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Method and Writing: A Review of Adams' Narrating the Close

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Abstract

The reviewer starts the review with her reading strategy of beginning with the discussion of the method. She argues that Adams' work expands definitions of culture and what constitutes the field in ethnographic work in a beautifully written piece of autoethnography. Adams marries method, writing, and topic matter. The reviewer believes that this text would be appropriate for undergraduate and graduate students as well as those of us wanting an excellent example of autoethnography. In conclusion, the reviewer claims excitement to see where this will take ethnographers in the future, and especially those of us interested in the study of stigmatized and marginalized identities and close relationships.

Keywords

qualitative research

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Method and Writing: A Review of Adams' *Narrating the Closet*

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The reviewer starts the review with her reading strategy of beginning with the discussion of the method. She argues that Adams' work expands definitions of culture and what constitutes the field in ethnographic work in a beautifully written piece of autoethnography. Adams marries method, writing, and topic matter. The reviewer believes that this text would be appropriate for undergraduate and graduate students as well as those of us wanting an excellent example of autoethnography. In conclusion, the reviewer claims excitement to see where this will take ethnographers in the future, and especially those of us interested in the study of stigmatized and marginalized identities and close relationships.

The claim "I study LGBTQ cultures" makes little sense: if LGBTQ cultures are not cultures, then how can I use ethnography—a method for studying cultural experience—to understand LGBTQ cultural members, happenings, and experiences? By claiming to study LGBTQ cultures, I claim to study cultures that some writers say do not exist. (p. 154)

This quote is an apt way to begin my review of Adams' (2011) *Narrating the Closet: An autoethnography of same sex attraction* because of my reading strategy: I admit that I began from the appendix (*Notes on method, criticism, and representation*). As someone who teaches qualitative methodology at the graduate and undergraduate level and uses autoethnography for some of her work, I welcome a book that explicitly addresses methodological issues in the presentation of the ethnography. I also was attracted to the topic given my research interest in stigmatized identities and how they are (re)negotiated in the context of close relationships. I looked forward to reading Adams' work because of the meeting of method, topic, and writing, and I admit to starting and finishing the piece in one sitting on a plane flight because it was that well-done; a feat for any academic work blending interpretive methods and creative writing.

It is challenging to do autoethnography well, thus I am always curious about how a researcher participant executes the method. Adams' work represents the best of personal narrative as it is highly theoretical, useful, and evocative (Ellis, 2004). Adams makes a convincing case for the study of LGBTQ identities as a cultural one and his work expands definitions of culture and ethnography. My reading strategy did not spoil the elegant writing flowing through the remainder of the book, and in fact, it crystallized my opinion that this text would be appropriate for undergraduate and graduate students as well as those of us wanting an excellent example of autoethnography.

Adams (2011) articulated his goal for the work early to frame the reading of the text: "I document my journey through, and processing of, the closet and coming out with the purpose of making experiences of same-sex attraction more humane, tolerable, and meaningful to for others" (p. 36). The point is to implicate all of us in climate issues; we

must all take ownership for creating safe environments for the important everyday talk of who and how we love. No one should have to “come out in silence” (p. 125).

If we think that a person’s intimate relationships should be ‘no one’s business,’ then we should not ask about boyfriends, girlfriends, marriage, and other intimate and meaningful forms of coupling. If we believe these topics are appropriate to discuss, then same-sex boyfriends, girlfriends, marriages and other intimate and meaningful forms of coupling must be appropriate, too. (p. 127)

This goal seems clearly born out in Adams’ choice to layer a process theory of LGBQ identities with the closet metaphor in chapters that articulate a process of going in the closet and the conditions necessary for the closet (Chapter Two), being in the closet and the secretive enactments and disconnect between personal and private avowals that must occur to maintain this state (Chapter Three), leaving the closet and the implication that coming out is an ever-present never complete process (Chapter Four), and a chapter (Five) on the paradoxes of the closet. Though Adams provided readers with a caveat in the introduction that this work may not be generalizable, was not intended to test predictions, or control outcomes as a post-positivist communication project would (p. 36), I experienced the work as an opening up of the importance of studying and providing concrete disclosure strategies for individuals with stigmatized identities of all kinds, especially those that may be invisible (e.g., PLWA). His use of his own experience of the closet and coming out, interviews with those who identify as LGBQ, conversations with others about same-sex attraction, and mass-mediated representations of the closet, coming out, and same-sex attraction make the statistics about hate crimes and identities personal (p. 159). We all feel the ascription process in some way because of the labels and attitudes and beliefs about others’ identities that we communicate directly and indirectly and that are available in larger discourse. Adams’ discussion of the paradoxes of the closet demonstrates the necessity of balancing between those identities we avow dearly and those ascribed to us by others (e.g., Faulkner & Hecht, 2011).

This work would be a good supplemental text in classes focused on the examination of relationships and identities, self-disclosure, gender, sexuality, and social support. As I read the book, I imagined overlaying various communication theories of identity and self-disclosure in class discussions indicating the heuristic value of Adams’ research and writing. The topics of expectations and disclosure, needs for disclosure, timing of disclosure, and relational consequences would all be appropriate foci. In particular, I thought of Hecht’s (Faulkner & Hecht, 2006) Communication Theory of Identity (CTI). The idea of coming out as a series of paradoxes that people create in interaction highlights the personal, relational, enacted and communal levels of identity. For instance, paradox number 6 states: “Coming out is sometimes perceived as necessary and important, mature and healthy, honest and politically responsible; conversely, not coming out is unhealthy and shameful, immature, dishonest, and politically irresponsible” (p. 112). The difference between one’s personal sense of same-sex attraction labeled LGBQ and relational others’ negative reactions to a disclosure of same-sex attraction can be considered an identity gap. The consequences of identity gaps are relational and

psychological from the dissolution of relationships to self-harm because of “reckless acts” (e.g., excessive drinking) and not receiving affirmation of the self.

The least compelling argument in the book was the claim to a gay language. The argument for gay language means that the questions we can ask about sexuality are limited, and this position then opens up debates about who is *in* and *outside* of an LGBTQ community (Cameron & Kulick, 2003). Cameron and Kulick (2003) contend that it is more productive “to regard them [features of ‘gayspeak’], instead, as symbolically or ideologically laden linguistic resources that are available for anyone—regardless of their erotic orientation—to draw on and recirculate to produce particular effects that may or may not be intentional” (p. 91). This, however, does not weaken the overall strength of Adams’ expansion of culture and ethnography. I just believe the case was overstated. Adams has demonstrated that ethnographers should enlarge notions of space and culture given that LGBTQ culture is not tied to concrete space in many cases (e.g., towns without LGBTQ bars). He demonstrated the notion of an LGBTQ space as liminal and thus shifting and slippery in need of personal experience to illuminate cultural discourse surrounding same-sex attraction:

The ethnographer of LGBTQ cultures must also find a way to study invisible and ephemeral phenomena, such as the closet, coming out, and same-sex attraction. For me, this means reflecting on and using my experience with the closet, talking with others about their experience with coming out, and examining mass-mediated representations of same-sex attraction. (Adams, 2011, p. 157)

In conclusion, Adams’ work expands definitions of culture and what constitutes the field in ethnographic work in a beautifully written piece of autoethnography. I am excited to see where this will take ethnographers in the future, and especially those of us interested in the study of stigmatized and marginalized identities and close relationships.

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Author Note

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