



On auto-ethnography

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Abstract

Auto-ethnography, an alternative method and form of writing, can make for uncomfortable reading. A transgressive account in the context of professional practice opens out a professional's life, remaking power relations in the process. Relational ethics is an emerging growth area for auto-ethnographers, given the ethical implications for everyone represented in a transgressive telling. Future directions include fresh juxtapositions of layered auto-ethnographic texts and collaborative accounts that break with the self–other dichotomy.

Keywords

Auto-ethnography, power relations, relational ethics, remaking professional practice, transgressive writing

Auto-ethnography is ‘an alternative method and form of writing’ (Neville-Jan, 2003: 89), falling somewhere between anthropology and literary studies. Some social science researchers have an interpretive literary style and others have been ‘trained to write in ways that use highly specialised vocabulary, that efface the personal and flatten the voice, that avoid narrative in deference to dominant theories and methodologies of the social sciences’ (Modjeska, 2006: 31). The complex relationship between social science writing and literary writing has led to a blurring ‘between “fact” and “fiction” and between “true” and “imagined” ’ (Richardson and St Pierre, 2005: 961). Auto-ethnographers will often blur boundaries, crafting fictions and other ways of being true in the interests of rewriting selves in the social world.

Auto-ethnography is ‘a relational pursuit’ (Turner, 2013). Auto-ethnographic writing can be ‘highly personal accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher

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for the purposes of extending sociological understanding' (Sparkes, 2000: 21). Writing both selves and others into a larger story goes against the grain of much academic discourse. Holt (2003) foregrounds the challenge that auto-ethnographers issue to 'silent authorship':

By writing themselves into their own work as major characters, auto-ethnographers have challenged accepted views about silent authorship, where the researcher's voice is not included in the presentation of findings. (2003: 2)

It will come as no surprise that auto-ethnography is a relatively young and contested field. The introspective and subjective performances that are, to a greater or lesser extent, inevitable parts of the auto-ethnographic act still raise questions about the value of each auto-ethnographic account and which accounts are to be published and counted as research. Journals such as *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *Qualitative Inquiry*, *Sociology of Sport Journal*, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* and *Disability and Society* however, regularly publish auto-ethnographic research.

Moreover, auto-ethnographic writing has become increasingly common in a range of disciplines, including those drawn on in professional practice. The writer of an auto-ethnography will 'strip away the veneer of self-protection that comes with professional title and position ... to make themselves accountable and vulnerable to the public' (Denzin, 2003: 137). An auto-ethnography written within/against a profession (Evetts, 2012; Lather, 1991) may destabilize boundaries between a professional's work and the rest of their life and break through the dichotomy between selves and others (Reed-Danahay, 1997).

In this article I am thinking sociologically about doing and writing auto-ethnography in contexts of professional practice. My auto-ethnographic doctorate, entitled 'Writing the ordinary: Auto-ethnographic tales of an occupational therapist', comprised fictional tales of practice written in direct dialogue with selected publications from my body of work. These twice-told tales of sexuality, food and death contained vulnerable, embodied representations from moments of practice (Denshire, 2010, 2011a, 2011b).

My discussion is grounded in more than 30 years' experience as a practitioner-researcher of occupational therapy. Practitioners in this little known health profession explicitly attend to the meanings of activities in people's everyday lives and therapists may write down moments from a client's life narrative as part of their practice. The interdisciplinary field of occupational therapy can be a productive space from which to interrogate representations of work and everyday life. Later in the article I consider auto-ethnographic examples of embodied accounts from health and disability studies against evaluation criteria derived from ideas of 'narrative truth'.

The article begins with a theoretical overview of auto-ethnography. Then I show how an auto-ethnographer writing within/against a profession may begin to rework representations of power circulating between intimates, friends, clients and colleagues using selected accounts from health and disability studies. In this way, I foreground relational ethics (Ellis, 2007) as a growth area for auto-ethnography and the social relationships and responsibilities that may have implications for everyone identified in one or more telling(s). Finally, I touch on future directions for writing auto-ethnography in terms of

the social implications of telling a story from more than one point of view and the scope for unexpected collaborations with previously silenced authors.

An overview of theoretical approaches

This section begins with the point that auto-ethnography goes beyond the writing of selves and notes that some of the early auto-ethnographies from the 1960s and 1970s were written in an anthropological tradition. Contemporary auto-ethnography comes out of a range of disciplines. Writers of these accounts address social questions of difference and becoming that may enable voices previously silenced to speak back. I note the binary distinction made between evocative and analytical auto-ethnography in a special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* and then show how Reed-Danahay (1997) and others go beyond this distinction in ethnographic accounts influenced by post-structuralism. Some ideas on writing in different voices and giving fictive accounts in auto-ethnography are presented. Finally, the section gives a précis of feminist scholarship on writing within/against, writing as knowing, postmodern emergence and a perceived reluctance to write professional practice differently.

