

Ethnographic Alternatives Book Series

Series Editor

Carolyn Ellis
Arthur P. Bochner
(both at the University of South Florida)

About the Series

Ethnographic Alternatives emphasizes experimental forms of qualitative writing that blur the boundaries between social sciences and humanities. The editors encourage submissions that experiment with novel forms of expressing lived experience, including literary, poetic, auto-graphical, multivoiced, conversational, critical, visual, performative, and coconstructed presentations. Emphasis should be on expressing concrete lived experience through narrative modes of writing.

We are interested in ethnographic alternatives that promote narration of local stories; literary modes of descriptive scene setting, dialogue, and unfolding action; and inclusion of the author's subjective reactions, involvement in the research process, and strategies for practicing reflexive fieldwork.

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Volume 3, *Kaleidoscope Notes: Writing Women's Music and Organizational Culture*, Stacy Holman Jones
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Volume 8, *Between Gay and Straight: Understanding Friendship Across Sexual Orientation*, Lisa Tillmann-Healy
Volume 9, *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetics*, Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, editors
Volume 10, *Karaoke Nights: An Ethnographic Rhapsody*, Rob Drew



Ethnographically Speaking

Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetics

EDITED BY

ARTHUR P. BOCHNER

AND

CAROLYN ELLIS



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more than I ever thought I might. As a result of your questions on what it means to be a woman, I already have another paper running around in my mind. The trouble with this e-mail technology is that I can't give you a big hug and I would certainly like to. Thanks for everything.

Beverley

August 26, 2000

Dear Beverley,

Your e-mail made me cry. Your story touches my heart. I feel deeply for your pain and the rejection in your life. It's hard to imagine that people could react so narrowly, but I know all too well they do.

I've been wondering why it is that your transformation doesn't bother me at all. I don't even think in that way. What you did seems so appropriate: You had a problem and you tried to fix it. In the same way, sexual orientation does not impact how I feel about a person—I think we are all multisexual if we take off the blinders/binders—sexual identity transformation does not change how I feel about a person either. Of course, you are not my husband, my father, or my son, and I didn't know you before your sex change. But I would hope, and have to assume, that I wouldn't feel different than I do now, even in those circumstances.

Art and I are publishing a volume from the 2000 SSSI Couch-Stone Symposium, and we'd like your paper to be included. I think it's important to get your story out in the world, for people to know it, for you to tell it, and for others to react to it. I'd like to celebrate your life, your choices, not hide you away.

As you continue working through my suggestions, remember this is your paper. You decide how to craft the final version. I'll still comment, but I want the final story to come from your heart. Given how your last e-mail affected me emotionally, I'm wondering if maybe we shouldn't publish these letters instead of trying to incorporate all of what you wrote into the story itself. It would show how the paper, and our relationship, developed as we worked together. What do you think?

By the way, I'd love to continue this work with you at University of South Florida, if that could ever be arranged.

Warmly, Carolyn



INTERLUDE

Autoethnography: Self-Indulgence or Something More?

ANDREW C. SPARKES

Arare sunny day so far this June in Exeter, and I'm stuck in an external examination board meeting. I glance at the clock on the wall—3.30 PM. We started at 2 P.M., so not bad going; these boards usually take hours. All the marks for the third- and second-year bachelor of science students have been checked, discussed, and confirmed. By now, my attention is drifting and I find it hard to concentrate. That just leaves the last item on the agenda, which is the "external examiners' report." If they keep it brief, I can get finished early today and fit in a bike ride.

Members of the department sit around a large table in a conference room. The left corner of the table is taken up by the external examiners, Professors X and Y. I am sitting next to Professor Y, on his right, so I get only a limited side view of him when he speaks. The head of the department invites comments from both of them. To my delight, Professor X begins by saying that the comments will be brief and he makes a few helpful points before giving the floor to Professor Y.

Again, this external examiner makes a number of supportive comments about assessment procedures and the quality of the students. Regarding the latter, Professor Y mentions that he read a small sample of the dissertations. Most of these were conducted within a traditional scientific framework and he makes positive comments about each. Professor Y then turns slightly toward me as he begins to discuss the only qualitative dissertation he looked at. This was supervised by me and was an autoethnography as defined by Ellis and Bochner (2000). It was written by a mature student and revolved around his experiences of sport, social class, the armed forces, hyper-masculinity, physical burnout, clinical depression, and his recent attempts to restore himself. Professor Y notes that it was "beautifully written, very interesting, fascinating." He fully supported the first-class mark I awarded the work. But then came the sting in the tail, when he said, "even though the dissertation might seem a bit self-indulgent."

Self-indulgent—the word slams into my left ear. I feel my neck and shoulder muscles tense as I move forward from my chair to rest my elbows on the desk. A flush of blood warms my face. By now Professor Y has turned a full forty-five degrees to his right to face me, and is smiling. I know it is a friendly smile and he means no harm. Indeed, in confirming a first-class grade for a work of this kind he is actually being very supportive. But for me, damage has been done. To use a word like "self-indulgence" in front of a department that is dominated by the scientific paradigm is to undermine not only the autoethnographic venture but, by implication, all forms of qualitative inquiry. I think to myself that this is all some might need to confirm their suspicions about the kind of work I do. I feel their eyes on me. They, and Professor Y, seem to be waiting for a response. But I'm not sure how to deal with it in this context.

