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## Sometimes I Am Afraid: An Autoethnography of Resistance and Compliance

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### Abstract

Utilizing a feminist autoethnographic stance and method, this article is based upon the dialogues produced by a student completing an assignment for a social work instructor. Various tensions are explored, including the role of autoethnography in both qualitative and feminist research and the role of fear in a woman's life. A critique of the role of culture in the experience of fear as well as the student's use of autoethnography to resist and accept fear is explored. The uses of autoethnography for social workers are also discussed.

### Keywords

Autoethnography, Fear, and Feminism

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## **Sometimes I Am Afraid: An Autoethnography of Resistance and Compliance**

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### **Situating Ourselves in the Literature**

This is a most unusual autoethnography because it has two authors, which immediately makes the “auto” suspect. However, there are two authors because the article is the result of a social work class assignment for an undergraduate student, Danielle, from a faculty mentor, Paige. The following is the development of the assignment through the dialogue and process of the student-faculty relationship. The autoethnography was experienced and conceived by Danielle alone; however, the ongoing relationship and conversations between Danielle and Paige ultimately resulted in the following autoethnography and the context that surrounds it.

Although the stories and experiences are singularly Danielle's, Paige found that these stories fulfill one point of autoethnography. According to Ricci (2003), autoethnography “allows the reader (and the writer) to experience something new - to feel, to learn, to discover, to co-create” (p. 594). Although specifically Danielle's experiences, the particular encounters of fear that she shares resonate with what we know to be women's experiences of fear specifically and generally. As Denzin (2003) states, since 9/11 we have lived in a “culture of fear” (p. 257). Although a growing emotion in American society, fear has particular meaning for women as research has clearly demonstrated that women are more fearful than men (Mehta & Bondi, 1999). Women's experience of fear is often debilitating and demoralizing, limiting their choices and freedoms in both body and mind. As a result of fear, women must “Take Back the Night” because they cannot walk freely without fear of rape or assault. Silva and Wright (2009) support this; they found that their participants felt restricted due to their fear of sexual assault and engaged in safety rituals to compensate. Fear also assists women in their desire for partnership because as it is often framed, they need someone to trust, to

support and to take care of them. As a result of fear women make choices and live lives that are based on conscious and unconscious attempts to “be safe”.

Fear has the potential to limit and to lessen the ability to participate fully in one’s life. If fear is left unchecked, the resulting dependency can result in irrationality and the loss of autonomy. Fear can also cause the loss of relationships and connections through the isolation that fear-based decisions often create. Feminists have suggested that women’s experiences of fear and, particularly, their more frequent experience of fear in contrast to male fear is a result of patriarchal social control (Hanmer & Maynard, 1987; Silva & Wright, 2009). Femininity and the idea of female vulnerability as an ongoing social discourse are pinpointed as a root cause of many women’s fears.

However, fear is not an absolute negative experience. Evolutionary theory has instructed us that fear is a needed and natural response. According to Giddens (1991), it is inevitable and to be expected. We need to be fearful at times. We know that fear is practical and is not singularly based on socialization and the desire for female subordination. Battersby (2008) wrote about the positive power in fear as an aid in preparing, as a motivating and driving force, and as a means of developing courage. According to Brosch, Sanders, Pourtois, and Scherer (2008), it is widely accepted in neurological research literature that fear aids in preparation and adaptive behavior. Folkman and Moskowitz (2000) discussed the tension of positive and negative affect that co-occurs during periods of intense stress, including heightened fear. They state that although the literature focuses on negative outcomes, positive outcomes also exist. Some of the outcomes include enthusiasm for new challenges, and a sense of pride, and relief. Thus, although most individuals would label fear as a negative emotion, there has been research and discussion of fear as having positive and useful aspects. This in turn leads to the idea that the goal is not the eradication of fear but rather, as Mehta and Bondi (1999) suggest, to be “agents capable of both resistance and compliance” to fear (p. 68). Any discussion of fear immediately creates dialectical tensions since fear is both positive and negative. The knowledge of fear is practical yet also discursive. It is also difficult to distinguish what the results of social and/or individual actions are in the experience of fear.

The tensions within the experience of fear presented in this autoethnography are not the only tensions explored. Qualitative research, its role(s), legitimization and uses and specifically that of autoethnography bring forth special forms of tension.

