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Abstract

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Keywords

autoethnography, reflexivity, transformative, qualitative research, education

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Autoethnography as a Transformative Research Method

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Autoethnography is a qualitative, transformative research method because it changes time, requires vulnerability, fosters empathy, embodies creativity and innovation, eliminates boundaries, honors subjectivity, and provides therapeutic benefits. This article discusses these seven lenses using select passages from “Jesus Christ and Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups: A Narrative on Homosexual Identity, Spirituality, and Human Development” (an unpublished manuscript) written in 2013. Keywords: autoethnography, reflexivity, transformative, qualitative research, education

The Journey Begins: Falling Into Autoethnography

Several months ago I began a journey. The journey was a personal adventure into my subconscious in an effort to understand and find closure with certain traumatic events from my past, but what started out as a simple story quickly became a full-fledged research project centered around embodied writing, performance, and autoethnography. The final product later came to be known as “Jesus Christ and Reese’sTM Peanut Butter Cups: A Narrative on Homosexual Identity, Spirituality, and Human Development” (“JCRPBC”; Custer, 2013). At first, the method I chose to use for this article was foreign to me, but as I immersed myself in the existing literature and reflected upon my style of writing, I came to know and embrace autoethnography.

Autoethnography is a style of autobiographical writing and qualitative research that explores an individual’s unique life experiences in relationship to social and cultural institutions. Carolyn Ellis in the *Handbook of Autoethnography* describes this powerful qualitative method eloquently.

... autoethnography is not simply a way of knowing about the world; it has become a way of being in the world, one that requires living consciously, emotionally, reflexively. It asks that we not only examine our lives but also consider how and why we think, act, and feel as we do. Autoethnography requires that we observe ourselves observing, that we interrogate what we think and believe, and that we challenge our own assumptions, asking over and over if we have penetrated as many layers of our own defenses, fears, and insecurities as our project requires. It asks that we rethink and revise our lives, making conscious decisions about who and how we want to be. And in the process, it seeks a story that is hopeful, where authors ultimately write themselves as survivors of the story they are living. (Jones, 2013, p. 10)

The process of autoethnography can uncover many different feelings within the writer. It can be joyful, sad, revealing, exciting, and occasionally painful. Diana Raab (2013) writes, “Because many autoethnographical studies relate to painful experiences, the researcher may encounter difficult moments during the course of the research and writing” (p. 14). Not only does an individual have to face their own pain, often times they are exposed to the pain and anguish of other people who have experienced similar circumstances. It is not an easy task to

relate to who we were in the past and understand how that translates into our identity today, but it is worth the effort in order to reap the rewards of reflexivity and introspection. This “looking into the mirror” requires radical honesty with oneself with the need to be forgiving, compassionate, and understanding, and find meaning from horrific, painful, or troubling events. Sell-Smith and Lax (2013) state, “It was important for me to find meaning in my experiences of pregnancy loss...a common theme in my life” (p. 8).

My own experiences initially revealed five lenses about autoethnography as a research method that evolved and transformed over time as I feasted on the writing of other people. I have reinterpreted these lenses and included two new ones that revealed themselves through additional reflection. This article discusses autoethnography as a transformative research method by highlighting those seven lenses. In addition, it integrates examples of personal narrative from my life utilizing text from “Jesus Christ and Reese'sTM Peanut Butter Cups” (Custer, 2013), and incorporates examples of the benefits of applying autoethnography in professional situations.

Lens 1: Autoethnography Changes Time

Autoethnography can radically alter an individual's perception of the past, inform their present, and reshape their future if they are aware and open to the transformative effects. Much of the process of autoethnography revolves around the idea of time and space. Time, as a linear procession of past, present, and future increments of experience, undergoes a metamorphosis. It becomes a dance without boundaries. Space includes all of the elements that an individual utilizes to construct their identity. Those elements can be corporeal objects (e.g. their body, a house, a loved one, etc.) or non-corporeal manifestations (e.g. beliefs, personality traits, ideas, etc.). Our perspective of these two factors can fundamentally alter the view we have of our lives.

