

## ETHNOGRAPHIC ALTERNATIVES

### BOOK SERIES

Series Editors: Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner  
(both at the University of South Florida)

**Ethnographic Alternatives** emphasizes experimental forms of qualitative writing that blur the boundaries between social sciences and humanities and experiment with novel forms of expressing lived experience, including literary, poetic, autobiographical, multivoiced, conversational, critical, visual, performative, and coconstructed representations. Emphasis should be on expressing concrete lived experience through narrative modes of writing.

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## THE ETHNOGRAPHIC

I



### A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography

Carolyn Ellis



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## Writing Field Notes, Interviews, and Stories: Issues of Memory and Truth

"I'M SORRY to have to tell you that Ken dropped our class," I say to the students.

"Why?" comes the chorus.

"He didn't feel comfortable doing autoethnography," I tell them.

"Did we make him uncomfortable?" Judy asks. "Was there something we could have done?"

"I don't think so. He may not have wanted to reveal his life."

"I understand that," says Jack, under his breath.

"I liked his sociological take on me in our interview," says Hector.

"He'll be comfortable writing more traditionally than we're doing in here."

I respond. "He's planning to do secondary data analysis in sociology."

"That will be different," says Jack, and I nod.

"Today we're going to talk about taking field notes on our experiences, and conducting and writing up interviews where we include our own stories," I say, changing gears. "I want to use Valerie's study as a way of thinking through issues of memory and truth, which come up anytime you're doing research.

Next week, we'll elaborate on vulnerable and therapeutic writing, and extend that conversation to writing evocatively and with ethical consciousness.

"Valerie, tell us how your project evolved."

### "Getting It Off My Chest" and Living with Breast Cancer Survival

"As you know, I'm studying long-term breast cancer survivors," Valerie announces. "I've been working with Carolyn for awhile, and I've already taken notes on my own story, done my interviews, and written a draft of each of the women's stories.

"This project started when I met Carolyn. I sought her out because I needed someone versed in qualitative methods on my committee. At first, Carolyn wasn't sure she wanted to work with me. Then finally she gave in, though she said I had to take a class from her before she'd be on my committee. She didn't think I'd actually follow through. But I did," she says triumphantly.

"Though Carolyn resisted initially, I insisted on working closely with her. I did everything she asked, and more. Finally, Carolyn said that since she was acting as co-chair of my dissertation, then we should formalize the relationship. Needless to say, I rushed out quickly to take care of the paperwork before she changed her mind. Now, four years later, I'm in this class because she thinks I need further training in methods. I don't want to take it, but, hey, here I am. I want to finish my dissertation." I chuckle, reminded of how blunt Valerie can be.

### Taking Autoethnographic Field Notes, "Capturing" Experience, Memory, and Emotional Recall<sup>1</sup>

"Carolyn told me to start by writing my story as field notes organized chronologically," Valerie continues. "At first, I resisted, because I couldn't figure out how exploring my story would add to what's already published or how it would fit with interviews of other women. Then, following Carolyn's advice, I wrote my memories of what happened to me. After this, I read other personal stories as well as analyses of breast cancer stories.<sup>2</sup> What I wrote had a lot in common with other women's stories. Similar to me, most women remember discovering the lump—that's always a traumatic event. Then, they focus on the diagnosis and assessment of treatment options. Next, they describe waking up from the surgery and then going through the follow-up treatment. Finally, they emphasize recovery and some sense of resolution.

"Most survivors describe making decisions about reconstructive surgery, shopping for a prosthesis—if they decide to wear one—their hair falling out,



and seeking alternative treatment," she continues, without skipping a beat. "I wrote about these things as well . . ."

"And what did you learn from writing your notes?" I ask.

"I learned that cancer is more than a medical story; it's a feeling story. I learned how scared I am even though I've been a survivor now for seven years. And that was the interesting thing—there are few stories about long-term survivors in the form of memoirs or in social science research. Most survivors tell their stories soon after recovery from treatment. They're usually pretty optimistic about recovery and often claim to be better off at the end than the beginning.

"I felt that, too—the optimism I mean—immediately after my treatment was over, that is," Valerie continues passionately. "But I don't feel that way now. I pretend I'm an upbeat, optimistic person with no worries, a warrior who has learned from her experiences. But what I had to face as I wrote my story is that I'm scared all the time that the cancer will come back. I've had carpal tunnel syndrome and it's probably from the chemo. Now I have sweats at night, and I don't know if it's early menopause—another gift of chemo—or signs of the cancer returning. I'm sorry, but cancer has not improved my life, and I can't make it into a gift, no matter what romanticized memoirs or self-help books might claim.<sup>3</sup> I don't have a renewed appreciation of each day; instead, I have renewed fear."

"I identify with what you're going through," Laura says. "I don't worry so much that my bone cancer will come back, but I do worry whether my knee replacement will hold and how many more surgeries I'll have to have. That hardly seems like a gift."

