

10-27-2014

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Recommended APA Citation

Lester, J. N., & Ozdogan, Z. (2014). Autoethnography in Practice: A Book Review of British Contemporary Ethnography. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(43), 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2014.1103>

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Abstract

In this article, we consider and offer a review of the edited volume, *Contemporary British Autoethnography* (2013). Within this volume, the editors, Short, Turner, and Grant, bring together 15 autoethnographic representations, which address issues of subjectivity, voice, writing, knowing, and being. Each contributor offers insights located within a particular field(s), while simultaneously sharing perspectives related to the qualitative community more generally. In this paper, we provide a brief summary of each chapter and also offer several questions generated after engaging with this volume. We invite others to participate in considering how this volume may be applied to their own research and everyday lives.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Writing as Inquiry, Arts-Based Research

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Autoethnography in Practice: A Book Review of *British Contemporary Ethnography*

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In this article, we consider and offer a review of the edited volume, Contemporary British Autoethnography (2013). Within this volume, the editors, Short, Turner, and Grant, bring together 15 autoethnographic representations, which address issues of subjectivity, voice, writing, knowing, and being. Each contributor offers insights located within a particular field(s), while simultaneously sharing perspectives related to the qualitative community more generally. In this paper, we provide a brief summary of each chapter and also offer several questions generated after engaging with this volume. We invite others to participate in considering how this volume may be applied to their own research and everyday lives. Keywords: Autoethnography, Writing as Inquiry, Arts-Based Research

In the edited volume, *Contemporary British Autoethnography* (2013), Short, Turner, and Grant bring together 15 autoethnographic representations that both highlight the possibilities for autoethnographic practice and the need for a poststructural critique of the “inflexible institutional rules, restrictions and normative assumptions” (p. 1) that often frame and limit the very doing of qualitative research. In their introductory chapter, Short et al. take stock of the ways in which autoethnography both implicitly and explicitly challenges the assumption that research should be value-free, linear, rational, and impartial. Setting the context for the individual chapters, the editors lay a foundation for the place of autoethnography within qualitative research, while also recognizing the risks and vulnerability that one takes when producing autoethnographic work.

Recognizing the “risks of autoethnography” (p. 11), we approached this book review with a commitment to personal reflexivity (Pillow, 2003), even in the way in which we interacted with each chapter and made sense of the key messages. We first share a summary of the overarching themes and analytic messages shared within the individual chapters, and highlight the contributions made to our unfolding understanding of autoethnography as both a methodology and method. We then move to share the questions that remain for us – questions that many of the authors invited us to ponder and likely would not be surprised to see us asking even after having read their work. We then conclude by identifying the many audiences that may benefit from reading this volume.

Overview of Edited Volume

Overall, this edited volume provides the readers with a deeper understanding of the meaning(s) of autoethnography, as it begins by sharing a common definition of autoethnography as being “research, writing, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social. The form usually features concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection...(and) claims the conventions of literary writing” (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). The volume at once questions the place of self, others, subjective knowing, and voice in autoethnographic practice, while explicitly and importantly addressing institutional resistance to autoethnography. Each chapter offers unique insights and

illustrations of autoethnography in practice, and builds upon the themes of subjectivity, voice, and writing as inquiry. We provide only a brief summary of each chapter.

Chapter 1: Introduction – Storying life and lives

In the introductory chapter, the editors provide a comprehensive overview of the definitions of autoethnography, its position in qualitative research as a writing practice, and the subjectivism in between/for and by socio-political meaning making and self. Further, the editors point to the purposes and functions of autoethnography as being on the borders between self/other, inner/outer, public/private and individual/social. Finally, the risks required to engage in autoethnography and resistances to it are given by contextualizing the dialogical de-contextualizing nurture of autoethnography against institutions and institutionalized assumptions that pervade the “doing of research” and the qualitative research paradigm.

Chapter 2: When we got to the top of Elm Grove

The second chapter, written by Hayler, underlines the dialogical trajectory between an analytic autoethnography and a narrative self-study by focusing on the shared narratives among the teacher-educators. The chapter clarifies the ways in which narratives might be represented and re-defines story as a method of inquiry in itself. By using metaphorical photos and (re)telling the story surrounding the pathways of self in a dialogical way, Hayler illustrates and explores the professional identities of teacher-educators.