Beyond the writing of selves

While auto-ethnography contains elements of auto-biography, auto-ethnography goes beyond the writing of selves. Writing that crosses personal and professional life spaces goes further than auto-biography whenever writers critique the depersonalizing tendencies that can come into play in social and cultural spaces that have asymmetrical relations of power (Brodkey, 1996). Potential contact zones in schools (Brodkey, 1996) and health settings can be ‘social spaces’ (Pratt, 1991: 34) where ‘strangers ... meet and interact’ (Brodkey, 1996: 27). Auto-ethnographic writing that shows interactive moments from these social and cultural spaces can be ‘the currency of the contact zones’ (Brodkey, 1996: 28):

... auto-ethnography invites writers to see themselves and everyone else as human subjects constructed in a tangle of cultural, social and historical situations and relations in contact zones. (Brodkey, 1996: 29)

Some early auto-ethnographers

The blurring of selves apparent in the early uses of the term ‘auto-ethnography’ has had a productive trajectory. *Facing Mount Kenya* written in 1962 by Kenyatta, the first president of independent Kenya, is recognized as the first published auto-ethnography and has been criticized for being too subjective and uncritical (Hayano, 1979). Anthropologist Karl Heider introduced the term ‘auto-ethnography’ in 1975 in the context of the Dani auto-ethnography (Chang, 2008). This work consisted of cultural accounts of sweet potato growing by the Dani people, a Papuan culture in the highlands of Irian Jaya who were the *informants* for Heider’s doctoral research (Heider, 1975, 2006). A few years later, Hayano (1979) used the term ‘auto-ethnography’ in a different way to refer to the study of an ethnographer’s ‘own people’, in the context of *himself* as a card playing

insider. The culture of card playing in Southern California was his ‘auto-biographical connection to the ethnography’ (Chang, 2008: 47).

Crossing disciplines, boundaries, borders

Communication scholars Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams and Art Bochner (2011) delineate the auto-ethnographic method ‘as both process and product’, reiterating that ‘a researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write auto-ethnography’ (2011: 273). Social science auto-ethnographers writing with a range of genres in literary and performance studies, social and political sciences, cultural studies, international relations, higher education, communication studies, disability studies and health and social care, are starting to challenge the discourses dominant in professional lives. As psychological therapist Lydia Turner (2013: 225) points out: ‘auto-ethnography endeavours to ... scrutinize ... dominant narratives, suggest alternatives and proffer viewpoints previously discarded as unhelpfully subjective’. In order to write auto-ethnography you cannot feel completely at home in your discipline (Burnier, 2006) and the discomfort experienced at stepping outside your own received frame is part of the auto-ethnographic task. Indeed, auto-ethnography can provide ‘vehicles for talking to each other often, across the borders of discipline and identity locations’ (Burdell and Swadener, 1999: 25).

Auto-ethnography ‘opens up a space of resistance between the individual (*auto-*) and the collective (*-ethno-*) where the writing (*-graphy*) of singularity cannot be foreclosed’ (Lionnet, 1990: 391). Auto-ethnography has also been interpreted as a critical approach necessitating a privileged speaker who ‘sometimes seem[s] to want to study everybody’s social and cultural construction but their own’ (Alcoff, 1991: 21) to no longer speak for others routinely, but rather to sometimes ‘move over’ and listen as a messenger would, to self-interrogate and ‘deconstruct [their] own discourse’ (1991: 3), bringing their privilege into question. Otherwise:

When ... researchers’ bodies remain unmarked – and hence naturalized as normative – they reinscribe the power of scholars to speak without reflexive consideration of their positionality, whereas others’ voices remain silent or marginalized by their marked status. (Ellingson, 2006: 301)

So how might researchers in the social sciences understand writing as a site of moral responsibility where authors acknowledge and celebrate previously silenced actors (Richardson, 1997)?

Wherever text is being produced, there is the question of what social, power and sexual relationships are being reproduced? How does our writing ... reproduce a system of domination and how does it challenge that system? For whom do we speak, and to whom, with what voice, to what end, using what criteria? (Richardson, 1997: 57)

Evocative/analytical distinctions?

Different approaches in auto-ethnography can be characterized in terms of different relationships between the personal and the wider social and cultural world the writing seeks

to enquire into. Ellis and Bochner (2006) have classified these differences in terms of 'evocative' and 'analytical' approaches, where evocative auto-ethnography foregrounds the writer's personal stories and analytical auto-ethnography connect to 'some broader set of social phenomena than those provided by the data themselves' (Anderson, 2006: 387). These two different approaches are extensively explored in a special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*.

This binary classification is useful as an initial way of making visible the variation in how auto-ethnographic writers integrate the strands of self and culture in their writing. Ellis and Bochner's (2000) preliminary definition, grounded in the writer's personal experience, has been particularly influential:

I start with my personal life. I pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions. I use what I call systematic, sociological introspection and emotional recall to try to understand an experience I've lived through. Then I write my experience as a story. By exploring a particular life, I hope to understand a way of life. (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 737)

In emphasizing the centrality of the personal, their account arguably backgrounds the social or cultural world in which the writing occurs, or, rather, reads the social and cultural through the personal. A consequence of this is that a fine dissection of a particular personal experience that the writer has lived through will frequently mean sacrificing opportunities to craft a broader ethnographic account that may also be autobiographically reflexive (Atkinson, 2006; Delamont, 2009).