"Both of you, Laura and Valerie, are very courageous to tell your stories. Is it too painful to write about these experiences?" I ask, in response to the emotion with which Valerie has told her story.

"I can handle it," says Laura, "especially if it's in the context of other peoples' stories."

"Including my story is very important to me now," says Valerie. "Holding in these feelings, all these years, was difficult. It's had negative effects on my psychological and physical well-being and on my family. It was hard pretending; sometimes I thought I was going crazy. Now I realize I don't have to pretend. Maybe through writing and talking with other women about their experiences, I can figure out another story to live, one that might help me cope better and not take so much out of me. I hope to write myself as a survivor in a deeper, more meaningful way."

Close to tears, Judy says, "I feel the same way. I have to write my story. Otherwise, I fear I might not be able to live through it. It's impossible to hold back all these feelings.

"I'm sorry," Judy says, taking the Kleenex Leigh hands her. "It's just . . ."

"We know, Judy" I say. "It's okay. What you're going through. It's hard.

"I imagine other women share your sense of vulnerability and loss of control over their lives even years after their treatment," I say to Valerie. "I think I would," I add, involuntarily shivering as I imagine the difficulty of cancer hanging over me in such an intrusive way.

"That's what I want to know—how it feels to us, how we cope, or don't—whether the experience continues to be as fresh and scary to them as it still is to me. I want to contribute to knowledge, but I also want to help others—and myself—create a story we can live with. How I'm existing now, denying my feelings—this is no way to live." Valerie shakes her head and sighs.

The students begin to engage in animated conversations about suppressing feelings, all talking at once. Their conversations give me time to think about how to respond when students feel emotional in class. On this occasion, I had rushed into the silence because I wanted to protect Judy from crying. Now I wonder if what she had needed instead was to cry—to cleanse herself for a while of heavy emotion. Or perhaps have all of us cry together—to feel a community of support. If not, maybe she hoped to talk about her feelings and try out another more emotional version of her story.

"Sometimes I think academia would be a more inviting and productive space if we were comfortable feeling more and openly expressing something other than boredom or criticism," I say. Judy nods, then blows her nose.

"Just like Valerie, I learned a lot by writing notes on my experience," says Penny, "though, at the time, I wasn't sure what I was doing. I wonder, when should you begin taking notes for an autoethnography?"

"As soon as you can. Sometimes you might decide to write about an event while you are in the clutches of the experience. But often when we are in the middle of an epiphany, such as Valerie's experience of breast cancer, it's too difficult to find time, energy, or the inclination to write about it," I begin.

"I often write about an event while it's happening," Judy offers. "That's what I did with my father."

"You've always been a journal writer," I say.

She smiles, "Sure have. Ever since I was little. I wrote about my hearing loss and then later about my divorce, which I continued in your class."

"If you are used to writing yourself through a crisis, then it will be easier to record your thoughts and feelings while you're in one. I found that recording my thoughts and feelings while Gene was ill and dying was very therapeutic, and it became second nature to continue doing so. Though I have to tell you, I stopped keeping a journal about two years after he died, and I really haven't kept one since."

"Really?" "That's surprising." Voices come out of the group.

"Maybe not so surprising," I respond. "James Pennebaker found two patterns in his interviews of several hundred students who keep diaries.<sup>4</sup> The



smaller group writes almost daily, until trauma strikes. The more common pattern though is to write only during periods of stress and unhappiness.

"I like to write about an epiphany while I'm going through it, such as with my mother's illness.<sup>5</sup> Of course, all autoethnographic writing occurs after experience. The question is how long after?" I chuckle. "Once I wrote notes for a story about race relations in a small town more than twenty-five years after the events took place.<sup>6</sup> While I remembered the general contours of what happened and how I felt, I was sketchy on other details, such as the description of the place and what was said.

"There are a number of ways to go about writing autoethnography," I continue, wanting to convey more information before we move to our more comfortable realm of conversation. "It really depends on where along the continuum of art and science you locate yourself. What claims do you want to make? If you want to claim you're following traditional rules of ethnographic method, then it would be best if you had kept notes on the experience as it happened. The notes would serve as field notes and you'd write from those."

"If you didn't have notes, how would you remember what actually happened?" Jack asks.

"Do you think the notes would tell you what actually happened? Aren't they partial interpretations as well?"

"Yes, but then how would I make sure that what I said was truthful?"

"The 'truth' is that we can never fully capture experience. What we tell is always a story about the past. Gregory Bateson says stories are true in the present though not in the past.<sup>7</sup> Field notes are one selective story about what happened written from a particular point of view at a particular point in time for a particular purpose. But if representation is your goal, it's best to have as many sources and levels of story recorded at different times as possible. Even so, realize that every story is partial and situated.