Chapter 3: Writing teaching and survival in mental health – A discordant quintet for one’s uses

In Chapter 3, Grant write from a poststructural position to de-centre the ways in which experiences of an academic-mental health survivor may be represented. He uses the analytic autoethnography as grounds for elaborating “the distinctive voice” for “hearing voices from “I”, “me”, “we” and “us” (p. 33). His chapter highlights the multiple and decentered voices in higher education and health practice, leading us to understand autoethnography from a poststructural theoretical position. Data included imaginary embellishment, dreams, daydreams, and storied memories of events he was involved in. His chapter shows the importance of the decontextualized existence of “voice” and “presence.”

Chapter 4: Cultural constraints – Experiencing same-sex attraction in sport and dance

Carless’ chapter gives us snapshots from his analytical *autoethnography* of “the embodied experience of same-sex attraction in a variety of sport-related settings” (p. 49). The presence of sex as body and body as sex in sport related settings is analytically narrated. Storied tellings of sexual outings create a contrast between the dominating heterosexual cultural and a culture in which sexual attraction is more fluid and permeates the everyday.

Chapter 5: Leaving the blood in: Experiences with an autoethnographic doctoral thesis

In chapter 5, Moriarty narrates her experiences of doing an autoethnography during her doctoral thesis. While sharing how she navigated producing an autoethnography in a context in which traditional thesis writing was expected, she draws upon autoethnodrama and analytic autoethnography. She illustrated the construction of herself/ves as she in the very process of

producing her thesis. Multiple voices and lived experiences are positioned as the grounds for making meaning, as this non-traditional approach to doctoral work is re-narrated.

Chapter 6: A truth waiting for a telling

In this chapter, Douglas uses a non-linear approach to writing to invite the reader into a re-telling of her life and experiences in elite sports and higher education. Her writing illustrates how experimental forms of writing serve to counter and resist grand narratives. She presents us not only with an example of experimental writing, but also proffers a critique of the ideology produced through the rhetoric of sporting “excellence” and “winning.”

Chapter 7: An Englishman abroad – An autoethnographic tale

In the seventh chapter, Short begins by situating himself as “*being a tourist*” and “*being a client*” within a mental health context (p. 98). This chapter is very much written like an artful masterpiece, incorporating a different type of storytelling. Using two different points in time, he uses narrative representations to represent the meanings of being a tourist and client. In this chapter, Short highlights how ethnographers may be judged by their presence within their experiences and the production of multiple selves.

Chapter 8: Ash Wednesdays: An autoethnography of (not) counselling

In Chapter 8, Wyatt both explicitly and implicitly makes the plural “I” visible by narrating multiple “I’s.” Drawing upon ethnography/assemblage, he (re)stories himself as he navigates through the bureaucracy of being and doing counseling, while eventually becoming a non-counselor. He frames his Wednesday by re-telling a story filled with multiple “I’s,” as he walks in in “a crisis in and of autoethnography” (p. 132).

Chapter 9: Assemblage/ethnography: Troubling constructions of self in the play of materiality and representation

In this compelling chapter, Gale and Wyatt explore the constructions that come to be in their collaborative writing, demonstrating the alterations on author/ity. They describe what they call “incessant nouncing” (p. 140). The authors highlight the idea of “becoming,” revealed in their use of I’s, we’s, and me’s. Autoethnographic telling becomes the way in which the two authors think about representation and discourses at play in their collaborative writing.

Chapter 10: Writing forms of fiction: Glimpses on the Essence of Self

In this chapter, Gilbourne and Marshall develop their debates around three fictional stories, which center on a young player’s life in professional football, sports psychology, and the dilemmas of coach/educator. These three stories were constructed to invite readers to question “how,” “why,” “when,” or “for what purpose” stories might get written. This chapter, more particularly, calls upon the reader as writer, interpreter, and qualitative inquirer to come to understand others in and through story. As the authors noted, these stories are the explicit and implicit grounds for communicating with selves in the form of “self-in-fiction” and “the informal act of reflective analysis” (p. 167).

Chapter 11: Didn't you used to be...? The role of serendipity and sagaciousness

In this chapter, Short offers a critical and helpful discussion about being in different times, various places, and living out multiple roles, as he chronicles his 31-year career in the English National Health Service. Short's approach to the re-telling of his own stories can be defined as the process and practice of coming to understand through reflection and reflexivity and viewing writing as inquiry. He claims that the phenomenon of "serendipities" and "sagaciousness" (p. 169) is embedded within the social context, and the very existence of self can be articulated by and through reflexively writing. Thus, for him, it is through stories and storying that we come to make sense of self/ves.

