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Abstract

Sharing some personal experiences and tying it to some larger social discourses regarding learning and the academy, I praise Heewon Chang, the author of *Autoethnography as Method*, for the practical and clear way she presents her method for writing autoethnographies

Keywords

Autoethnography, Qualitative Methods, Social discourses

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An Autoethnographic Book Review

Sally St. George

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*Sharing some personal experiences and tying it to some larger social discourses regarding learning and the academy, I praise Heewon Chang, the author of *Autoethnography as Method*, for the practical and clear way she presents her method for writing autoethnographies. Key Words: Autoethnography, Qualitative Methods, Social discourses*

Personally Writing

I do not have unlimited space here, so I will be forthright and honest. My writing life is not usually the most generative or satisfying part of my academic career. I am a practitioner and a teacher and I am constantly writing—e-mails, curriculum documents, memos, letters of reference (I am fabulous at this kind of writing), words of encouragement to students, conference proposals, conference presentations, and administrative reports. It seems that I primarily do my work writing in front of a computer screen. I also write, mostly co-write, chapters and articles for publication because that is the scholarly expectation of the academy. Professors learn early that they must publish or perish—this short phrase tells volumes about the culture and values held within higher education.

I must also admit that I am highly jealous of my colleagues who are prolific and love to write. It feels like I have to force myself to write; and on those days when I must devote myself to scholarly writing, I make sure that the refrigerator and cupboard are stocked with comfort foods. I predicted that it would take me a week to compose this review of Heewon Chang's (2008) *Autoethnography as Method*, much longer than it took to read this very clear, straightforward, personable, and practical guide to writing and presenting an autoethnographic inquiry.

Dr. Chang is forthright about sharing some of her own writing that is quite personal in nature. The personal stories are very interesting and are used to illustrate the discrete autoethnographic methodological tasks of collecting, managing, and interpreting data. Her writing style made me think of that of a good mentor—encouraging, challenging, and holding high expectations to help the mentee to achieve at his/her highest level.

Being Critiqued

My aversion to writing is not a random aberration. I have two children who find their creative outlet in writing—I am jealous of them too. But I lived—and live—in a time in which the discourses of evaluation and criticism are considered by teachers, coaches, and parents to be motivational in improving one's place in society or performance. Feedback was key to wanting to shelter my writing from public review or critique. In junior high school, I remember vividly the feedback to the weekly

compositions we were assigned in language arts: “not very creative,” “poorly organized,” “an introduction that lacks interest,” “sentence beginnings not varied,” but also “excellent grammar.” Such feedback did not improve as I progressed into high school English: “ideas not well organized,” “too much of your own interpretation of the content rather than what we talked about,” “lackluster,” “does not engage reader,” but also “technically well-done.”

I became a math major in college! The pain of writing exists to this day—and even in the moment I write this paragraph. I will tell you that I do not cry over writing assignments as a professional, but the tears shed over time could have raised the level of Lake Erie.

I think that Dr. Chang might have been anticipating reluctance or lack of confidence from her readership because she offers many exercises to get the juices flowing. For example, in speaking to the reader, she says,

Through writing exercises of chronicling, inventorying, and visualizing self, you are encouraged to unravel your memory, write down fragments of your past, and build the database for your cultural analysis and interpretation. As I reminded you earlier, writing exercises suggested here should be treated as catalysts for further thoughts. (p. 72)

While I was reading this book, I had the feeling that Dr. Chang’s work had a familiar tone to it. About midway into the text, I realized that Dr. Chang could be considered the “Anne Lamott of qualitative inquiry.” Anne wrote *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (1994). What Anne does for budding fictional writers, Heewon does for qualitative researchers contemplating or putting together an autoethnography. They both show us the myriad ways that we can connect what we experience in our lives to our writing.

Critiquing Writing

To be honest, when I was first asked to review and edit works submitted as autoethnographic, I was a little nervous and uncertain. I had read some autoethnographic accounts; I found the works captivating and well-written. Like a good short story or novel, I was drawn into the story and would begin to worry and care for the main character. But when I remembered I was in the position of reviewer or editor and not leisurely reader, I was often left with a nagging and pervasive question: What is the difference between this piece and something that would be published in *The New Yorker*?

