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A Revolutionary Collage of Same Sex Attraction Stories

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Abstract

Tony E. Adams' (2011) book presents what could be considered a revolutionary, humanizing understanding of same-sex attraction. This is accomplished by providing a relational understanding of "the closet" and experiences of coming into, living in, and coming out of the closet. It is a production of significant social relevance, denouncing the marginalizing effects of the domains of heteronormativity. While highly scholarly, his evocative storytelling makes this book accessible to an interested reader regardless of his or her degree or area of specialization.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Same-Sex Attraction, Relational Perspectives

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A Revolutionary Collage of Same-Sex Attraction Stories

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Tony E. Adams' (2011) book presents what could be considered a revolutionary, humanizing understanding of same-sex attraction. This is accomplished by providing a relational understanding of "the closet" and experiences of coming into, living in, and coming out of the closet. It is a production of significant social relevance, denouncing the marginalizing effects of the domains of heteronormativity. While highly scholarly, his evocative storytelling makes this book accessible to an interested reader regardless of his or her degree or area of specialization. Key words: Autoethnography, Same-Sex Attraction, Relational Perspectives.

I am at the Ft. Lauderdale airport waiting to board the plane for a trip to San Diego. I am devouring Tony Adams' (2011) book, excited about the prospect of writing its review. Standing among a crowd waiting for the zone numbers to be called to board, I finally become aware that a man has been uncomfortably trying to lean down in front of me, trying to read the title of the book. His tags and shirt indicate he works at the airport. He finally says, "What are you reading?" Taken by surprise I respond by reading the title of the book: *Narrating the Closet: An Autoethnography of Same-Sex Attraction* by Tony Adams. I immediately continue, "It is a research story of a gay man about being a gay man." While preoccupied at first for not having given justice to Adams' linguistic specificity and care in choosing the term "same-sex" instead, as well as for my reference to a single story versus multiple stories, I am soon taken by this man's puzzling response to my description.

This man seems unsure of how to respond. He places his gaze on the window, smiles with hesitation; simultaneously expressing what seems to be confusion about what to do with this information. If I am to speculate, I would say that at this point he would prefer to leave the situation but perhaps because I was staring at him he felt compelled to say something. He finally decides to speak, asking without any apparent investment in an answer: "And how is it?" Enthusiastically, I answer, "Promises a great read. I am just starting, but so far I find his story engaging and touching, and somewhat revolutionary." While this could suffice, his apparent confusion and, at this point, lack of interest motivates me to add a comment (one it is certainly too soon for me to make at that point in terms of a review): "Everyone should read it!" Prior to wishing each other a good day and going our separate ways, he explains that his curiosity was awakened by the design of the cover. We both agree it is a lively, colorful cover that easily catches anyone's attention.

Together with Ron Chenail's (2010) article "How to Read a Review of a Book like a Qualitative Researcher," this encounter guided my review. This man's questions stayed with me probably in preparation for an inquiry from another potential curious bystander, like you, the reader. In addition, I was guided by my commitment to set myself to test what was truly a dramatic assertion on my part when rather loosely I advised, "Everyone should read it." I offered this comment mostly wondering at that

moment how different, or not, this man's response to the topic of Tony's (Adams, 2011) book could have been if he read it.

What Am I Reading?

Adding to the publisher's location of this text within categories such as gay-lesbian studies, communication, and relationships, from my biases and prejudices (Chenail, 2010) as a family therapist interested in autoethnography, I situate this text as an evocative, transformative and autoethnographic production that makes a difference (Ellis, 2004, 2009). I consider it to be a book on cultural stories told personally that seem to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct the cultures themselves by way of Tony's (Adams, 2011) and many others' stories of same-sex attraction and coming out. The cultures that are undergoing this transformation, in part thanks to this book, are LGBTQ cultures, which, as Tony interestingly discusses in the Appendix, "have no dominant place or space, no field, no here and no there, no definitive idea about what constitutes an insider and outsider" (p. 156).

These stories unfold within the course of six chapters denouncing and resisting social categories of heteronormativity. They are nicely framed by Tony's love story with an ex-boyfriend, Brett, whose death, possibly by suicide in association to coming out, motivates Tony to write this book. In a way this book becomes Brett's legacy as well as the legacy of many others whose suffering due to the marginalizing effects of heteronormativity resulted in their existential fatigue, leading them to their death by suicide. The book begins and ends with this emotional story.

Throughout the book, Tony (Adams, 2011) seems to achieve his goal clearly stated early in Chapter 1 to provide a "contemporary, practical, and relational understanding of same-sex attraction." He commits to this goal through the production of a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973, p. 10) of his personal experiences of "the closet" and coming out. His robust personal stories in each chapter, of suffering but also of hope, are enriched by the experiences of others accessed through interviews, mass-mediated representations, and scholarly sources.

Tony (Adams, 2011) achieves what he describes as a "collage of texts" with different layers of consciousness through the play of different voices, at times in first person, at others in second, shifting also into third person (Chapter 3). In doing this, he recruits the reader into various vantage points in relation to the closet and coming out during the course of his narrative. While an interesting narrative style, he reveals in the Appendix that these shifts are more than mere stylistic writing. They correspond in part to his sense of shame when revealing painful and hurtful stories for which a voice in third person makes it more bearable to write.

