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Abstract

In *Revision: Autoethnographic Reflections of Life and Work* (2008), Carolyn Ellis demonstrates a striking ability to tell stories while simultaneously interrogating their meanings. Ellis uses autoethnography and meta-autoethnography to write herself and others into stories which connect to issues that extend beyond the particular characters in the stories. This book demonstrates the value that autoethnography can offer to researcher, reader, academia, as well as to community practice. This review introduces the term experiential layering as a way to describe Ellis' revisioning of the stories that she presented in *The Ethnographic I*.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Meta-autoethnography, Experiential Layering, Qualitative Research

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Review of Carolyn Ellis' Book, *Revision: Autoethnographic Reflections of Life and Work*

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In Revision: Autoethnographic Reflections of Life and Work (2008), Carolyn Ellis demonstrates a striking ability to tell stories while simultaneously interrogating their meanings. Ellis uses autoethnography and meta-autoethnography to write herself and others into stories which connect to issues that extend beyond the particular characters in the stories. This book demonstrates the value that autoethnography can offer to researcher, reader, academia, as well as to community practice. This review introduces the term experiential layering as a way to describe Ellis' revisioning of the stories that she presented in The Ethnographic I. Key Words: Autoethnography, Meta-autoethnography, Experiential Layering, and Qualitative Research

Carolyn Ellis' latest book *Revision: Autoethnographic Reflections on Life and Work* (2008) is a follow-up to her earlier book *The Ethnographic I* (2003) and, as she states, picks up where the former left off. Consistent with her numerous other writings, in *Revision*, Ellis strategically uses words in a manner that transforms a simple telling of stories into a complex interrogation of the meanings that are created from stories. She does this while enticing readers to actively engage with the text through a literary and emotional journey through her intimate reflections of stories.

Perhaps the most interesting feature in this book is Ellis' description of what she terms *meta-autoethnographies*. Ellis describes this novel practice as "occasions in which I revisit my original representation, consider responses, and write an autoethnographic account about autoethnography" (p. 13). Against a backdrop of a conceptual "text in motion," Ellis further explains that meta-autoethnography provides

opportunities to alter the frame in which I wrote the original story, ask questions I didn't ask then, consider others' responses to the original story, and include vignettes of related experiences that have happened since I experienced and wrote the story and now affect the way I look back at the story. (p. 13)

Having read *The Ethnographic I* (2003) I am acutely aware of the differences between the original stories and the revised stories. It is apparent that the person who wrote *Revision* (2008) is connected to, yet experientially different from, the person who wrote *The Ethnographic I*. This malleability of the ways in which we tell stories, the ways we perceive, and the ways we reflect, suggest that, though events may be situated in a specific time and place, our experiences and the ways in which we make meaning of particular events are fluid across time and space. In addition, stories are influenced by

what I term *experiential layering*. This term refers to the practice of new experiences being juxtaposed upon, beneath, beside, and within former experiences, which then influence the ways in which we remember and re-tell our stories. Thus, we continually re-create and re-imagine our former selves into our current selves. In *Revision*, Ellis invites readers to oscillate back and forth and within multiple variations of her current and former self.

Revision: Autoethnographic Reflections of Life and Work (2008) is presented in 5 parts. After the introduction, which provides an overview of the book, Ellis offers contextual background information about her childhood, race relations, and experiences with ethical considerations in social science research in Part 1, "Growing up in a rural community, getting an education, and finding my place in community ethnography." Part 2, "Becoming an autoethnographer" describes some of Ellis' struggles during her transition into becoming an autoethnographer. Part 3, "Surviving and communicating family loss" is a deeply intimate reading of three types of loss: loss of sibling, aging of parent, and termination of pregnancy. Part 4, "Doing autoethnography as a social project," demonstrates how autoethnography can be applied in practice. This section of the book, particularly chapter 12, "Connecting autoethnographic performance with community practice," illustrates Tierney's (1994) assertion that "research is meant to be transformative; we do not merely analyze or study an object to gain greater understanding, but instead struggle to investigate how individuals and groups might be better able to change their situations" (as cited in Waghid, 2000, pp. 27-28). Ellis discusses ethical issues in research in Part 5, "Reconsidering writing practices, relational ethics, and rural communities." This is the last section of the book, yet it is not a conclusion. It merely reminds readers that *Revision*, both the book and the practice, has no finite ending, no abrupt termination, and no last word. Rather, revision is a continual process of re-membering, re-imagining, and re-telling.

Revision: Autoethnographic Reflections on Life and Work (2008) is primarily a why-to-do autoethnography book rather than a how-to-do autoethnography manual. It is a testament to the importance and value of autoethnography as a qualitative research method. Ellis examines and re-examines her "I" in ways that "aren't easily addressed by orthodox social science" (p. 16). This book is appropriate for beginner and veteran autoethnography researchers alike, as it showcases some of the finest autoethnographic works in print.

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