Throughout the process of writing my own narrative, I was often reminded of the shifting sands of time and space. The circumstances of my youth have been reshaped and reformed many times over the last few decades. The subjective nature of memory allows me to hold it in my mind, move it around, and see it from many different angles. Nancy Mangano Rowe (2009) refers to this concept as “space-time dimensions of movement” (p. 127). In reference to sandplay and other expressive arts therapy like autoethnography, she writes that those who use these methods “understand the significance of moving through time and space in the healing process” (p. 127).

Many of the experiences we participate in or witness during our lifetimes generally are positive in their effect on our psychological and emotional wellbeing; however, for every positive event there are just as many situations that are debilitating, traumatic, and even horrific to recall. Autoethnography assumes that the writer has allowed him or herself the freedom to enter into these situations again in order to write and share them with the world. This freedom comes with a cost—that cost is the necessary reformation of the way we view something that we have experienced. For example, in order for me to write about pedophilia, suicide, homophobia, and religious bigotry, I had to make a pact with myself to be willing to see the kaleidoscope of possibilities contained in each issue (radical honesty and truth). I had to redirect emotion and energy in order to place myself within the context of the circumstances over and over again. Rowe (2009) emphasizes that “this energy can profoundly change the internal psychological complexes that result in changes in the external world as well” (p. 122).

So what occurred as I wrote about myself in a different time and place over 30 years ago? In a nutshell, I was able to view my life as if I were filming a movie. Imagination gave me the opportunity to move stage props around, redress characters, alter the emotional impact of spoken lines, recreate the dynamic between individuals, lighten the mood or make it heavier,

and gain new perspective of lived experiences. This projection through “space-time dimensions” forced me to become more empathetic towards people that I had distanced myself from for many years, and to see events in completely different ways.

In writing about the unseen and unknown birth mother of her internationally adopted son, Sarah Wall (2008) beautifully illustrates how she formed empathy for this woman. The more I read, however, the more my problem of representation grew. I began to understand her perspective, her circumstances, and, thus, the enormity of her decision to “abandon her child.” I started to empathize with her, and this created tension in how I might reconcile my long-standing exclusion of her from my consciousness with a new awareness of what her experience might have been. (p. 41)

This is exactly how I came to be able to write about those individuals who sexually, psychologically, and emotionally abused me as a child three decades ago. I cannot say I was able to forgive those people, but I did open my heart and soul to the necessity of understanding their way of being.

Rosemarie Anderson (2001) states, “What can be known is interpretive, ever changing, and creative. It can never be *nailed down* in an objectivistic sense. What is *true* today interpretively is not necessarily so tomorrow” (p. 87). To the best of my ability I altered time and space by reshaping how I perceive the phenomenon and individuals from my past life. Through autoethnography I was given the opportunity to interpret and reinterpret the fabric of my life’s memories, thus constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing my identity.

Lens 2: Autoethnography Requires Vulnerability

Autoethnography promotes vulnerability, nakedness, and shame in order to heal psychological and emotional wounds when individuals and society are receptive to the cathartic effects of feminine energies. I write from “JCRPBC” (Custer, 2013):

I was eleven years old when I lost my virginity to an older man.

The early morning light is beginning to punch through the heavy curtains draped across the living room window of my mother’s 14 x 70 mobile home in rural Pennsylvania. The snore of my brother lying beside me is rhythmic. He can sleep through a tornado. I can see my mother’s toes on the couch sticking out from under an afghan she finished knitting a few days ago. Her breathing is also heavy. Being relegated to the floor to sleep has become a common event during the summer. My mother thinks it saves electricity by shutting off the other rooms from air conditioning. We nest ourselves like a pack of animals in a burrow in the confines of a dark and sterile box called the “living” room. More like “death” room if you ask me.

Oh, I forgot to mention the most important part of this story. Above my head and to the right on the wall facing north hangs a picture of Jesus Christ nailed to the cross. He bleeds from his hands, feet, and head. A light bulb is installed at the top of the frame so that when it’s turned on a beam shines down from heaven on the grisly image. The gruesome piece of wall decoration no longer has the shock effect on me as it once did. I now notice that Christ has a great body. His pecs are fleshy mounds of masculinity, his ripped abdominal area is toned to an eight-pack, and his thighs are thick and meaty. There isn’t one hair on his entire youthful body. Some areas of his skin appear to glisten from sweat and all that is keeping him from being fully nude is a loincloth across his mid-section. My heart is racing thinking about the sacrilegious things I’d like to do with a guy like that. I’m not the least bit attracted to the beard, but that can be shaved off. Christ is my shepherd, and I want nothing more than to do the dirty with him. Christ leads me through the path of darkness into a back room filled with gloryholes. Christ makes me to lie down in green pastures where we film a pornographic scene of mutual

lust. Yes, I know. I'm only eleven. (p. 1)