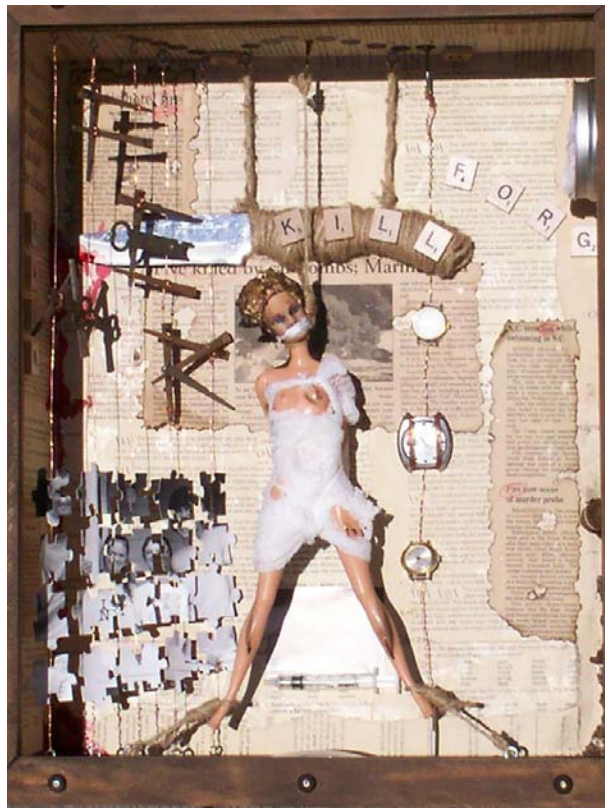
Denzin and Lincoln (2000, 2005) speak about these tensions through their “moments” (2005, p. 14) of inquiry in qualitative research. Currently there are eight “moments” that begin with the traditional period, which includes ethnographic accounts of “objective” research that presents the experiences of “others” as “alien, foreign, and strange” (2005, p. 15). The next moment continues with phase two, the modernist, which continues to attempt the application of quantitative rigor to issues of social inequality. Moment three, the blurred genres, was observed in the 70s and 80s and included a wide variety of qualitative methods and more interpretive and open-ended works. Next was the crisis of representation that included reflexive writing and the questioning of validity, reliability, and objectivity as meaningful constructs for qualitative research. This, then leads to the postmodern stage where action and participation from silenced groups was sought and grand narratives were “replaced by more local, small-scale theories fitted to specific problems and specific situations” (p. 20). The postexperimental inquiry moment,

which existed only from 1995-2000, included experimental writing such as “literary, poetic, autobiographical, multi-voiced, conversational, critical, visual, performative, and co-constructed representations” (p. 20). Currently, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) are looking to a future which involves battling against “the methodological backlash associated with ‘Bush science’ and the evidence-based social movement” (p. 20).

We would like to position the current article as one resisting the backlash and confronting the tension of the abrupt end of the postexperimental moment. This research is one in which we navigate and resist the oppositional forces to feminist thinking in research. Hoping to be involved in and advancing the continuation of the seventh moment, we use a feminist first person voice in this article, include a creative art element and aspire to take a small step for qualitative researchers and readers towards emancipation.

### **Paige’s Autoethnography Assignment**

In an attempt to teach social work students about qualitative research, self-reflection and the general sense of otherness that people can experience in American society, I asked my students to create an artistic representation of their “otherness” and then to write an autoethnographic text. I provided my students with a detailed description of the actual assignment (see Appendix A) as well as readings that provided an example of autoethnography (McLaurin, 2003; Ricci, 2003) and ideas about autoethnography (Bennett, 2004; Holt, 2003). In addition, I lectured on the topic and discussed with the class examples of and potential topics for autoethnographies. I also encouraged students to come talk to me during office hours about the assignment if they had questions. Danielle was one of those students and she shared with me her idea about doing a shadowbox that held symbolic representations of fears she had. I supported Danielle’s idea and was excited to see what she would produce. Danielle then created her Shadowbox of Fears (see photo) and wrote the required autoethnography paper.



One result of Danielle's autoethnography was the public reaction to viewing it. With her permission, Danielle's Shadowbox of Fears was displayed at a local art gallery, two regional conferences, and in my office. I set it on a chair facing my office door, which often was open. When people walked down the hallway, if they glanced into my office, they saw the Shadowbox of Fears. The responses were frequent and intense, evoked personal reflection, and created dialogue on the topic. Students, staff, and faculty would all stop and stare, some would gasp, others would do a double take, and many came into my office to ask about it and eventually share their own thoughts. People I had never spoken to before stopped to talk to me about it, and I was overwhelmed by the reactions to it. Generally, people felt a gut reaction to the shadowbox that could be described as scary, intense, sad, and/or traumatic. Everyone also immediately commented on the dichotomous feeling it created because of the beauty that the shadowbox contained as an art piece. Viewers saw it as violent and scary but at the same time so beautiful and artistic. Passersby seemed to be repelled by the violence and anger of the piece but also felt drawn to the detail and drama of the shadowbox. To me, this was meaningful as people's reactions added another level to the already existing tensions and dichotomies found in the topic of fear, and specifically to Danielle's autoethnography.

People also wanted to hear what the shadowbox was about and why it was in my office, and I found myself repeatedly explaining what autoethnography is, how it is used, and what Danielle's was generally about. Women repeatedly responded to the topic of fear and would sit and talk to me while sharing their experiences of and reactions to the issue of fear. As I have described in another article on autoethnography (Averett, 2009), the process of telling the story can and did cause a small social reaction and produces new moments of meaning. One reaction led to the creation of this manuscript as I was encouraged to work with Danielle to get her experience out to a broader audience than just our local community.

Another moment of meaning that the assignment created was that many of the students, including Danielle, commented on how freeing or emancipating the process of doing the autoethnography was. This resonates with what studies about the connection between art and psychology have said. According to Virshup (1996), "The process of drawing first, then writing or talking about the image, has no peer in bringing suppressed experiences and emotions to consciousness, and resolving paralyzing and debilitating conflicts" (p. 261).