I want to ask him what he means by self-indulgent. Why not use different terms, such as self-knowing, self-respectful, self-sacrificing, or self-luminous? For me, the dissertation was anything but self-indulgent, and it included many of the characteristics of *heartful* autoethnography (Ellis 1997, 1999). These include the following: the use of systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall; the inclusion of the researcher's vulnerable selves, emotions, body, and spirit; the production of evocative stories that create the effect of reality; the celebration of concrete experience and intimate detail; the examination of how human experience is endowed with meaning; a concern with moral, ethical, and political consequences; an encouragement of compassion and empathy; a focus on helping us know how to live and cope; the featuring of multiple voices and the repositioning of readers and "subjects" as coparticipants in dialogue; the seeking of a fusion

between social science and literature; the connecting of the practices of social science with the living of life; and the representation of lived experience using a variety of genres—short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose.

I want to ask him just how aware he is of the new writing practices that have emerged in qualitative research, and how writing differently allows us to know and analyze differently, as well as to make our "findings" available to more diverse audiences (Barone 2000; Richardson 1994, 1997, 2000a). I also want to ask him about the criteria he is using to judge the autoethnography produced by the student. I wonder if he has engaged with the debates on the nature of criteria and the kinds of nonfoundational criteria appropriate for judging alternative forms of qualitative inquiry.

I want to ask him, given that there are now multiple interpretive communities and multiple criteria for evaluating qualitative research, has he thought of the following criteria as possibilities when judging autoethnography: What substantive contribution to our understanding of social life does it make? What is its aesthetic merit, impact, and ability to express complex realities? Does it display reflexivity, authenticity, fidelity, and believability? Is it engaging and evocative? Does it promote dialogue and show potential for social action? Does the account work for the reader and is it useful?

I want to ask Professor Y so many things. In my imagination I do all this and more in a few fleeting seconds to save the day and dissolve the charge of self-indulgence. But meetings like this revolve around quantifiable marks and assessment procedures as provided by university regulations. It is not the place for a long, or even a short, debate on judgment criteria and the nature of autoethnography. I feel my shoulders getting tighter; I feel angry, but know that a confrontation here would serve no good purpose. Anyway, I have a tendency to avoid conflict whenever I can; it's not my way. So, I turn ever so slightly to my left, but keep my eyes fixed on the paperwork in front of me.

"Don't worry," I say with a smile, "I've written a paper about the charge of self-indulgence."

Professor Y laughs and responds, "I'm sure you have."

Some members of the department also laugh. The tension is broken and we move on to the final details of the meeting. My questions are neither asked nor answered. The charge of self-indulgence is left undisturbed.

Before leaving the room, I thank Professor Y for his comments and we exchange pleasantries. But the tension remains in me. The sweat is on my palms.

I had forgotten how painful the word “self-indulgent” can be, and how deep the wound goes when it is applied to the work of your students or to your own work. I’d forgotten how difficult it is to defend against this charge. The word gets to me. I feel guilty about not challenging it. On leaving the exam board meeting I could simply have got on my bike and cycled off the stress. Instead, I went to my office and picked up two papers that I had written. One was a “narrative of self” (Richardson 1994), which I had written about my own body-self relationships over time, called “The Fatal Flaw” (Sparkes 1996). The other was an article that revolved around reactions to “The Fatal Flaw” specifically, and autoethnographies in general, in which I focused on the kinds of criteria used to pass judgment on them and how these might change in the future (Sparkes 2000). Given the need I feel to defend myself and my students, I quite literally armed myself with these papers and returned to the conference room to give them to Professor Y. Jokingly I say, “Here is something to help you sleep on the train,” before asking him to read them when he got a chance. To my delight (or was it relief?) he says he will and I want to believe him. Perhaps when we meet again next year, he will think differently about self-indulgence and understand why I feel it so often is misapplied to autoethnographic work.

I return to my office. The sun is still shining but I don’t go for the bike ride. For the rest of the afternoon I sit and churn over why the charge of self-indulgence makes me feel so vulnerable. My thoughts go back to 1994 when I first began thinking about using my own personal experiences as the basis for an academic article. I mentioned this to a colleague who, without hesitation, informed me that it sounded like an “academic wank”: that is, a form of public masturbation.

I recall how relieved and elated I felt when I read the comments from two of the six reviewers of my initial submission of “The Fatal Flaw.” One said, “By artfully merging the subjective biographical/biological with the sociocultural, the ‘personal’ does not become solipsistic,” while the other said, “The writing is personal without the narcissistic quality that so often mars such work.” These and other comments made by the reviewers suggested that they did not see my article as self-indulgent—I had escaped the charge. But the emptiness in my stomach always returns when I read the comments of one reviewer who said, “It is very hard to make good sociology—which is what I think this paper wants to be—from a single case study, especially if it is one’s own. We all have stories. Indeed, we all have lived lives, and I’m not sure we’re doing scholarship, and sociology, a favor by ‘sociologizing’ them.”

I was simultaneously flattered and nervous when in a book by Coffey (1999), my “Fatal Flaw” article was used for the purpose of discussing self-ethnographies

in two chapters. I’m flattered that my article is chosen at all, and for Coffey’s depiction of my “ethnographic body narrative” as “extremely personal and highly reflective” (1999: 124), and a “rather different, self-centralized approach to ethnographic writing and tales of the body. . . . The account can be located within a new wave of autobiographical writing that focuses on the body and the self” (1999: 125). Perhaps, Coffey suggests, articles like mine indicate we are now standing on the boundary between ethnography and autobiography. What we might be witnessing is a new form of ethnographic practice, more firmly rooted in a social context and the situatedness of author-self.