In her book *Daring Greatly*, Brené Brown (2012) discusses the concept of vulnerability (the elucidation of physical, psychological, emotional, or spiritual insecurities to self and others) in great depth. She immediately connects courage and fear with the level of vulnerability we are comfortable engaging with and displaying to the world.

Vulnerability is not weakness, and the uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure we face every day are not optional. Our only choice is a question of engagement. Our willingness to own and engage with our vulnerability determines the depth of our courage and the clarity of our purpose; the level to which we protect ourselves from being vulnerable is a measure of our fear and disconnection.

Autoethnography by its very nature is engagement. It is reaching deep down into the soul and pulling up trash and scum. It is a dirty job. However, the results of engagement with oneself are the act of "courage and clarity of purpose." By choosing to withhold our deepest and most intimate thoughts from ourselves and the world, in effect, we create fear, insecurity, and distrust. Brown (2012) declares, "We need to feel trust to be vulnerable and we need to be vulnerable in order to trust" (p. 46).

Throughout the process of discovering my own vulnerability through writing, I began to understand and perceive subtle energies working on my psychological makeup. These energies were almost elusive in nature. They were not overt in the sense that they were forceful or aggressive. They were passive, receptive, sympathetic, gentle, and patient. Contrary to masculine energy that intimidates, constrains, demands, objectifies, and enforces, the energies working through my autoethnographic writing were feminine. They permitted me to be vulnerable, feel shame, and allow subjectivity in my theoretical work. At first I was fearful of subjectivity, but quickly realized that the fear limited my ability to trust. The feminine voice inside persuaded me to write about events from my past that were buried deep within my body. They invited me to bring the scars of abuse into the light of day where I could witness their true nature and permit them to heal. It wasn't easy.

Writing autoethnography is a test of one's ability to be vulnerable to his or her self. It cuts and it rips at our spiritual and psychological bodies, and can even cause the manifestation of injury in our physical bodies. Old wounds are reopened and exposed to the world. The exposition is at first cold, calloused, and terrifying, but by keeping our eyes open, the courage of being naked and vulnerable begins to heal our gashes. We become the embodiment of courage through writing. Rosemarie Anderson (2001) says, "Embodied writing brings the finely textured experience of the body to the art of writing. Relaying human experience from the inside out and entwining in words our senses with the senses of the world, embodied writing affirms human life as embedded in the sensual world in which we live our lives" (emphasis in the original, p. 83).

It was through autoethnography and embodied writing that I affirmed myself and no longer needed to hide behind the facade of etiquette and protocol. I was free to be myself and to sing out loud with a voice that speaks to the shadow and invokes the light.

Lens 3: Autoethnography Fosters Empathy

Autoethnography enables empathy through the embodiment of stories. The "space-time dimensions of movements" between individuals and Self forms empathetic behaviors that foster transformation and healing. I write from "JCRPBC" (Custer, 2013).

To the other side of me on the floor lies my mother's boyfriend. He's about the same age as Jesus hanging on the wall. His name is Tom. Tom represents the only male adult figure in my life after my dad passed away six years ago. I hate Tom. I think I hate him the most

because he mistreats my mother. I don't like abusive assholes. Maybe pedophiles can smell the pubescent hormones of kids and maybe not, but nothing stopped Tom from strategically placing his hand near my crotch as he turned to his side.

Morning Wood, meet Hand.
Hand, meet Morning Wood.