In the analytical tradition, on the other hand, a sense of objectivity is valued. Anderson (2006: 378) sets out the following 'key features' for analytic auto-ethnography; '(1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis'. In the same special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* mentioned above, Atkinson has endorsed Anderson's 'analytical, theoretical and objective approach to auto-ethnography' (Chang, 2008: 46). Sarah Delamont (2009) has disseminated her views on the self-interested and ethical weaknesses of auto-ethnography. I return to the relational ethics of auto-ethnography later in the article.

Writing both self and culture

Beyond the binary distinction of evocative and analytical forms the question of what is ethnographic about auto-ethnography requires a reflexive examination of conceptions of both self and culture in terms of writing. In this regard, Reed-Danahay (1997: 2) suggests that auto/ethnography:

... synthesizes both a postmodern ethnography, [with] the realist conventions and objective observer position of standard ethnography ... and a postmodern autobiography, in which the notion of the coherent, individual self [has] been ... called into question. The term has a double sense – referring either to the ethnography of one's own group or to autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest.

This synthesis requires a reassessment of how the self and culture are conceptualized and written. An auto-ethnographic representation of practice can function as something of a

corrective to depersonalized and disembodied accounts of professional work. Recent auto-ethnographic accounts influenced by post-structuralism displace a unified self as the primary site of experience and meaning, writing a self decentred and destabilized through multiple speaking positions and representations (Denshire and Lee, 2013). In a post-structural auto-ethnography, 'the writing writes the writer as a complex (im)possible subject in a world where (self) knowledge can only ever be tentative, contingent, and situated' (Gannon, 2006: 474). In these ways, auto-ethnographic writing can be simultaneously personal and scholarly, evocative and analytical, descriptive and theoretical (Burnier, 2006).

Writing and performing auto-ethnography

Stacey Holman-Jones (2005: 765) describes auto-ethnography as 'a blurred genre ... [that] refus[es] categorization ... believing that words matter and writing toward the moment when the point of creating auto-ethnographic texts is to change the world'. She discusses the act of balancing with respect to auto-ethnographic writing. That is, the balance between, first, telling versus showing – how much of ourselves do/should we include, and what should we leave out? And then she writes about holding together the/a self and culture in a world that is constantly in flux. And Jess Moriarty (2013) describes her accomplished doctoral thesis at the University of Brighton as 'an autoethnodrama about pressures of life in a fictional university and the impact of the perceived publish or perish culture on some academics' motivation and desire to write for academic publication' (Short et al., 2013: 243).

Auto-ethnography is a fictive tradition. Tensions exist between auto-ethnography and literary traditions, with stories being put together using composite characters and sources (Clough, 1999). Literary tales make use of conventions such as dialogue and monologue to create character, calling up emotional states, sights, smells, noises and using dramatic reconstruction. Oral traditions are also an important part of recovering the ordinary-everyday of practice. Impressionist tales are open to multiple interpretations and the writer has a degree of 'interpretive authority' when choosing the story in question. There is a freshness and spontaneity at work in the live performance of an impressionist tale. It is 'a tall order' to 'communicate in writing less of the cold ambition that comes from print and more other truths and intimacies that come from speech' (Tyler, 1986: 123).

Auto-ethnography is usually written in the first person (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). An auto-biographical defence of personal narrative in sociology will intentionally use the second person 'you' to address any charge of self-indulgence, name the work as self-involved and point out those neutral, disembodied conventions of a traditional masculine academic discourse (Mykhalovskiy, 1996). And writing in the third person, as 'she' or 'he', distances the self to become just another figure/character in the drama. This is a methodological decision so that the story becomes more fictive, a rationale drawn from collective memory work (Crawford et al., 1992), for writing all self-stories in third person rather than the dangers and risks of remaining in the first person. Telling a story in the first person can run a risk of too much attachment to self and a certain set of memories.

Feminist bodies of work

In *Getting Lost: Feminist Efforts toward a Double(d) Science*, Patti Lather (2007) revisits the earlier publications that mark her trajectory as a feminist methodologist, inserting what she calls an 'Interlude' between each of the existing texts in her book. In folding her new and old writings both forward and back, she achieves a polytemporality. Situating feminist research both within and against traditional approaches to social science 'makes it possible to probe how feminist research re-inscribes that which it is resisting as well as how it resists that re-inscription' (Lather, 1991: 27).

In *Fields of Play: Constructing an Academic Life*, Laurel Richardson (1997: 1) explores these two questions: 'How do the specific circumstances in which we write affect what we write? How does what we write affect who we become?' Her reflections on the co-authored ethnographic drama 'The sea monster' gave rise to the 'writing-story' genre, the story of how a text is constructed. She found the power of this genre by writing the story of co-authorship as *her* story, 'not allowing another voice to penetrate the text' (1997: 74). Each representation or 'writing-story' that she produced, on rereading an existing piece of writing, becomes increasingly evocative, 'illuminat(ing) a different facet of the complexity of a writing-life' ... as 'Forewords' or 'Afterwords' (1997: 5).