Not only did the students find freedom and insight in their personal experience of an autoethnographic creation, but they also found a deeper connection to one another as they shared their autoethnographies. During our class session when students had the option to present their creative elements and discuss their papers, the class often was led to tears, laughter, and grave silence. Several students commented that the experience was their favorite of their entire academic career. Others likened it to therapy, and one student stated she would be sharing her autoethnography with her therapist. The students found, like any good autoethnography is meant to do, that even if their experiences were not exactly similar, they could still engage in "self conscious reflexivity on their own relation to the experience" (Ellis & Bochner, 1996, p. 28). Students shared that they had received verbal and email communications from their fellow students encouraging them

in their experiences, thanking them for sharing and in return sharing their own similar stories.

Like the students' experiences, it is our hope that you the readers are able to do the same with the following autoethnography about the tension between acceptance of and resistance to fear. We hope that the image, the themes, and the topic of fear--particularly women's fear--will create your own thoughts, reflections, and reactions that are similar yet distinct.

### **Danielle's Fears**

Sometimes I am afraid. As a woman I feel I have been taught to display my fears and seek support from others around me. It is because of this socialization that during a time when I was feeling at the mercy of my fears I created a shadowbox filled with items that symbolized the things I felt had begun to rule my life. I created the box as a way to identify my fears and remove them from myself. It was an opportunity to examine them from an outside perspective and determine what it was about these things that made me so afraid. I was able to symbolically "remove" these fears from myself and essentially put them away in a box where they would no longer rule my life.

Today, the act of looking into my shadowbox evokes both a sense of weakness as well as an inner struggle of whether to accept my fears as a part of myself or to work toward overcoming and disowning them. At the time that I made the box there were four central themes of fear that were dominating my life and thus I represented them in the shadowbox.

### **Time**

The first theme that is displayed in my box is time. As a young child I was oblivious to time. Though I knew that dinner was at six o'clock and my bedtime was at eight o'clock, my world did not revolve around a clock. I was free to play until my mother called me to dinner or for bed. It was her job to keep track of time, not mine. When I entered school, time became something that ruled my life. I had to be up at a specific time, catch the bus before it passed my stop at half past seven, get my work done before lunch at 11:30, catch the bus home again, and get my homework done before my bedtime. My life began to be ruled by a clock, and though I did not particularly enjoy it, I became used to it. Time, though annoying, was never a scary thing until my junior year of high school.

During the holiday season of my junior year, my family and I were making the slow journey back home after spending a few days with my paternal grandmother in Florida. As we made our way southwest, the weather continued to become colder and snow soon littered the ground. Boarding the small prop plane that would take my family from Denver, Colorado, to our home in Riverton, Wyoming, I felt at ease. Though the plane seated only about 12 people and would bumpily travel over the Rocky Mountains, I had flown on it numerous times throughout my childhood. Taking a seat directly behind my father and several seats behind my mother and younger brother, I fastened my seat belt and directed my attention to the flight attendant. As the engines started and the aircraft began to slowly make its way down the runway, the flight attendant removed her

safety brochure from her overhead locker and began to speak. Staring out the window at the ground moving beneath the plane, I felt the aircraft gather speed and watched as the plane's wheels gracefully left the ground. I have always loved flying, and I giggled childishly at the flip my stomach did as the plane hit sporadic turbulence, climbing higher.

Continuing to climb for several minutes, the plane finally reached its appropriate altitude. On an average flight this would signal the turning off of the seat belt sign and the excitement of receiving a beverage and snack from the flight attendant. However, there are no snacks or beverages on a prop plane, and there is absolutely no unbuckling your seat belt because of the sporadic turbulence the plane encounters throughout the flight. Though most rides on the plane are bumpy and unpredictable, the weather on this flight grew worse and the view of the clouds I had out my window turned darker with each kilometer. Accustomed to the bumpy ride, I paid no attention to the shaking aircraft as it increased in intensity. Closing my window shade I elected to rest my eyes and think of the comfort of my own bed and canine companion Dopy waiting for me at home.

I fell asleep but was awakened by a particularly long and rough bout of turbulence. It took several seconds for me to remember where I was and to process what was happening. When I was finally fully awake, I could hear the loud pelt of hail on the exterior of the plane and I could sense uneasiness in the air. Raising my window shade in an attempt to see what was going on outside, I was greeted with a black sheet of nothingness. Looking around me for something to hold onto as a second bout of rough turbulence overtook the plane, I desperately reached for my armrest. Grasping my fingers tightly around it as a third, much longer sequence of turbulence shook the plane, I was startled when the armrest rose up along with my bouncing arm. It was broken.

In the absence of something to hold onto, I reached in front of me and grabbed the back of my father's seat, accidentally digging my right index fingernail into his right ear as I did. Startled at the sharpness of my fingernail, my father turned in his seat and looked at me with excitement in his eyes and a devious grin on his face. He was enjoying this adventure while I was shaking and wide-eyed with fear. Looking around me for comfort, I turned in my seat to look at the man who was sitting behind me diagonally. To my amazement, as the fears of dying at the age of 17 raced through my mind, he sat calmly typing on his laptop while it bounced uncontrollably on his lap. Deciding that looking behind me for comfort was not helpful I chose to look up the aisle in front of me to the cockpit. Through the front windshield of the plane I could see nothing but the black sky. The control panel that was lit with buttons and lights seemed to blink at me against the darkness outside. As if he had sensed my worried eyes, the copilot pivoted in his seat looking down the aisle and into the plane's cabin. With a quick move of his hand he reached up and grasped the curtain that separated the cockpit from where I sat in fear and closed it, creating a barrier and obstructing my view of what was going on in the front of the plane. Taking this as a sure sign that something was terribly wrong, I clutched the back of my father's seat, staring at the worn navy blue fabric beneath my hands.

