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On Being Degraded in Public Space: An Autoethnography

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Abstract

In the form of an autoethnography, the author analyzes a violent attack he suffered in public and discusses how the incident relates to a degradation ceremony. The author explains why the incident did not meet the required conditions of a successful degradation ceremony and defines a concept called degradation incident. Like a degradation ceremony, a person who experiences a degradation incident is perceived by the public as lower in the local scheme of social types. Unlike a degradation ceremony, transformation of one's total identity is not a required outcome of a degradation incident. The significance of being degraded in public without experiencing a transformation of total identity is discussed.

Keywords

Degradation Ceremony, Degradation Incident, and Autoethnography

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On Being Degraded in Public Space: An Autoethnography

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In the form of an autoethnography, the author analyzes a violent attack he suffered in public and discusses how the incident relates to a degradation ceremony. The author explains why the incident did not meet the required conditions of a successful degradation ceremony and defines a concept called degradation incident. Like a degradation ceremony, a person who experiences a degradation incident is perceived by the public as lower in the local scheme of social types. Unlike a degradation ceremony, transformation of one's total identity is not a required outcome of a degradation incident. The significance of being degraded in public without experiencing a transformation of total identity is discussed. Key Words: Degradation Ceremony, Degradation Incident, and Autoethnography

Introduction

Several years ago my friend and I received a vicious beating in public. Our attackers made no attempt to take anything from us. The two men spoke no words while they administered the beating. We have no explanation of why they attacked us. Curled up on my couch for hours after the beating, I tried to make sense of my experience. As I replayed the incident in my head, a concept I had learned about in graduate school kept returning to my mind: degradation ceremony. I believed I had experienced my own degradation ceremony. Did the conditions for a successful degradation ceremony occur that evening? Or, did I experience something resembling a degradation ceremony? I explore these questions in the form of an autoethnography. I begin by explaining the degradation ceremony concept and offer cases in which the concept has been applied. Garfinkel (1956) offered the seminal description of degradation ceremony:

Any communicative work between persons, whereby the public identity of an actor is transformed into something looked on as lower in the local scheme of social types, will be called a status degradation ceremony (p. 420).

According to Garfinkel, a key feature of a degradation ceremony is that a transformation of identity occurs. The transformation does not involve the substitution of one identity for another. Rather, the person becomes a different and new person in the eyes of his condemners. Thus, degradation ceremonies are concerned with the alteration of total identities. Public denunciation is crucial to a successful degradation ceremony. Someone publicly announces that a person is in essence a lower species. In a degradation ceremony, the ritual destruction of a person is intended.

In a degradation ceremony, the individual is called to account before the group, witnesses denounce him, the offender is pronounced guilty, and steps are taken to strip

the individual of his identity as a group member. As Henslin (2003) points out, Hester Prynne serves as an example of someone who encountered a degradation ceremony. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, town officials forced Prynne to wear a scarlet "A" sewn on her dress to indicate that she was an adulteress. The scarlet "A" was essentially a badge of shame, and it branded Prynne as a moral outcast from the community.

Ceremonial features are key to bringing about a successful degradation. For example, Emerson (1969) shows how juvenile courtroom proceedings are structured so that delinquents are degraded and given the status of wrongdoer. Another important feature of a successful degradation ceremony is the transformation of a person's total identity. For instance, in their analysis of the construction of Benedict Arnold's reputation as a traitor, Ducharme and Fine (1995) explain how Arnold was transformed from celebrated military hero to despised villain. A denouncer is crucial to the process of transforming someone's total identity during a degradation ceremony. For example, Richardson (1975) shows how a pastor played the role of denouncer in a process that transformed a man's identity from financial leader and long-time church member to that of troublemaker. Eventually, the man and his family were forced to leave the church they helped to create.

Together these cases illustrate that a degradation ceremony is a formal, ceremonial process involving the denunciation of someone who ultimately suffers a transformation to his total identity. Having shown how the degradation ceremony concept has been applied, I will later explore whether my experience of being attacked in public met the required conditions of a successful degradation ceremony, as delineated by Garfinkel (1956). First, I discuss autoethnography and explain why I chose this method to analyze what happened to me.