The idea of writing as a method of enquiry (Richardson and St Pierre, 2005) has been recently extended into a 'new theory of representation' (Somerville, 2007: 225) that articulates 'the common elements of these alternative approaches to research so that each individual and each research project is not an isolated effort to break through the unsayable to new knowledge' (Somerville, 2007: 225). Spurred on by Indigenous colleagues, Somerville has gone further than deconstruction to the idea of hope and I return to this idea later. Her new theory of representation is cyclic, focusing on 'creation of meaning from the relationship between the parts ... creation from working the space in between' (2007: 239).

These foregoing bodies of work are relevant to auto-ethnography in several ways. First, through deconstructive notions of doubled writings and tellings published in a single volume (Lather, 2007); second, using writing as a method of enquiry (Richardson and St Pierre, 2005); and third, in terms of postmodern emergence, both 'becoming self' and 'becoming-other' (Somerville, 2007) as a vulnerable observer (Behar, 1996).

Transgressive accounts of (professional) practice

In her auto-ethnographic doctorate on learning and becoming in the field of academic development, Tai Peseta (2005) has posed the following question at the University of Sydney where a palpable sense of apprehension and reluctance circulated about writing practice differently and critically:

What is it about the labour and organization of academic development that effaces such expressions of difference; that very often stifles our ability to creatively represent our work when we come to write of it? (2005: 114)

And in an unpublished presentation entitled 'Academic development as the practice of "thinking otherwise"' at a conference symposium on auto-ethnography in three

professions, Peseta suggests that 'auto-ethnography opens a door for those of us interested in offering accounts of professional practice that are committed to acknowledging a human-ness to the work'. She continues:

While criticisms of auto-ethnography throw up the 'auto' of the researcher as an aspect of the approach that warrants caution (Fine, 1999; Gans, 1999; Ryang, 2005), there are now so many accounts of 'life' that have been enabled by auto-ethnography and more generally, the literary turn within the social and health sciences (Ellis, 1995; Behar, 1996; Sparkes, 1996; Bochner, 1997; Denshire, 2009). Without these intimate and detailed evocations of life and professional practice, our knowledge of those worlds would be severely diminished. (Tai Peseta, May 2012, personal communication)

Transgressive accounts go beyond 'the proper' to trouble the ethical relations of self and other in order to break through the dominant representations of professional practice, creating new knowledges. Dominant academic discourses are being challenged by scholars such as Ruth Behar in anthropology; Collette Granger, Linda Brodkey, Peter Clough and Tai Peseta in education; DeLysa Burnier in political science; Elizabeth Dauphinee in international relations; Barbara Jago in communication studies; Jodi Hall and Tessa Muncey from nursing; and Ann Neville-Jan, Anne Kinsella, Rachel Thibeault and Nancy Salmon in occupational therapy. I have come to consider these accounts transgressive auto-ethnographies of (professional) practice and now go on to evaluate several exemplary auto-ethnographic accounts from health and disability studies in the next section.

Empirical evidence and assessment of research

Various professional fields have worked within particular conceptions of the domain of health that have largely excluded the extensive field of disability studies (Hammell, 2006). Now auto-ethnographic writing from disability studies (Richards, 2008), anthropology (Behar, 1996), occupational therapy (Kinsella, 2006; Neville-Jan, 2003; Salmon, 2006) and nursing (Muncey, 2005; Wall, 2008) is challenging the dominant techno-rational discourses in health that define experiences of illness and wellness, self and other. I have selected auto-ethnographic accounts by Rose Richards, Nancy Salmon, Anne Kinsella and Ann Neville-Jan in which these authors each critically reflect on embodied experiences of health and disability, challenging existing power relations and raising ethical issues.

First, a well-developed example of the power of auto-ethnography to represent about illness and disability is a compelling insider account of kidney failure, transplantation and recovery (Richards, 2008). The account resists 'any notion of authorial omniscience and objectivity' (2008: 1720) and shows the layered complexity of 'different points of view and different positionings in a given situation' and the 'underlying theoretical assumptions that inform the positions being examined' (2008: 1725).

While testimony can disrupt and emancipatory discourses break the silence, destabilized narratives may be the most effective type of auto-ethnography (Richards, 2008) because they 'problematise representation', inviting readers to 'co-create meaning and discover what his or her own positioning is in a given context' (Richards, 2008: 1724).

Rose Richards's account about 'writing the othered self' challenges existing power relations between the users and providers of health services, raising ethical considerations about relations between selves and others in health, disability and disease.

Second, Nancy Salmon (2006) portrays an intense personal relationship between mother and daughter, conveying the strangeness both of having dementia and caring for someone with dementia, in the process highlighting some of the inequities of care-giving in Canada and the lack of respite. Her auto-ethnographic narrative of care-giving used diary excerpts, reflective writing and poetry to evoke the transit zone both women must inhabit, flipping the viewpoint of a care-giving daughter who is also a health professional (Salmon, 2006). This account foregrounds her authority as a care-giving daughter on her mother's last night in the family home and raises poignant ethical questions of loss and change, pushing Salmon's professional identity into the background.