Next I get anxious—particularly when, having noted that this move might have positive consequences for the representation of peopled, polyvocal social worlds, Coffey comments, “Yet some would say that such texts are not ‘doing’ ethnography at all, but are self-indulgent writings published under the guise of social research and ethnography” (1999: 155). Indeed, at one point Coffey asks, “Yet are we in danger of *gross self-indulgence* if we practice autobiographical ethnography?” (1999: 132, emphasis added) Thus, the *universal charge* of self-indulgence seems to slip into place for *all* autoethnographic work regardless of the qualities of any individual venture. For me, this is a dangerous and threatening move.

Self-Indulgence: Internalized Fears and Regulatory Practices

Self-indulgence: undue gratification of one’s appetites or desires.

Self-pollution: masturbation.

Self-knowing: knowledge of one’s own nature.

Self-respectful: respect for oneself or one’s own character.

Self-sacrificing: forgoing one’s own good for the sake of others.

Self-luminous: emitting a light of its own. (*Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*, 1982: 1229)

According to Charmaz and Mitchell (1997), scholarly writers are expected to stay on the sidelines and to keep their voices out of the articles they produce. In many ways, they are expected to emulate Victorian children: that is, to be seen (in the credits) but not heard (in the text). Thus, “silent authorship comes to mark mature scholarship. The proper voice is no voice at all” (Charmaz and Mitchell 1997: 194). Writing that breaks away from this standard, the kinds of writing found in autoethnographies, thus falls under the rubric of what Church

(1995) calls *forbidden narratives*. Such narratives are treated with deep suspicion and hostility within the academy. Mykhalovskiy (2000, personal communication) asks why this is so: "What is it about personal narratives in social science that people find so offensive? It must be something more than a challenge to scientific objectivity, etc. There is something I think that people really despise about this kind of work that I haven't quite figured out." Certainly, those that produce autoethnographies are acutely aware of this hostile atmosphere and universal charge of self-indulgence that is so often leveled against them.

For example, Jackson (1990), commenting on his own critical autobiographical project, noted the common criticism, particularly in many leftist groups, that this kind of work is too self-indulgent, too introspective, and too individualized: "Or there is the dismissive sneer of 'lifestyle politics,' that reductively fits this kind of autobiography into the polarities of economic/class politics or navel-gazing" (1990: 11). Reflecting on her experiences of presenting a poem about her traumatic relationship with her now-deceased father, Anderson (1999: 63) says, "I offered the paper with some trepidation, as I felt exposed and at risk of self-indulgence." Likewise, Brett Smith, commenting on his use of a narrative of self to explore his experiences of depression, acknowledges "the charge of narcissism and self-indulgence that might be leveled against my project" (1999: 267). More recently, in exploring his thoughts about the powerful imprint left by a father who committed suicide when his son was only ten years old, Gray expresses the following concern:

Perhaps my biggest struggle throughout the writing has revolved around taking what has always been very private and making it public. Despite my determination to make this happen, I hear voices that tell me this is a very bad, dangerous course to take. These voices say, "This work is narcissistic, and self-indulgent, and you are embarrassing yourself through a melodramatic, emotional self-exposure." When I read the social science literature on masculinity, my fears are confirmed. I encounter writers who express a disdain for autobiographical approaches, an implied suggestion that the genre is populated with narcissistic egomaniacs. Is that me? (Gray 2000: 111)

Of course, writers of autoethnographies and narratives of self (like any other form of representation) need to be aware that their writing *can* become self-indulgent rather than self-knowing, self-respectful, self-sacrificing, or self-luminous. As Hertz notes on the ethical questions that rise in the wake of new self-reflexive forms of ethnography, "revealing oneself is not easy. For example, how much of

ourselves do we want to commit to print? How do we set the boundary between providing the audience with sufficient information about the self without being accused of self-indulgence" (1997: xvi). Indeed, as part of his critique of the new fashion of self-revelation in what he calls narrative nonfiction in literature, Morrison (1998: 11) comments, "Confessionalism has to know when to hold back. . . . It takes art. Without art, confessionalism is masturbation. Only with art does it become empathy."

According to Rinehart, the universal charge of self-indulgence leveled against autoethnography and other forms of vulnerable writing is based on a misapprehension of these genres as self-conscious navel-gazing that is "grounded in a deep mistrust of the worth of the self" (1998: 212). This is because, as Krieger argues, the traditional view of social science is premised on "minimizing the self, viewing it as a contaminant, transcending it, denying it, protecting its vulnerability" (1991: 47). For Mykhalovskiy (1996), once the view of the self of the social scientist as a contaminant is in place, then the way is opened to define any writing about one's self as self-indulgent. As a form of academic gatekeeping, he notes, "naming of the work of the writer as work that indulges only that writer's self is peculiarly silencing. . . . They are symptomatic of practices through which the proper academic subject is reproduced; one who is writing, above all else, writes about the other" (Mykhalovskiy 1996: 135–36). More recently, Mykhalovskiy (2000, personal communication) notes, "The whole notion that pleasing the self is a problem, is a problem. I continue to wonder about the charge as a regulatory practice. I know it worked in my case. I've really backed off of autobiographical sociology and am only now tentatively reentering the field." Clearly, as Bochner and Ellis (1996) point out, narcissism and related criticisms, such as self-indulgence and self-absorption, function to reinscribe ethnographic orthodoxy and resist change. Moreover, this regulation and reinscription contain a number of misplaced assumptions that need to be highlighted.