Methodology

Autoethnography views the researcher's own experience as a topic of investigation in its own right (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). It is a mode of inquiry that challenges conventional norms of scholarly discourse. These norms, or "metarules," privilege arguments, theories, abstractions and jargon over feelings, stories, concrete events, and accessible prose (p. 746).

An autoethnography is one of the methods of inquiry that Richardson (2000, pp. 927-930) calls "creative analytic practices"--that is, creative and analytic writing formats that are valid representations of the social world. Quantitative research, as Richardson notes, can be interpreted through tables and summaries. On the other hand, she observes, the meaning of qualitative research is carried in the text. Autoethnography and other creative analytical practices do not follow standard writing formats prescribed by traditional social science practices. By nurturing our own voices, Richardson says, we release hold of the "science writing" that not only grips our consciousness but also sustains a particular vision of what constitutes knowledge. Among the criteria that Richardson (p. 937) uses to evaluate this type of work are substantive contribution (e.g., Does the work contribute to our understanding of social life?) and reflexivity (e.g., How did the author come to write this text?).

Autoethnographies have taken many forms, such as a short story about a family member dying of cancer (Jago, 2005), a personal account about homophobia and the struggle to understand homosexuality (McLaurin, 2003), an essay about how the competing demands of teaching, research, and scholarship make it difficult to do one's work as an academic in a way that is not superficial (Pelias, 2003); and an examination of decisions to pursue a new career at midlife, exploring issues of gender and age in the process (Klinker & Todd, 2007). Davis (2005) offers an account of his training as a marriage and family therapist, and describes how a meaningful experience with his father changed their relationship and also changed him professionally. As another example, Ellis (1998) wrote an autoethnographic story about hating her voice. She has a lisp, something she characterizes as a minor bodily stigma. Aside from conveying the process of living with a stigma, she uses her personal experience as a way of discussing Goffman's (1963b) broader concept of stigma. In doing so, she integrates theory with narrative.

There are even autoethnographies about writing autoethnographies. For instance, Holt (2003) writes about the process of getting an autoethnographic manuscript published in the discipline of physical education pedagogy, using comments from journal reviewers as a data source. In doing so, he sheds light on how autoethnographies are evaluated by reviewers and editors when judged by traditional criteria. Muncey (2005) discusses the various techniques she used to construct an autoethnography about teenage pregnancy, such as photographs and artifacts. Wall (2008) reflects on the process of writing an autoethnography about her experience as an adoptive parent. She discusses issues she confronted when writing her story, including representation, objectivity, data quality, and ethics. As the autoethnography genre emerges and defines itself, she argues, it is important that those who use the method reflect on, and share, their experiences.

Some criticism has been directed at autoethnography. For instance, in his review of Carolyn Ellis's *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*, Goode (2006, p. 259) is critical of Ellis for not offering a clear, systematic definition of autoethnography. He expresses concerns about certain elements associated with the genre; for example, the notion that autoethnography has therapeutic value for the researcher and potentially for readers. Goode challenges the idea that research has anything to do with therapy. It is important to point out that he does not dismiss the genre entirely, i.e. he refers to Ellis's autoethnographical *Final Negotiations* as "heroic" and describes his experience reading it as "exhilarating". Atkinson (1997) does not specifically write about autoethnography but does address the subject of researchers who use narratives in their research. Though he believes narratives can provide valuable insights, he is critical of narratives that merely are a "celebration of the individual subject" (Atkinson, p. 335). Such narratives, in his view, are void of social context, social action, and social interaction. Consequently, he asserts, they do not achieve serious social analysis.

Sparkes (2002) discusses the charge that autoethnographies and other personal narratives are self-indulgent. Though he acknowledges these forms of representation can become self-indulgent, he does not think that self-indulgence is characteristic of the genre. Rather, he believes the genre is exemplified by self-knowing, self-luminous writing that celebrates concrete experience and intimate detail. That the researcher includes oneself in a vulnerable, emotional way does not automatically mean the work is

an exercise in self-indulgence. As Wall (2008) says, autoethnography offers a way of giving voice to personal experience while advancing sociological understanding. This does not mean we have to abandon conventional academic writing. Autoethnographies and other forms of personal narratives can be likened to learning a second language (Richardson, 2000). As Richardson points out, learning alternative ways of writing increases our repertoires and the number of audiences we might reach.

