Multiple Selves, Multiple Voices and Autoethnography

Abstract

A prerequisite to helping others, for example in health care and education, is arguably some requirement to understand one’s self. But who are we? What do we mean by the self? In order to investigate this question I introduce, describe and discuss a novel qualitative research approach; autoethnography. I argue how the self, multiple selves and identity formation is socially constructed; knowledge and reality are actively created by our social relationships and our interactions. As an autobiographical genre of writing, evocative autoethnography is written in the first person displaying multiple layers, connecting multiple selves to the many cultures we inhabit. As a reflexive methodology it offers a means of critically exploring the social forces and discursive practices that have shaped their cultures.

Pre-introduction

Sat with three friends talking about books we have read.

**Dave** talks about a book he has read

**Wendy** says ‘*I read that book. I don’t remember the passages you are talking about*.’

**Dave** says ‘*Oh Ok maybe it was that other book*.’ He then talks about another book.

**Wendy** says ‘*I have read that one as well. I think you have made a mistake. I don’t remember that either*.’

**Dave** then says ‘*Well maybe what I thought happened in the book has happened to me*?*’
Introduction
This article discusses some aspects of my Professional Doctoral studies and how my work grew out of a need to try to understand my often experienced sense of being misunderstood, misrepresented and marginalised. I then became interested in who it was that was being misunderstood and misrepresented. My own experiences then become the subject of the research. As a research process and product my autoethnographic research constitutes a form of critique, enabling me to resist dominant representations of myself as a person and importantly here as a psychotherapist and teacher by others.

I argue that we use stories as ‘equipment for living’, as apparatus to understand, navigate, collaborate and try and make sense of the many different situations we encounter. I propose that connections between the cultures people occupy and an individual’s reflexivity can keep them stuck, liberated or emancipated with regard to their personal narratives. Whilst autoethnography approaches is not intentionally instructional, the storytelling is instructive. By showing my vulnerabilities this work is a prism for the reader to reflect on the narrative cultures they inhabit. In recent years, as part of the ‘narrative turn’ (Denzin and Lincoln 2000) in the social sciences, a growing number of scholars have suggested that we live in a world shaped by stories.

Memories and accuracy: which decides?

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A few Disturbances:

It’s September 1998. I have just qualified as a nurse cognitive behaviour therapist. I attend a European Cognitive Behavioural Psychotherapy conference in Cork, Eire. After the opening ceremony I talk to another delegate. We discuss cognitive behaviour therapy and its application for children. The discussion continues for about 15 minutes. I assumed that we are both willing to contribute.
She then says: ‘Where did you do your clinical psychology training?’
I reply: ‘I am a nurse therapist not a psychologist’
The conversation ends abruptly. She walks away. No explanation. I am left alone feeling sad, perplexed and confused. What happened? What does this now say about my contribution to the conversation?

I was a member of a local Psychological Therapy Service (PTS) Management Committee. At one meeting the Professional Head of Nursing discusses the possibility of a new role: A Nurse Consultant for the Psychological Therapies Service. There is opposition from some Psychology colleagues. Their concerns focus on professional supervision and Professional accountability. The conversation ends. No further explanation.

A new discussion takes place. Two new Consultant Psychologists are needed. This suggestion is met with support, agreement and no opposition.

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At another meeting, a much needed discussion about ‘waiting lists’ took place. For many years I have suggested one way of managing the waiting list: to see clients as soon as possible and if they are suitable to then use an active waiting list. This approach has some supportive evidence in the literature (Short and Kitchiner 2003). This idea is met with opposition. Comments referred to the importance of leaving people to wait and see if they really need therapy. I am not sure if this reply is satisfactory. I raise some of my concerns.

‘We need to move on with the agenda Nigel’. The conversation ends. I am left feeling unheard again. I am irritated and annoyed.

Later in the same meeting, a new member, who apologies for his late arrival, joins the group: A systemic psychologist. The ‘waiting list’ is added to the agenda again. I thought we had finished discussing this item? Another misunderstanding perhaps? The new member discusses the importance of seeing people as soon as we can. To my surprise the group members all agreed with this proposal. Perhaps my suggestion has been forgotten. It had only been about 30 minutes since my contribution! I cannot expect people to remember everything that I say. Maybe what I said wasn’t that important. Maybe it was the way I presented my case, my opinion. I feel upset again. Is
it me that is not important? Is it something to do with the profession I belong to? Am I just being too sensitive? What is it? I know some colleagues who would probably say to me: ‘Let it go Nigel. It’s not worth it’.