"If you viewed your project as closer to art than science, then your goal would not be so much to portray the *facts* of what happened to you accurately," I continue, "but instead to convey the *meanings* you attached to the experience. You'd want to tell a story that readers could enter and feel a part of. You'd write in a way to evoke readers to feel and think about your life and their lives in relation to yours. You'd want them to experience your experience as if it were happening to them.

"If these were your goals," I continue, "writing notes at the time the events occurred would have been useful, but not necessary. If you're writing about an epiphany, which you usually are in this kind of research, you may be too caught up in living it to write about it."

"But then how do you remember all the dialogue and details later?" Jack asks.

"When I wrote *Final Negotiations*, about the chronic illness and death of my first husband, I didn't actually remember everything I wrote about, certainly not the exact words we spoke anyway. I had notes for much of what I described, but I still had to construct scenes and dialogue from partial descriptions. And I hadn't kept notes for everything I wrote about. But it's amazing the details you can recall, and for how long, if the event was emotionally evocative. Of course, I also realize that all memory takes place in the present and is oriented toward the future. My current frames of memory—and my need to have a coherent sense of myself—influenced what I remembered and what the memories meant to me.<sup>8</sup>

"Whether you're writing during, immediately after, or much later, I recommend that you start by taking retrospective field notes on your life, as Valerie did. Include all the details you can recall. I find it helpful to organize my writing chronologically first, using the main events to structure the tale. I try to write daily, rereading what I wrote the day before, then filling in new memories. Remember, you are creating the story; it is not there waiting to be found. Your final story will be crafted from these notes."

"What do you include in the notes?" asks Penny.

"Everything," I say, then laugh. "Of course, you can't. I like to concentrate on emotions and dialogue, but it's also important to describe places, colors, sounds, and movements. Those descriptions will come in handy when you're writing your story."

"What's the difference between field notes and a first draft of a story?" asks Hector.

"Sometimes little, but usually a lot, because in field notes you're trying to get down as much as you can. In a draft, you have to choose a plot line and concentrate on developing it, foregoing anything that doesn't fit your theme."

"How will I know when I'm writing from my perspective then and when my current perspective is clouding my memory of what happened?" Penny asks.

"Your current perspective always clouds your memory. Annie Dillard says that if you value your memory, don't write a memoir.<sup>9</sup> I'd say the same thing about an autoethnography. Writing will cloud your memory in that what you write will loom larger than the actual experience and essentially replace the experience, much like 'snapshots of your vacation fix and become more real than your vacation.'<sup>10</sup> Adrienne Rich says that "the story of our lives becomes our lives."<sup>11</sup>

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Leigh's brow is furrowed and her mouth puckered. "What are you thinking, Leigh?" I ask.

"Just wondering if the same is true of journaling. Does it change the experience forever and fix it in the same way?" Leigh replies.

"I never thought of that before," says Judy, jotting down notes. "I guess it does, especially if you read and reread what you wrote—which I always do."



"Making memory more complex is that it doesn't work in a linear way, nor does life," I offer. "Instead, thoughts and feelings circle around us, flash back, then forward. The topical is interwoven with the chronological. Thoughts and feelings merge, drop from our grasp, then reappear in another context. In real life, we don't always know when we know something. Events in the past are interpreted from our current position. Yet that doesn't mean there's no value in trying to disentangle now from then, as long as you realize it's not a project you'll ever complete or 'get right'; instead, you strive, as Richardson says, to get it contoured and nuanced in a meaningful way."<sup>12</sup>

"How do you do that?" Penny asks.

"I use a process of emotional recall similar to the "method acting" of Lee Strasberg at the Actors Studio.<sup>13</sup> I imagine being back in the scene emotionally and physically. Revisiting the scene emotionally leads to remembering other details. The advantage of writing close to the time of the event is that it doesn't take much effort to access lived emotions—they're often there whether you want them to be or not. The disadvantage is that being so involved in the scene emotionally means that it's difficult to get outside it to analyze from a distance, from a cultural perspective. Yet both of these processes, moving in and moving out, are necessary to produce an effective autoethnography. That's why it's good to write about an event while your feelings are still intense, and then to go back to it when you're more emotionally distant. I've had students who were great at getting *inside* emotional experience, but they had tunnel vision. They couldn't move around in the experience. They were unable to see it as it might appear to others. They had trouble analyzing their thoughts and feelings as socially constructed processes."

"I'm not sure I'll ever be good at emotional recall," Jack laments.

"It takes practice, and some people are better at it than others." Reflecting my conversation with Art, I continue, "Though I have no hard evidence, I believe the process is often easier for women than for men, or at least more familiar."

"It's time that our talents get celebrated," says Laura. "The university tends to reward masculine characteristics and thinking."

"That may be true, but I wonder if women are more likely to get stuck in the experience and find it more problematic to move outside," offers Hector.