Chapter 12: Artificial persons and the academy: A story

In Chapter 12, Smith offers a critique of power and neoliberalism in higher education, grounding his telling in narrative knowing. The artificial person constructed is a "who" must "speak on behalf of institutional procedures and organizational rules" (p. 199). Drawing upon autoethnography, he describes the *parrhesiast* in academia and underlines that "becoming an artificial person isn't destiny, it can be resisted" (p. 201). Yet, he highlights the ways in which the privileging of quantitative research methodologies, and measurement in particular, become grand narratives.

Chapter 13: Autoethnography at the will of the body – Reflections on a failure to produce on time

In Chapter 13, Sparkes writes a meta-autoethnography around the challenges and ethics of engaging in autoethnographic practice. Sparkes claims to generate "an autoethnography of an autoethnography" (p. 204), debating the ethical considerations that autoethnographers encounter. This productive discussion how autoethnographies are already-to-be-shared, or yet-to-be-told, as they are pre-objective and multi-sensual. Sparkes leaves the reader with many, multidirectional questions about autoethnography, particularly as related to the researcher's emotional readiness.

Chapter 14: The evocative autoethnographic I: The relational ethics of writing about oneself

In this chapter, Turner highlights the challenges of engaging in autoethnographic work, drawing upon stories from her life. Using evocative autoethnography, Turner draws upon ethical theories to illustrate and explore the challenge of using "others" in autoethnographic work. Like Sparkes, Turner asks questions about ethical dilemmas and challenges in terms of consent and the role of permission in the construction of narratives within a research study. She frames autoethnography as one of the ways to "democratize the representational sphere of culture" (p. 229).

Chapter 15: CODA

In the final chapter, Turner, Short, and Grant give us an editorial reflection about the book in terms of the included concepts, themes, and issues. The chapter itself is written as a dialogue and offers the reader a window into the layered understandings that the editors bring to the practice of autoethnography, implicitly inviting questions and explicitly offering their

own. This very chapter leaves the reader with an understanding of how much there is yet to know about self, others, and culture, and the practice of coming to know.

Remaining Questions

Indeed, there are many questions that we were left with, but there were three in particular that we took note of as we read and discussed how we experienced the volume.

- How can those of us in the qualitative community who do not produce autoethnographies apply the lessons shared within this volume to our research and practice of recursive reflexivity?
- In what ways might others qualitative approaches and practices push against the “inflexible institutional rules, restrictions and normative assumptions” (p. 1) that surround research practices?
- Similar to what the editors voiced in their final chapter, we wonder, how does one evaluate an autoethnography? In “its poststructural and experimental forms”, what does it look like to move beyond “checklists” when critiquing autoethnographic work (p. 232)?

We offer these questions for others who may read this volume, and invite other readers to speak back to our wonderings.

Suggested Audiences

This volume makes an obvious connection to academics and those who engage or are interested in engaging in autoethnographic work. Specifically, with an interdisciplinary focus, this book is one that will speak to those working in a variety of disciplines, particularly those engaged in multi-perspectival and multi-disciplinary work, as the editors have included chapters that include topics ranging from sports to mental health, to education to psychotherapy. As Short et al. (2013) noted, “the contents” of the individual chapter “have a relevance to all undertaking or thinking about undertaking autoethnographic study within or outside of a professional field” (p. 11). As such, readers from a variety of disciplines can engage with the text, studying the very craft of autoethnographic practice and learn to write and “hold onto the possibility of the personal, the personal pronoun, the person, the relational” (Gale & Wyatt, 2013, p. 150). Finally, we dare say that this text may also be one that non-academics may find intriguing, inviting, and compelling, as they contemplate their own existence and understanding of self(ves).

Conclusions

In conclusion, this volume provides the qualitative community with various theoretical and practical considerations, debates, and dialogues about and around/inside of autoethnography. While it is clear and comprehensive, it is also layered and illustrates the messy work involved in pursuing engaged qualitative work. Each of the authors walks the fine line of doing research in ways that challenges those institutional structures that demand structure and inflexibility. Finally, this volume offers us an opportunity to revisit the “politics of subjectivism” (p. 4), as the author orient to subjectivism as a resource and guide for their autoethnographic practice. Perhaps this alignment with unabashed subjective practice is where the lesson for the qualitative community more generally lies, particularly as we all continue to navigate how “culture flows through self and vice versa” (p. 4).

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Article Citation

Lester, J. N., & Ozdogan, Z. (2014). Autoethnography in practice: A book review of *British contemporary ethnography*. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(Review 13), 1-6. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR19/lester13.pdf>
