Handbook of Autoethnography

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Section Introduction

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and auto/biographical ones in particular tell similar stories to mine, although not all of them had as much positive support as I enjoyed.

I have speculated elsewhere (Sikes, 2017) that my interest in hearing and telling—doing—personal narratives goes back to spending countless hours with my wonderful grandmother, Nana Sikes. Nana was constantly telling tales about herself and her relationships with and to family members and people she had encountered in the past and to the present day. As she storied she was also offering critical analysis that, whilst not originating in knowledge of academic disciplines, could, nonetheless, be seen and understood as examples of (albeit homespun) sociological, historical, philosophical, psychological, theological (and more) theorizing. Nana was an intuitive doer of narrative auto/biography, and her stories taught me a lot not only about her but also about the world, my place within it, and how “things” worked for people who were variously and differently situated.

My experiences in this regard are far from unique. To take but two examples of youngsters growing up in not very formally literate, working-class communities, Robin Boylorn (2013) in the deep south of the USA and Ivor Goodson (2005) in England’s Berkshire, both write of how family narratives educated them about their personal histories and offered frameworks for making sense of the ways in which those histories and their current lives were located in and influenced by cultural, geographical, social, political, economic, and other contexts.

Ivor and Robin recognized the significance, value, and power of personal stories for themselves and for others and consequently took that knowledge with them into the academy, as have I and many others. For me, the most important warrant for doing auto/biographical research generally and autoethnography
specifically has been C. Wright Mills’ exhortation to social scientists to employ the “sociological imagination” whereby “the personal uneasiness of individuals is focused upon explicit troubles and the indifference of publics is transformed into involvement with public issues” ([1959]1970, pp. 11–12) in a way that could prompt transformational change. Mills went on to say, “no social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history, and of their intersections within a society, has completed its intellectual journey” ([1959]1970, p. 12). Concern with these problems, which are frequently rooted in social injustices, is often both motivation and justification for why many people chose to do autoethnography—because of its potential to prompt personal enlightenment about theirs and others’ differential positioning. They may also hope that their autoethnographic writings or performances could have the effect of raising public awareness and even inciting action. These days, however, and for most autoethnographers, the notion of reaching intellectual completion in the form of a once-and-for-all explanation presented in a piece of writing or a performance or some other form of representation is, I think, regarded as impossible: autoethnography is not done once and for all. Life and the sense that is made of it is a multifaceted, messy and ongoing project, and, for a variety of reasons, understandings of why we did what we did and of the things that we experienced at and in a particular time and space can change. That this is the case is graphically illustrated in Carolyn Ellis’ (2009) Revisions: Autoethnographic Reflections on Life and Work, wherein she revisits papers written at former stages of her life. As Ellis says in the introduction, when commenting on a story she wrote in 1993 about her brother’s death in a plane crash:

Could I leave this portrayal as I had written it in 1993, fifteen years before? I decided that I could not. I felt it important to question and challenge my earlier versions of events in my life, revising and rethinking what I’d written from the perspective of the present.

(p. 12)

On this view, and borrowing from the first edition of this Handbook (Holman Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013), doing autoethnography is more than a methodological approach:

For most of us (contributors to the handbook), autoethnography is not simply a way of knowing about

the world, it has become a way of being in the world, one that requires living consciously, emotionally and reflexively.

(Ellis, 2013, p. 10)

Autoethnography can, therefore, be seen as existential practice, whereby doing it is also to be. This is because it is a practice that offers a means of interrogating what being may involve as we live through particular contextualized experiences. Such interrogation can result in changed understandings and perceptions that can have a greater or lesser impact on how we are in the world. For Art Bochner,

the autoethnographic way of life originates in doubt and uncertainty. To be alive is to be uncertain. . . . Autoethnography allows a person to lean into uncertainty rather than struggle against it.