As I concentrated on the back of my father's seat, my body jerked from side to side and I struggled to keep my feet touching the floor of the plane. I could hear my carry-on suitcase shifting in the overhead bin above me, and hail pelting against the plane. While I listened to the sounds of the storm outside and feeling the plane move my



body uncontrollably, as if on a roller coaster ride that had gotten out of control, a thought I had been trying to avoid crept into my mind. What if my family and I were to die? Closing my eyes, I began to panic. I was not ready to die. I had not done all of the things I wanted to do in life yet. I had not traveled to Europe or explored New York City. I had not graduated from high school, much less gone to college. If I died, I would never be able to experience what it was like to date a boy or grow old. I would never own my first home or give life to a child. These thoughts of what I would never experience if I were to die on this flight home tortured me as I was tossed around by the turbulence.

Finally, after what seemed like a lifetime the hail pounding the plane began to subside and the turbulence, though still forceful, began to decrease. Landing at the Riverton airport, I could not wait for the flight attendant to open the door and let me step onto solid ground once again. As the captain's voice came over the intercom thanking us for flying with him today and apologizing for the unexpected bumpiness, I closed my eyes once again. This time instead of thinking of all of the things I would never get to experience, I vowed to myself that I would do the things that I yearned to do in life before I ran out of time.

My fear of time is symbolized in my shadow box in two main ways. One symbol is the more obvious use of the hanging watch faces. The other symbol is that of the burned cigar, its ashes symbolizing the time that has passed in my life.

### **Loneliness**

A second theme that is displayed in my shadowbox is the loneliness that results from being forgotten by those I love. Like my fear of being stereotyped, my fear of loneliness is also connected to my family. Upon moving the family to North Carolina after living in Wyoming for over 20 years, my mother began experiencing extreme anxiety and depression. One particular morning I arose from a night of troubled sleep to find my mother on the couch clutching her knees tightly to her chest and shaking uncontrollably. Her face was pale despite her olive-colored skin, and her body looked so thin it was almost non-existent beneath her light blue pajamas. Her eyes were closed as if she was trying to hide from the world, and her toes were curled over the edge of the couch. Oblivious to my presence, my mother continued to rock back and forth, her limp black hair moving slightly with her body. There were dark circles under her eyes from the lack of sleep, and the cheerful gleam that was ever so present upon her face when she smiled was dull and morose. Her lips were turned down in a defeated frown, and her skin sagged upon her youthful looking face. As she rocked, my mother created an aura of depression and nervous energy within the room. The early morning rays of sunlight, accentuated with a tint of orange that shone through the window, seemed to stop when they reached her. All of her desire to move off of the couch seemed to be smothered by the overpowering emotions stirring within her.

As a child, my mother had been raised in a family that was filled with continuous arguments between her parents and her maternal relatives who lived next door. Growing up on the same street as the majority of her extended family, my mother continuously had family members to interact with. Along with the benefits of this constant interaction, there was also drama surrounding who was doing what and with whom. Throughout her childhood my mother witnessed unrelenting and irrational screaming between her parents

and her relatives next door. Many of the arguments she witnessed were of things any outsider would find silly, such as what time her mother got out of bed. With the stress of the continuous yelling between members of the two households, my mother learned to hold her emotions inside instead of confronting them as she grew older.

Upon her escape from her argument-laden childhood and into a marriage with my father, my mother buried the emotional baggage she felt as a result of her childhood deep within her. Moving from her home in New York to Wyoming, she was able to escape the noisy confusion of her childhood. Wyoming was a quiet state with few people and the expectation of privacy.

During her years of marriage and throughout my childhood, my mother was the central source of strength and love in my family. During times of fear and sadness she was the one we all went to. She was the one who held our family together and kept us functioning as a whole. She was the root from which we all grew. During my childhood my mother was always strong, never showing any signs of the dark emotions that lingered within her mind.

When we moved to North Carolina, the quiet lifestyle my mother had readily embraced disappeared. Our city in North Carolina was busy with traffic and continuous sirens that she had been able to escape from in Wyoming. This continuous noise seemed to bring up the noisy confusion of her childhood once again. Slowly, the emotions and memories my mother had tucked away began to resurface. Eventually they overwhelmed her. It was during this time that I saw my mother vulnerable for the first time in my life.

Standing in the brightly-lit living room seeing my mother rock back and forth as if she had entered a world of emotional emptiness, I felt my stomach clenched in apprehension. I had never seen my mother so absent of positive energy and determination. It was as if she were merely a body that was living and functioning with no true life left within her. Clasp my hands together and bringing them up to my chest, I began to cry. My mother's pain was so powerful that I could feel it entering my heart, her sorrow becoming my own.