"I doubt it," Laura replies. "We have so much history of moving between worlds. Think of raising children and how women have to move smoothly between the rational and emotional every day of their lives."

"Good point," I respond and then listen as she and Hector continue the discussion.

Finally, Laura says, "Speaking of moving between worlds."

"I know," I respond. "It's time to move from concentrating on the needs of the mind to focusing on the needs of the body. Be back in ten minutes."

### Interlude: Teaching Autoethnography

During break, alone in my office, I think about how difficult it is to teach qualitative methods courses well, including autoethnography. My autoethnography syllabus progresses in a logical, developmental way: from laying the foundation and contextualizing autoethnography; to different approaches to autoethnography; to autoethnography in interview research and personal narrative; to taking notes; to writing stories and dealing with the issues of writing truthfully, therapeutically, vulnerably, evocatively and ethically; to thinking of writing as inquiry; to the different forms writing can take; to evaluating and publishing autoethnography; to taking it to the community; and, finally, to participant response and reflections on writing.

But autoethnography does not proceed linearly. The "stages" are not mutually exclusive. Often they all collapse on you at once. Students can't do "x" without considering "y." They have to make ethical decisions before they begin the project. They should know how to introspect and analyze the material as they take field notes. Sometimes they must choose another topic or change their approach. They have to have some sense of the available forms the writing can take, and their talent for that kind of writing, before knowing the approach they want to take. Sometimes students can't make sense of something I'm presenting without knowing something else I have not yet covered. Sometimes I bring up issues before it seems chronologically appropriate to do so. Sometimes I ask students to hold off on a particular topic—have faith that eventually all their questions will be answered and the important issues covered. That is hard for them, since they want to know everything at once. Ideally, I want them to know everything before they start their projects. But the time frame of the class makes that impossible. Moreover, most learning comes in the doing. You can't be an autoethnographer without doing autoethnography.

I require students to complete research projects through the course. Thus, it is sometimes necessary to talk, out of sequence, about something unique to a particular project that must be figured out before a student can go to the next step. Sometimes a student makes a mistake and we use that as a moment of learning. I tell them they inevitably will make mistakes; that it is part of doing research. I encourage class members to listen to problems that others bring up, since they too may encounter similar issues. Even if they don't, these details are where the larger issues play out. I stop to probe, but not too much, and provide emotional support.



Some students feel I'm sending them into the woods without a compass.<sup>14</sup> But a compass does no good (in fact, it could do harm) if they rely on it before they've wandered around a bit and gotten the lay of the land. In any ethnographic research, the issue being researched almost always gets murkier before it gets clearer. We have to deal in uncertainty. Then a point comes that I tell students, "Get out your compass. You now have to focus on where you're going or you'll never get there in the time we have available."

Teaching autoethnography is similar to carrying out an autoethnographic project. The process is murky, especially in the beginning. The class doesn't always proceed linearly. I have to remain flexible, be open to uncertainty, and trust the process and myself. My students or coparticipants—real human beings in real situations—have to be my first consideration. Sometimes they get emotional and I have to figure out the best way to respond. Sometimes I feel emotional. Sometimes I reveal painful details about my life. I try to model how to feel and express emotionality, yet also be able to stand back and examine it from the outside in.

Teaching an autoethnographic class is like writing an autoethnography. How do you both thematize chapters/classes yet deal with process? How do you figure out what to leave out,<sup>15</sup> given there's never enough time in a semester or space in a thirty-page article or two-hundred-page book? Hmm . . . no easy answers here.

### Interlude: Emotions, Politics, and Social Change

"Wouldn't it be nice if men could be more emotional?" Laura states, when class begins, continuing her discussion with Hector.

"Your generalization is based on heterosexist and white biases," says Hector. "Gay men *are* emotional. So are Latino men. At least they show it more."

"You're right. I was overgeneralizing," Laura admits, blushing slightly, and twisting her hair around her finger. She turns her body in her chair, and I wonder if her leg is bothering her.

"This whole class and the books we read are all biased," accuses Hector, leaning forward so he can see me. "We've read little about people of other racial and ethnic groups. While white women write many of the personal stories, white men seem to be the theorists. And try to find a gay author among the group."

I want to lash out at Hector. Instead, I take a deep breath and wait for someone else to respond. When nobody does, I ask, "Hector, are there stories you have in mind that you'd like to bring in for the class to read?"

"Not really. I just thought it was interesting how white the readings are."

"More white women do autoethnography than any other group," I say defensively, "though more and more, members of other groups are joining in.

To name a few, Deborah Austin, Ruth Behar, Joy Pierce, Dionel Cotanda, Richard Rodriguez, Michael Arrington, Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa,<sup>16</sup> I probably could and should do a better job of representing racial, ethnic, and sexual diversity, though the work of class members is certainly diverse. We have Jack, an African American male, writing about interracial relationships; Leigh, who is Jewish, is writing about Messianic Judaism; Ken had planned to write about gay men who want children; and you, with a hybrid identity, are writing about finding out your father was Mexican."