(2020, p. 6)

What Art says here has particular and salient resonance for me as a practitioner of autoethnography writing from my sitting room on March 24, 2020—the first day of the national emergency measures imposed in England for a minimum of three weeks in order to attempt to limit the spread of the coronavirus. Inter alia, and at present, the restrictions entailed mean that I can’t see my children and grandchildren in the flesh; my long-distance partner can’t visit from North America and I can’t travel to him; the churches I attend for weekly and daily masses are locked and aren’t holding the services that are so important to me; my university is physically closed, although we are still teaching and supervising and I must quickly learn to use technology to meet with colleagues, give lectures, and hold tutorials; I am allowed one short walk or cycle ride a day; I can’t meet with more than one other person and if I do I must keep 2 meters away from them; I can only shop in pharmacies, food stores, and pet shops and then I should only do this when absolutely necessary. At this time, I am worried about the health and well-being—physical, emotional, financial—of my psychiatrist daughter, about to return to work after nine months maternity leave, and of my son and daughter-in-law, both dentists and expecting a baby (God willing) in June. I’m also discombobulated because I am not allowed to visit my husband who lives in a care home, is in end-stage young-onset dementia, and, already this month, has young-onset dementia, and, already this month, has already been deemed to be very close to death. If, during the lockdown, he comes to this state again, I will not be able to sit beside him and hold his hand.
This state of affairs is unprecedentedly full of doubt and uncertainty, but I think that taking an autoethnographic gaze, doing autoethnography, and considering my perceptions of the experience within the social and cultural contexts in which they are located does offer some therapeutic and calming help in leaning into the uncertainty and accepting that this is how things currently are. I am also reminded here, at a time when we are being asked to make radical changes to how we be, do, and are in the social world, of Tami Spry’s (2018) contention that

> the strange dialogue of self/Other/culture is the reason that performing/composing autoethnography is a moral act (Conquergood, 1985, 2013) a “paradox of the ethnographic moment” (Madison, 2011), a method that must address “who are we?”

(p. 628)

But to return to Mills, while we obviously cannot know how or indeed whether he would regard and rate the various manifestations research described as autoethnography/autoethnographic can take as being authentic academic productions, his notion of the sociological imagination does raise fundamental questions around whose and which experiences and knowledges are considered worthy of study and of who can research, re-present, and speak for whom. Doing autoethnography can be—and often is—invoked as a challenge to traditional, hegemonic, imposed power imbalances. This is because it offers a space wherein individuals can critically and reflexively reflect on their experiences. Furthermore, it enables people to speak for themselves rather than through intermediaries, as has usually been the case in more traditional qualitative and interpretative social science approaches, however much researchers have claimed to “give voice,” problematic as this concept is now recognized as being (Mazzei & Jackson, 2009). It also offers a challenge—resistance as Bochner (2020, p. 86) terms it—to traditional notions of what kinds of experiences and knowledges are considered appropriate, “valid,” permissible, or ethical topics for scholarly inquiry as well as to the forms that that inquiry should take and how it should be re-presented.

As autoethnography has become more widely used, it is not just those who might be considered “gatekeepers,” such as journal editors, publishing houses, doctoral supervisors and examiners, and promotion panels who query what constitutes a legitimate contribution to knowledge and what can/should be researched, written about, or otherwise shared. Within this section on “Doing Autoethnography” it is clear that autoethnographers themselves are acutely conscious of the way in which, as Laurel Richardson (1990) has put it, “narrativizing, like all intentional behaviour . . . is a site of moral responsibility” (p. 131) with ethical considerations permeating all aspects of the autoethnographic process, from decisions about what aspects of our experience we are going to focus on, through how we chose to re-present them, to where, and if, we disseminate/publish/perform. Indeed, the section could quite appropriately have been called “Doing Ethical Autoethnography” given the manner whereby, in their different ways and with their various foci, the authors demonstrate how ethical concerns permeate the doing of autoethnography.

Subjecting our own lives to a critical, research gaze implicates other people and inevitably the social, political, cultural, and material contexts in which we live because there is very little, and maybe not anything, that we do in total isolation. Indeed, Tami Spry (2018) wonders if “perhaps [performative] autoethnography is not about the self at all; perhaps it is instead about a wilful embodiment of ‘we’” (p. 628). It is certainly the case that, whatever form it takes, doing autoethnography does raise ethical questions around narrative privilege (Adams, 2008), questions around such matters as who is in a position to be able to tell/write and disseminate their story, who will be able to hear/read/experience it, and what the consequences of any hearing/reading/experiencing of it may be (Bolen & Adams, 2017). Doing autoethnography is not always benign, and I do have to note that in my time as peer reviewer and doctoral examiner I have come across autoethnographic pieces that depict hurt and that sometimes seem to aim to be deliberately vengeful. There can be a thin line between writing and reflecting on our experiences in a way that might help us and others make positive sense of them, which could potentially lead to healing or growth or even transformative social/political action and, as we say in the UK, in sticking the boot in.