Having discussed autoethnography as a method of inquiry, I turn to a reflection of how this paper evolved over a period of several years. I do so with the understanding that reflexivity is a key ingredient of autoethnographic work (Richardson, 2000; Wall, 2008). Then, I tell my story about being beaten on a public street.

How This Paper Came to Be

This paper began in May 2001. I had finished my Ph.D. coursework at Stony Brook University and completed two of three “track papers” required by the department before I could write a dissertation proposal. These track papers were in three categories: analytic, empirical, and theoretical. I handled the analytic and empirical papers without much trouble, but the theoretical paper was a major obstacle. I wasn’t sure what exactly constituted a theoretical paper. For a long time I thought I would never write it and therefore never even get to the beginning stages of a dissertation.

I found my inspiration for the theoretical paper after getting beat up in Buffalo in May 2001. The day after the beating, I wrote about the episode as a way of trying to grasp what had happened. I kept thinking of Garfinkel’s degradation ceremony concept. I thought that if I explored my experience with Garfinkel’s concept as my foundation, then perhaps I would end up with a theoretical paper. I completed the paper and was relieved when it was accepted by the department. One of the people who read that version of the paper was Erich Goode. He was one of my professors when I took graduate courses in the mid-1990s at Stony Brook. Goode had since moved on to the University of Maryland, but kindly agreed to read my paper anyway. I still have the letter he wrote after reading the paper, dated June 14, 2001, in which he offered supportive and constructive feedback. Of course, I focused on the encouraging portions, including his remark that my paper had “possibilities.” By no means did Goode say that I had a finished paper on my hands, nor did he say that it was ready for publication. He was merely telling me to do my homework and improve my paper. He mentioned an article by Carolyn Ellis (1998) in the *Sociological Quarterly*. Foolishly, I didn’t retrieve Ellis’ article. Instead, I made some revisions to the paper and submitted it to Journal #1.

I received a rejection letter from Journal #1 in August 2001. The editor suggested that I pursue my topic but to do so by tying my personal experience to a broader set of accounts from victims of interpersonal violence. One idea that he offered was to sign up for a police ride-along program in order to accompany officers as they responded to violent incidents. Another idea he gave was to get permission to join therapy groups for victims of interpersonal violence. These were interesting suggestions, both of them conventional research projects, but neither strategy would allow me to tell the story I wanted to tell. I believed there was sufficient value in sharing my individual story and by tying it to the literature on the degradation ceremony concept.

I let the paper go for a while, a long while, as I was working on my dissertation on an unrelated topic and eventually submitted it to Journal #2. Now February 2005, the paper was once again rejected. The upside was that one of the reviewers thoroughly critiqued the content of my paper, offering helpful suggestions to improve the substance of my argument. I followed much of the advice, and submitted a substantially revised version to Journal #3. In October 2006 I received an e-mail from the editor stating my article had merit but that it was unfinished. He encouraged me to revise and resubmit the manuscript, but offered suggestions that, had I followed them, would have turned my article into a very different paper. Again, the result would have been a conventional manuscript without the story I wanted to tell.

At the time I sent my paper to Journal #3, I had also asked Kenneth Feldman, my dissertation advisor at Stony Brook, to read the latest version of my paper. After he read it, he asked if I was acquainted with autoethnography and mentioned the work of Carolyn Ellis. He also sent me an article about autoethnography by Nicholas Holt (2003). Though I read Holt's article and e-mailed Holt to ask if he would read my paper, I was once again foolish in not familiarizing myself with Ellis' work. I was being stubborn. I wanted to believe that I had a finished paper on my hands. I was deliberately looking for someone to validate the paper I had already written. Holt responded in October 2006, offering helpful feedback and encouraging words. However, like those I had reached out to before, he did not tell me what I wanted to hear--that my manuscript was publishable in its current form.