I believe that Tony's (Adams, 2011) research makes revolutionary and transformative contributions by providing of a relational understanding of same-sex attraction. From the outset, he situates "the closet" as a metaphorical space "invisible and ephemeral" (p. 157) and discursive in nature. He provides the reader with a relational perspective by addressing this metaphorical isolated, marginalized space *in relationship with* isolating, marginalizing practices of what he refers to as the heteronormative discourses.

Tony (Adams, 2011) unleashes the complexities and paradoxical nature of the closet (Chapter 5), exploring matters of same-sex attraction and coming out by situating them in the complexities of a cultural context dominated by hetero-normativity discourses. Same-sex attraction and coming out is depicted as not solely contained within the boundaries of a person's skin (Foucault, 1978; Madigan, 2010; White & Epston, 1990). This renders the closet available for transformation and narration, as the title of the book very well suggests. Still, a biological referential is sustained by Tony's use of the term "same-sex" (Chapter 1) as opposed to descriptions of gender or sexuality, as he discusses through an informative review of each term.

The relational perspective of this autoethnographic research alerts readers to how matters of the closet are not solely a matter of those who are attracted to same-sex people. This is addressed through Tony's (Adams, 2011) insistence on accountability and responsibility (Chapter 5) addressed in his storytelling that implicates both those who comes out and those to whom a person comes out. The relational perspective is also apparent in Adams' contribution of completing the distinction (Flemons, 1991) of coming out (Chapter 4). This is achieved by the inclusion of experiences that, as Tony points out, are very often neglected—experiences of coming into the closet once same-sex attraction is not easily accessed (Chapter 2). Tony also relates stories about living in the metaphorical space of the closet (Chapter 3), shaping internalizing accounts that "assemble relational walls" (p. 71), contributing to isolation and suffering.

In Chapter 6 Tony (Adams, 2011) offers what he describes as a "metacommunication," going back to revise his storytelling of the first five chapters, but this time from the vantage point of hope "to maneuver everyday paradox" (p. 129) in relation to same-sex attraction. He offers seven tentative "strategies" to change the paradoxical conditions and premises of the closet, being closeted and coming out.

How Is It?

This research certainly lived up to its promising title and the reviews included on the back cover. It is worth taking up Tony's (Adams, 2011) invitation to "a journey of promise and pain...to consider the closet and coming out in nuanced ways...into a discussion that not only promotes compassion and understanding but may also make experiences of same-sex attraction more humane and tolerable" (p. 8). Its literary and scholarly arrangements elevate its social relevance. Agreeing with one of the back cover reviews by Keith Berry, University of Wisconsin-Superior, it is certainly an "overdue book."

My scholarly interest at first for this book as an autoethnographic production became secondary to my growing interest regarding its potential social contribution. I was moved by the stories of suffering, pain, shame, struggle, compassion, paradoxes and hope, finding myself gaining a better understanding of matters of the closet. Most importantly, I gained a heightened level of responsibility and accountability as a heterosexual woman, or rather, a person whose experiences are of different-sex attraction.

Returning to the topic of my scholarly interest in the production of autoethnographic research, I found it useful to read the Appendix when footnoted during the method description in Chapter 1 to get a better sense of the foundations of the structuring of the book. Maybe some of the descriptions of the "assembling" of the book

would have been useful to put in the forefront rather than as an Appendix, as a map for the reader to engage with the narrative. Particularly, Tony's (Adams, 2011) writing techniques such as using square bullets to denote shifts between themes; as well as the consideration of the nuances of LGBTQ cultures I referenced above.

I was left wondering about notions of representation and generalization in autoethnography, particularly while reading Chapter 2. Tony (Adams, 2011) presents a series of "conditions" for the closet based on the analysis of his experiences and the experiences of others. These conditions are presented as "must" requirements for the metaphor of the closet. I wondered if the presentation of requirements in terms of "musts" or "conditions" rob the metaphorical meaning of the closet itself or narrow space for other possibilities of understanding. This is not the case when the author later offers "tools" to address the paradoxes of the closet, which are presented in a subjunctive mode, in terms of what "might" work or "might" break, avoiding notions of representation or generalization.

Should "Everyone" Read It?

While it is indeed a scholarly work, as an autoethnographic research, Tony's (Adams, 2011) storytelling certainly makes this book accessible for "everyone." For the reader who is less interested in the scholarly aspect of the storytelling, it is possible to be engaged by the stories. For the reader who is more interested in the scholarly research production, this book provides a rich contribution for the study of cultures, particularly of constitutive "invisible" and "ephemeral." characteristics, as described by Tony (Adams, 2011). These two possibilities achieve what I consider to be one of the more beneficial features of autoethnographic research. This is, according to Ellis and Bochner (2006), to under-cut conventions that foster divisions between an elite class of professionals and those silenced in the dark. This book is highly accessible to interested people regardless of their degree and area of specialization. You can access the book's web page located at <http://www.lcoastpress.com/book.php?id=338> to see its table of contents and to read what others have written about their experiences with Tony's book.

Therefore, after reading this book, I still hold my enthusiasm that this powerful transformative message is for "everyone," whether a bystander or not. At the same time, acknowledging Tony's (Adams, 2011) discussion on accountability and responsibility, I am holding back on giving advice on who "should" read it or not, leaving that decision to the reader her or himself. As a family therapist, I could envision the potential benefits that this research could provide for therapists, being a good fit with the contextual and relational perspectives of this field of practice. I also can envision the rich conversations that a text like this could awaken in classes such as Human Sexuality. Also, it could be a good reference book for autoethnographic research, particularly the Appendix section.

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