Challenging Misplaced Assumptions

Freeman (1993) analyzes autobiographical texts that provide exemplars of what a particular kind of life can be like, and the narrative work that goes into reclaiming one's own history. He does not find it difficult to see that such work "might be of value to someone besides ourselves" (1993: 229). Likewise, Church (1995), in exploring the *personal, private, and emotional* dimensions of research, observes how this challenges male-dominant conventions concerning what can

be discussed in academic settings. She emphasizes that the emotional does not wipe out the *public*, *theoretical*, and *rational*. Rather, Church suggests, what we experience and present of ourselves as subjective or personal is simultaneously objective and public:

I choose to foreground my own voice. This is not narcissism; it is not an ego-centric indulgence. . . . Critical autobiography is vital intellectual work. . . . The social analysis accomplished by this form is based on two assumptions: first, that it is possible to learn about the general from the particular; second, that the self is a social phenomenon. I assume that my subjectivity is filled with the voices of other people. Writing about myself is a way of writing about these others and about the worlds which we create/inhabit. . . . Because my subjective experience is part of the world, the story which emerges is not completely private and idiosyncratic. (Church 1995: 5)

Questions about the goals of autobiographical sociology are also raised by Mykhalovskiy (1996). He argues that the claim of narcissism rests upon an individual/social dualism that obfuscates "how writing the self involves, at the same time, writing about the 'other' and how the work on the 'other' is also about the self of the writer" (1996: 133). Consequently, to characterize autobiographical work as self-indulgent is to make claims about its content by invoking a reductive practice that asserts the autobiographical to be only about the self of the writer and no one or nothing else. However, this kind of dualistic thinking, according to Jackson, is mistaken because it "wrenches apart the interlocking between self and society" (1990: 11). In a similar fashion, Stanley (1993) notes that people do not accumulate their life histories in a social vacuum. That is, even though individuals may largely control the processes of recalling and interpreting past events, this process is also a social activity influenced by people with whom the individual interacts. Therefore, the autobiographical project disputes the normally held divisions of self/other, inner/outer, public/private, individual/society, and immediacy/memory. Likewise, Gergen's (1999) social constructionist view of the self as *relational* challenges the dominant ideology of the self-contained individual that underpins notions of self-indulgence.

Drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Gergen (1999) argues for a vision of human action in which rationality and relationship cannot be disengaged. Here, our every action manifests our immersion in past relationships, and simultaneously the stamp of the relationships into which we move. Thus,

for Gergen, any performance, such as writing an autoethnography, is relationally embedded.

Recall the way in which our expressions gain their intelligibility from a cultural history. In the same way I cannot make sense if I use a word that I myself have made up, my actions will not make sense if they do not borrow from a cultural background. Thus, when I perform I am carrying a history of relationships, manifesting them, expressing them. They inhabit my every motion. . . . [W]e are always addressing someone—either explicitly or implicitly—within some kind of relationship. . . . We now find that one's performances are essentially constituents of relationships; they are inhabited not only by a history of relationships but as well by the relationships into which they are directed. (Gergen 1999: 133)

Against this backdrop, Mykhalovskiy challenges reductive practices and argues that "to write individual experience is, at the same time, to write social experience" (1996: 141). Indeed, he argues that making connections between individual experience and social processes, in ways that point to the fallacy of self/other, individual/social dichotomies, is the task to which autobiographical sociology is best suited. As one of the reviewers noted about my autoethnography the "Fatal Flaw," "Especially noteworthy are his reflections on a number of 'blurrings' (disease-illness, mind-body, public-private, man-woman, body-emotion, physical prowess-intellectual strength, self-others, conformity-deviance, etc.)." Likewise, in reflecting on her own narrative of self that focuses on identity formation in high-performance sport, Tsang (2000: 47) notes:

I have claimed these stories to be my own, yet a story of myself, of my identity, necessarily involves and depends upon a story of the Other too. So these stories belong to them as well (albeit not in the same way or invoked with the same power)—the Other being the characters in the stories with whom I interact and compare myself and allude to. These are also the readers' stories, for through reading, readers construct their own meanings and identity with or resist certain elements of a story. How they do so not only reflects back on them and their own values and notions of themselves, but also implicates them as collaborators in the creation of the meaning of the text.

These views receive strong support from Bochner and Ellis, who ask, "If culture circulates through all of us, how can autoethnography be free of connection to

a world beyond the self?" (1996: 24). They rightly conclude that it cannot, and so the concerns that some critics have raised about the self-indulgence of autoethnographers become absurd.

Another question Mykhalovskiy (1996) asks is: "To whom does the autobiographical text speak?" Condemning autobiographical texts as self-indulgent, he suggests, reflects the experience of a particular reader that is then generalized to a universal reader. "Here, the charge of self-indulgence is a contradictory reading, which as a specific or particular response invokes a universal reader who shuts out the possibility of the text speaking to others" (Mykhalovskiy 1996: 137). Such a move also seems to imply that the universal reader has universal characteristics and always reads from the same social positioning. These assumptions may inform the production of some texts, but they do not hold for autoethnographies that call on different ways of telling and showing, and invite a different kind of reading.

