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When Language Lies: Truth, Silence, and Codes of Deception

Tammy C. Cline

University of Georgia, tcatc@uga.edu

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Abstract

What does an autoethnography look like? How do you conduct reliable qualitative research when you are both the researcher and the researched? Where do you find truth as an adult when you discover your life as a child was full of secrets? In his book "A Need to Know: The Clandestine History of a CIA Family", author H. J. Goodall (2006), tells the story of his personal journey investigating his own life growing up with a father who was a counter-intelligence offer in the cold-war era. While this narrative is an engaging and readable account, it is also a work that probes questions of identity, family codes of language, and the multiple contexts and questions of truth. Furthermore, Goodall's writing provides a working example of methodology and theory used in autoethnography.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Qualitative Research, Truth, Language

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When Language Lies: Truth, Silence, and Codes of Deception

Tammy C. Cline

University of Georgia, Athens, USA

What does an autoethnography look like? How do you conduct reliable qualitative research when you are both the researcher and the researched? Where do you find truth as an adult when you discover your life as a child was full of secrets? In his book "A Need to Know: The Clandestine History of a CIA Family", author H. J. Goodall (2006), tells the story of his personal journey investigating his own life growing up with a father who was a counter-intelligence offer in the cold-war era. While this narrative is an engaging and readable account, it is also a work that probes questions of identity, family codes of language, and the multiple contexts and questions of truth. Furthermore, Goodall's writing provides a working example of methodology and theory used in autoethnography. Keywords: Autoethnography, Qualitative Research, Truth, Language

Harold Lloyd "Bud" Goodall, Jr., a professor and the director of the Hugh Downs School of Communication at Arizona State University, is known for his pioneering work in the new ethnography of organizations and communities. Goodall's *Casing a Promised Land* (1989) was the third contribution in the field and the first book length study that employed autoethnographic methods. His expertise is brought full force to his recent book *"A Need to Know: The Clandestine History of a CIA Family"* (Goodall, 2006) as he tells the story of his quest to reconcile the father he knew as an ordinary government worker who retired on full disability from the Veterans Administration, to the father he came to know as a CIA counterintelligence agent. On page nine he writes, "I wrote this book because I could no longer not write it. I could no longer not write it because I didn't want to lie to my son or evade the questions my wife continued to ask me about my father. My father ... the man I grew up with but never knew" (Goodall). There were too many unexplainable gaps in his family history. *A Need to Know*, the winner of the National Communication Association Ethnography Division's 2006 Best Book Award, is Goodall's search for the truth in the hope of finding understanding.

Research Overview

He conducted years of research in preparation for this book, but his journey began with the physical inheritance of both his father's diary and a copy of *The Great Gatsby*. These "codebooks", as his father called them, were combined with a number of other data sources and methods which include interviews, retrospective fieldwork, copies of government files and documents, numerous articles and books, and in rare cases, photos. Goodall (2006) provides an extensive list of sources and references in the back of the book to support the soundness of his findings. He also clarifies when he lacks sufficient evidence to prove or corroborate his theories and conclusions. Goodall's book may read like a novel, but its powerful story meets the standard for sound academic integrity.

A Need to Know is a qualitative study for which Goodall (2006) states that he “locates within a broader tradition of scholarship that goes under the general heading of new narratives and history or cultural studies of the cold war era,” (p. 373). He uses autoethnography as his conceptual methodology. The research is so contingent on the context of its circumstances, that he rightly prioritizes “placing the facts under a historical and political, not biological, lens” (p. 359). Operating from a constructivist paradigm, I find his interpretation theory to be strongly hermeneutical as it involves searching for meaning within the context of the period in which his father lived. As such, *A Need to Know* offers an intriguing back-story that is fascinating and informative. Nevertheless, his narrative reads almost like a hermenetical/phenomenological work due to the circles of questions and reflections on his experience as lived and as recalled.

A Story within a Story

Endorsements and reviews on the back cover of the book emphasize the insider portrait Goodall paints of the Cold War, and in particular, the impact it had on his family. Hugh Downs, longtime anchor of ABC's 20/20 writes, “The effect of clandestine operations on the operators and their families is something we don't think about often, or encounter in reading spy literature ... An enlightening and moving work.” Author Elaine Tyler, PhD., writes “Goodall has written a powerful, eerie, and moving portrait of his father, and of a life built on lies required of a secret agent during the Cold War. The book reads like a mystery combined with Shakespearean tragedy and conveys how families can be battered and broken by the forces of clandestine government work. This tale is an intimate story of family life, and also a chilling picture of Cold War America.”