The callous touch of Tom's hand on my penis is making me feel excited and also disgusted, but I give into the sexual tension of the moment. Tom obviously isn't asleep, but he's pretending to be. I block him out of my mind and focus on the feeling of orgasm. At least I think it's an orgasm. I'm not sure since my mother never explained the "how-to's" and "what-if's" of my male appendage. I don't know what else to do except go with the flow. I lost my virginity today. (p. 6)

How many times have you cried while watching a video online or were angered after reading a story in the newspaper about the struggles and trauma of other people? These feelings are known as empathy. We find a common frame of reference with strangers because we are able to put ourselves in their situation. Empathy fosters an environment of understanding, cooperation, transformation, and healing because we set aside our selfishness in lieu of altruistic and magnanimous behavior. In the same way, autoethnography "contains true-to-life, vivid depictions intended to invite sympathetic resonance in the readers or audience" (Anderson, 2001, p. 87).

The autoethnographic writer connects their own life experiences with those of onlookers in a way that transforms preconceived ideas and biases. My own writing evolved into a dialogue with a potential, and as yet unseen, readership. I exposed deeply held secrets and shadows from my life in order to place the readers in a comfortable voyeuristic position that might enable them to look at their own. From this existential sharing of spirit, community is born. "Autoethnographic texts reveal the fractures, sutures, and seams of self interacting with others in the context of researching lived experience. In interpreting the autoethnographic text, readers feel/sense the fractures in their own communicative lives..." (Spry, 2001, p. 712).

As I wrote "Jesus Christ and Reese'sTM Peanut Butter Cups" (Custer, 2013), I relived the smells, sights, sounds, and feelings of events long ago. I wrote from the heart in a way that would draw my readers into the living room of my mother's mobile home and feel the anger as I confronted her pedophilic boyfriend. I created a vivid holographic representation not only to get people to cry and shout, but to also think. While mentoring a student about using autoethnography as her dissertation research method, Carolyn Ellis (1999) said,

...if you viewed your project as closer to art than science, then your goal would not be so much to portray the facts of what happened to you accurately but instead to convey the meanings you attached to the experience. You'd want to tell a story that readers could enter and feel a part of. You'd write in a way to evoke readers to feel and think about your life and their lives in relation to yours. You'd want them to experience the experience you're writing about... (emphasis in the original, p. 674)

Over the process of writing my autoethnography, I found it more and more beneficial to be frank and honest. By placing myself in this mindset, I formed a trust relationship with myself that I feel is readily noticeable in my work. This inner trust, as mentioned above, expands to create a bond between people who initially may have had nothing in common with one another. Dropping the need to feel secure, becoming vulnerable to the world, and openly inviting judgment breaks down barriers between human beings. In the act of setting aside my

fear of exposure, I was able to contribute to the nurturing of empathy. Ultimately, this became one of the most important reasons to write my personal narrative regardless of how raw or uncouth it may have seemed to my inner critic.

Lens 4: Autoethnography Embodies Creativity and Innovation

Autoethnography incites creativity by enabling the imagination of the readers, and is innovative by design because it focuses on unique individual experiences. I write from “JCRPBC” (Custer, 2013).

Today is a good day! I fought back and released the rage that has been building in me over the past three years. Earlier my mother and Tom were arguing. Their fights are loud and abusive. Many times I just want to grab a knife and stab Tom over and over again. Feelings of anger and hate are my constant companions. There is guilt in me also – guilt that I’ve betrayed Jesus Christ and failed to turn the other cheek. How can I? How can I stand by and let my mother be abused regardless of how ignorant she might be? In my own way, I am becoming what my father never was before he died. I am the son, the husband, and the father figure my mother wants and needs so badly. I can’t be all of these though, and some days it is hard just to be a son. Today was one of those days. I got involved in the argument and just about the time Tom was going to hit me, I grabbed a can of aerosol hairspray and let him have it right in the face. He screamed in anger, but I was laughing my balls off. It felt so good to let out repressed frustration. Finally, I could stand naked to the world and didn’t give a shit. My mother tried to stop me in some kind of twisted attempt to protect her boyfriend. The irony is almost ludicrous. I don’t think my mother knows how to separate her sick need for Tom and the love she should be providing me. She was now the object of my anger and I screamed back at her for what she was doing. “You think you know everything! You don’t! You don’t even know that he’s been sucking my dick the last three years!” Maybe she does know but can’t admit it. Maybe she is so afraid of the demons inside her head that it would kill her to take a stand for her children.