I sometimes find it difficult to let these disturbances go. I can feel them. They were hurtful and are sometimes difficult to ‘shift’ from my embodied selves.

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So, how can we understand these stories? How can I begin to comprehend these experiences? How can I construct these situations in a way that offers me a more soothing and compassionate outcome?

Autoethnography

One way of trying to answer these questions is a novel, progressive research approach entitled Autoethnography. Autoethnography provides a medium for not only telling stories, but a mechanism for developing stories, ‘a self narrative that critiques the situations of self with others in social contexts’ (Spry 2001, page 710). Autoethnography provides such a wide range of presentations that Ellis & Bochner (2000) suggest it is impossible to try and arrive at a single definition. It is described for example, as ‘an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural’ (Ellis & Bochner 2000, page 739).

Reed-Danahay (1997) raises questions about the notion of a coherent, individual self; she describes autoethnography as ‘an ethnography that includes the researcher’s vulnerable self, emotions, body and spirit and produces evocative stories that create the effect of reality and seeks fusion between social science and literature’ (Reed-Danahay 1997, page 2). In autoethnographic approaches, therefore, ‘the researcher is the epistemological and ontological nexus upon which the research process turns’ (Spry 2001, p. 711).

I am suggesting that stories of our past experiences can provide us with powerful insights and contribute to our professional developments. To add weight to this assertion Huddleston, Gribble and Taylor (2003) say that:

‘Autoethnography is a personal reflection on events that took place. As a personal experience it has been valuable and has opened up my (Huddleston) thoughts to a wider perspective on research, beyond the traditionally accepted methodologies and has encouraged me
to follow a constant path of reflection to improve my teaching practice’ (page 3).

Through reflective systematic introspection (working from an ethnographic wide-angle lens), the researcher/s focus/es on his/her/their observations outwards on social and cultural aspects of their personal experiences; then they look inward, exposing their vulnerable selves (see Ellis & Bochner 2000; Ellis 2004). This methodological approach offers a critical view of the relationships people have with their multiple selves and the multiple relationships they have with others.

The approach focuses its attention to considering the ‘self’, ‘selves’ and what are labelled ‘identities’. Who are we? How are we represented, who represents us and who decides who we are, when we are and where we are at given times. It can be like looking into someone’s thinking, with many exploded and unexploded ordinances.

My suggestion is that Autoethnography proposes that individual’s epistemological worldviews, their acquired knowledge and the subsequent use of this different knowledge, are embedded in various institutional practices. By Institutional practices I mean the places people inhabit and perhaps continue to inhabit; for example, our families, our school, society, friendships and work environments. It is through this embodiment that different forms of individuality are specified, experienced, governed and represented. I suggest that our individual framework, which contains ontological, epistemological and methodological ideas, has a premise which is based on a ‘basic set of beliefs that guides actions’ (Guba 1990, page 17).

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Even as you read this article you may notice many different voices; these voices have emerged from a wide range of different types of experiences. It is not always clear whose voice you will be hearing. You may of course recognise your own voice echoing through the pages.
Mills (2000) argued that the sociological imagination placed sociology at the intersection of biography and history. He claimed that only by combining the two; translating private troubles into public issues can we make sense of our lives. By closer aligning the private self and the public self, do we have the potential, not necessarily to live a less fractured life or even to experience ourselves as less fractured, but rather an acceptance of our multiple selves in our many fractured ways of being, to acknowledge and be aware of how this acceptance and acknowledgment influences wider relationships at both a particular level and a cultural level.

Ellis (2004) talks about starting research from one’s own experiences; using our own life stories within our cultures to look more deeply at self-other interactions. Through active construction, deconstruction and finally reconstructions of personally evocative experiences, an evocative epistemology (Grant 2007), we can provide new meanings for ourselves our lives in particular drawing attention to issues of constraint and associated ‘disturbances’ which people experience. I suggest that these disturbances are often expressed through power relationships, knowledge, authority and legitimacy.

