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### **Inaugural Conference of British Autoethnography Keynote. Autoethnography: threat and promise**

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A very warm welcome to all of you to this, the Inaugural Conference of British Autoethnography and the launch of the book Contemporary British Autoethnography (Short, Turner & Grant 2013). Before I start the keynote proper, I'll tell you something of the history behind this conference. Three or four years ago Dr Nigel Short and I had a few conversations that acknowledged the significance of the North American luminaries of autoethnography, whose work contributed much to our learning the methodology and craft. At the same time, we recognised that it would be good to produce a British book to showcase the work that was being done on this side of the Atlantic. So in 2011, Nigel, Dr Lydia Turner and I met, rather opportunistically, on the Falmer site of the University of Brighton and had our first book planning meeting.



A little later, we started to meet with a few other people from our university who, like us, were already involved in the approach, including Drs Jess Moriarty and Mike Hayler, and we called our group 'Altogether for Autoethnography'. We used this group in a critically supportive way to help us with our respective works in progress. Two good and important things happened: with regard to the book, after having no luck with a couple of publishing houses, Mike Hayler managed to facilitate a contract with Sense Publishers in Rotterdam in Professor Ivor Goodson's Studies in Professional Life and Work series. The second thing was that Professor Avril Loveless from our Education Research Centre gave us the support of her school in hosting this conference. As editors, Nigel, Lydia and I sought out and secured the contributors for the book, all distinguished British autoethnographers.

Okay, I'll start off with a story about a scenario that in my experience highlights a fairly typical and important issue, central to the uptake of autoethnography as a respectable and legitimate methodology. Imagine a gathering of interested academics working in qualitative inquiry at a UK university somewhere in recent times. I've been invited along to contribute to a discussion about autoethnography and am one of the few people present who has published in the approach. It's a small gathering but an international one and, in addition to us autoethnographers, there are a several academics working in narrative inquiry and qualitative research more generally and a small number of postgraduate students who are considering using autoethnography in their doctorate and who seem simultaneously attracted to and fearful of the approach.

At an early point in the meeting, one of the doctoral students raises a predictable and understandable concern. She doesn't express it quite as succinctly as this, but essentially it's about how to use autoethnography without transgressing the implicit and explicit rules of the academy around what constitutes proper qualitative research and proper qualitative researcher decorum. Put more simply, she asks 'how am I supposed to break the organisational rules around what I should write about, and how I should write it, without getting into trouble?'

Her words reflect an ever-present risk for new and seasoned autoethnographers in the context of the universities many of them work in. We live in times characterised by what Sparkes (2013) and others refer to as 'methodological fundamentalism; times in which a narrow, conservative view of what constitutes scientific inquiry has insinuated itself into academic life, privileging positivist research agendas and shaping their taken-for-granted superiority as gold standard in the operating assumptions of the academy.

We also live in times where neoliberal, new public management and audit, performance and target-driven academic cultures hold sway (Grant 2014a), which

function in the shaping of the subjectivities of academics with regard to what is valorised in the name of ‘excellence’ and ‘quality’; times where sober rationality is coded safe, proper and synonymous with tacitly accepted high standards for conducting qualitative research. And many of those affiliated to mainstream, what Mazzie and Jackson (2009) label ‘conventional’, qualitative inquiry join in this game in policing these standards. The net result is that embodied, highly reflexive, performed emotionality is often disparaged, reviled, coded dangerous and seriously transgressive, or ignored as meaningless.

Apart from the political, managerial and ideological assemblages contributing to contemporary forms of scientism shaping experiences, assumptions and behaviour in British universities, there are also more longstanding implicit rules about the management of emotion at play. These operate both in academic disciplines and the structuring of relationships in universities as bureaucratic organisations. In the early 1990s and later, the work of Stephen Fineman (1993, 2003), the organisational emotion scholar, suggested that the absence of what he described as ‘zones of expressive tolerance’ for the expression of emotion will always be to the detriment of bureaucracies. The dark side of organisations will out, somehow, despite the best rational efforts of organisational actors, so overly-rational organisations always have an emotionally transgressive underbelly.