Without my mother's positive energy and ever-present liveliness, I found myself unable to function. I felt lifeless and empty as I stood there witnessing her pain. Standing in the living room that morning, I began to fear the complete emptiness that would remain in my heart if my mother were to continue feeling like this. If my mother did not get well, I would lose my best friend. I could not let this happen. Hastily wiping my tears from my eyes I called to her softly, afraid I would startle her. As she lifted her head and locked her sorrowful eyes with my own, I walked toward her and sat beside her on the couch. Grasping her thin shaking hand I reached over and hugged her frail body. I roughly brushed my tears aside, determined, for it was my turn to be strong.

Though I did everything I could to be strong for my mother during her time of need, I could not take her pain away. My mother was the only one who could control when she would become well. It took several weeks, but she eventually sought help and was put on medication to control her depression, and she attended weekly sessions with a local social worker. With time my mother's condition began to improve. However, my mother still continues to experience moments of anger and anxiety after holding conversations with her parents. Because of this, my mother's depression has continued to have a presence in my life and loneliness continues to be a theme that I fear.

My fear of loneliness that would result from the loss of someone I love is symbolized through the picture of my family falling to pieces. This fear is also symbolized through the picture of my boyfriend and me, where I am scribbled out and “forgotten.”

## **Pain**

A third theme that is seen in the shadow box is that of physical and psychological pain. Throughout my junior high and high school years I received many oral operations and orthodontic work to correct my jaw alignment and the location of my teeth. These operations and procedures were a result of finding out that I had been born without both of my lateral incisors. Because of this I needed many oral operations in order to move my existing teeth into their appropriate spaces and create room for two false ones. Early on in my procedures, the only thing that was required was the pulling of four teeth to make room for the permanent ones that were growing in. During the time of my operation I could have cared less about the teeth I was losing, for I knew more would come in their place. However, with time and the increase in the intensity of operations needed to fix my teeth, my lack of concern soon began to dwindle.

During one particular operation in high school my dentist was going to remove a ball of excess gum tissue that had grown between my two front teeth. The operation was to allow my two teeth to come together and make room for the two false ones that were to be put in on either side of them. Going into the dentist office that day, I was very apprehensive. This time I was not going in for another simple operation, but rather one that would take a part of me that could not be replaced.

Finding myself in the dentist office’s waiting area, it took all I had to stay calm. When my name was called to go back to the room where the procedure was going to take place I could feel my legs shaking, threatening to give out from under me. Sitting in the cold and impersonal dentist chair and feeling in my mouth the dusty latex gloves of the man who was going to forever change the way I looked, I concentrated only on the orange light that shone overhead. With much self-talk and psychological trickery, I managed to calm myself and to develop a nonchalant attitude, as the numbing agent began to take effect. When it was finally time for the procedure to take place, I found myself psychologically prepared for what was going to occur, but not physically.

During the operation I was fully conscious and able to see what the dentist and his assistant were doing to my teeth through the reflection in the examination light. With beady brown eyes gazing over a mint-colored mask, the dentist encircled my excess gum tissue with a small band. As he twisted the band I began to experience incredible pain. The numbing agent had not fully worked. Before I could express my discomfort the dentist took a pair of small clipper-like scissors and moved to snip my gum tissue off.

Closing my eyes tightly against tears, I felt the pain as the dentist slowly brought the blades of the scissors together against my gums. My heart caught in my throat; a whimper yearned to escape from my lips. The dentist brought the blades of the scissors fully together, detaching the ball of tissue from between my two front teeth. In the same instant that the blades came together, I heard the band that had been twisted around the tissue snap free from my mouth, and my face became splattered with blood. Horrified, I opened my eyes and was greeted with the beady brown eyes of the dentist gazing over a

blood-splattered mask and the reflection of a bleeding and gaping hole in my mouth. After that point I was in so much pain and so terrified over what I had seen in the light's reflection that I psychologically shut down. I cannot remember the rest of the procedure or leaving the dentist's office with my mother. All I can remember is the horrible pain I felt and the feeling of my own blood covering my cheeks and chin.

The knife that is hanging above the Barbie and the blood that is dripping down the wall of the box symbolize the fear of physical pain. The needle that is hanging behind the Barbie on top of the picture of the burn victim also shows physical pain. Psychological pain is shown through the pulled wisdom teeth, which symbolize the loss of a part of oneself, and the empty "holes" felt as a result of that loss.

### **Gender Role Expectations**

The final theme that is present in the shadow box is that of being stereotyped because I am a woman. Throughout my early childhood, my parents taught me independence and encouraged me to do anything I desired, regardless of gender roles. When I entered grade school, society told me different. As I became more exposed to the gender roles that were exhibited as appropriate for women in society, I began to fear them. I soon came to fear being seen as inferior to men because of my sex. I feared being deemed less intelligent, because I think differently than the stereotypical woman does. Most of all I feared the theft of my independence by a man. I feared being dominated by a man and becoming dependent on him. I soon began to fear becoming the dependent, uneducated, and overly emotional woman I continuously saw portrayed in the media.

As I grew older I began to explore why I feared being stereotyped and took actions toward avoiding it. Throughout the rest of my educational career I threw myself into my studies in order to avoid being out-performed academically by the men around me. I joined my high school tennis team and aimed to be able to hold my own against any guy on the team. In high school I also avoided dating anyone for fear that I would lose my independence and that the guy I was dating would come to control my life. Still now, though I am currently dating someone, I am careful to ensure my independence and be dominant in my relationship.