Heilker & Vandenberg (1996) talk about how for many years the writing of texts has been heavily influenced by an epistemology that suggests that we can only have one thought or idea in our heads at a time, that one thought leads to another and time flows in one direction only. This, they suggest, leads to writing that is well developed and well ordered, consistent, and methodical. They apply the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin to advance a conception of writings as a centrifugal, novelistic, dialogical, and a carnivalesque form. They further develop this idea by suggesting that the direction a piece of writing takes is often determined by the chronological sequences that occur in the writers mind. In this way I have regularly punctuating this text with for example, photographs and some of my different voices. In this way I am being autoethnographic with the reader. I set out some of my experiences using for example polysemia and polyvocal representations.
I wish to emphasise that I am attracted and drawn to an idea that we are not just a single person, but rather a multitude of possibilities. I assert that as autoethnographers we could be using these multiple selves to create multiple presentations. Multiple selves demand multiple presentations. In the same way the readers of this text have opportunities to utilise their multiple selves by drawing on their different selves when reading and experiencing this work. For example their reading may be influenced by where they read it, what time of the day/night they read it. Will they know who I am?

As Gergen (1991) indicates the self does not operate independently of the social; the self is understood as a social account. The self is seen as a ‘relational self’. According to the anthropologist Anthony P Cohen (1995), who a person is at any given time, depends upon who is being asked and who is doing the asking. This is similar to the narratives of psychotherapy and education. The people I see in the clinic and the students and fellow teachers I meet have stories whose delivery is often influenced by the questions I may or may not ask and of course the questions they may ask me. I think that some people might have experiences similar to mine. I know this from conversations I have had with other people.

My writing enterprise could be described as ‘faction’ (Geertz 1988): an imaginative reflection on real events: a ‘making out’ of a particular meaningful scenario but NOT a ‘making up’

My work has a history dating back to March 1954. Ideas captured in this text have been constructed and reproduced time and again throughout my life. I have new thoughts popping in my head all the time. I do not know however with any certainty or accuracy when or where some of these ideas were conceived. Have I had these ideas
before, did I overhear someone talking about an idea, did I perhaps read about it? Where and what is the source?

Derrida (1998) emphasises that we are unable to capture everything in our accounts. Our accounts are inexhaustible. There will always be something more that could be included. Stories, like life, are unstable and complex, they twist and turn and can never achieve full coherence. Autoethnography is what Autoethnographers do. Autoethnographers inscribe patterns of their cultural experiences. There is an assumption that where there is meaning there is culture (Ellis and Bochner 1996). My experiences do not happen in isolation. My stories are made up of many stories which include other people’s stories. As Freshwater and Rolfe (2004) suggest; ‘all texts are intertexts; all texts take their meaning in relation to other texts; more than that, all texts are all other texts…. (Freshwater & Rolfe 2004, page 11) they continue ‘the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original’ (Freshwater & Rolfe 2004, page 11)

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February 2008-Hastings
I was driving along the coast road in Hastings, England. My daughter is sat next to me. A thought pops in my mind unannounced. I tell her that I am unable to remember what colour the flash is when a speed camera flashes. A few moments later an ambulance pulls out of a turning, on our right, joins the road we are on and heads in the same direction and is now in front of us. As he speeds away from us he has to go on the other side of the road. Our side is ‘jammed packed with traffic’. As the vehicle passes the speed camera in the middle of the road, the light ‘flashes’. This all happened within a few seconds of my earlier statement. My daughter and I look at each other. ‘What a coincidence’ we both say, at the same time. This reminds us of a line from the film Muriel’s wedding. We both laugh. My daughter then tells me about a similar experience she had a few days before. We smile at each other and agree we feel connected.

Personal experiences; relational and reflexive selves

Ellis (2004) suggests that researchers incorporate their personal experiences into their research by starting with a story about themselves, explaining their not one all-inclusive self. There are a multitude of possible stories, each of which, depending on where we enter, leads to new constructions of self or using our personal knowledge to help us in the research process.
Our understanding of others can only develop from our experiences and these experiences involve our histories and accompanying stories. I suggest that social constructions can make it possible for the self to move away from a bound self within a stable coherent Meta story to see itself in an all its shifting contradictory multiplicity and fragility.