Around the same time, in a groundbreaking text in the history of autoethnography, entitled *Investigating Subjectivity*, Ellis and Flaherty (1992) pointed out the wonderful irony in what was, up until then, a sociology of emotions pitched almost exclusively at a rational level. The message of these authors was let’s do the sociology of emotions emotionally, and, given the crises of representation and authority in the social and human sciences in the 1970s and 1980s, let’s not be afraid to embrace subjectivism while we’re at it. The explicit charge was to give researcher-participants centre-stage status more in qualitative research projects.

It’s difficult to ignore the great contribution of subjectivism for the social and human sciences. Witness the number of inter-related ‘turns’ in recent decades: the critically reflexive turn (eg Pillow 2003), the poststructural turn (eg Jackson and Mazzei 2009, 2012); the affective turn (Clough and Halley 2007); the narrative turn (see Grant, Biley & Leigh-Phippard 2012). Despite this, subjectivism is constantly pathologised in various ways in many quarters in higher education and, ironically, in many quarters of qualitative research teaching and practice. A friend of mine who’s having a hard time at her university about this very issue recently suggested that charges of solipsistic ‘self-obsession’ often levelled against autoethnography and autoethnographers should be reframed as ‘generous researcher self-representational practices’.

I don’t recall hearing conventional qualitative inquiry taken to task for being ‘other-obsessed’. But, in terms of its colonialism, I believe that this would be a reasonable charge. Much conventional qualitative inquiry seems to myself and others to be a form of voyeurism or scopophilia – a kind of qualitative porn, with researchers, and readers by implicit invitation, safely on the outside looking in, and always seeing the reassuringly familiar – which evokes a comfortable feeling of expectations being met; a form of cultural tourism that demands only safe and distanced recognition and empathy. This positions participants forever as ‘other’, with minimal or no disruption to existing socio-cultural structures, structures of power and politics, and with no passionate call to change the world (Grant 2014b; Jackson and Mazzei 2009, 2012). But of course such colonialism is effaced, obscured, denied, or disavowed in mainstream work that lacks criticality.

I frequently see examples of the above year on year in the, mostly, health-related qualitative work that I peer review for journals and research committees and in papers presented at conferences. What is notably absent in much of this work is any developed sense of critical reflexivity; any sense of what Wright Mills (1959, 2000) described over 50 years ago as ‘the sociological imagination’: evidence of researchers’ reflexive awareness of the relationship between them and the socio-cultural and historical spaces they occupy. So, of course, important issues around power and politics are absent from many of those texts, as are standpoint positions, and, of course, passion.

At micro, meso and macro levels, the organisations in which some of these studies take place are often treated as neutral, benign, bricks and mortar backdrops to practice, rather than socially constructed phenomena riven with tensions, contradictions and, often, plain nastiness. These organisations are left seriously under-critiqued and under theorised, or just not theorised at all. At worst, this results in naïve realist texts which are parochial, insular and theoretically deficient.

In contrast, I guess there’s a fair number of people working within autoethnography who wear their hearts on their sleeves. For many of us, it’s not enough just to write it, or talk about our topics. We are condemned to live them – at least as much as we can, sometimes because we function as standpoint or movement scholars for our research areas, rather than, to borrow a term from Frank Furedi (2004), simply educational technocrats. For some real and virtual audiences, this can be endearing, engaging and connecting, while for others it can confirm what a bad, unruly, dangerous, undisciplined and unscholarly lot we are, lacking distance, balance and objectivity.

But autoethnography is, according to Carolyn Ellis, meant to be unruly. It seems to me that one sure-fire way of doing autoethnography without troubling too much or breaking some of the rules of the academy game is to produce safe, anodyne, sanitised non-challenging work. I’ve read some published papers over the last few years that purport to be autoethnographic, where culture and power structures are ‘stroked’ rather than interrogated and critiqued, or not really discussed at all. When I read them, I picture – perhaps unfairly – the writers of these tales as nice, coherent, clean living folk caught up in some 1950s post-war consensus time warp, who always find love, and triumph over adversity well before pyjamas, cocoa and a sensible bed-time, and confirm what a lovely and safe place the world (their world) is if you just stick to the rules, in a fair and balanced way.