A Need to Know is a poignant tale of the emotional cost of silence. It reveals the price Goodall's father, Lloyd, paid in service to the government, as well as the price his mother, Naomi, paid in service and love to her husband. Goodall (2006), painstakingly and painfully, recounts and reconstructs his father's life. Born in 1922, Lloyd grew up in Ohio during the depression. He went on to become a World War II hero who received a Purple Heart, a Veterans Affairs representative, a Foreign Service reserve officer, and a vice consul. In Rome he carried the authority of the President of the United States of America. Yet, none of this explained the mysterious absences of Goodall's father. Neither did it account for Lloyd's extreme need for secrecy. Goodall reasoned that something was responsible for his family's cryptic life and ultimately, the self-destructive downward spiral of his parents. He was right. Goodall's father was a spy for the CIA, but Goodall never knew until after his father's death. Based on this story, it is doubtful that the CIA ever wanted anyone to know.

I chose to read *A Need to Know* because of a life long interest in espionage stories, that begin in high school with my own father's copies of Ian Fleming's James Bond novels. I was intrigued by the fact that a father who was a real CIA agent raised Goodall. Additionally, as a doctoral student who has begun looking into autoethnography, I was interested in Goodall's methodology. In beginning the process of writing my dissertation, I believe that a narrative approach will best facilitate the story I wish to tell of my own teaching and research into the role of creative arts in education. Through my experiences I have seen how language and art are tightly intertwined. It is from this perspective that I am fascinated by the way Goodall wields his words like an

artist with a brush, and furthermore how his reflection on language is adeptly woven through his book.

The focus of my review is not on the value of the historical, political, or even entertainment aspects of this book, although it is decidedly valuable for those very reasons. Those are surface story-lines. Another angle of discussion, easily mined for metaphor, links the story itself to *The Great Gatsby*. Goodall (2006) writes that certain passages in *The Great Gatsby* “foreshadow the mystery and the final chaos that he associated with his own father’s life” (p. 44). He periodically compares his father to Gatsby, although he is not as sure as the character, (Nick Calloway) that Gatsby, (i.e., his father turned out all right in the end). Yet, *A Need to Know* delves much deeper. This book is about truth and about language. It is also about the language of truth and the truth of language. These are subtle but sharp nuances explored within the sub-story. Goodall examines the power of words when they are spoken, and the devastating consequences when they are suppressed.

Coded Language

Language is a tool that Goodall (2006) knows can be used to reveal, conceal, obscure, or alter. He knows this because he lived in a home where language was coded, and he didn’t have the key. His father was just “gone” (p. 168) and his mother justified the lack of explanation because “it was complicated” (p. 140). Questions were not answered, and he learned to stop asking. He accepted the way things were in his family. All he was told was that his father “worked for the government” (p. 183). Goodall explores the symbolic use of language by relying on studies by Bamford (2001), Kahn (1967), and Martin (1980). He also relied on his own studies, as well as those of Kenneth Burke (1989). He shares that not speaking the truth about his family established “within my narrative identity a hidden and very much clandestine self” (Goodall, p. 320). When discussing the co-dependent and dysfunctional relationship of his parents, Goodall writes “I didn’t think about it that way then. I didn’t yet have the language” (p. 298). In another passage he writes “I didn’t then have the benefit of this elaborate language of explanation with which to parse and measure the messiness of his life” (p. 321). This “messiness” resulted from a family who knew “they” were listening and saying “the wrong thing” could have dire implications for national security during the Cold War. Silence and secrecy were simultaneously instruments of safety and destruction. According to Goodall, “communication in any family is a complex of systemic language loops and feedback information” (p. 333). How sadly ironic that Goodall’s father, a man “who dealt in the international market for useful information” (p. 170), was least capable of dealing with information within his own home.

Where is Truth?