At *The Qualitative Report* we pride ourselves on studying the literature and attending conferences and workshops to keep up-to-date on the latest developments in qualitative inquiry. Reading *Autoethnography as Method* assisted me in feeling confident that autoethnography is not just “loosey-goosey” and can be a systematic, deliberate, and coherent account inclusive of method and therefore worthy of being called legitimate research. Some of my colleagues and students seem a little concerned about this kind of talk, worrying that I might be closing the doors to innovation and possibility by emphasizing or privileging the systematic-ness and deliberateness of inquiry. I do not think I am closing doors, rather I am opening the door for deliberateness (or the “black

box” of inquiry) to be shared publicly for evaluation. I like Dr. Chang’s tact on autoethnography:

The autoethnography that I promote in this book combines the cultural analysis and interpretation with narrative details. It follows the anthropological and social scientific inquiry approach rather than descriptive or performative storytelling. That is, I expect the stories of autoethnographers to be reflected upon, analyzed, and interpreted within their broader sociocultural context. (p. 46)

From my reading of this, there is no restriction on the content or message, but the message should have come through a careful examination of the content. Dr. Chang spends a considerable amount of space in her book clearly explaining and documenting what she means by culture as well as the connection between culture and self.

So you may ask then, how does one who is not an avid writer, still sensitive to having her written words criticized, and yet under university pressures to publish, act in the capacity of reviewer and editor, especially with works that are so personal and on the cutting edge of qualitative inquiry? I think that there are two key factors here. First, it is the appreciation of how difficult it is to write that which is personally revealing, and secondly, the analysis; rigorous and deliberate analysis makes the difference between works in research journals and those published in *The New Yorker*. Dr. Chang’s writing in this book illustrates her consideration of both. She writes:

In autoethnography, the insider and the outsider converge. Namely you are the generator, collector, and interpreter of data. For this reason, you are familiar with two different contexts: the original context of data and the context of autoethnographic interpretation and writing. During data interpretation you excavate meanings from two different contexts and wrestle with contradictions and similarities between them. (pp. 127-128)

To me this does not sound like it closes doors—it sounds like it opens doors to greater connection of self and cultural associations and subsequently understanding and generation of meaning, as well as the marriage of what is viewed as legitimate in academic worlds with that which is creative, unique, and personalized. Both of these, the scientific and artistic, are fraught with discourses of value and legitimacy.

Even in terms of her view on analysis, which is the hallmark of qualitative inquiry, Dr. Chang offers autoethnographers a grasp of structure and flexibility. She writes:

Cultural data analysis and interpretation. . . this process transforms bits of autobiographical data into a culturally meaningful and sensible text. Instead of merely describing what happened in your life, you try to explain how fragments of memories may be strung together to explain your cultural tenets and relationship with others in society. In this sense, autoethnographic data analysis and interpretation distinguish their final product from other self-narrative, autobiographical writings that

concentrate on storytelling. Analysis and interpretation enable researchers to shift their focus from merely ‘scavenging’ or ‘quilting’ information bits to actively ‘transforming’ them into a text with culturally meaningful explanations. . . .You are expected to review, fracture, categorize, rearrange, probe, select, deselect, and sometimes simply gaze at collected data in order to comprehend how idea behaviors, material objects, and experiences from the data interrelate and what they really mean to actors and their environments. (pp. 126-127)

I hope Dr. Chang will not mind it if I use this passage when I am reviewing manuscripts and need to help an author make this aspect of his/her work more visible and pointed. I promise to give her credit in the review note as I suggest her book to the author.

Dr. Chang does not just leave the reader with an explanation, again she has provided a treasure trove of exercises that are intended to help students of autoethnography learn and to help autoethnographers accomplish the goals and expectations noted above.

Considering Culture in Writing

Dr. Chang situates her writing in the culture of writing inquiry—it is at once the context and the goal. I would strongly urge any writer of autoethnography to utilize her text. For those who are beginners, her exercises can help propel the process and help to keep writers on a fruitful track, one in which they can feel confident and not afraid of or crushed by critique. For those who are experienced, it can serve as a good check on making explicit those dimensions that are necessary for readers to more fully understand the implications of the cultural influences on the lives of individuals. And for reviewers and editors, it can help us help others, keeping our eyes on the power of the connection between personal experience and cultural understandings and on how publishing such work can lead us to social change.

My own brief experience with writing autoethnographically is that it is refreshing and can produce some change. I realized that I was groomed or prompted to dislike writing—it is not a fatal flaw within me, but clearly a social message given from teachers long ago, not easily forgotten, and still an influence in my life even after all of this time. I did enjoy telling my own story, and realize that it could be simply self-serving if not for establishing a connection with the larger discourses of teaching, mentoring, motivation, competition, and excellence. I hope that you can see the impact of these discourses in the ways in which they intrude into individual and collective lives. I appreciate Dr. Chang’s steady stance on method and her gentle encouragement in writing personally with a larger aim. Before reading her book I would never have considered writing in this fashion. Thank you, Dr. Chang.

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Author Note

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