Barone (1990) notes how paradigmatic texts are designed in accordance with a logico-scientific mode of thought; invoke a universal, passive, unengaged reader; and call for *efficient* readings that focus on concepts, ideas, and facts to be retained and the actions to be performed as a result of reading some work. Such texts have the characteristics of an *industrial tool* that is not meant to be dismantled and reconstructed; its function is to create a seamless, denotative, linear discourse that rearranges the relationship among complex phenomena into a propositional form. According to Barone, the text-as-tool does not prize metaphorical aptness but offers the standard of technical precision. "It is not designed to surprise the reader-as-user. Its modes of fashioning are not designed to challenge the common order. . . . This text offers one verbal version of reality, meant to be taken literally; taken for the only world that can be represented, the real one" (Barone 1990: 315–17).

In contrast, as a way of knowing, narrative implies a *relational world*. As McLeod (1997) notes, a story always exists in a space between teller and audience. The story may be created by the teller, but it is always created in relation to a particular audience, "so it is as if to some extent the recipient(s) of the story draw it out of the teller. . . . Even a story written alone, such as a novel, has an implied audience" (McLeod 1997: 38). Accordingly, Barone (1990) makes a strong case for literary narrative texts that call upon narrative modes of knowing, as an occasion for conspiracy that encourages the reader to engage in the activities of textual re-creation and dismantling. Here, reading is not a passive but an active process that people undertake from multiple positions. This point is emphasized by Tsang (2000: 55):

Even with my stories in print and susceptible to readings and rereadings of the same words, form, and medium, each reader brings different resources to a text and, thus, different tools for making meaning out of my stories. For example, a reader who identifies racially as being white may have a different reaction and set of experiences with which to refer to when reading my stories of racialization than does a reader who strongly identifies as a racial minority. This in turn may be different from someone who identifies as racially mixed, or someone who hasn't really thought about race at all. The stories may summon different experiences from different readers in a variety of ways and with each reading (by the readers).

Therefore, according to Barone (1990), an *aesthetic* reading of the text is called for in which the readers' attention is centered directly on what they are living through during their relationship with that particular text. Similarly, Frank (1995) suggests that readers of personal accounts of illness might like to think and feel *with* the story being told rather than *about* it. In distinguishing between the two, Frank (1995: 23) comments, "To think about a story is to reduce it to content and then analyze that content. Thinking with stories takes the story as already complete; there is no going beyond it. To think with a story is to experience it affecting one's own life and to find in that effect a certain truth of one's life."

Furthermore, as Bochner and Ellis note, a good account is able to inspire a different way of reading. "It isn't meant to be consumed as 'knowledge' or received passively. . . . On the whole, autoethnographers don't want you to sit back as spectators; they want readers to feel, care and desire" (1996: 24). Thus, Brett Smith (1999), in a narrative of self about his ongoing roller-coaster ride with severe clinical depression, sets out to challenge realist forms of representation that strip away the depth and intense emotional experience of the various depressions, flatten people's words and worlds, and provide disembodied and emotionless accounts. Smith's messy text, in the form of short stories and poetry, is intended to evoke the reader's vulnerabilities, ambiguities, and ongoing struggles, as well as the gendered nature of his condition, by inviting the reader-as-*bricoleur* to rupture the traditional pattern of scientific knowing, and to "feel, hear, taste, smell, touch, and morally embrace the world of depressions" (1999: 275). In a similar fashion, Tillmann-Healy (1996) provides a sensual text on the secret but complex relationship she has with her body, food, and bulimia. Here, she pulls the reader away from the abstractions and categories that fill traditional research on eating disorders in a culture of thinness and invites them into the midst of her otherwise

"normal" life to experience how she, a bulimic, *lives and feels*. Tillmann-Healy (1996: 80) comments: "I write from an emotional first-person stance that highlights my multiple interpretive positions. Physicians and therapists keep readers at a distance. I invite you to come close and experience this world yourself."

As such, authors of autoethnographies seek to produce writerly rather than readerly texts. According to Wilson (1998), readerly texts lead the reader logically, predictably, and usually in a linear fashion, through the research process. Little space is available for readers to make their own textual connections between the stories and the images presented. In contrast, Wilson (1998: 173) notes, "The writerly text is less predictable. It calls on the reader to engage with the text to more deliberately bring to the reading his or her experience as a way of filling the gaps in the text."

This kind of thinking fits with poststructuralist views that stress the interaction of the reader and the text as a coproduction, and reading as a performance. As part of this performance, readers must be prepared to make meaning as they read, put something of their own into the account, and do something with it. To this end, according to Barone (1995), the artfully persuasive storyteller who *trains* the reader, understands the necessity of relinquishing control, of allowing readers the freedom to interpret and evaluate the text from their unique vantage points, will coax the reader into participating in the imaginative construction of literary reality through carefully positioned *blanks* in the writing. These invite the active reader to fill them with personal meaning gathered from outside the text. Here, the aim of the storyteller "is not to prompt a single, closed, convergent reading but to persuade readers to contribute answers to the dilemmas they pose" (Barone 1995: 66). For example, Tsang, in attempting to convey to the reader a sense of her varied, ambivalent, confusing, but sometimes definite relationship to her own multiple identities, notes, "My belief is that an engaging story can relate this sense to you in such a way that you can identify with it on a personal level, using your own experience to understand and empathize with my experience" (2000: 46). Similarly, Ellis, in reflecting on how she came to write *Final Negotiations* (Ellis 1995), makes the following points:

My open text consciously permitted readers to move back and forth between being in my story and being in theirs, where they could fill in or compare their experiences and provide their own sensitivities about what was going on. I attempted to write in a way that allows readers to feel the specificity of my situation, yet sense the unity of human experience as well, in which they

can connect to what happened to me, remember what happened to them, or anticipate what might happen in the future. I wanted readers to feel that in describing my experience I had penetrated their heads and hearts. I hoped they would grapple with the ways they were different from and similar to me. (Ellis 1997: 131)

This focus on reader response encourages connection, empathy, and solidarity, as well as emancipatory moments in which powerful insights into the lived experiences of others are generated (Sparkes 1994, 1997). This kind of writing can inform, awaken, and disturb readers by illustrating their involvement in social processes about which they might not have been consciously aware. Once aware, individuals may find the consequences of their involvement (or lack of it) unacceptable and seek to change the situation. In such circumstances, the potential for individual and collective restorying is enhanced. Accordingly, a valuable use of autoethnography is to allow another person's world of experience to inspire critical reflection on your own (Bochner and Ellis 1996; Ellis 1997; Sparkes and Silvennoinen 1999). Here, readers recontextualize what they knew already in light of their encounter with someone else's life. This may not always be a pleasant experience. When an autoethnography strikes a cord in readers, it may change them, and the direction of change cannot be predicted. Indeed, as one of the anonymous reviewers commented in regard to my own autoethnography, "The Fatal Flaw":

In "tapping" and evoking different levels of experience/subjectivity he constructs a multi-layered text which allows for, rather than specifies, a wealth of insights reaching well beyond the author's particular predicament. It makes you think and feel, and opens up a wide range of questions able-bodied people probably never think about. Actually, this text could be used as a great "sensitizing" agent in the classroom. (See Sparkes 2000: 25)

Autoethnographies can, therefore, become a call to *witness* for both the author and the reader. For example, in chronic illness, as Frank noted, becoming a witness means assuming "a responsibility for telling what happened. The witness offers testimony to a truth that is generally unrecognized or suppressed. People who tell stories of illness are witnesses, turning illness into moral responsibility" (1995: 137). Frank distinguishes between the witness in the traffic court and the illness witness. Both speak on the authority of being there but the latter's

testimony is less of seeing and more of *being*; "illness stories are not only about the body but *of and through the body*" (1995: 140). This testimony, according to Frank, *implicates* others in what they witness. Witnessing is never a solitary act, and it always implies a relationship. Ill people tell themselves stories all the time, but they cannot testify to themselves alone; "part of what turns stories into testimony is the call made upon another person to receive that testimony" (Frank 1995: 141).

For Ropers-Huilman, acts of witnessing occur "when we participate in knowing and learning about others, engage with constructions of truth, and communicate what we have experienced to others" (1999: 23). These acts can have powerful consequences:

Witnessing affects one's persona in its entirety—our bodies, hearts, and souls are changed and renewed by what we witness in our lives. . . . Witnessing is powerful. There are great opportunities and dangers inherent in the process of witnessing others' lives and constructing meanings about those experiences. (Ropers-Huilman 1999: 24)

Witnessing also has a number of *obligations* (Ropers-Huilman 1999). These obligations include recognizing our engagement in active, yet partial, meaning-making; recognizing that, as witnesses, we will change others and our roles as change agents need to be considered with great intentionality and sincerity; we have to be open to change; we have to tell others about our experiences and perspectives; we have to listen to the interpretations of other witnesses; and finally, we have to explore multiple meanings of equity and care and act to promote our understandings of these concepts.

Closing Thoughts

In light of the issues I have raised, I believe that the universal charge of self-indulgence so often leveled against autoethnography (and narratives of self), is based largely on a misunderstanding of the genre in terms of what it is, what it does, and how it works in a multiplicity of contexts. Autoethnographies can encourage acts of witnessing, empathy, and connection that extend beyond the self of the author and thereby contribute to sociological understanding in ways that, among others, are self-knowing, self-respectful, self-sacrificing, and self-luminous.

The lack of understanding surrounding autoethnography, and how it might

be judged, is not surprising. As DeVault (1997) notes, sociologists are not accustomed to evaluating personal writing and, for many, the standards for critique and discussion seem "slippery" in comparison with the more familiar criteria associated with orthodox scientific research reports. She suggests that as personal writing becomes more common among social scientists, researchers will need to develop new avenues of criticism and praise for such work. "Presumably, a 'good' story in some contexts, for some purposes, may not be so good for others. Such criteria for evaluating personal writing as sociology have barely begun to develop" (DeVault 1997: 24).

As researchers begin to develop ways to judge autoethnography I hope they can resist the temptation to seek universal, foundational criteria lest one form of dogma simply replaces another. In making a powerful case for understanding research as *experience*, Garratt and Hodkinson (1998) argue against choosing any list of universal criteria in advance of reading a piece of research. They suggest that the selection of appropriate preordained sets of different paradigmatic rules is not a solution: "A more constructive way forward begins with the acknowledgment that the selection of criteria should be related to the nature of the particular piece of research that is being evaluated" (1998: 527). As John Smith (1993) echoes, we need to construct our criteria for judging various forms of inquiry as we go along.