As a spy, Lloyd would have been adept at using language to obscure the truth; truth becomes a very relative thing. At any given time it can be overt or covert or subverted. Truth depends on who’s telling it, who’s hearing it, what it costs, and what it is worth. There are different degrees of truth including plausible, partial, deniable, surface, and whole. It is all a matter of perspective, or is it? What about Goodall’s search

for the truth of his family's history? Goodall (2006) further asks, "Where do you go when you are stripped of your family? When all you have left is your narrative inheritance" (p. 23). Narrative inheritance is defined by the author as "the afterlives of the sentences used to spell out the life stories of those who came before us. The narratives we inherit from our forbears provide us with a framework for understanding our identity through theirs" (p. 23). Goodall needed to decipher his father's identity before he could make sense of his own. Is there ever just one truth? As Rorty (1989) submits

Truth cannot be out there—cannot exist independently of the human mind—because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own—unaided by the describing activities of human beings—cannot. (p. 5)

Where does truth fit into identity? What role does it play in the narrative heritage passed down through generations? What is the fall-out when this heritage is compromised by lies? These questions and more are not pure conjecture; they are issues that Goodall (2006) personally faced. Hidden truths resulted in a void, he says, "I knew too well their silences. The depth and crush of them" (p. 263). There is risk in telling the truth just as there is risk in uncovering it. Furthermore, looking for the truth of your identity and chancing the possibility of discovering an alternate identity in the truth, forms a perplexing problem. Upon the discovery of his father's diary, he writes, "I felt as if my whole life was turned inside out. I had been betrayed by the truth" (p. 17). The person he knew as "self" was demolished in what he later called a "relational identity crisis" (p. 15). Even so, the diary catapulted him into the role of detective, uncovering secrets in his life. Ultimately, this expedition provokes the reader to take a closer look at the truths, lies, and codes within their own life and in the stories of their family. Roland Barthes' (1977) uses the concept of the "presence of an absence" in reference to people missing from photographs. I believe it also applies here to Goodall's instinctive awareness of the deficit of truth in his life.

The Language of Description

In addition to the themes and reflexivity of this work, in which the author consistently questions himself as both a participant and a researcher, the language of the author deserves comment. "We are," writes Goodall (2006), "as human beings, first and foremost, language makers and storytellers" (p. 28). Goodall has a distinct way of delivering his research findings in an approachable and understandable text. *A Need to Know* is a story. Characterizations are layered and metaphorical, just like the narrative itself. The descriptions of place are minimal, yet the descriptions of the experience in and of place are very vivid. The reader gets a raw sense of the setting and only later realizes how few of the details were actually given. At times there exists a poetic phraseology within the text that provides a unique unclinking of meaning. For example, Goodall writes that while holding his mother's hand as she died, he sat "in that exact darkness that is partially made out of the material of the night and partially made out of the ineffable meaning of the darkness itself that can never be denied its place on this

earth, or in our hearts” (p. 355). Another example is “flying with my father was pure aerial poetry” (p. 303). My only criticism of *A Need to Know* involves the content and tone of the final chapters. I find the ideological rhetoric an unnecessary addition to an otherwise superb book. Although I understand Goodall’s perspective, and even his need to express his passionate views, I wish he had not used the end of this story as a platform for his political beliefs.

The Author’s Findings

What are the findings of this research? It is a journey of re-searching, and as such, there are few definitive resolutions. “I thought that researching their lives and trying to answer the confounding questions of my childhood and adolescence would clear up my lifelong confusion about them. This was partially done; but now I have newer questions and deeper mysteries” (Goodall, 2006, p. 369). Without language and truth, how do you effectively communicate? You cannot. Yet, in spite of an upbringing layered in secrecy, Goodall (2006) has written, to the best of his ability, the truth as he has come to understand it. Through his words, the voice of his father, long silenced, can now be heard.

To read more about this book, please check out the publisher’s site at <http://www.lcoastpress.com/book.php?id=2>

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Author Note

Tammy C. Cline is a doctoral student pursuing a degree in Art Education. She has 10 years of teaching experience including K12 and higher education. Her research examines the effectiveness of an arts-based creativity curriculum for equipping pre-

service elementary educators to teach their students 21st century skills. Other research interests include the educational benefits of visual arts experience for non-art students; and, the use of art to assist language acquisition for EFL students. She is teaching as a visiting professor at a University in China for the 2012-2013 academic year. Correspondence regarding this review can be addressed to Tammy C. Cline at E-mail: tcac@uga.edu or tammycline4@gmail.com

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