As I sat down to write snapshots about my life, I couldn’t help but wonder what was too much to reveal and what was too little. This inner dialogue caused me to write and rewrite many stories in order to find just the right words, essence, and spirit. I wanted to evoke a sense of dread during some moments and anguish during others. I wanted the reader to feel my anger, elation, disgust, passion, awe, and lust. In order to do that I had to energize my imagination, relive experiences in my mind and heart over and over again, and paint a picture as vivid as a photograph. Often this required that I allow sections of narrative to incubate so that they might gestate and come to fruition over time. This “slowing down” allowed creativity to flower. “Indeed, in slowing down and looking for resonance within the body of the writer in the act of writing, embodied writing reveals the tangibly unique – sometimes ineffable – qualities of the writer” (Anderson, 2001, p. 86). The subtle qualities I wanted to convey to the reader percolated without force.

Autoethnography is a creative process. It is an artistic tool of deep inquiry. It cuts and chisels at the stone of our being in order to reveal a marble statue inside our many layers of coal. It is also an innovative tool because it promotes reevaluation, reinterpretation, and reinvention from the inside out. “Thinking out of the box” about our lives in retrospection and introspection stimulates creativity and innovation which are social tools used to “transmit our identities and social positions to others. They are social products that represent cultural norms and beliefs and transmit normativity, hegemony, power, oppression, and resistance” (Brown, 2011, p. 80).

I had to think literally and figuratively as I wrote about issues such as pedophilia,

religious sacrilege, emotional abuse, suicide, homosexuality, sexual deviancy, and neglect. This required no uncertain amount of license to weave a personal narrative that would appeal to a broad audience who may or may not have a common frame of reference. I learned to compose and perform a lyrical ballad much like the bards of old. In my autoethnography, “poetic images, literary style, and cadence serve embodied depictions and not the other way around” (Anderson, 2001, p. 88). That is the true beauty of autoethnography as a research method – art serves as a means to convey life.

Autoethnography provides the modern researcher with the opportunity to communicate multiple world views without compromising the need to be scientific. It keeps the researcher embedded dead-center in her work and does not separate the two. It has been argued that it is impossible to have completely objective data as long as the influence of the researcher remains a variable in how that data is finally interpreted (Ellis, 1999; Spry, 2001; Wall, 2006, 2008). Positivism is tainted by human influence and many research methods are now addressing this reality. Sarah Wall (2006) speaks to the emergence of postmodernism in response to positivism. “The goal of postmodernism is not to eliminate the traditional scientific method but to question its dominance and to demonstrate that it is possible to gain and share knowledge in many ways” (p. 2). Creativity and innovation that inspires change, transformation, and revolution offers multiple ways of seeing the world. As a community of beings, one authoritative truth or vision is not sufficient for we all live unique stories.

Lens 5: Autoethnography Eliminates Boundaries

Autoethnography uses metaphors, symbols, and allegory to communicate knowledge between individuals (human and non-human) and cultures. I write from “JCRPBC” (Custer, 2013).

It’s been about six months now since I tried to commit suicide. The process of healing and growth has taken its toll on numerous occasions, but I am beginning to see light on the horizon. My best friend puts up with me somehow even after I told her I was gay. The other day she took me to a local pond that attracts many ducks and geese that nest there during the spring. One particular goose made her nest along the bank of a small stream that winds away from the pond. In many ways I see myself in her. I am also sitting on a nest of eggs waiting for them to hatch. In my case, these eggs are dreams, goals, and possibilities. Patience has never been one of my strongest points and I have my mother to thank for that. Instant gratification is something I am very familiar with. That’s probably why I take sexual risks. I need to be more careful though. This new disease called AIDS is killing gay men left and right. I don’t think I’ll ever contract the virus, but nevertheless, I scheduled a test. It sucks that you have to wait at least two or three weeks for the results. It would be ironic if the test were positive after trying to kill myself.

I inch closer. Scuttle. Scuttle. Closer. Minutes tick away.
 I inch closer to little Mother Goose. Slink. Slink.
 She watches me. I watch her. Mindful. Aware.
 Scuttle. Scuttle. Slink. Slink.
 I’m within a couple feet. Inches.
 Slowly I reach my hand out. Soft feathers. She hisses quietly.