I left the paper idle until I learned of *The Qualitative Report*. I was excited by a statement on the journal's website: "We strongly believe all authors and their research have merit." I submitted my paper in September 2007, writing to the editor that I was encouraged by the journal's mission. In February 2008 I was informed that my paper was accepted into the journal's manuscript development program. One of the reviewers, Maureen Duffy, commented that she liked the approach I had taken but said I had not properly framed my experience in a qualitative research context. She recommended that I consider framing my experience from an autoethnographic perspective and supplied me with a reference (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) to get me started if I were to take that route.

I decided to pursue this paper as an autoethnography and embarked on a course of studying the method. I finally wised up and looked into the work of Carolyn Ellis. As I became familiar with her work, I nearly quit working on this paper. After reading her narrative about the death of her brother in a plane crash (Ellis, 1993), I felt underwhelmed by my own story about getting attacked. My one-time beating couldn't compare to the tragedy of a lost family member. Nor could my story offer the kind of powerful emotion unleashed by Ellis in her extraordinary narrative. I felt the same thing when I read *Final Negotiations* (Ellis, 1995). Analyzing my experience of being humiliated in public seemed like an exercise in self-pity compared with the deep introspection achieved by Ellis' story of the highs and lows she experienced in the course of her intimate relationship.

I also faced a dilemma about whether it was appropriate to call my work an autoethnography. After all, it had not started out as one, and part of me felt I was awkwardly trying to retrofit my manuscript so that it would become one. As I learned more about the method, I wished I had paid attention to those who had taken time trying to coach me. Had I followed Erich Goode's advice in 2001 to look into the work of

Carolyn Ellis, I would have discovered that what I had written was autoethnographical in nature. The very article to which Goode pointed, Ellis' (1998) narrative about her lisp as a stigma, would have been the perfect model for me to follow. Her article shows how sociological theory and personal experience can be combined in a way that enhances understanding of our social world. All along, that was what I was trying to achieve in this paper.

Despite my reservations, I continued working on my paper, realizing that each autoethnography is unique because each one is written with a specific purpose and with a particular degree of emotion. The point is not to compare tragedy or trauma. The point is that autoethnography is a genre that allows us to tell the stories we want to tell, in the way that we want to tell them. As Richardson (1990, p. 120) says: "How we are expected to write affects what we can write about." I think that is why there is not a precise definition of autoethnography. By being inexact, the genre opens space for more stories to be told. What follows is the story I want to tell. After years of revisions and starts and stops, here is how I tell it.

The Incident

It was a night out in Buffalo, New York. My friend Jeff was visiting from California. We went to a bar to have a few beers and catch up on old times. After a couple of uneventful hours, we decided to head home, but not before getting a few slices of pizza. From the bar, we walked the length of three storefronts, purchased our pizza, and stood quietly outside enjoying the mid-May air. As I began to eat, I heard three words I'll never forget: "Let's get 'em!" By way of curiosity, I lifted my head, catching a glimpse of the stranger who uttered these words, only to receive a punch in my face. It was a very clean shot, right to my mouth. I was too stunned to react. He delivered a second blow; as I received it, I noticed my friend getting the same treatment from my attacker's partner in crime. When he punched me a third time, I lost my footing. I fell to the ground and my shoulder hit the pavement. He was remarkably consistent: all three shots landed squarely to the right side of my mouth. I tried to get up, and as I rose, I watched my friend circle around to avoid another punch, but as I later found out, he took a good shot under his left eye. Before I could get to my feet, my assailant nailed me one final time. This pushed me backwards, so I took advantage of momentum and backed myself into the pizzeria, figuring he wouldn't follow. Fortunately for me, he didn't.

Seconds later, two bouncers from the bar made their way to the scene, and assisted my friend. As they did, a handful of Buffalo policemen arrived. My nemesis told a spectacular lie to the cops: he had merely jumped in to help his friend. His friend, subdued by one of the bouncers, didn't bother to corroborate. Pointing in my attacker's face, I hollered: "SHUT UP! SHUT UP! YOU'RE A LIAR. BE A MAN. BE A MAN AND TELL THE TRUTH." The officers let me tell my side of the story, but they weren't concerned. They merely cleared the scene. The bouncers returned to their post. Spectators near the pizzeria moved on. Dazed and confused, I lost track of our attackers. I asked a cop if I could have a ride home, but he laughed and said "We're waiting for food." They walked around the corner. It was a case of civil inattention, defined by Goffman (1963a) as follows:

What seems to be involved is that one gives to another enough visual notice to demonstrate that one appreciates that the other is present (and that one admits openly to having seen him), while at the next moment withdrawing one's attention from him so as to express that he does not constitute a target of special curiosity or design. (p. 84)

My friend and I stared at each other in disbelief. We walked back towards the bar, planning to speak to the bouncers. Then, we thought we saw our attackers walk into the bar. Perhaps with revenge in mind, we raced towards them, only to be restrained by the same bouncers who had ended the attack. As they did, I heard a customer on the bar patio holler "What's that homo gonna do?" I looked up and saw him glaring at me. Two things occurred to me: first, he used a word designed to emasculate me. It is the oldest male trick in the book: calling another male a "fag," "queer," or "homo" in order to suggest he is not a real man. Second, I thought, he assumed I was beaten in a fight. Seeing my busted lip he must have figured I had lost fairly, so what could I accomplish by chasing the man who had pummeled me? It was a degrading experience: I had just been victimized by an act of violence and this man's response was to insult me in front of several onlookers.

Analysis

As noted earlier, Garfinkel (1956, p. 420) describes a degradation ceremony as "any communicative work between persons, whereby the public identity of an actor is transformed into something looked on as lower in the local scheme of social types."

I believe Garfinkel's (1956) definition relates to the episode that I have described. There were three key elements of communicative work I encountered. First, the physical attack I suffered at the hands of a stranger. Second, the civil inattention I received from the policemen. Third, the verbal insult issued by the individual on the patio. In public I became a man who apparently was unable to defend himself, a man not worthy of the police's time and concern, and a man deserving of mockery from the audience on the patio. I was thus constituted as a lower social type on the street that evening. In short I became a "homo," a man who cannot defend himself.

There is no doubt I was degraded that evening. To degrade is to reduce to a lower rank; to debase or deprave; to lower in dignity or estimation. What I experienced, in succession, was: a solid beating at the hands of a stranger, police officers dismissing me, an audience on a bar patio staring at me, and one vocal member of that audience denouncing me. In those few minutes I was quickly reduced in value in the public's eye.

However, upon interpretation of Garfinkel's (1956) concept, I recognize that my experience was not truly a degradation ceremony for three main reasons. First, according to Garfinkel, a person's total identity must be transformed: "The person becomes in the eyes of his condemners literally a different and new person...He is not changed, he is reconstituted" (Garfinkel, p. 421). I cannot say that my total identity was transformed. It might be said that my identity was discredited--I will comment on this possibility later. But it cannot be said that I was reconstituted because there was no "transformation of essence" (Garfinkel, p. 422).

Second, there was no ceremony. A degradation ceremony is formal, structured, planned, and intended to not only degrade an individual but to transform his total identity.

I did not experience a structured ceremonial proceeding. The episode was indeed degrading, but it was not a staged ceremonial proceeding. Rather, it was a spontaneous incident with my degradation as an outcome.

Third, for a successful denunciation to occur, there must exist a denouncer who is regarded as acting in his capacity as a public figure. I consider the man on the patio who called me a “homo” to be my denouncer. However, according to Garfinkel (1956), the denouncer must arrange to be invested with the right to speak in the name of the values of the group. What the denouncer says must be regarded by the witnesses as true, whereby the witnesses assume that they and denouncer are alike in essence. My interpretation of Garfinkel leads me to believe that a degradation ceremony involves a prominent figure declaring something like: “With the authority vested in me, and with the support of the witnesses that surround me, I hereby denounce this man who can no longer be one of us. He is something less than the rest of us. In fact, as we look back at events in his life, we can see that he always was, in essence, something less than us.” This did not occur. My denouncer was not invested with the right to speak on behalf of witnesses. The denouncer was not invested in transforming my essence. He did, however, play a major part in humiliating me. And it is significant that no one on the patio challenged his comments. His denouncement went uncontested. The patrons on the patio were the witnesses to my denunciation, and, they conformed to his point of view.