Here I am reminded of Jerome Bruner’s (1993) words when writing of autobiography with, I feel, equal relevance to autoethnography:

> [A]n autobiography is not and cannot be a way of simply signifying or referring to a “life as lived.” I take the view that there is no such thing as a “life as lived” to be referred to. On this view, a life is created or constructed by the act of autobiography. It is a way of construing experience—and of reconstructing and reconstructing it until our breath and our pen fails us. Construal and reconstrual are interpretive. . . . Obviously, then, there is no such thing as a “uniquely” true, correct or even faithful autobiography.

(pp. 38–39)
The doing of ethical autoethnography requires conscious, reflexive awareness that we are creating, crafting, constructing, and construing a version of our lives. I think that, for those of us within the academy who are making scholarship claims for our autoethnographic productions, it should normally be a version that—to draw on Tony Adams’ and Andrew Herrmann’s (2020) information to potential contributors to the first peer-reviewed journal devoted exclusively to autoethnography—must use personal experience intentionally to illuminate and interrogate cultural beliefs, practices and identities (“ethno”). At its core, autoethnography assumes that personal experience is infused with social norms and expectations, and autoethnographers engage in rigorous self-reflection—often referred to as “reflexivity”—in order to identify and interrogate the intersections between self and cultural life. The “ethno” component . . . also requires manuscripts to engage the purposes and practices of ethnography, such as referencing/critiquing extant research, identifying patterns of talk and action, interviewing others, doing fieldwork in “natural settings,” analysing popular discourse and grand narratives about a topic, describing meaningful epiphanies and aesthetic moments, and/or providing insider access to contexts in which cultural outsiders and other research methods could never provide.

Having suggested these parameters, autoethnographic work—doing autoethnography—does take many forms as the chapters within this Handbook generally and in this section in particular demonstrate. Harry Torrance has noted that

the very act of compiling a Handbook implies an aspiration to attempt to define the field, while an editor also has to acknowledge that, inevitably, different researchers will find different work more or less influential, and might even read the same work from a very different perspective. The selection is thus indicative of the major tributaries, trends, topics and issues, but without being definitive.

(p. 3)

Perhaps there is something of an irony when talking about a delineational aspiration with respect to a collection of writings that are essentially subjective and personal. However, as with writing our own lives, any edition of a handbook is temporal and subject to change. Within a very short space of time, what it means to be doing autoethnography has changed beyond most people’s imaginings and is likely to change into the future (Allen, 2020). The chapters in this section give us some insights into the possibilities, showcasing what people are doing now.

CODA

Exactly a year on from when I wrote the words above, they came back to me for pre-publication checking. The events of the past 12 months certainly highlight (with knobs on as my mother would have said) that life is a messy, unpredictable, ongoing project; that autoethnography is not done once and for all; and that using it to lean into, rather than struggle against, the uncertainty, can offer therapeutic and calming help. Given how my life has panned out since March 2020, I asked the editors if I could add a coda as both an update and an exemplar of what I had been talking about, and they kindly agreed.

The first UK national lockdown (2020) was not over in three weeks but went on into July. We then had another between November 5 and December 2 followed by a third from January 4, 2021, with potential and progressive easing of restrictions from April 12. Learning to live without being with, and touching, loved ones and having to rely on technology to see people has been hard for most of us and my own emotional and mental health has certainly suffered.

My husband died on May 13, 2020, from dementia, not Covid, and by then, thank God, the care home was allowing families to be at death beds. I wrote about that experience (https://www.solidarityandcare.org/stories/essays/death-in-the-absence-of-hugs). I’ve not yet written about what it was like for my son and daughter-in-law to have their baby in June under Covid conditions, or of how I have found being retired and being awarded emeritus status—which happened in September—but I probably will. That’s what we do.

REFERENCES