At last after what seems like an eternity, Mother Goose lets me touch her feathers and pet her neck. I am in complete meditation and ecstasy. Nothing else in the world exists except the tickle of a feather, the slight movement of her head, and complete silence. Not silence as in

absence of sound, but silence as in peace. This feeling is like a no-thing-ness. I am one with the goose and everything around us – deep interconnection. I don't even know that a picture is being taken of Mother Goose and me. Profound silence.

I could not have learned patience any other way than how I did just now. This beautiful, exotic creature seems more real to me than people. I connect with the goose on such a deep level that nothing can describe it, and in fact, to put this experience in words does not do it justice. Words destroy the completeness I feel.

Sarah Wall (2006) provides the most concise purpose of autoethnography that I have read to date. She says, “The intent of autoethnography is to acknowledge the inextricable link between the personal and the cultural...” (p. 1). In other words, “I am the world and the world is me.” This is the “inextricable link” that Wall talks about. Each individual human being creates society and culture. We are the world both in the literal and figurative sense. Responsibility becomes more than just a duty to family or country—it becomes a living reality, first to ourselves and then outward to others. Autoethnography communicates the “self” to the world and the world is deeply augmented. Many of the researchers I read agree with this conclusion (Ellis, 1999; McIlveen, 2008; Spry, 2001; Zimmermann, 2009).

The preceding four lenses are attributable to this cross-cultural communication, but none more so than the third – empathy. Peter McIlveen (2008) in “Autoethnography as a Method for Reflexive Research and Practice in Vocational Psychology” asserts, “Perhaps story is the soul of empathy – genuine understanding, a shared humanity that reaches across, touches; and in feeling with the other, we become our own self – the human intertextuality of existence” (emphasis in the original, p. 19).

It is certainly true that in my own journey of writing “Jesus Christ and Reese's™ Peanut Butter Cups” I had to become “another Dwayne” in order to share his experience. He is a younger person who faced great challenges from many directions long before he had graduated high school. In addition, I had to place myself in the shoes of the people that influenced this younger Dwayne. I had to feel their pain, sadness, and shadows as if they were my own. And finally, the process came full circle as I projected my life onto the screen for others to witness in reflection of their own.

Autoethnography is the embodiment of “the human intertextuality of existence” because someone had the courage to be vulnerable – first with themselves and eventually with others. I had to quietly listen to “another Dwayne” in order to hear the truth of his story. I had to set aside my preconceived ideas of his experiences and allow myself to be open to multiple worldviews, or be blinded by my own biases.

Lens 6: Autoethnography Invites and Honors Subjectivity

Autoethnography is intrinsically subjective. It brings the researcher/writer into self-awareness and honors their ability to affect the world around them.

Many times throughout the righting of “JCRPBC” I was faced with the realization that my work was as far removed from an objective, empirical analysis of homosexuality and human development as you could get. I was constantly lambasted by authors I read who insisted on the eternal separation of research from the researcher. There could be no room for personal opinion, feelings, or relationship with the theoretical constructs that I as the researcher was considering. Sell-Smith and Lax (2013) relate with this dilemma by mentioning, “A successful dissertation equals one that rejects the null hypothesis. Students are encouraged to study a phenomenon from afar, failing to situate themselves in personal relationship to the study and failing to reveal how the study relates to them personally” (p. 1). My rational mind could accept the need for “objective” science, and yet my natural mind spoke to me from an instinctual point of view. How could society have evolved (or devolved) to a state of denial of intuition and

creativity, and proceed to condition the individual mind to reject its own experience as valid? This question led me to rebel against traditional empirical science, and allowed me to display significant subjectivity regarding human development in “JCRPBC”. Science was telling me to sell myself short, but I could not in good faith reject my unique identity. Sell-Smith and Lax (2013) emphatically reaffirms this position saying, “My experience of multiple and recurring pregnancy loss was and continues to be a significant part of who am I and how I look at the world. Failing to acknowledge how these experiences impact my dissertation research would ignore or deny a significant part of my identity” (p. 2).

Autoethnography as a transformative research method is valuable to science because it incorporates and even celebrates individuality. It allows the researcher a unique way of understanding their intimate and influencing relationship with the research process itself. Sell-Smith and Lax (2013) once again affirm this theory stating, “Instead of trying to keep a façade of objectivity, I realize that I am more authentic when I acknowledge my own ‘situatedness’ and draw awareness to the role I play in creating and shaping knowledge” (p. 14).

