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An Innovative Way to Present Qualitative Work: A Review of Life after Leaving: The Remains of Spousal Abuse

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Abstract

Life after Leaving is an innovative, creative, and amazing autoethnographic work in which Tamas explores how women struggle to make sense of loss, get recovery, and experience the loving, longing, fear, uncertainties, trust, hope, and frustration after leaving spousal abuse in the form of a performative and arts - based dramatic story. In this paper I review this book mainly from two aspects: data trustworthiness and data analysis. For qualitative researchers and our doctoral students in education or social studies, the success of this book would encourage all of us to bravely use various and more advanced approach to present our studies and dissertations.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Performative, Spousal Abuse, Trustworthiness

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An Innovative Way to Present Qualitative Work: A Review of *Life after Leaving: The Remains of Spousal Abuse*

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Life after Leaving is an innovative, creative, and amazing autoethnographic work in which Tamas explores how women struggle to make sense of loss, get recovery, and experience the loving, longing, fear, uncertainties, trust, hope, and frustration after leaving spousal abuse in the form of a performative and arts-based dramatic story. In this paper I review this book mainly from two aspects: data trustworthiness and data analysis. For qualitative researchers and our doctoral students in education or social studies, the success of this book would encourage all of us to bravely use various and more advanced approach to present our studies and dissertations. Keywords: Autoethnography, Performative, Spousal Abuse, Trustworthiness

Life after Leaving is an innovative, creative, and amazing autoethnographic work in which Tamas explores how women struggle to make sense of loss, get recovery, and experience the loving, longing, fear, uncertainties, trust, hope, and frustration after leaving spousal abuse in the form of a performative and arts-based dramatic story. Tamas uses an attractive and coherent story with five acts to not only skillfully address the complete five sections required by a traditional dissertation respectively, but also involve her thoughts changes and daily lives, even some seemingly private things, into the every act of this story. Using multiple artistic expressions such as narratives, dialogues, drawings, journal entries, and poems, this book gives me a fresh feeling and guides me to embark on Tamas' journey. In this paper, I would like to talk about my feelings of this book from two main aspects: data trustworthiness and data analysis.

In Act III, Tamas vividly presents her postmodern philosophical paradigm through an anthropomorphic dialogue with a dog. "You can't adjudicate truth across discourses. ... I don't want kingdoms of one; I want a negotiated, complex account that respect community" (Tamas, 2011, p. 67). "I don't think detached objectivity is ethical or possible" (Tamas, 2011, p. 66). All these words indicate her postmodernism perspective which proposes that knowledge and reality are socially constructed through human beings' intersubjective experiences within the lived world. All knowledge is perspective (Nietzsche, 1984). Although the postmodern approach claims that the complete elimination of a researcher's potential biases in qualitative study is practically impossible, it still suggests that researchers should make efforts to minimize their predominant voices and attenuate their unavoidable prejudice. "Nobody has complete or authoritative truth. But there is still more true or less true" (Tamas, 2011, p. 66). Being a postmodernist, Tamas has tried to enhance the trustworthiness of her study through keeping reflexive journal (Watt, 2007) and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Her reflexive journals livingly describe the whole process of writing a dissertation as well as the subtle changes in her thoughts and feelings that most doctoral students

might go through: the beginning ambiguity and discouragement in preparing the proposal, feeling the shape and direction of it, having the proposal defense, anxiety and worries about the decision from the ethics, strategies, and difficulties in recruiting the participants, getting permission from the gatekeeper, collecting and analyzing data, and finally to the moment before the dissertation defense. Meanwhile, her description of family life such as house reconstruction, childrearing, and the confusions between work and family responsibilities directly takes me into her world and experience these things together with her. Hence, use of reflexive journals could strike a responsive chord in the hearts of its readers.

Nevertheless, Tamas misses some points in this part of the book. Despite her recognition of the costs and benefits of being either insider-researcher or outsider-researcher, she talks nothing about her perceptions of relationships between the two roles and how she negotiates the relationships during the research process. Insider and outsider are not exclusive to each other, so this issue should be considered from a dialectical perspective rather than from a dichotomous approach (Breen, 2007). Insider and outsider are understood as a binary of two separate preexisting identities, and the space between can be occupied by the researcher. "The role of the researcher is better conceptualized on a continuum, rather than as an either/or dichotomy" (Breen, 2007, p. 163). The shift between insider and outsider could assist researchers in getting a deep understanding of participants' thoughts and behaviors, but also make researchers maintain relatively neutral attitudes, instead of given equal weights to both statuses throughout the whole process. Readers might be interested in how Tamas has flexibly adjusted her membership status between insider and outsider roles based on her and the participants' dynamic interactions in lived experiences, emotions, responses, languages, and body behaviors.