Therefore, as Schwandt (1996) proposes, criteria are better seen as enabling conditions and guiding ideals to be applied contextually. Here, criteria operate in ways that enable adjudication to take place. The reviewer actively deliberates on the extent to which the research embodies qualities such as coherence, expansiveness, interpretive insight, relevance, rhetorical force, beauty, and texture of argument. Such criteria as impact, evocation, authenticity, fidelity, and believability might also be called on in passing judgment, moving the social sciences to incorporate more literary, poetic, and artistic forms of judgment.

For many, myself included, it is no easy task learning to judge differently, to listen carefully and to attempt to grasp what is being expressed and said in research traditions different from our own (Bernstein 1991). Our academic backgrounds, professional socialization patterns, and career structures mitigate against this. It is so much easier to display an indifferent superficial tolerance, or facilely assimilate what others are saying into our own categories and language without doing justice to what is genuinely different, or even simply to dismiss what the other is saying as incoherent nonsense. However, as Bernstein suggests, we have an ethical imperative to attempt to "understand and engage with the incommensurable otherness of the 'Other'" (1991: 66).

Smith and Deemer also emphasize that in any encounter with a production, especially something "new," one must be willing to risk one's prejudices: "Just as in the process of judgment one asks questions of a text or person, the person or the text must be allowed to ask questions in return" (2000: 889). They argue that approaching a novel piece of work requires that one be open, that one be willing to allow the text to challenge one's prejudices and possibly change the criteria one is using to judge the piece, and thereby change one's idea of what is and is not good inquiry. Smith and Deemer are quick to point out that to be open does not mean to automatically accept, and that one may still offer reasons for not accepting something new. They also emphasize to risk one's prejudices "requires one to accept that if one wishes to persuade others, one must be equally open to being persuaded" (2000: 889).

As part of this openness, we need to educate ourselves and others (as producers, critics, and consumers of research) to recognize differences and judge various genres accordingly, using appropriate criteria. Again, it is important to emphasize that this does not involve using criteria as universal standards against which to make judgments. In this sense, as John Smith (1993) argues, the term "criteria" is laden with foundational implications and becomes a touchstone that can be employed to distinguish the good from the bad, the correct from the incorrect. In contrast, Smith points out, "criteria" may refer to *characterizing traits* that have, at best, mild implications as a prescription for inquirer behavior and do not necessarily refer to something held to be foundational. Here, researchers might discuss the characterizing traits of a particular approach to inquiry, such as autoethnography, and simply note that these are the way researchers seem to be conducting these particular kind of inquiries at the moment. The difference here from the foundational view is that reviewers are willing to describe what one *might* do, but they are not prepared to mandate what one *must* do across all contexts and on all occasions.

For John Smith (1993) and Smith and Deemer (2000), once criteria come to be seen as characterizing traits or values that influence our judgments, then any particular traits or values will always be subject to constant reinterpretation as times and conditions change. They have an open-ended quality that can be challenged, added to, subtracted from, modified, and so on, depending on the context and the purposes. This is because a characteristic of research we thought important at one time and in one place may take on diminished importance at another time and place. Therefore, various criteria in list form may act as a starting point for judging autoethnographies, but these may not apply on all occa-

sions and other criteria can be added to or subtracted from them, depending on the circumstances. These lists are challenged, changed, and modified in their application to actual inquiries. As Smith and Deemer emphasize, the limits of modification are a *practical* matter; they are worked and reworked within the context of actual practices/applications and cannot be set down in abstract formulas. "Our lists are challenged, changed, and modified not though abstracted discussions of the lists and items in and of themselves, but in application to actual inquiries" (Smith and Deemer 2000: 889).

Given the conditions described, it is clear that tensions, contradictions, conflicts, and differences of interpretation will persist regarding autoethnographies. However, this should not cause undue anxiety. Rather, as Garratt and Hodkinson (1998) emphasize, such diversity should be seen as an invitation to deepen our understanding and sharpen our judgments of those specific pieces, of the issues they raise, and of research in general. My hope is that many will accept the invitation.

Imagings: Too Happy an Ending, or a Possibility?

It's a sunny June day again. Again, I'd rather be out riding my bike than sitting in the external examination board meeting. The same faces are here sitting around the table as last year. The main difference is that now I choose to sit opposite Professor Y rather than next to him. His remarks about an autoethnography produced by one of my students last year unsettled me, got to me, stung me, and made me reflect long and hard on the issue of self-indulgence. This year will be different. In my head I've rehearsed my answers a hundred times. I'm ready. If he once again speaks of self-indulgence, I want to be looking at him as I refute the charge.

But all this angst is costing me. In the days leading up to this meeting, I feel the defensive posture I'm so used to taking seep into my bones. Last night I couldn't sleep for thinking how things might go today. I'm tired, my lower back aches more than normal. All this, I realize, because I am still intimidated deep inside by the charge of self-indulgence. Despite my mental rehearsals, I'm still not sure I believe myself.

Adrenalin is beginning to kick in now. The meeting is going very much to schedule and the reports from the external examiners are next on the agenda. I suddenly realize that my mind has been so focused on this item that I can't remember much of what has been said so far. Then I recall giving Professor Y a couple of my papers on autoethnography at the meeting last year and wonder if he has read them. There has been no contact between us since then, and he did-

n't mention them in the usual exchange of courtesies between us at the start of the meeting. I inhale deeply and try not to look anxious or agitated.