"But Ken dropped out and the majority of this class is composed of white women who want to write victim narratives about their personal lives."

The class again is silent. Finally, "We're writing survivor narratives," says Judy. "Nobody in here is writing herself as a victim."

"Instead, their goal is to reduce the stigma and marginalization of illness and disability," I say. "They aren't asking for pity and they aren't portraying themselves as pathetic and helpless. On the contrary, they use narrative as a source of empowerment and a form of resistance to canonical discourses."<sup>17</sup>

"Maybe so. But I doubt any of these stories will change anything," Hector continues. "They might even lead to women becoming more vulnerable and more likely to take on a victim identity. White men will continue dominating and dictating the stories that get told."

"Being able to write personal narrative and include emotions is pretty radical in and of itself," I say.

"Maybe for you, but not for me," Hector replies. "I've been educated at USF where emotions and personal stories have been a part of most of my classes. So including emotions and our own lives is not something that I have had to fight for. You didn't have that, so you keep rebelling against your own education."

"That's true, but wait until you get outside USF. You might be surprised, depending on where you are hired, that it's not always acceptable to write social science as personal narrative or to include your emotions in what you write."

"Carolyn's right," Laura says into the silence. "I see it in some of the circles I travel. Autoethnography is on the margins, and some academics don't consider what we do as research."

"I want to write political critique anyway," says Hector.

After a pause, Penny says, "Maybe we should get back to interviewing." Class members nod in agreement. I'm glad someone else in the class brought us back to the topic. I appreciate how Hector reminds us of the political dimensions of what we do, though sometimes I wish the reminders were done less critically and in a way that was less likely to close down conversation. Is criticism the most effective way to change peoples' minds or hearts?



## Conducting and Writing Up Interviews: From Accuracy to Memory to Truth

"Talk more about your interviews," I say to Valerie.

"I wanted to do interactive interviews and I thought they'd be pretty much like conversations you have with friends. So I did my spiel with each participant about how we would share our stories. But few of them really were interactive."

"What were they then?" I ask.

"Some of the women got so into telling their story there wasn't room for me to add anything. But most sat silently after answering a question until I asked the next question."

"I guess they're so used to the authoritative interview situation," I say, "that they expect the researcher to ask the questions. We see it on TV all the time, and certainly in social science that's the way it's been."<sup>18</sup>

"I tried to go with the flow, like Carolyn told me to do, but then I worried that I wasn't doing it right. Was I participating enough, or too much? I didn't want my story to get in the way of the stories the women were telling, so I held back. In the middle of the interviews, I figured out that I didn't always have to be saying something to be participating. I reflected on my story as the participant talked about hers. That worked as long as I was still listening."

"And some of the interaction comes in when you write, when you imagine what you were thinking or might have been thinking then—or even just adding what their words lead you to think about at the point of writing. The reflections never stop," I say, as Valerie busily takes notes.

"I hadn't thought of that," says Valerie.

"Is there anything about your researcher self in your stories?"

"No. Should I put that in?"

"That's part of your experience, isn't it?" I ask. "You are a breast cancer survivor and a researcher, so I'm sure you had reflections about the research experience and how you were doing as a researcher."

"You bet I did," she says.

"Broadening the meaning of 'interactive' and 'reflexive' will give you more ways to include your own story."

"Good, because I've had trouble knowing how to do that."

"Would you talk about writing up the interviews?"

"Certainly. I've written a draft of each," Valerie answers, "but I'm not happy with what I've produced. Following Carolyn's suggestion, I tried to write each interview in a different format to reflect the different qualities of the interviews. For the one in which I told more of my story, I chose the form of a letter to my diary. The result was that I took authorship of the other woman's story. In another interviewer's story, I let the respondent tell her story in a

monologue, using as many of her own words as possible, because she talked nonstop. I couldn't get a word in edgewise. Using another font, I added in the reflections that occurred to me about my own experience as I heard her talk. I wrote a third, the most interactive of all, as a conversation. Here the reader gets more of my words and fewer of my reflections. I tried to write all the stories differently, but I've run out of forms, so I'm having to repeat them with my other two participants."

"Would you like to read one of your interviews to the class?" I ask.

"I'm not sure they're working yet."

"What isn't working?" I ask.

"When I read what I wrote, the stories sound wooden. I haven't captured the passion that was generated in the interviews. I mean, my gosh, sometimes we cried with each other. That's not in my stories."

"You'll find that not every format you try will work in an artistic or truthful way," I say. "Sometimes you have to write something that doesn't work before you find a format that does. Besides the written page is not the same as the interactive interview. You lose the nonverbals, the face-to-face cues, and so on."