As I have continued to grow and develop emotionally, I have begun to explore why I fear being stereotyped because I am a woman. After much thought I have come to the realization that I fear being stereotyped because then I lose my identity and uniqueness and become like the women who are portrayed in the media. I feel as if those who have stereotyped me tower over me. I feel as if they are cognitively and emotionally dominating me as I am physically bound and helpless. I lay powerless against the impression others have of me. I am unable to move and rise against the thoughts of others. I am unable to prove that stereotypical notions of me are false. I have become weak and stupid. I have dwindled to a mere object that can be controlled. I am no longer my own person, but simply another woman, a stereotype. I have lost my identity.

This fear is symbolized in the disfigured, bound, and gagged Barbie doll. The Barbie is burned as a symbol of disfigurement and the loss of outward attractiveness that I as a woman am constantly pressured to uphold. The doll is bound at the ankles and wrists as a symbol of the "glass ceiling" that is placed over me in the workplace that

prevents me from achieving the occupational position I strive for. Finally, the doll is gagged to symbolize how my thoughts and passions seem to be overlooked and ignored because of society's stereotype that women are half-witted and possess no creativity.

### **Fear from Working through My Fears**

An amazing part of the process was that creating my shadow box was as fear-evoking as identifying the fears that I would reveal in it. Though some of the items that are contained in the box were considerably easy for me to handle and assemble, such as the watch faces and the picture of my family, others were not. One item in particular I could not bring myself to handle when assembling the box was the Barbie doll.

Rummaging through the local flea markets and second hand stores for the perfect Barbie doll that I could burn and bind made me feel as if I were a serial killer searching for my next victim. When I found the perfect Barbie for my shadow box, it was hard for me to touch it and remove it from the box of stuffed animals where it lay. Paying the unsuspecting cashier for the doll, I tied a knot at the top of the "Thank You" bag that imprisoned it and stored it in the trunk of my car for the remaining weeks until the day I would create my shadow box.

When the day arrived to assemble my shadow box, a mixture of emotions swarmed throughout my body. I was excited that I was going to create a piece of art, and yet anxious about the subject matter. I was determined to take the fears I had identified within myself and remove them from my being, but I was nervous about how others would perceive me in the future after having seen my creation. Finally, I was afraid of facing each fear when the time actually came for me to take it in my hands and face it semi-objectively.

While I placed on my boyfriend's kitchen counter several scraps of cheesecloth that would clothe the Barbie, the twine that would surround her ankles and neck, the wire that would bind her wrists, the cotton that would cover her lips, and the green gas lighter that would leave burn marks on her body, I felt anxiety rise within me. I found myself thinking, "There is no way I can symbolically do to this doll what I fear being done to myself." As I stood in front of the counter that held the various items needed for assembling my box, I became overwhelmed with fear. I struggled with thoughts that began to fill my head that said I should not create the box because of the torture I was putting myself through and that I was too weak to face my fears. Determined to follow through with the project and to prove how strong I was, I assembled as much of the box as I could without assistance and then sought help with burning the Barbie.

I did not want to turn to a man for help. Above all, I did not want to turn to a man because of my personal weakness. However, standing in front of the counter that contained everything I would need to mutilate this Barbie, I knew I could not do it myself. Instead, I called on my boyfriend, Mike, to help me. I rationalized my decision by telling myself that I should be able to call on him. After all, I saw our relationship as an equal one, much like that of my mother and father.

Calling Mike in from the living room and telling him that I needed his help burning my Barbie, I watched as he casually picked the doll, cheesecloth, and gas lighter off of the countertop. Though I had originally thought that I would not witness Mike's burning the Barbie, I began to feel that watching the event was important for me in order

to face this fear, though indirectly. Watching Mike casually wrap the cheesecloth around the Barbie to symbolize a garment, I felt my anxiety increase, anticipating what I would witness next.

Following Mike through the living room and out into the front yard, I clasped my hands together in front of myself, overwhelmed with the guilt of putting this doll through the torture that I feared going through myself and feeling almost silly for thinking this way. Standing far enough behind Mike's right shoulder to use him as a shield between myself and my fear, I still found myself standing close enough to torture myself with the sight of his burning the Barbie. As he rapidly clicked the gas lighter until it lit, I felt actual fear for the Barbie, though she would feel nothing. With the orange flame now flickering at the end of the lighter, I watched with apprehension as Mike slowly ran the lighter up and down the length of the Barbie's body as if to tease her, a slight breeze causing the flame to flicker delicately.

As Mike brought the flame of the lighter to the Barbie's head and began to burn its hair, the scent overpowered me, causing me to become dizzy. When he moved the lighter to the tip of the doll's left and then right breast, I watched as the flame burned the cloth that covered the Barbie's chest and caused her plastic flesh to shrink and twist, followed by a wispy stream of smoke that rose from her body. I watched as Mike brought the orange flame of the lighter to the Barbie's right and then left leg with more confidence, causing the plastic on her legs to turn black. As Mike burned the last of the markings on the Barbie's legs, he cocked his head to the side as if to perfect his art. Satisfied with the lines he had created, he turned his head and looked at me over his right shoulder. For a split second I was afraid of him. I had become so involved in watching him burn the Barbie that I had emotionally become it. Showing no reflection of my fear in his blue eyes, he turned to face me and held the smoking Barbie up between us as if to show off his piece of art. Unaffected by what he had just done and my reaction to him, he casually asked, "What's next, Babe?"