Third, Anne Kinsella looks back after 10 years on an experience of 'lingering discomfort' (2006: 40) as an occupational therapist reflecting on how the objectivity expected of her silenced her emotions. The following, telling excerpt from her poem 'Professionalism' is dedicated to Louise, a 26-year-old woman living with a progressive brain tumour:

... Your body's disappointments I know
 Of necessity
 It is my job
 I transgress by visiting
 Your family in the evening
 On occasion
 In emergencies ...
 Your last Christmas
 I keep the gift in my bottom drawer
 Guilty ... (Kinsella, 2006: 42)

Poetry has the potential to disrupt the taken for granted (Kinsella, 2006). Here Kinsella reflects critically on the inner conflict she experienced in curbing the human drive to exchange gifts, feeling that 'professionalism' only allowed her to accept a present from another and not to reciprocate with the gift of a small carefully chosen sculpture. Her poem resists the usual professional language, by 'beginning with the life world [dimensions] of the practitioner' (2006: 43) that are so frequently 'disregarded or repressed' (2006: 44). She suggests that it is not uncommon for practitioners to experience tensions around the phenomenological aspects of practice. Her account also challenges the received clinical binaries of client and therapist, raising important ethical questions around making room for gestures of mutuality and reciprocity in health care interactions.

Finally, auto-ethnographic researcher and occupational therapy academic, Ann Neville-Jan (2003), takes an 'embodied perspective of disability' (2003: 116) as a woman living with spina bifida, by using the term impairment 'to draw attention to the bodily struggles involved in participation in everyday activities' (2003: 115). She preferred to publish her second auto-ethnography, a moving account of her quest for a child, in *Disability and Society* (Neville-Jan, 2004). And she speaks out as a woman living a 'preventable' condition (Neville-Jan, 2005).

When Ann Neville-Jan (2003) looked back on her symposium paper that was ostensibly about potential connections between biology and occupation, she realized that, actually, the take-home message of the paper was about her *encounters with practitioners* [italics added]. Current accounts of impaired bodies focus productively on ‘the reflexive relationship between the bodily and the social’ (McDaniel, 2011: 3) and how ‘the body literally is conceptualised as embodying the social’ (2011: 7). Perhaps Neville-Jan publicly came to know the spaces of both ‘self’ and ‘other’ as a woman living with spina bifida who is also an occupational therapy academic and an auto-ethnographer. Ann Neville-Jan inhabits these life spaces simultaneously in her body of work. She challenges power relations and raises ethical questions about the authority of embodied experiences of disability.

In my view, the foregoing auto-ethnographic accounts satisfy both Richardson and St Pierre’s (2005) factors for reviewing personal narrative (substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, impactfulness and expressing a reality) and Bochner’s (2000) concrete details, structurally complex narratives, qualities of authenticity and honesty, a standard of ethical self-consciousness and a moving story. The conventions of the authoritative discourses of science and medicine will ‘support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power’ (Butler, 2006: 46). Embodied auto-ethnographic accounts of professional practice in health and disability studies, such as these, can reconfigure power relations, opening out disembodied renderings of experience and remaking practice interactions.

In the context of health and disability studies, auto-ethnographic writings can create discomfort through their challenges to traditional realist modes of representation. They can also bring new visibilities and awarenesses concerning ethical issues and power relations for people involved in health contexts, however. In the context of writing about clinical practice, for example, auto-ethnographic accounts may necessitate a significant questioning and reworking of received clinical binaries such as patient–therapist and client–practitioner. Putting the self into the picture at all is challenging enough in this context, but putting the very notion of a self at risk opens up places of vulnerability that can also be opportunities for radical reworking of categories of thought and action, including those that cross boundaries between fields or professions (Denshire and Lee, 2013).

Relational ethics: A growing area of interest

Reflecting on a story about his 87-year-old father and 17-year-old son, in a meta-auto-ethnography (Ellis, 2009) waiting to be told ‘at the will of the body’, established auto-ethnographer Andrew Sparkes (2013: 207) notes: ‘our stories are not our own. In the process of writing about ourselves, we also write about others.’ The relational ethics of a professional’s practice, that is to say ‘the interpersonal ties and responsibilities researchers have to those they study’ (Adams and Ellis, 2012: 189), is emerging as a growing area of interest across a range of fields and professions with implications for all members of a researcher’s social network whether intimates, clients or colleagues identified as characters in a telling (Ellis et al., 2011). Relationships with others may change over time with consequent changes in ethical obligations. Process consent may be needed at each stage of a project (Ellis, 2009). And auto-ethnographers are obligated to share

their accounts with others who are involved in their texts and to open the space for others to talk/speak back (Ellis, 2000; Pratt, 1991).