More accounts of how autoethnography is reshaping the face of science and allowing subjectivity to influence our relationship to the world around us is provided by Davidson (2012), Hodgins and Boydell (2014), and Raab (2013).

Lens 7: Autoethnography Provides Therapeutic Benefits

Autoethnography is therapeutic in nature and writing about one’s Self in relation to a theory, experience, or belief is transformative.

Great insight can be gained through the vulnerability that an individual places him or herself in order to relive and share traumatic events from their private lives. In dialogue with another person about these writings, additional growth and healing can occur. Therapy does not necessarily come in the form of an old man with a white beard. It can also come from a heart that is willing to be open to exposition and nakedness.

Writing and telling a story about myself opened old wounds, but also manifested the energy needed to heal them completely. I had to be available to the past as I wrote about pedophilia, sexual, emotional and psychological abuse, and discrimination in the form of homophobia. It became obvious through the discourse that I was having with myself that these old scars were never completely dissolved. Caroline Allbon (2012), writing about her own wounds brought about through a diagnosis of Multiple Sclerosis (MS) reveals the cathartic attribute of autoethnography in her life. “It [Allbon’s paper] proposes the use of stories, specifically ante-narratives, to highlight how making the invisible aspects of chronic illness visible; and contributes to work on organisational learning whereby knowledge drawn from the body can serve as a prospective sense-making activity...” (emphasis in the original, p. 62). These “invisible” aspects that Allbon refers to can be emotions, fears, thoughts, beliefs, subconscious iterations, or other hidden products of suppressed experiences. Allbon (2012) continues saying, “The paper provides insights about how personal change is brought about as result of a confirmed diagnosis of MS. It suggests that storytelling contributes to the transformational process to learning about new routines in the management of MS, outlining how and why the development of leadership is important throughout the story-telling process” (p. 62).

The need to understand and heal myself through autoethnography (Sell-Smith & Lax, 2013, p. 2) forced me to interact with who I was in the past first and then integrate that person into the person I am now. This required working with the idea of who I was and who I am, in addition to the ideas of other people that I shared my work with. Sell-Smith and Lax (2013) write, “The process of constantly bouncing my own reactions off of the reactions of others and the literature benefitted me in myriad therapeutic ways” (p. 14).

The amount of literature available (Hodgins & Boydell, 2014; Malhotra, 2013; Raab, 2013) on the therapeutic benefits of autoethnography is growing every year, and it is becoming clearer that everyone from educators to psychologists and corporate executives to counselors are benefiting from this method of inquiry.

Implication: Autoethnography in Professional Application

As I move out of being a graduate student and into the professional arena, I am faced with the difficult choices of how I want to apply autoethnography occupationally. This method of research has been the subject of ridicule for many decades in the scientific community, and is just now beginning to gain ground and momentum as a valid and acceptable way of knowing. The benefits of autoethnography in education, counseling, psychology, sociology, the arts, and other spheres are prominent subjects of discussion.

Ellyn Lyle (2013) in "From Method to Methodology: Narrative as a Way of Knowing for Adult Learners" shows us how learning can be facilitated through reflexive narrative. She states, "Informed by a critical agenda, I understand reflexive narrative processes as uniquely able to help teachers and learners revisit schooling experiences with the aim of shedding light on their educational experiences" (p. 22). This critical awareness of "revisiting" past experiences can redefine learning for adults at critical junctures in their lives.

Tom Strong and his colleagues in "Meaning-Making Lenses in Counselling: Discursive, Hermeneutic-Phenomenological and Autoethnographic Perspectives" shows us how writing can shape and reshape individuals in need of understanding of given circumstances and past situations. Strong, et al. (2008) writes, "Counselling can be seen as a context or process for meaning-making where clients and counsellors actively interpret and construct meaning" (p. 117). He places great emphasis on the role of the counselor as facilitator or "tour guide" in the dialogue they have with clients, helping them walk through the events of their lives and gaining some kind of validation and significance (Strong et al., 2008, p. 125). Finally, Strong et al. (2008) points out the many ways or modalities available to a counselor when working with clients through autoethnography.