At my most un-charitable, I also picture a composite metaphor to represent this kind of, to my mind pseudo-autoethnographer: how about someone who’s part Cliff Richard, with large chunks of Barbara Cartland thrown in for good measure? Producing the autoethnographic equivalent of some distant unpopular cousin of Rock music, with all the sweaty, sexy and exciting bits removed, and the rock of course; combined with fanciful, sugar-coated romantic fiction – stories about relationships and life devoid of all the credibility, complexity, messiness and tragedy of human existence, in short with all the life removed. Fortunately, neither the book launched here today as part of this conference, nor its workshops, contain such contributions. (Apologies to Cliff Richard and Barbara Cartland fans here today, by the way).

Kitrina Douglas and David Carless (2013, 103) recently described autoethnography in terms of its ‘...past, present and future history... as a continual “coming out” – over and again – for each new student, colleague, editor, and conference delegate we encounter.’ Perhaps suggestive of Denzin and Lincoln’s (1994) moments in qualitative research more generally, Kitrina and David argue that the ‘Moments of autoethnography’s history are .... Happening simultaneously and repeatedly (in different contexts for different people) ... the future of this always contested, often marginal methodology hangs in the balance, as autoethnography... seems to be always and at once a threat and a promise.’



So, while realist and literal tales share methodological space with experimental, performance and poststructural work, it's hard to seriously interrogate culture without threatening its operating assumptions. But, in terms of social justice, these threats are aimed hopefully at shaping a better world. Where there are threats to established cultures there are also boundaries. And, at the risk of over-stretching military metaphors, where there are boundaries there are border guards who police them. However, thankfully, there is also the promise of irritating insurgents, 5th columnists, quislings, resistance workers. Autoethnography threatens the stability of normative methodological practices and promises a steady stream, or perhaps torrent, of robust challenges. It also does this in relation to both its own assumptions and scholarly parameters, when these become parochial and insular, and to those of qualitative research more generally. Hopefully all of this will be confirmed in the workshops today and is well-represented in the book.

At this point, for the benefit of delegates here who might be new to the approach, I'll provide one possible summary of what autoethnography's about, drawing from our book (Grant, Short & Turner 2013). Autoethnography is described as a contemporary qualitative methodology that demands unusually rigorous, multilayered levels of researcher reflexivity given that the researcher and the researched are often the same person, with the exception of pragmatic mixed methodological designs, permutations such as analytic autoethnography and what Ellis (2013) has recently described as collaborative witness or relational autoethnography.

As it strives towards the experimental, the approach demands the pursuit of creative writing practices that locate it as much in the humanities as in the social and human sciences. Autoethnography owes its existence to, among other phenomena, the narrative turn in those disciplines and continues to be governed by critical tensions in the philosophy of science underpinning qualitative research more generally, including in the ongoing postmodern and poststructural critiques of liberal-humanist and realist, literal representational practices of conventional qualitative research (Grant 2014b; Jackson and Mazzei 2009)

So autoethnographies that appeal to readers to believe in a coherent, reliable narrator, who assumes centre stage in a story that faithfully transmits the lived experiences of her or his identity, which progresses from a beginning to an end, co-exist with poststructural autoethnographies that play with notions of the de-centred, disconnected, incoherent, time- and shape-shifting, constantly emerging subject. To labour a point here, autoethnographies having an implicit investment in 'the liberal humanist subject that is an individual person or self' (Jackson and Mazzei 2012, 10) share genre space with autoethnographies acknowledging the historical constitution of subjectivity and the 'entangled production of agency' (where agency is constantly performed, enacted, emergent, contingent, rather than constituting an essential quality that someone possesses).

Tensions within the approach are also played out at the level of related assumptions about culture, culture being central to the autoethnographic agenda. In recent years, Carolyn Ellis (2004), one of the doyens of the approach, described autoethnography as research, writing, and method that connects the autobiographical and personal to the cultural. By 'culture' she meant the meaning construction woven in human and material contexts as people go about and through their lives.