Devices that are intended to protect participants' identities in auto-ethnographic accounts include fictionalizing (Clough, 2002) and the use of symbolic equivalents (Yalom, 1991). Protective writing devices such as a nom de plume (Morse, 2000), composite characterization (Ellis, 2007) and pseudonyms (Chang, 2008) can be used in an effort to respect the privacy of those portrayed in an auto-ethnographic narrative. But such devices are not always employed or suited to the task, given the politics of autoethnography and the diversity of writing styles. Martin Tolich's (2010) critique of current auto-ethnographic practice has resulted in 10 ethical guidelines for the field. While these guidelines seem somewhat prescriptive and unidirectional for use in the complex social field of auto-ethnography, they do highlight the potential vulnerability of both auto-ethnographic researcher and participants. Identified risks relate to internal confidentiality for family members, clients and colleagues as well as the risk of self-harm to researchers themselves (Tolich, 2010).

Auto-ethnographic studies of grief, illness experience and disability, such as Sparkes's (1996) account of masculinity, sport and his physical vulnerability and Ellis's (1995) story of losing her partner Gene to emphysema, arguably intersect with experiences of professional life. There may also be a distinction in that the former often represent more individualized, private and intimate experiences while the auto-ethnographies of professional lives may be more public and overtly relational and deal with different types of experience, such as embodied representations of moments of practice. The power relations are different and the expressive needs are different too. If one is speaking from a position of a vulnerable and somewhat voiceless minority, 'speaking back' to power (Pratt, 1991), then one might focus more on conveying one's own experience and foregrounding it, while relegating the social and relational to the background. In what follows I reflect on my auto-ethnographic doctorate in this regard.

Setting out to write an auto-ethnographic account felt somewhat daunting to me at the start. Reading the work of others enabled me to learn about auto-ethnography 'by example' (Wall, 2006: 6). Embodied representations, both published by nurses, of mental illness, addiction and the crisis of visibility (Bruni, 2002) and an insider account of back pain (White, 2003), and forbidden social work narratives about having a breakdown (Church, 1995) were initially troubling to read. At first, reading very personal accounts written within/against feminized professions and hearing auto-ethnographic narratives such as these positioned *within* the authoritative discourse (Bakhtin, 1981) seemed too self-disclosing and exposing of the writers' lives.

Until I started to read *against* the discourse, 'interrupting comfortable reflexivity' (Pillow, 2003: 187), I have to confess that I was as likely as not to classify some of these embodied personal narratives as auto-ethnographies of affliction. Gradually though, the viscosity and the pain expressed by these authors persuaded me to somehow start writing my body-self as part of my auto-ethnographic research, even though lived bodies have been strangely absent from health care research (Ellingson, 2006).

Writing and reading auto-ethnographic accounts threw me around emotionally, stirring up unresolved grief and questions to do with class beginnings, gender and belonging. Making opportunities to de-brief after dealing with confronting materials is

important. Given the possibility that ‘abandonment is ... a common practice of the would-be auto-ethnographer’ (Bruni, 2002: 32), it is necessary to become aware both of the risks in using the self as the only source of data (Holt, 2003) and of the ‘resilience and conviction’ (2003: 19) vital to writing in this genre. Establishing a warrant for auto-ethnography is pivotal to carrying out this kind of research.

My resulting portfolio of tales of sexuality, food and death dramatized ‘paradigmatic scenes’ from a remembered world of occupational therapy at Camperdown Children’s Hospital. This auto-ethnographic account of a professional’s practice also featured fictionalized accounts of previously silenced others. These fictional tales were twice-told, first by an Anglo-Australian occupational therapist in her thirties and then by girls of Pacific Islands, Aboriginal and Turkish heritage. I addressed my ineptitude as a White woman from a relatively privileged part of Sydney who was writing the voices of non-Anglo-Australian others by asking cultural insiders to comment on the tales throughout the writing process. Crafting such fictional accounts may have ethical implications for (re)presenting something of the intimacy and viscerality of interchanges between all actors involved in moments of practice (Denshire, in press).

These tales I wrote were constructed through my eyes and memory. They contained fictional characters and composite events, making the real people who inspired these characters unrecognizable. Fragments of real events were woven with fiction and ‘symbolic equivalents’ (Yalom, 1991). Although the actual names of most of the hospital wards were not used, in the spirit of auto-ethnography places such as Wade House and the former Camperdown Children’s Hospital were identified. The university ethics officer waived the need to complete a formal ethics application on the grounds that the tales were fiction so a formal ethics application was not required.

The assumptions and procedures of most institutional ethics committees differ markedly from the values of potential auto-ethnographic researchers. In my experiences working with Honours and higher degree students, these different paradigms may compel students ‘to dress experiences constituted by current organisational structures in ill fitting theoretical clothes’ (Selby, 2005: 8) to satisfy committee requirements about expectations of participant anonymity, informed consent and right to withdraw, for example. Not that I am saying that these expectations are not useful for auto-ethnographers to take into consideration; just that they do not constitute the whole story of undertaking the relational, and often reciprocal, social practice of auto-ethnography.