On Being Degraded in Public Space

I have established that I did not experience a degradation ceremony. The required conditions for a successful degradation ceremony were not present that evening. The event was not planned to transform my total identity and my degradation was not orchestrated by a denouncer who spoke on behalf of a social group. What, then, did I experience? As argued earlier, I was degraded. I was ridiculed in public space. My total identity was not destroyed but it was, in a sense, discredited. Despite being victimized, I was mocked in public. A man called me a “homo” to suggest I was not a real man and to ridicule my attempt to retaliate against my attacker. In that moment my identity was discredited: I became someone who possessed an attribute that made me different from the others with whom I shared public space that evening. I now possessed a stigma, an “undesired differentness” (Goffman 1963b, p. 5). It is the type of stigma that Goffman refers to as a blemish of individual character. On public display I was “separated from a place in the legitimate order”, I was placed outside, and made strange (Garfinkel 1956, p. 424). I was denounced and discredited as an individual who cannot defend himself and as someone who deserves to be humiliated in public.

What I experienced that evening was a degradation incident. I define degradation incident as an occasion when a person, having been degraded, is perceived by the public as lower in the local scheme of social types. No formal ceremony is required. The occasion need not be planned. It is not essential for a group to invest their values in a denouncer. Transformation of one’s total identity is not required. In a degradation incident one’s identity may be discredited. One may be discredited based on physical

characteristics, perceived character deficiencies, or because of the “tribal stigma” of race, nation, and religion (Goffman 1963b, p. 4).

One might ask: what does it matter if someone is degraded but does not experience transformation of one’s total identity? One answer, I believe, is that consequences such as fear of surroundings, mistrust of others, and a change in self-concept might be the result of a humiliating incident. Much like the victims of muggings interviewed by Lejeune and Alex (1973), my degradation incident shattered the frame of everyday life. The encounter left me in a mindset to question basic assumptions about my surroundings. The typical middle-class citizen expects that in familiar surroundings, he will be free from the attacks of others. But being attacked, dismissed, and degraded broke this assumption of invulnerability and generated mistrust of others. This is no small matter. As Hewitt (1989) declares, one’s neighborhood is supposed to function as a safe haven, a secure place to help individuals maintain a sense of place and purpose in the social world.

There is also the matter of public space to consider. Scholars have lent rich insights about how people exert control and power in public space (Anderson, 1990; Duneier, 1999). In interviews with individuals who committed muggings, Lejeune’s (1977) subjects stated they selected people whom they perceived as unlikely to resist. Although a mugging is not the same thing as a beating, the victims selected often have something in common: they are perceived as physically powerless (or, perceived as not powerful enough to resist). After my beating, I speculated with friends and family members as to why my friend and I had been selected. I am small, only 5’5” and 155 pounds and my friend is not much bigger. We perhaps appeared as easy prey to our attackers. I doubt they would have attempted to bully larger, intimidating figures.

In some cases individuals are treated in public space according to their physical characteristics. At the sight of a young black man, for example, some white citizens will cross to the other side of the street. As such, some individuals are treated disrespectfully because they are black. Consider, also, women who are harassed by men when walking in public. Some men stare at women. Others make rude comments to them. Some will even touch them as they walk by. Women, then, are also treated differently because of physical characteristics. Wheelchair users have offered accounts of the differential treatment they receive in public because of their condition (Cahill & Eggleston, 1994). What do I have in common with members of these groups? I was perhaps treated according to my physical characteristics.

In the public realm, it is obvious that people who share social space do not have a lot of information about each other. We know little about strangers we encounter in public. The details we observe-- race, gender, age, size--place people into categories. I knew nothing personal about the man who punched me in the face. My attacker knew nothing personal about me. However, the categories into which I was placed--male, adult, small--qualified me as a physical object to be dominated.

Earlier, I suggested that a change in self-concept might be the result of a humiliating incident. This can happen if a person is denounced and takes seriously the view of his denouncer. A person might think of himself differently long after the denouncement takes place. In my case, I admit to thinking to the present day that my denouncer might have been right: maybe I am incapable of defending myself. All these years later, I wonder how I would react in a similar situation. Would I manage a punch

this time? Thwart the would-be attacker? Administer a beating of my own while screaming “NOT THIS TIME”--that’s how I imagine it anyway. It’s sad, or strange, that I tend to look over both shoulders when I open my car door or hear someone walking close behind me. Maybe I have good reason to be afraid. It’s not uncommon that I read about somebody who was assaulted in public. For instance, in March 2008, a 21-year-old college student was beaten into paralysis outside a bar in Buffalo at 3:30 in the morning (Vogel, 2008). As of June 2008, he was still unable to walk (Meyer, 2008). When I first read the story of this young man I couldn’t help but think that could have been me.