### **Critique of Culture**

While making my shadowbox and exploring my inner-workings in search of my fears and the reasons behind them, I symbolically pulled them out and was able to examine them semi-objectively. I became fascinated with why I found myself so afraid of these things, and I wondered why now that I had removed them from myself they seemed less frightening and almost silly. At one point during my observation and self-exploration I was struck with the notion that these things I was so afraid of were not mine alone, but also that belonging to society. My parents, brother, peers, teachers, and the media have instructed me throughout my life what to and what not to fear. Upon looking at my fears with some sense of distance and objectivity I soon came to realize that I am not personally afraid of many of the things in the box. Rather, because of what I have been taught about them, I think I should be afraid of them. By coming to this realization my personal therapy of identifying my fears and removing them from myself transformed into the act of dislodging these "fears" from my being and giving them back to society.

Throughout our lives we are instructed by society about what and what not to fear. As children we are exposed to stories filled with wicked stepmothers and big bad wolves that produce fear within our fairy tale idols. As we grow older we are told by our

parents that talking to strangers or accepting anything from someone we do not know can be dangerous and that we should fear such things when they happen. Out of this we are taught to fear others and the harm they may do to us, causing our trust in possible friends and acquaintances to diminish, thus affecting our relational capacities (Comstock, 2008).

We watch television where violence is the norm and news programs are filled with people harming others. According to Eschholz (1997), "both television and newspapers have been found to greatly overrepresent the incidence of violent crime" (p. 37). It seems children are snatched daily and terrorists are ever increasing.

We are socialized by those around us how to act and are submitted to consequences when we do not do as society expects. We are beaten for being gay, shunned for being physically or mentally handicapped, and disrespected for being old. Women are stereotyped, as are men, and those who do not fall into these specific sex or gender categories are feared and labeled freaks (Kimmel, 2004). As a result of this socialization we grow to fear anything that society calls "abnormal."

Behind many of the fears that inform society is the media (see Heath & Gilbert, 1996 for a review of the topic). It is the one social institution that can truly rouse fear within anyone. With images of incarceration, punishment, pain and torture, disease, war, and poverty, the media teaches us to cower at the things that are to be feared by all. Using the media to broadcast fear as a control agent, it is society that engrains into our lives the fear of stigmatization, pain, loss, abandonment, and old age. By recognizing the agents within society that have taught us what to fear we are then able to identify which fears are truly ours and which ones are those of society.

As well, the critical examination of our collective and personal fears can give rise to conversations that change social beliefs and interactions, as Paige found from having a scary but beautiful shadowbox sitting in her office. Society is us, and we change society, ourselves and one another through our conversations and shared and co-created meanings, the shifts and the new knowledge that is created through dialogue, process, reflection, and interaction (Anderson, 1997).

Upon recognizing that many of the fears within my shadowbox were not truly mine, I began the journey of examining how society defines these things as frightening. The bound and gagged Barbie doll soon took the form of society's fear of abnormality as a result of disfigurement (see Goffman, 1986) and the fear of being bound and gagged as a symbol of being prevented from reaching the American Dream, which U.S. President Barrack Obama acknowledged in a public address, is a growing fear in the current economy (The Associated Press, 2009). The symbol of passing time through the hanging clocks took the form of the fear that one will become less desirable in appearance and less respected with old age (Lewis, 1997). The passing of life through the symbol of the cigar came to be viewed as society's fear of approaching old age and death. The fear of not being desired and alone in life was tied to society's fear of never finding someone to love him or her, as seen in the picture of my boyfriend and me.

The physical pain that is seen through the symbolism of the knife took the form of people within society having their guard up at all times and trusting no one for fear that those around them mean them harm. Traces of what society fears are also seen in the picture of my family falling to pieces. This fear takes the form of divorce, separation, and widowhood in which a family faces dysfunction and chaos. Finally, behind all of the fears displayed in my box are newspaper articles that have headings composed of words

that are associated with fear in society. Through the aged look of the articles and the highlighted words in red, the media's ever-present, yet often inconspicuous, teaching and shaping of our fears is represented in the box. Though the articles are arranged as the background and often overlooked, I feel it is their symbolism that is the most powerful.

By symbolically giving these fears back to society I have not, however, become fearless, for that is not the goal. I have instead begun to identify which fears I feel I have been exaggerated or misrepresented by social institutions such as the media (Escholz, 1997) and patriarchal norms (Hanmer & Maynard, 1987; Silva & Wright, 2009), and which ones I feel are instructive and needed. Creating my shadowbox and writing the resulting paper helped me to reflect and process what I fear and why. I realized that within my box there are still two main fears I have internalized as my own. I still continue to fear the passing of time, though I have come to realize that I do not fear it because of approaching death or the fear of never accomplishing the American Dream. I now fear time for the complete opposite reason. I fear that so much of my time is dedicated to the will of others, such as through school and work, that I will eventually have no time for those I love and for myself. I am afraid that as time passes my free will will diminish and all that will be left of me is a robot, doing what others demand in a life of monotonous routine (see Moen & Roehling, 2005).