It seems to me that this definition can lend itself to the idea of culture as a kind of folksy form of liberal social participation, where no one group is better or worse than any other, where no group stands out as particularly privileged or disadvantaged, and where people are endlessly, uncomplainingly and uncomplicatedly assimilated – woven into the quilt of life. Or at least with complaints about life that can be documented in such a way that does little to explicitly contest the pre-determined shape, texture, pattern, purpose and function of the quilt. Reflecting hegemonic cultural practices, the smooth operation and management of social, political and ideological structures remain minimally challenged or disturbed. This is arguably played out in the politics of those autoethnographic representational practices that tend more towards mainstream, conventional qualitative inquiry.

In contrast, and without wishing to suggest an overly simplistic binary between conventional and more edgy autoethnographies – we operate from and share a broad church – those autoethnographers who embrace a more critical and poststructural edge to their work might regard such representational practice as anathema to trenchant and reflexive cultural interrogation. Textual practices which expose oppressive, deadening and creativity-stifling sociocultural agendas and experiences are key in challenging cultural hegemony. To this end, autoethnographers may adopt the role of cultural trickster in employing fictional and

satirical devices to highlight cultural contradictions (Grant 2013).

I believe that cultural trickster or, to use a more sober term, cultural conscience agent autoethnographers perform a valuable service in exposing the dark side, the black holes, the lacunae of cultures – the parts people are perhaps aware of in their peripheral consciousness, but, by tacitly held common consent, don't usually talk about and don't want to talk about. Such exposure amounts to speaking the unspoken and unspeakable and refusing cultural invisibility Short (2013).

The cultures that contribute to our subjectivities form part of taken for granted dominant discourses. From a critical theoretical perspective, dominant discourses – big stories or master narratives – discipline and routinize life and behaviour to the extent that the margin of human unpredictability, or margin of freedom, increasingly narrows (Grant and Leigh-Phippard 2014). From postmodern and poststructural critical standpoints, Calhoun and Karaganis (2001, 194) argue that '...criticism and theory are best used to increase the size of this margin, breaking the grip – if in only occasional ways – of predictable action and habit'.

I think that 'breaking the grip' is a nice metaphorical device to guide the purpose of the kind of autoethnography that some of us write and read. We want to continue to develop our sustained, small contribution to breaking the grip of insidious, potentially or actually harmful, discursively grounded cultural and representational practices, as these often escape critical academic, professional and public gaze.

Speaking the usually unspeakable, and breaking the grip, goes with a reflexive concern over the use of language, where the assumption of language as a neutral vehicle for reporting research is explicitly rejected. Those with aspirations towards autoethnography should take writing and representational practices very seriously indeed and regard writing as a craft they need to work at, just as if they were practising a musical instrument in order to improve and gain mastery over it. So research is not written up. Instead, knowledge is created through writing: draft after draft after draft after draft....

Representational practices include a concern for representational ethical concerns, as voiced eloquently by Lydia Turner and Andrew Sparkes in our book. Compared with other research approaches which follow a tick-box approach to ethics, autoethnography throws up myriad ethical complexities. Taking writing, representational and ethical practices seriously also implies a concern about literary style. Poetic forms, the explicit deployment of metaphor, messy texts, experimental writing and the disruption of linear time are just a few of the devices and tropes that characterise contemporary autoethnographic work.

By breaking the grip, speaking the unspeakable, experimenting with form, structure and content, and constantly pushing back the representational boundaries, autoethnographers increase cultural tolerance for the expression of emotion: for what can be said about this area of cultural life, this organisation, this institution, this discipline, this group of people. In this context, autoethnographic studies function as acts of resistance to challenge cultural operating assumptions and are well represented in the book. Doing all of this puts the embodied, visceral person into writing, which Jess Moriarty describes in her chapter as putting the blood back into what would otherwise be Halal texts.

In summary, autoethnography reinforces the importance of storytelling and personal narrative in the human and social sciences. Accepting that in an important sense readers are ventriloquists, shaping what autoethnographies say for them, autoethnographic storytelling helps them not only learn about the personal lives of autoethnographers – lived experience if you're a traditionalist or liberal humanist, witness accounts maybe if you're a poststructuralist – but also about the social and cultural worlds in which we are all situated in myriad and diverse ways. It gives people – autoethnographers and their audiences – the cultural and symbolic capital and narrative equipment to shape and re-story their lives. This underscores the narrative ethical dimension of the approach: as morality tales, autoethnographies arguably provide resources to help people both interrogate and challenge aspects of their worlds and themselves in them, and work towards re-shaping these worlds in the interests of social justice.

