

Inaugural Conference: Autoethnography

Sandy Hutchinson Nunns

The conference

The Inaugural Conference of British Autoethnography took place at the University of Brighton's Grand Parade site on Saturday, 22nd February 2014. The conference, which involved delegates in discussions, presentations and performance events around the opportunities and challenges of contemporary autoethnography, was a great success. One hundred and fifteen delegates from near and far attended to work with contributors from a range of disciplines who are experienced and published in this approach. A variety of theoretical, ethical and methodological issues were examined and discussed throughout the day, including the performance of identity, voice, and a range of socio-cultural critiques.

Book Publication and Review

Short N. P., Turner L., and Grant A. Eds: (2013): *Contemporary British Autoethnography*, Rotterdam: Sense Publishers

Published to coincide with the Inaugural British Autoethnography Conference at the University of Brighton on February 22 2014, this collection of works by British autoethnographers is a fascinating insight into this developing field.

The editors define autoethnography as,

'... a contemporary qualitative research methodology, demanding unusually rigorous, multi-layered levels of research reflexivity, given that the researcher/s and the researched are the same people.' p.1

'... producing creatively written, detailed, local and evocative first person accounts of the relationship between personal autobiography and culture.' p.2

With its emphasis on post structural approaches to understanding narrative and the self, this field is increasingly compatible with a theoretical understanding of therapy practice. This volume demonstrates how the field has expanded to include narratives of direct interest to counselors and psychotherapists, with articles specifically

about the experience of giving and receiving therapy.

For example, Jonathan Wyatt gives a wonderful evocative account of no longer practicing as a counselor. He invites you, the reader, into his experience in a way that is both familiar to the client/practitioner style, yet unique to an autoethnographic approach to the subject.

The editors Short, Turner and Grant each contribute a chapter as individuals, but it is their collective introduction, *Storying Life and Lives*, that sets out the field for newcomers and contextualizes what is to come for old hands. It is a field that some, more used to quantitative styles of data analysis, may find unusual, not to say uncomfortable. This is a methodology that,

'... celebrates and prizes subjectivity rather than viewing it as an irritant, and can be distinguished from autobiography or memoir by its commitment to rigorous cultural interrogation and analysis.' p.3

The methodology may be new to therapists, but the content will be of serious interest. The editors represent much that is familiar; Short is a retired mental health university lecturer and CBT therapist; Turner a consultant psychological therapist in the NHS; and Grant is a principal university lecturer in health and social sciences, all of whom write engagingly from their experiences in the field.

This theme of personal experience within an examined cultural context, brings together writing from authors and researchers from a variety of disciplines. We find narratives from academics and from professional sportswomen side by side with writing of a counselor reflecting on not practising anymore. We find stories of teachers in the mental health system, students' experience of writing their doctoral theses, attempts to fictionalize autobiography in order to make sense of a life, and increasingly theoretical and technical pieces of meta-autoethnography and the autoethnographic 'I'. All are accessible, engaging and provide that rare thing, a good academic read.

These are wonderful, generously giving accounts of the personal process of the writers. I see this discipline as complementary to the traditions of writers such as Yalom, Casement and more recently Bollas and Grosz, whose books have allowed the reader and writer to enter into a relationship of joint meaning making, so vital to the practice of therapy and counseling.

The editors often use the word 'integrity'; see for example the discussion on page 232. This is a concept that goes to the heart of this collection. To write in this way is risky – to write for yourself is to risk learning what we seek to keep hidden from ourselves, seeing our shadow if you like. To publish that writing is to let others see that process and to risk misunderstanding and the cultural consequences of that misunderstanding. So to write at all, it has to be with personal and academic integrity and that is what this volume shows: good practice at taking legitimate, bounded personal risk.

And that is where the volume ends, with a conversation about how an,

'... ethically attuned autoethnography' is 'never as clear cut as a neat list would remedy.'

Personally, I don't have enough OCD to really value lists. Not anal enough. Maybe that's why, dear reader, I too am an autoethnographer. A psycho-meta-autoethnographer actually. But that's another story.

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