So I wonder about a series of ethical standards for auto-ethnography predicated on ‘pedagogy of hope’ (Somerville, 2007) and ‘ethics of care’ (Denzin, 2014); these are ethical values more compatible with particular Indigenous perspectives, for example, that value both respect and sharing within a local cultural group where ‘ethical codes of conduct serve partly the same purposes as the protocols which govern our relationships with each other and with the environment’ (Smith, 2012: 25).

The goal of auto-ethnography: ‘to write ... texts [that] move others to ethical action’ (Denzin, 2014: 70) will have ethical implications for both the writers and the readers of an auto-ethnographic account. Elizabeth Dauphinee (2010) describes something of the aftermath of the war in Bosnia and its impact on ‘the life and loss of a man named Stojan Sokolovic’ (2010: 799) in writing on questions of truth, power and ethics for the field of International Relations. She shows how ‘purposeful auto-ethnography’ (2010: 799)

‘opens space for the reader to see the intentions – and not just the theories and methodologies – of the researcher’ who may be variously present in the text as author, witness or participant. Auto-ethnography ‘opens us to a deeper form of judgement. That is the core of its ethics’ (2010: 813).

Future directions

Postmodern conversation around truths and fictions (Smith, 1996) continues to inform critical understandings of the value and versatility of contemporary auto-ethnographic writing in the social sciences (Reed-Danahay, 1997; Somerville, 2007). Understanding the cultural features of the group in question – their beliefs, their reasoning and communication remains necessary in writing any form of ethnography (Van Maanen, 1988). New representations are overdue in research in the social sciences, as Peter Clough points out:

There are new maps to draw in the making of ‘fictional’ characters, maps to help us in the task of writing *people* into narrative. Translating life’s realities as lived by men and women into story, and doing in such a way as still to be believed, is the ethnographic challenge. (Clough, 2002: 64)

Topical genres of auto-ethnography include: Indigenous auto-ethnography, narrative ethnography, reflexive interviews, reflexive ethnography, layered accounts, interactive interviews, community auto-ethnography and, contentiously, personal narratives that stand alone (Ellis et al., 2011). Types of co-constructed narrative include collaborative auto-ethnography (Chang et al., 2013), co-constructed, decolonizing auto-ethnography (Diversi and Moreira, 2009), duo-ethnography (Norris et al., 2012) and collaborative writing (Wyatt et al., 2011). And performance ethnography (Denzin, 2003; Spry, 2011) and sociopoetics (Pelias, 2011) are some examples of performance-based genres. Hence I have selected two new directions to discuss for the production of auto-ethnographic texts. Each will be discussed in turn with examples.

Juxtaposing tellings from more than one point of view

The first is the trend to freshly juxtapose auto-ethnographic texts that have been written from more than one point of view. A ‘layered account’ (Ronai, 1995: 395) is one that shows connections among ‘personal experience, theory, and research practices’ as the writer moves ‘back and forth between narratives and reflections on those narratives or their content’ (Goodall, 2008: 68) and challenges a single telling from just one viewpoint. Layered accounts may proliferate in future, juxtaposing multiple tellings from more than one point of view, especially via new media and performance auto-ethnography (Spry, 2011).

The associated concept of *assemblage* includes but goes beyond the literal bringing together of a range of heterogeneous elements in different modalities to offer different perspectives on a phenomenon. Assemblage challenges and displaces boundaries between the individual and the social through a focus on practice, which offers a new

'ontology of the social' (Denshire and Lee, 2013). Through successive displacements of the self as the primary site of experience and meaning we seek to contribute new understandings about the potential for auto-ethnography to engage with professional practice as a space of multiplicity.

Collaborative accounts that break the self–other dichotomy

The second new direction I am proposing is the production of collaborative accounts by previously silenced voices. There is potential for remaking somewhat tired traditional professional attributes, such as 'professional expertise' and 'professional detachment', into something more negotiated, to enable co-produced moments of practice in a world in flux. In this way, producing collaborative texts that are co-authored both with and by previously silenced others (Richardson, 1997) is another future direction for auto-ethnography in contexts of professional practice that necessitates redistributing power between service users/co-researchers and service providers.

These collaborative texts may take the form of interactive interviews, community auto-ethnography or co-constructed narratives written by two or more authors (Adams and Ellis, 2012; Ellis et al., 2011). These transgressive texts go beyond 'the proper' to trouble the ethical relations of selves and others in order to break through dominant discourses, creating new knowledges. A collaborative account of professional practice would enable power to circulate between all the actors involved in the interests of service users 'speaking back' and moving in from the margins to productive interaction with practitioners.

But writing body-selves back into auto-ethnographic accounts is difficult to accomplish when lived bodies have been strangely absent from health care research (Ellingson, 2006). Quarantining the resources necessary to craft collaborative accounts, such as time to write and institutional support, will remain complex to secure, however, within largely unreflective and over-regulated practice settings. Some collaborative auto-ethnographic writing projects have been completed within supportive higher degree research settings. An example of interactive interviews within a critical auto-ethnography from the University of Western Ontario follows.