Autoethnographic counsellors attempt to engage their clients on many levels, to recreate with them what it is in their stories that are important to them. This high level of engagement is facilitated by the many different modalities for expression that AE [autoethnography] recognizes and utilizes. Song, poetry, plays, stories, talking, dance, music, yoga, media, journalling, art, role play, history, cinematherapy, bibliotherapy, painting, novels, comics, and conversation are a few of the different modes of expression which AE [autoethnography] recognizes.

Even within sociology and education the benefits of narrative are quite obvious when applied within a safe and comfortable environment for individuals to express themselves. David Purcell (2013) as a sociology teacher writes, "This reflective practice enables me to assess the effectiveness of classes, become more efficient and precise with my course preparations, have a stronger sense of mastery as a teacher, and more deeply understand the relevance of sociology for the scholarship of teaching and learning" (p. 6). He provides three solid benefits of reflective practice in his occupation: improving as a teacher, improving course preparation skills, and improving as a sociologist (Purcell, 2013, p. 13-15).

Autoethnography will be an intricate and vital aspect of any professional endeavors I partake of in the future. Whether developing a team of employees in a leadership position, or educating adults through distance learning, I will consistently utilize personal narrative as a means for growth and transformation. I believe that as individuals change, so also do the organizations and social structures they create. Allbon (2012) illustrates how this is possible.

While autoethnography draws the attention of the researcher to the "self," it is reflection

on the impact or effect of organisational experiences on self and vice versa that supports my claim that, most importantly, my autoethnographic approach to inquiry is a useful method to address organisational development and has implications for developing leadership and change management. (p. 69)

With increasing numbers of accounts of practical application of autoethnography in occupational settings (Edwards et al., 2011; Hodgins & Boydell, 2014; Raab, 2013; Vasconcelos, 2011), it is without a doubt that the future looks very bright for self-reflective research methods.

Continuum: Autoethnography as a Transformative Research Method

Is autoethnography transformative as a research method? The answer is resoundingly affirmative! Diana Raab (2013) mentions, "...the transpersonal relevance of an autoethnographical study encompasses the idea of fostering self-awareness and self-discovery, which may lead to transformation. The autoethnographical researcher must be comfortable exposing his or her deepest emotions" (emphasis in the original, p. 14). Transformation occurs dramatically for the individual who is courageous enough to reveal him or herself to the world and readily embarks on a fantastic journey. It also occurs for those that participate in the process of introspection, reflexivity, and contemplation with the autoethnographer (i.e. the readership, audience, or other researchers). Autoethnography is a transformative research method because it changes time, requires vulnerability, fosters empathy, embodies creativity and innovation, eliminates boundaries, honors subjectivity, and provides therapeutic benefits.

It must be reiterated that the process of autoethnography as a research method is often painful and numbing, and the radical honesty required of the researcher when faced with her own humanity can be overwhelming at times. However there are many therapeutic and occupational benefits of the method as discussed above. Sell-Smith and Lax (2013) write, "...the rage and resentment that I felt from my losses gave me the momentum to power through this project in a raw and genuine way" (p. 14).

Speaking about the process of transformation in autoethnography, Sarah Wall (2006) writes, "I was confronted, challenged, moved, and changed by what I learned" (p. 2). I can personally attest to the truth of this statement. The metamorphosis cut deep into my being and continues to affect me each day. I see myself in a different way because "autoethnography has been a vehicle of emancipation from cultural and familial identity scripts that have structured my identity personally and professionally" (Spry, 2001, p. 708).

Sell-Smith and Lax (2013) also paint a picture of metamorphosis within the scientific community stating that, "The combination of quantitative, constructivist and autoethnographic perspectives could potentially add a new layer of depth and richness to data that originally seemed flat and sparse after statistical analysis alone" (p. 2). This is an exciting time to participate in the growing movement to make autoethnography a valid and acceptable method of research.

As a researcher, a student, and a human being, I will continue to embody autoethnographic research and writing because of a desire to transform my inner self and others. As McIlveen (2008) points out, "Reflexivity in research and practice offers more than a checking process; it is a process which in itself proffers new understandings and actions—transformation" (p. 17). I welcome this transformation for the rest of my life as a continuum of never-ending exploration and self-discovery.

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