"I'm trying so hard to capture what each respondent said and how she said it, and what I actually thought and felt at the time, that I think my efforts have gotten in the way of the story," Valerie volunteers.

"This may be a good time to talk about accuracy and truth in writing," I say.

"But aren't they the same thing?" asks Jack.

"No," I respond. "The stories Valerie is writing may be accurate in terms of who said what when. But, as Valerie said, they are not truthful, at least not in the sense of truthfully conveying the emotional experience that occurred in the interview."<sup>19</sup>

"Valerie," I say, "you're trying so hard to be accurate or factual that you're losing the heart of the story. I doubt then that these stories will capture readers. As Zinsser says, '[F]idelity to the facts is no free pass to the reader's attention.'"<sup>20</sup>

"That's sure true," says Valerie, looking dejected. "I don't even want to read some of them myself."

"I start with the assumption that language is not transparent, and there's no single standard of truth," I say. "This premise questions the concept of descriptive validity—that researchers are 'not making up or distorting the things they saw and heard.'<sup>21</sup> I would argue that all validity is interpretive and dependent on context and the understandings we bring to the observation."<sup>22</sup>

"So then should we just do away with validity?" Jack asks.

"We should redefine it for our purposes," Hector suggests, "though I'm not sure how."

"Good point, Hector," I say and smile, looking for my notes on validity. When I find them, I say, "Lincoln and Guba ask how we know when our social



inquiries are faithful enough to some human construction that we and those we study feel safe to act on what we find. In seeking to redefine validity, these authors turn to criteria for judging the processes and outcomes of research projects rather than the methods by which outcomes are produced. A standard of fairness judges whether all stakeholder views are reflected in the text. Ontological and educative authenticity assesses whether there is a raised awareness in the research participants. Catalytic authenticity and tactical authenticity evaluate actions by participants and researchers to prompt social and political action if that is desired.<sup>23</sup>

"In autoethnographic work, I look at validity in terms of what happens to readers as well as to research participants and researchers. To me, validity means that our work seeks verisimilitude; it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible. You also can judge validity by whether it helps readers communicate with others different from themselves or offers a way to improve the lives of participants and readers—or even your own."

"One way to improve lives would be to help the people we study understand their worlds better, and the way those in power shape them. Then, perhaps our respondents might transform their own worlds," Hector suggests. "Then our research would be political."

"I guess that would be catalytic and tactical authenticity," Hector says, and I nod, thinking how much more effective Hector is when he's offering something positive rather than attacking.

"We also might ask their help to understand our world," says Laura.

"And consider the consequences of our stories for us, the storytellers, as well as for those who read and serve as characters in our stories," volunteers Leigh.

"We also might think about what kind of a person the story shapes us into," says Penny.

"And the new possibilities it introduces for living our lives," says Valerie.

"I also think we should consider how well the storyteller was able to communicate with other participants," Judy suggests. "Did he or she have good relationships with them?"<sup>24</sup>

"I like the transgressive nature of these definitions," says Hector.

"There's more," I respond. "Laurel Richardson uses the metaphor of a crystal to deconstruct traditional validity.<sup>25</sup> A crystal has an infinite number of shapes, dimensions, and angles. It acts as a prism and changes shape, but still has structure. What we see depends on our angle of vision."

"Another writer, Patti Lather, proposes counter-practices of authority that rupture validity as a 'regime of truth'<sup>26</sup> and lead to a critical political agenda.<sup>27</sup> She mentions four subtypes: ironic validity, concerning the problems of representation; paralogical validity, which honors differences and uncertainties;

rhizomatic validity, which seeks out multiplicity; and voluptuous validity, which seeks out ethics through practices of engagement and self-reflexivity.<sup>28</sup>

"This gives you a lot to think about regarding how to define validity, and many ways to consider validity in your projects," I conclude. "Perhaps we should end here. Valerie, I'll edit your stories and return them in a few days. Why don't you think more about how you want to revise them? If you have time, try rewriting one and bring it to the next class. I think your experience has been helpful to everyone."

"I sure hope so," Valerie says, sighing as she gets her books together.

"Wait a minute," Jack says to me, interrupting Valerie's leave-taking gestures. "You say our stories should be truthful, but then you say they don't have to be accurate. Wouldn't you say that this is a lot like writing fiction?"

"It's similar," I respond. "And some social science authors write fiction as social science.<sup>29</sup> For example, Angrosino wrote fictional stories based on his ethnographic work about adults with mental retardation."<sup>30</sup>

"Why would he do that?" asks Jack.

"He felt that the techniques of fiction allowed him to get to the truth of his participants' experience without risking revealing the identity of any specific character or place. He wanted to show life being performed, so that readers could enter the experience and draw their own conclusions."<sup>31</sup>

"Angrosino's text makes different claims from most social science texts, which purport to be 'factually true,'" I continue. "Angrosino claims to convey the truth of experience."