Within the span of a year I witnessed both the good and the bad sides of Buffalo. In November 2000, a blizzard crippled Buffalo for two days. Never before have I seen a city operate like a small community. There were people pushing strangers’ cars out of ice and snow; others were handing off their cell phones so stranded motorists could call their loved ones; young men used snowmobiles to deliver medicine and baby food. From the good to the bad: in May 2001, as an anonymous member of the city, I got knocked around by a young thug, brushed off by the police, and subsequently mocked by people on the street. Maybe there was something in the air. That month, there were nineteen homicides in Buffalo--the highest number of homicides of any month in Buffalo’s history (Habuda, 2001). It is obvious that getting beat up is less serious than homicide, but both are violent acts. I sometimes wonder what might have happened if my beating had taken place one street over, where no bouncers existed to intervene. My shoulder took a hard fall to the concrete--what if it had been my head?

Now it is 2008, and my shoulder still isn’t right. I’ve never said anything to my physician. I don’t go to chiropractors. I tried Reiki, an alternative form of healing, but it didn’t work. My shoulder is the scar you can’t see. It reminds me of my beating. So does the pizzeria where the attack occurred. Sometimes, when I walk by it with friends, they tease me about my unofficial boycott of the pizzeria. For them, the incident is fodder for jokes. People have laughed when the story has been retold. I guess there’s something funny about getting punched in the face when you didn’t deserve it.

I told students in my spring 2008 Research Methods class about my efforts to publish this article as an autoethnography. In doing so I shared the details of what happened to me. They were very interested. A few days later I was asked by a smiling student in my Introduction to Sociology class if would tell the story to the class. I said no. It turns out his friend was in my Research Methods class. I was naïve for thinking the story would stay within the walls of one classroom and be used only as part of a discussion about research methods.

For me, what I experienced is no laughing matter nor is it a good story. The effects have been long-lasting. To this day, whenever I pass a stranger on the street, if he moves too close to me or has a strange look in his eye, I get tense and think that a confrontation is imminent. Perhaps that is the most serious consequence of my degradation incident: distrust of fellow man.

Concluding Remarks

And so ends a journey of sorts. After many years of trying to tell my story, I have finally told it. Earlier, in discussing the evolution of this paper, I mentioned some comments that I received over the years during the peer-review process. Some reviewers

pushed me in a conventional direction. Although that was a path I chose not to take, there are indeed a variety of ways that one could explore this subject while using traditional research methods. For instance, one could interview individuals who have been victimized and degraded in public. Among the possible inquiries: How does someone react to his or her environment after experiencing a degradation incident? Has the denouncer influenced the person to think differently about him or herself? Has the person's view of human nature changed? What are the conditions that engender hostile reactions to someone who has been victimized? Another conventional research project could be based on interviews of individuals who have been victimized and degraded in order to investigate why people are not all treated the same way as they move through public space. Beyond public space, an analysis of public discourse could be pursued. For example, one could examine how individuals are degraded and discredited by talk show hosts, columnists, and bloggers.

I don't mention these ideas to suggest that such approaches are better than the autoethnographical approach I have taken. I don't view one particular form of qualitative inquiry as superior, just as I don't view qualitative methods as superior to quantitative methods, or vice versa. Qualitative and quantitative research, conventional and unconventional writing--there is room for all styles. Though the means differ, the ends are similar: produce knowledge in a way that enhances understanding of the world we inhabit.

I close with final thoughts on autoethnography. I view it as a genre in progress. I see it as a genre that stimulates creative inquiries. Some autoethnographies are more analytic than others. They acknowledge the relevant literature to various degrees. I expect the genre to gain in popularity. The increased popularity, I believe, will reflect the desire of scholars to not be boxed in by a formulaic way of writing and conducting research.

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