Professor X says his bit. Nothing surprising there. Professor Y begins by adding some supportive comments to reinforce the points made by Professor X. He then moves on to the dissertations he read. Four again this year, three quantitative and one qualitative, the latter supervised by me. I hardly hear what he says about the quantitative dissertations. Phrases such as "well-defined hypotheses," "aware of validation procedures," and "appropriate forms of statistical analysis" slip by me. I know the form.

Then mine. I lean back slightly in my chair and look across the table at Professor Y. I suddenly realize he is wearing the same jacket as he did last year and wonder if this is a bad omen. I become conscious that I am staring at him. I glance down at my notes only to look up sharply as he reads out the title and the name of the student. It's an autoethnography in which a student explores the ways in which, over the years, various relationships between his father and himself have been constructed and deconstructed by their involvement in contact sports. Using photographs, short stories, and poetic representations, it highlights how their involvement in contact sports has limited the forms of communication available to them as father and son, how this shapes and constrains their current relationship within a specific form of masculinity, and how this is a source of worry for the son as their "sporting bodies" decline in the future. For me, it was an outstanding piece of work. I awarded it a first-class grade. But what did Professor Y make of it?

Our eyes meet. I suddenly realize that I don't want a confrontation. I just want to listen. I offer him a small smile and I feel my shoulders drop as the tension in them releases. He begins with an audible sigh and then a long pause as he collects his thoughts.

"Well, where to begin? No easy task this in more ways than one. First, I'm simply not used to this kind of inquiry. I don't get to read it much—actually never—in my line of work and I'm far more comfortable with straight scientific dissertations." Nods from some of my colleagues around the table. "Having said this, in my role of external examiner I feel duty bound to be fair when I make comments. I feel this even more having read the two papers Andrew gave me last year." He looks directly at me.

"Yes, Andrew, I did read them. Not my idea of bedtime reading for sure (laughs), but they certainly got me thinking. They made me realize that I can't call on my usual criteria. However, if I'm honest, I'm still not totally sure how I

should be judging this kind of work. Let's say I'm on a steep learning curve. So, I'm looking to you to be kind to me today. I'm moving into unknown territory and that's dangerous for a man of my age." Laughter from colleagues around the table. I smile at Professor Y and realize that he has been just as worried about this moment as I have been.

"Right, let me use a word I didn't know last year. This is an 'autoethnography,' is that right Andrew?" I nod approvingly. "Now last year, on reflection, I wrongly used the term self-indulgent to describe a similar kind of dissertation. I'm much more cautious about using that term now. I still think that writing about your self *can* be self-indulgent but clearly this is not necessarily so in all cases. So let me say right away, I *don't* find this dissertation in any way self-indulgent. I *do* find it very well written, thought-provoking and, dare I say it, 'evocative.' That's another word I wouldn't have thought of using last year (laughs).

"This dissertation really held my attention and I read it all the way through in one sitting. I even read some chapters twice. It's beautifully crafted. There are some wonderfully engaging stories about the relationship between the student and his father through sport, and I couldn't help but see bits of me in some of the stories. After all, I'm a father of two boys, well, grown-up young men now, and of course I've been a son. And sport has been central in all these relationships. So a great deal of what the student wrote about rings true to me, it connects to moments in my own life. At times this is amusing but at other times it's disturbing. His autoethnography makes me reflect on the ways in which, when I was a young boy, my father and I communicated. It makes me very conscious of how I learned that some things could be said but other things were out of bounds, and how I carried these silences into my adult life.

"The dissertation made me think a lot about how I've communicated, and *do* communicate, with my sons now, and how this has been shaped by what happened between my father and me. I was left worrying about what we can and cannot say to each other as father and sons. I'm sure there are things my sons would like to talk to me about but they don't. I *know* there are things I would like to have said to my own father before he died. I *know* there are things I'd like to share with my sons but don't, and this makes me sad. It's something I would like to change over the next few years. In fact, as a starting point, I'd like to share this dissertation with my sons. I'd also like to give it to some other sporting fathers I know. I think many of the issues it raises would resonate with them and be a big help in thinking about how things might be different between them and their sons.

"I could go on, but I'm conscious of time. So I'll close by saying that this dissertation had a big impact on me in a lot of ways. Even though I'm not sure how to judge it, I'm happy to judge it as a first-class piece of work, and support the grade it has been awarded. My thanks to the student for having the courage to write it in the way he did."

And then, the moment is over. The head of the department quickly deals with the final agenda items and closes the meeting. Professor Y has to rush to get his train home but I catch up with him on the stairs as he leaves. We shake hands.

"Thanks for what you said in there. I really appreciated it."

"My pleasure. Who says you can't teach an old dog new tricks?"

"Not me. Have a safe journey home. I'll see you again next year."

"Look forward to it. Who knows, by then I might have written a few short stories of my own."

We depart. He for the train station, I for a bike ride.

Notes

1. For examples of this debate and suggestions for appropriate ways of judging alternative forms of qualitative research see Blumenfeld-Jones (1995), Bochner (2000), Clough (2000), Denzin (2000), Ellis (1995, 1997, 2000), Garratt and Hodgkinson (1998), Gergen and Gergen (2000), Larher (1993), Lincoln (1993, 1995), Richardson (1994, 2000a, 2000b), Schwandt (1996), John Smith (1984, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1993), Smith and Deemer (2000), Sparkes (1995, 1998).
2. For other criteria in action and a rejection of this orthodox scientific view see Sparkes (2000).

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ETHNOGRAPHIC AESTHETICS: ARTFUL INQUIRY



PRELUDE

"Collage"