An example of interactive interviews within a critical auto-ethnography

I consider that Jodi Hall's (2012) doctoral dissertation, '“Okay, so remember, this is a *drape* – not a sheet”: A critical auto-ethnography of (per)forming the practice(d) body of a Gynaecological Teaching Associate', characterizes the new directions for auto-ethnography, employing both layered writing interspersed with voices of silenced others. This doctoral thesis, awarded from the University of Western Ontario, addressed the interactions and agendas of all the human and non-human actors and texts circulating in a pelvic teaching programme (GTAs, medical students, programme administrators, material objects) in original, multi-perspectival ways.

The socio-political processes and products of social and affective change in this study speak right back to the critics of auto-ethnography who complain of researcher self-obsession. The study has intricate methodological strands, artfully woven through

performances of both selves and fictional composite others. Her research offers powerful views into silenced experiences of pelvic teaching, successfully risking researcher self-disclosure in the process. The literature reviewed lays out ethical dilemmas in the field of pelvic teaching from the viewpoints of everyone involved, exposing gynaecological practices that were (and may still be) dubious and unethical, and reconfiguring gendered knowledges for the education of health professionals.

Hall is a qualitative researcher, doula and women's health advocate. Her critical perspectives are highly original and unrelenting, (re)sensitizing readers to women of all ages and our bodies, and restoring the authority of women's experiences while critiquing normative discourses of gender performance. Her grasp of the auto-ethnographic genre enabled her to present intimate aspects of her own layered experiences right up front to participants without any charge of self-indulgence, describing multiple pelvic examinations that show the discursive tensions in pelvic teaching and 'how to (not) talk the body'.

As a further example, nursing scholar Tessa Muncey (2005) has skilfully juxtaposed 'the snapshot, metaphor, the journey and artifacts, in combination in a published auto-ethnography', problematizing her memories of becoming pregnant at a young age to 'demonstrate the disjunctions that characterise people's lives' (2005: 69). Also, Johanna Uotinen (2011), writing within cultural studies on her time as a patient in a Finnish Intensive Care Unit, has further expanded the conceptual terrain of auto-ethnography through her enquiry into 'bodily ... unbeknown knowledge', where auto-ethnographic writing can excavate 'those practices that have become invisible because of their ordinariness or repetitiveness' (2011: 1309).

Conclusions

In these ways, auto-ethnography demonstrates the potential to speak back (and perhaps differently) about professional life under prevailing conditions of audit culture so as to make and remake ethical relations in contexts of professional practice (Denshire et al., 2012). Auto-ethnography continues to occupy 'an intermediate space we can't quite define yet, a borderland between passion and intellect, analysis and subjectivity, ethnography and auto-biography, art and life' (Behar, 1996: 174). The foregoing vulnerable, embodied accounts derive from 'reflexivities of discomfort' (Pillow, 2003: 187) opening possibilities for:

A more embodied field of qualitative ... research [that] would maintain more permeable boundaries, be more difficult to categorize, and offer less certainty and more vulnerability. Researchers would have to address our fears of illness, death, and bodies out of control instead of staying detached and ignoring our bodies (and others' bodies). (Ellingson, 2006: 308)

Despite the challenge, discomfort and occasional joy of writing auto-ethnography, it is important to press on with the auto-ethnographic project in order to destabilize and redraw the boundaries between a professional's work and their life, creating space for dialogue with previously silenced others. New auto-ethnographic accounts remaking practice interactions with all actors involved can represent professional practice more

fully and bring about ethical action. Indeed, the risk of auto-ethnography ‘opens us to the possibility of seeing more of what we might ignore in both ourselves and others, asking why it is ignored, and what we might need to do about it’ (Dauphinee, 2010: 818).

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Author biography

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Résumé

L'auto-ethnographie, méthode et forme alternative d'écriture, peut provoquer un sentiment d'inconfort chez le lecteur. Le récit transgressif dans un contexte professionnel modifie les conditions d'exercice de la profession, reformulant les relations de pouvoir au cours de ce processus. L'éthique relationnelle est devenu un domaine d'étude privilégié chez les auto-ethnologues, compte tenu des implications éthiques d'un récit transgressif sur la personne représentée. Les orientations futures de la recherche se concentrent sur les textes auto-ethnographiques à plusieurs niveaux et les récits collaboratifs, rompant avec la dichotomie ego-alter.

Mots-clés

Auto-ethnographie, relations de pouvoir, renouvellement des pratiques professionnelles, relations éthiques, écriture transgressive

Resumen

La auto-etnografía, un método y forma de escritura alternativos, puede provocar una lectura incómoda. Un relato transgresor en el contexto de la práctica profesional despliega la vida de un profesional, reconstruyendo las relaciones de poder en el proceso. La ética relacional es un área de crecimiento emergente para la auto-etnógrafos, dadas las implicaciones éticas para todo el mundo representado en una narración transgresora. Orientaciones futuras incluyen yuxtaposiciones frescas de textos auto-etnográfica en capas y relatos en colaboración que rompen con la dicotomía self-otro.

Palabras clave

Auto-etnografía, relaciones de poder, reconstrucción de la práctica profesional, ética relacional, escritura transgresora