For those reasons, autoethnography significantly contributes to the history, practice, witnessing and interpretation of living. This and the strong focus on writing, representational practices, cultural critique and reflexivity, makes the approach important for emerging and experienced narrative scholars, and for those interested in oral and life history, biography and autobiography methods, for researchers, scholars and students across the humanities, social sciences, communication, education, social work and health, and for qualitative researchers generally. Conventional qualitative researchers would do well to consider using autoethnographic strands in their work, to add another, rich dimension to it.

And what of its future? Its future's in its present. You can sing and use music as the basis for autoethnography, something that David Carless and Kitrina Douglas are involved in; you can express it through paintings, photographs; through innovation at the level of method, methodology and theory. For example David and Kitrina utilise and value personal stories in the book; Jess Moriarty writes autoethnodrama; Nigel Short and Mike Hayler build on the metaphor of the journey to construct their work; Ken Gale and Jonathan Wyatt develop the theory and practice of assemblage autoethnography; David Gilbourne and Phillip Marshall use fiction to glimpse the essence of self; Brett Smith and myself focus on the culture of the academy, respectively storying artificial persons and deploying satire; Andrew Sparkes writes meta-autoethnography and Lydia Turner reflexively explores relational ethics.

You can also take autoethnography in a different relational direction, in the form of what Ellis (2013) recently described as 'collaborative witnessing'. This is something that Helen Leigh-Phippard, Nigel Short, Laetitia Zeeman and myself have been involved in for some years now. I'll tell you about some of our work at this point, starting with its context.

The language used in mental health interventions traps people in stories. These stories may misrepresent them, socially disadvantage them, disempower them, discriminate against and stigmatise them (Thornicroft 2006; Grant, Biley & Leigh-Phippard 2012).

From a narrative ethical perspective, great care should be taken over how people are represented. However, some communities may claim an exclusive right to define and portray individuals in particular ways, with unfortunate consequences. These include policy, professional and empirical mental health representations of people that are reductionist, doing immense disservice to emotional and contextual lives.

This highlights the issue of language as a site of the struggle over representation and meaning. People create myriad meanings about themselves and others through engaging with each other in everyday life practices. The ways in which we can be abusively or humanely represented, or can represent ourselves in texts, can never be exhausted, as language and nuanced meaning are infinite and ever-shifting dialogic and cultural resources (Holquist 2002). This facilitates the constant emergence of different communities of textual meaning making (Frank 1995; Richardson 1997), implicating the relevance of both narrative ethics

for representational practices (Adams 2008) and re-storying to reflexively resist normative constructions of identity (Grant and Zeeman 2012; Grant and Leigh-Phippard 2014; Grant, Leigh-Phippard & Short in review).

In contrast to representational plurality and differentiation, it is notable that a reductionist trend in the representation of human suffering in the mainstream mental health literature seems to go constantly unchallenged, generally speaking. With a handful of exceptions, including my own and Nigel Short's work and my work with Nigel and Helen Leigh-Phippard (eg Chase-Grey and Grant 2005; Grant et al. 2008; Short 2005), readers would be hard put to spot a real, fleshed-out, life-contextualised person in much of the mainstream British policy-informed mental health literature. Instead, individuals with problems in living are usually described as sanitized bundles of diagnostic labels, symptoms, emotions, cognitions, behaviours or treatment outcomes.

In this context, I believe that the work I'm currently involved with Helen and Nigel positions it within a social justice agenda. The overall research project is entitled *The Book, The Stories, The people*. It proceeded from a text that we published in 2011 called *Our Encounters with Madness* (Grant, Biley & Walker 2011). After textual analysis of the book and interviews with contributors about the experiences associated with writing their chapters, we used creative non-fiction short stories in a relational autoethnographic design as collaborative witness accounts of our experiences of institutional psychiatry. These stories were decentred to the extent that we all have what might be described as hybrid emerging identities: so we're scholars-mental health academics-survivors-mental health practitioners... We strive to avoid writing from one privileged, or transcendent, identity position.

