards and forward through time (Turner, Chapter 14)

- Co-authored autoethnographies (Gale & Wyatt, Chapter 9)

A key strength of the book is that it contains extensive examples of detailed descriptive writing. One of the effects of this sort of evocative autoethnography (Muncey, 2010) is that the reader feels physically present in the moment described by the writer, and able to enter her or his feelings about an interaction. In my early explorations into qualitative methods I experienced some frustration reading descriptions of methodologies that were not accompanied by actual examples; I

acknowledge my own personal preference for a concrete illustration. Conversely, my first encounters with autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Ellis, 2004) were frustrating because they seemed to be *all* example, and no straightforward discussion of theoretical and methodological issues. This book offers both. The introductory and concluding sections outline the central ontological and epistemological issues for readers who are completely new to autoethnography; the other chapters offer several examples of different kinds of autoethnography, each a manageable length to read.

The book introduces the reader to some key writers in autoethnographic methods (Ellis, Bochner, Etherington, Muncey) though others are absent (Reed-Danahay, Chang). There seemed to be a heavy emphasis on contributors in academic world; I would have valued a wider diversity, although the emphasis is probably inevitable, given the editors' explanation that the book developed out of a conversation (or a series of conversations) between academics in the same educational establishment. Similarly, the title claims to represent 'British' autoethnography, yet all but one of the contributors is from England. There is one contribution from Scotland, and none from Ireland or Wales; again, perhaps this is inevitable, given the geographic location of the editors – or perhaps it reflects that fact that autoethnography is not being widely used across all regions of the UK. My only serious criticism of the book is the lack of an index; this seems particularly unhelpful, given that the book is clearly aimed at students and novice researchers. Nevertheless, it is a good introductory guide for both new and experienced researchers, especially those who find that quantitative or more conventional qualitative methods do not help them to find meaningful answers to the questions they want to ask. Overall, however, I feel this is a useful concise introduction to autoethnography as a methodology.

(1,414 words including title, excluding references)

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Contemporary British Autoethnography. Saved in: Bibliographic Details. Â Published: Rotterdam : Sense Publishers, 2013. Series: Studies in Professional Life and Work Ser. Subjects: Autobiography > English authors. Â |a Intro -- Contemporary British Autoethnography -- TABLE OF CONTENTS -- Acknowledgements -- 1. Introduction: Storying Life and Lives -- 2. When We Got to the Top of Elm Grove -- 3. Writing Teaching and Survival in Mental Health: A Discordant Quintet for One -- 4. Cultural Constraints: Experiencing Same-Sex Attraction in Sport and Dance.