Besides, her use of website to involve the participants in the feedback and revision process does greatly enlighten me. However, regretfully, Tamas does not explain the effects of this way of member checking on data trustworthiness enhancement. Her words "I have not heard much back from the participants about the data—but I don't want to pester them for reassurance" (Tamas, 2011, p. 101) sounds a little ambiguous. Readers might be interested in whether there are participants who have actually engaged in this process. If yes, how many of her participants have commented, what their comments are, and how she and the participants negotiate the inconsistent ideas and perceptions. If no or only few participants have taken part in this process, the effects of this process might be doubted. Besides, it would be better if the author could share the findings and her interpretations with the participants for verification. In addition, the author could consider using peer debriefing (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to minimize her subjective bias.

In terms of data analysis, the book ends with an insightful and impressive discussion of the ethical and practical shortcomings of the recovery paradigm: imposition of labels, unreasonable allocation of power and blame, depoliticized perpetuation of the status quo, and lack of revolutionary or subversive impact. This paradigm "obscures the centrality of the agency of the abuser" (Tamas, 2011, p. 143) and shifts the responsibility to the women. Due to the reasons such as childrearing, children protection, and financial security needs, women have been obligated to swallow their anger, endure cycles of violence, and seek ways for recovery. However, these women participants' words indicate that the complete recovery is impossible and their psychological trauma can

never be eliminated. The author's profound discussion might pose important questions for all the readers: Why do women have to take the responsibility for male violence? What should males do for their domestic abusive behaviors? Do they need any community intervention programs or psychological therapy for mental recovery? How to prevent spousal abuse? The author does not provide any practically possible ways of radically solving this problem and its negative aftermath. She only proposes to reframe the post-abuse recovery process by using "the metaphors of the undead and spectral to imagine our way through stuck and narrow places" (Tamas, 2011, p. 151). I do not think spectral journeys of survival is a positive problem-solving method, but a means of self-deception, self-consolation, avoiding conflictions, and escaping reality, which might future reinforce the status quo. Those abused women would wrongly imagine that more efforts and contribution to the family might stop their spouse' abusive behaviors, but on the contrary, women's naive imagination and tolerance would put them in a worse situation.

Domestic violence rooted in gender and power has attracted attention across society since the mid-20th century. Feminism which advocates equal political, economic, and social rights for women has played a big part in directing people's attention on the most common and the private form of domestic violence—spousal abuse, and in protecting women from domestic violence. Based on feminism, our ultimate purpose is not to help abused women in recovery, but also terminate family violence. Feminist researchers contend that in essence, men attempt to maintain their societal dominance and control over women through domestic violence (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Stark & Flitcraft, 1996). Spousal abuse is an obvious manifestation of historically existing hegemonic masculinity. To prevent domestic violence, I tentatively propose two points. First, as argued by feminists, we need to strengthen notions of women's dignity and autonomy in education system. All the people including males must criticize, change, and deconstruct their ideas of hegemonic gender discrimination. Second, domestic violence has long been excluded from public interventions due to its privacy and the lack of related laws and regulations, so that this kind of gender-based abuse has not obtained enough attention and serious treatment. Therefore, besides perfecting laws against domestic violence, we should mobilize all social forces to participate together in domestic violence defense.

Unquestionably, autoethnography has certain shortcomings, for example, overemphasis on narration rather than the analysis and interpretation of a culture. In this book, the author spends a lot of space in narrating her thoughts development and family life stories. Hence, compared to its unique performative writing style and powerful artistic appeal, the author's interpretation of the data appears to be less impressive. In addition, Tamas does not mention the implications of this study for future research and its limitations.

In a word, this book represents a postdoctoral student's bold innovation and attempt in doing qualitative studies. It makes readers feel like looking at a vivid movie, instead of a rigorous and serious dissertation. For qualitative researchers and our doctoral students in education or social studies, the success of this book would encourage all of us to bravely use various and more advanced approach to present our studies and dissertations.

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