This has resulted in autoethnographic book chapters (Grant 2013; Grant and Leigh-Phippard 2014), and autoethnographic and practice development papers (Grant 2013; Grant and Leigh-Phippard 2014; Grant, Biley & Leigh-Phippard 2012; Grant, Leigh-Phippard & Short in review; Grant et al. 2012; Taylor, Leigh-Phippard & Grant 2014). In this work, we role-modelled narrative restorying (Grant and Zeeman 2012) to liberate ourselves from the narrative entrapment of institutional psychiatry, from stories told about us and others which are disabling, pathologizing and discriminatory, and constructed in the name of mental health 'care' and 'treatment'; for us, mental health survival is a social justice issue.

I hope our work functions as exemplars of autoethnography in exposing oppressive cultures and cultural contradictions, which enable writers to re-story themselves into better futures, both individually and as part of liberating storied communities. Thus is the hegemony of biomedical reductionism and institutional psychiatry challenged, highlighting the therapeutic and political possibilities of autoethnography.

Readers can use those stories in lots of ways: for those in recovery and survival, for example, to use as exemplars, not to copy directly, but as a possibility focus to orientate and use selectively as narrative templates and resources for their own life restorying (Grant, Leigh-Phippard & Short in review).

Turning from our work, present and future developments in autoethnography can also include pushing the colonial-busting poststructural manifesto of Alecia Jackson and Lisa Mazzei (2009, 2012), to include more respect paid to the unconscious, the unspoken – voicing the in-between, dreams and silences, shifting the focus away from conventional literal representational practices (Grant 2014b).

Qualitative research, including autoethnography, grounded in the sufficiency of the literal voice neglects important inter-related issues. Briefly, these include the historical, contextual and discursive circumstances involved in the production and performance of voice; the positioning of subjects within structures of power; and the ambiguity and contradictions within and between individuals and their lives. All of this makes assumptions of coherent voice and similarity between research participants problematic (Grant 2014b).

Voice cannot be considered an innocent and straightforward way to account for a 'self'. Power, subjectivity and desire shape the ways in which individuals speak of their present and their lives overall. Further, consciousness can never be fully present to itself through language (Jackson and Mazzei 2009, 2012). The light of human meaning is always refracted through the dark glass of language and language is always unstable. Any expectation of indisputable meaning is confounded by words forever constituted by myriad signifiatory traces of other words.

If it is accepted that there can therefore never be a clear unambiguous statement of anything, then all stories have the status of simply being one story in place of another (Mazzei 2009). Written and spoken voice is forever condemned to insufficiency: As MacLure (2009, 100) argues, 'Neither can deliver the fullness and immediacy that fuels the dream of presence'.

On these grounds, the act of writing participant and researcher voice from a poststructural qualitative research perspective constitutes the performance of provisional 'truth'. There is nothing before or behind language use and such performance is about speaking and writing oneself and others into existence within relations of power. Following Deleuze, Davies (2009) argues that an individual, rather than being a self-conscious 'I', is a location where thoughts may emerge. The act of writing opens the writer to becoming what is not yet known and what can never be contained in words, as Jonathan Wyatt and Ken Gale admirably demonstrate in the book. Writing should therefore aspire to the constitution of other, different, ways of knowing and seeing, rather than to the constant rehearsal of the familiar (Davies 2009; Richardson & St Pierre 2005).

Autoethnographic theatre is already happening through, for example, the work of David Gilbourne, David Llewellyn, Phil Marshall and Jess Moriarty. I'd like to see more organisational reflexive performance – autoethnodramas of academe – to build on the counter-discursive challenging of the neoliberal, new public management agenda. This would complement the work of Andrew Sparkes, Brett Smith, myself and others with, I hope, lots of satire included. Some aspects of our universities desperately need lampooning.

Overall, I'd like to see more of us refusing to separate our personal histories from our academic histories; more of us writing back against the grain of the taken for granted and helping others to do so too, in storying a future marked by compassion, solidarity, communion, change, justice and hope.

I hope you all enjoy and profit from the day.

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