"Most of the time writing and publishing conventions are different for social scientists and fiction writers. Identifying as social scientists affects the decisions we make about what and how to write."

"In your view, how do decisions social scientists make differ from those of fiction writers?" Jack asks.

"Generally, autoethnographers limit themselves to what they remember actually happened. They don't tell something they know to be false, though that's not so clear cut. It depends..."

"On what?" Jack asks.

"Say you want to protect the privacy of a research participant you've made into a character in your story. You might use composites or change some identifying information. Or you might collapse events to write a more engaging story, which might be more truthful in a narrative sense though not in an historical one."<sup>32</sup>

When Jack looks at me questioningly, I say, "You know—the story evokes in readers the feeling that the tale is true. The story is coherent. It connects readers to writers and provides continuity in their lives. Or as Plummer puts it," I say, looking down at my notes, "what matters is the way in which the story



enables the reader to enter the subjective world of the teller—to see the world from her or his point of view, even if this world does not ‘match reality.’<sup>33</sup>

When I see a look of understanding on Jack’s face, I continue. “Even realist ethnographers, who claim to follow rules for doing science, use devices such as making composites or collapsing events to tell better stories and protect their participants. Yet, they worship ‘accuracy.’ They say, if it didn’t happen, don’t tell it. Don’t put words into participants’ mouths. But ethnographers do put words in participants’ mouths all the time.”

“How can they get away with that?” Jack asks. I’m enjoying Jack’s questions. I sense his desire now to know rather than simply to challenge.

“By relying on memory, editing and selecting verbatim prose out of context, and then surrounding it with their own constructed analytical contexts. The worst offense, in my mind, is omitting details that don’t fit the analysis, or playing down their importance. But even without that, when it comes to analysis, most traditional ethnographers have no problem reaching beyond description for all kinds of interpretation.”

“Give me an example.”

“They create the ‘typical’ person or day, the ‘common’ event. They use ambiguous descriptors like ‘most,’ ‘some,’ ‘frequent,’ and ‘few.’ They also reify concepts such as social structure and organizational climate. I did this too in my dissertation, the study of two fishing villages. And, let me tell you, when community members read what I wrote, what I saw as typical was certainly not what they saw as typical. What I wrote told you more about how I organize my world, than how they organized theirs.”<sup>34</sup>

“So then it doesn’t really matter what you write?”

“It matters alright. What you publish has consequences. Unless you inform the audience you are doing otherwise, I believe you should try to construct the story as close to the experience as you can remember it, especially in the initial version. If you do, it will help you work through the meaning and purpose of the story. But it’s not so important that narratives represent lives accurately—only, as Art argues, ‘that narrators believe they are doing so.’<sup>35</sup> Art believes that we can judge one narrative interpretation of events against another, but we cannot measure a narrative against the events themselves because the meaning of the events comes clear only in their narrative expression.”

“So if we’re not judging so much on accuracy, what are we judging on?” asks Jack.

“How about the usefulness of the story?”<sup>36</sup> Art argues that the real question is what narratives do, what consequences they have, to what uses they can be put.<sup>37</sup> Narrative is the way we remember the past, turn life into language, and disclose to ourselves and others the truth of our experiences.<sup>38</sup> In moving from concern with the inner veridicality to outer pragmatics of evaluating sto-

ries, Plummer also looks at uses, functions, and roles of stories, and adds that they ‘need to have rhetorical power enhanced by aesthetic delight.’<sup>39</sup>

“I agree with Art and Ken Plummer,” I continue. “And I would say explicitly that our stories should have therapeutic value . . .”

“Therapeutic value?” Jack stammers. “I’ve come a long way in this class, but I just can’t go there.”

“Maybe you can,” I say, looking at my watch, “but let’s wait until next week. It’s past time to end class. We’ll allow you the company of your current convictions without challenge for one more week.”

Jack smiles as he collects his books. “You’re a trip,” he says, making me smile in turn.

“Hey, I like your new duds,” I say, noting his casual, purple, cotton t-shirt and black jeans. “Purple is my favorite color.”

“I know,” Jack replies, pointing to my long, Blue Fish, purple pants; matching vest and t-shirt; and dangling earrings with purple stones. “You wear purple all the time.”

I listen in as Judy and Leigh hang around to talk to Valerie about her study and Hector engages Jack about therapy and research.

## Reflections on Living the Autoethnographic Life: Life Seeps into Work

After class, Judy comes to my office.<sup>40</sup> When I see tears gather in the corners of her eyes, I say, “How about a hug?”