Along with my fear of losing time for what I wish to do, I also fear losing my self-identity. In a world that stereotypes women as half-witted objects of desire I fear that I will be bound and gagged just as the Barbie in my box is. I fear that with no time for myself and my loved ones, I will become enmeshed in a world that is filled with work and submission. I fear that though I am strong-willed and know who I am and what I want in life, I will be held back because of my sex and society's view of women. Finally, I fear the "glass ceiling" and the loss of identity that comes with being viewed as a "woman" instead of a wife, mother, daughter, and most importantly, "Danielle".

Originally creating the box as a way to identify and examine my fears and to learn more about myself, I have experienced personal insight as well as a greater understanding of the inner-workings of society. By systematically moving through the symbolism of society's fears displayed in my box I have come to view fear as a control mechanism used in society to make all people strive for the same thing and stay within societal order. With this conclusion in mind I have come to behold my shadow box in an entirely new light. I now see the creation of the box as the act of removing the societal control of fear from myself by giving these fears back to society. Though I still experience fear, I have accepted and internalized these feelings as my own and I am no longer ashamed of them, because after all, everyone is afraid of something.

### **Emancipation: Acceptance and Resistance**

We have attempted to do and promote research that is both resistant and emancipatory. Our belief is that autoethnography, and feminist autoethnography in particular, is similar to how Moosa-Metha (2005) describes feminism in that it "privileges the specific and the contextual over the transcendental and the universal" (p. 54). Our desire was not to fall victim to what positivist researchers often do in their attempts to universalize experience and knowledge. Feminist autoethnography is



intended to resist the social and institutional norms that often dictate research. It promotes women's voices and unique experiences.

As well, our desire is not to fall victim to the mistakes of past feminists and universalize the experience of women (Comerford & Fambrough, 2002). The specific and contextual experiences of Danielle are not the experiences of all women, in that her fears are personal and particular to her life and experiences. However, what Paige intended in having Danielle and her social work classmates work through the process of completing an autoethnography was to universalize the experience of being an individual. The idea is that we are all different, yet all have the experience of being outsiders (in our individualized experience of what it means to feel outside of some norm). Paige's goal with Danielle and all her social work students was and is to use feminist ideas on learning and relationships in the classroom in such a way that students learn the importance of the individual experience and yet see the similarity we have in our shared humanity.

In this article Danielle has shared her experiences of fear in an attempt to do what feminist autoethnographers intend: to make visible the everyday and embodied world of women's lives. This is beneficial on several levels and has implications for social work research and practice. Researchers benefit from autoethnography, as the process can increase insight and self-awareness, which for the social worker has the added benefit of improving the ability to work well with clients (Allen & Piercy, 2005). The social worker's notion of "use of self" is assisted via autoethnography as we are provided the opportunity for a greater understanding of self.

Through autoethnography social workers can also increase their potential for client and participant empathy. Through the reflection on the experience of "otherness" the writer and readers become more aware of the various ways marginalization and oppression can occur. This too can go beyond the social worker-client interaction to have meaning for our larger social structure and hopefully lead to social change (Averett, 2009; Comerford & Fambrough, 2002). The cultural critique that occurs in feminist autoethnography provides a powerful opportunity to expose the ways women experience their gender within the limitations of prescribed roles and to explore avenues for women's empowerment.

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## Appendix A<sup>1</sup>

### The Autoethnography Assignment

**Autoethnography.** Students will get creative and choose an artistic medium they feel most comfortable with, such as poetry, a short play, painting or an art project of any kind and create a self-reflection. Students will then write a five-page paper that reflects on the piece and make a social comment/critique. Students will turn in both the creative and written aspects of the assignment. Students will also have the opportunity to share with class members IF desired.

### Autoethnography

**An autoethnography is.** qualitative research that typically involves a creative element, a poem, a play, a painting, a sculpture, a photograph, a piece of any kind of art work that the researcher creates and then uses to reflect upon in writing. The written aspect contains elements of self-reflection and critique of culture. According to Bennett, S. (2004), autoethnography is:

- An analytical/objective personal account
- About the self/writer as part of a group or culture
- Often a description of a conflict of cultures
- Often an analysis of being different or an outsider
- Usually written to an audience not a part of the group
- An attempt to see self as others might
- An opportunity to explain differences from the inside
- Sometimes a traditional essay answering the five Ws
- Sometimes a typical essay with topic sentences and three to five supporting examples
- Always an attempt to explain one element of self to other
- An explanation of how one is "othered"

For this assignment students must first CREATE. Write a poem, a play, take a photograph, create a painting, a sculpture, a collage that in some way is a reflection of self and your "otherness."

Then in reflection upon your creation write a five-page paper. The paper should describe how the created object is a reflection of you. The paper should describe the creations meaning and purpose. As well, the paper MUST contain some element of social critique or commentary. This is a professionally written paper; although personal it is still to be written as if being submitted to a journal for acceptance. Grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, flow, organization and punctuation ALL MATTER.

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<sup>1</sup> Bennett, S. (2004, July). *Susan Bennett on autoethnography*. Retrieved from <http://www.humboldt.edu/art/>

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