She relaxes in my embrace for a moment, then pulls back quickly when her hearing aid whistles. “Stupid thing,” she says, sitting and fiddling with her left hearing aid.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“I think Dad’s close to dying.” Tears roll down her cheeks. I place my hand on her shoulder and wait silently until she can speak. When she does, her words pour out quickly. “I had to sign the DNR [do not resuscitate] orders yesterday. I didn’t know what to do about the clause on the feeding tube. Dad’s living will states that he doesn’t want artificial feeding. But I just can’t . . . I can’t honor Dad’s wishes on this and let him starve to death. I told the nurse that if he should become comatose then I might want to reconsider, but right now I want Dad to be given some chance of recovering. Did I do the right thing?”

“You handled things the best you could. Don’t second-guess yourself,” I reassure.

“I’m worried about my dissertation,” Judy suddenly says. “I don’t know what I’m going to do, and then I have comps coming up, and I need to submit



a proposal to IRB, and I have to talk to my committee members, and I don't know how to describe my project to them."

"Slow down. None of this has to be thought about now."

"I know, but in a strange way, I like thinking about it," she says. "It takes my mind off Dad, even though my dissertation will be about him." Given how I felt when I took notes on my partner Gene's demise, I understand how writing can feel like an escape from living the topic you're writing about. Sometimes I wonder, though, if Judy should be writing about her father's dying while it's happening. She insists this is what she wants to be working on now. I remember being overwhelmed by death and grief when I was writing about it, living it, and teaching it.

"Carolyn, I don't want to tell other peoples' stories," she suddenly pleads. "I'm so involved in mine, I'd like to focus just on it."

I feel a *déjà vu* to our experience with her M.A. thesis. "We'll see," I say. "Let's take everything one step at a time."

"I want to get done, quickly," she blurts out. "There's so much to do, and I hardly have any time with my husband. When this is all over, I'd like to go on vacations and have fun. Maybe I shouldn't be trying to get a Ph.D."

"Nonsense," I say. "Anyway, now is not the time to be making these decisions. Dissertations are not something to be done quickly. They take lots of effort and rewriting. I want you to pick a topic that you can really be involved in."

"My own story—that's what I'm involved in."

"If you write only your story, you'll have to do it as fully as possible. I'm talking about interviewing your siblings, possibly the doctors and nurses who attend your father, and doing participant observation in the nursing home."

"But my siblings and I are barely speaking."

"Part of doing an autoethnography is to include as much of the experience as possible. Lots of siblings have conflicts when their parents are dying," I acknowledge, thinking about my mother's deterioration and wondering how my siblings and I will handle her demise. "Perhaps you could shine some light on that and show through your own story how people can come back together after such an event. Of course, that would mean you'd have to be willing to mend fences."

The sad look on Judy's face speaks of the impossibility of the task I have set for her. I suddenly realize that we are having the conversation I was committed not to have now. The dissertation can wait; now she has to live through her father dying. "Okay, enough. Go deal with your current situation. Just keep taking notes. We'll talk about the rest later." She rises to go, and I stand and hug her tightly.

"Thanks for always being here," she says, as she fiddles again with her whistling hearing aid. "This is so hard," she says, crying. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to cry in front of you."

I hand her a Kleenex. "I'd worry if you didn't break down. Keep me posted."

"Oh, I will," she says, as she smiles and then walks out the door. I see that Penny has waited for her, and I relax when I hear her ask about Judy's father.

As I drive home, I think about my interaction with Judy and how much I have become a part of her story. I feel both a responsibility and a desire to accompany her, and students like her, through their experiences, especially if their trauma becomes part of their scholarly exploration. I believe in teaching the whole student. Taking into account the other kinds of things going on in students' lives and the impact of studying trauma on their well-being, all feels like part of directing autoethnographic projects. Sometimes I feel drained and am concerned that I can't be there for all of them. Other times, energized, I realize how much I need them—how they help give my life meaning.

Perhaps it's a good thing I don't have children, I think. If I did, I wonder if I would have the time and energy to maintain the relationships with my students that autoethnography requires. My musing gives me renewed appreciation for faculty members who do both.

As I walk in my front door, the answering machine clicks on. In spite of the barking dogs greeting me, I hear Judy's voice and I hurry to the phone. "I'm at the hospital now," she says. "Dad's feeding tube came out. He might have removed it himself. I told them not to put it back in. I've signed his death warrant. Now I know the dying process has begun. I told Dad it's okay for him to die and he smiled. I also told him that I'd like to keep him around longer. Just wanted you to know, Carolyn."

Art and I listen together. As I reach to pick up the phone before it clicks off, Art puts his hand on my hand and says softly, "Dinner's ready. Eat first before you call her back. That will give her a chance to get home and you a chance to relax a bit first."

"Good idea," I say, thankful for his concern and for a little respite. I must pace myself. I fall into the chair and Art serves dinner while our four dogs take turns climbing all over me. "I love you," I say to them all, including Art. I feel so loving, and loved, and blessed. Those feelings come, in part, from being included in Judy's story.