In my Doctoral work (Short 2010) I used autoethnography to try to stimulate new ways of thinking about the ‘relational self’ (or aspects of the self in relation to significant others) and the ‘reflexive self’ (Adams 2007). This has contributed to my understandings of the self and perhaps more importantly people I come into contact with. I deliberately wrote about me, my multiple selves within the context of the different cultures I inhabit. Whatever the specific focus, authors use their own experiences, within a context where to be human is to be damaged by life experiences, (Grant, Mulhern, Mills & Short 2004, Short, Grant & Clarke 2007) to look more deeply at self-other interactions. By writing me into my work as the main character, I questioned accepted views about silent authorship, where the researcher’s voice is often not included in the presentation of the research process or findings.

Stories and storytelling

Autoethnography hopes to raise further questions, promote ongoing and evolving conversations as opposed to finding an ‘answer’ which has the potential of closing conversations. Hearing my tales helped me gain a different
understanding of my tales (Short, Grant & Clarke 2009) and sharing my tales will possibly help other people understand their tales.

Each of us is woven into historical constructions of others as they are into ours (Mills 2000; Gergen 2001). Identities can only be maintained if all parties play their supporting roles. Thus, I suggest that if I transform my scripts this may influence others scripts. Offering people an opportunity to be reflective and reflexive may offer them a mechanism for their own transformation. People’s stories may change if they hear my story changing.

Further, to suppose that it is possible for a researcher to step outside their humanness, by disregarding one’s own values, experiences, and constructions, is to believe in smoke and mirrors; magic (Guba and Lincoln 1994). More ideas emerged about people’s identities and how we represent ourselves in different ways in different cultural and social settings by using different narratives; different constructions. As Brockmeier & Carbaugh (2001) suggest: ‘the self in time - can only exist as a narrative construction’ (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001, page 15).

As Cottle (2002) discusses; hearing and or reading the words of another person’s narrative is essentially an encounter, where we not only respond to the words of the ‘other’-implying to echo the ‘other’- but also to our own responses. In this way I connected scholarly and personal narratives. You are invited to experience some of the different ways I express myself. My stories are influenced by others stories and so on. It’s cyclic.

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‘Personal identity cannot seem to be fixed…the person experiences himself as many selves, each of which is felt to have a life of its own’ (Miller 1974, cited in Gergen 1991, page 249).

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Writing itself has been identified as a way of learning (Allen, Bowers & Diekelmann 1989); the process works to develop thinking through active engagement as opposed to writing for an outcome. This has demanded multiple
texts, representing multiple Nigel’s and others. This representation moves me from the centre; holding it up for the readers to inspect.

I see writing as a performance; performing the art of writing. During the composing of my work I wanted to write many things down. Ideas were swirling around in my head. I was regularly troubled by not knowing how to do it. So much of autoethnography is about me, not it. I have been surprised how difficult this has been sometimes. Like a fish swimming in water, we can sometimes forget that we are embedded in our experiences and cultures with minimal reflexivity.

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Following the writing of my work I presented it to friends and colleagues then got their feedback. I have used some of their contributions in my Doctoral (Short 2010) work. In this way I am able to demonstrate how my stories are made up of lots of stories. I think that people might think of writing skill as knowledge; something that once you know it, then you can do it. I believe that writing skill is tacit and arises from pure practice and response, a rhetorical operation, not necessarily an intellectual one. I will also be using different types of media; images and written records and some of the text may take you by surprise in the same way that our usual intrusions take us by surprise. These can be used not only as data but also as ways of representing different field data (Dicks, Soyinka & Coffey 2006). Ruth Behar (1997) also says that what happens within the observer must be made known if the nature of what has been observed is to be understood. In autoethnographic writing the researcher’s own epistemology is at the very heart of the researcher’s tale.

Jazz

Jazz is a genre of music that is often difficult to define, but the key is improvisation. Lyttelton (2007) says it requires honesty; if it’s not honest then it’s not jazz! The essence of Jazz is that it comes straight from the performer to the listener. The music tries to find a common ground; it is a form of music that is alive at that moment; performers compose in the here and now of the moment. Each performance is improvised so that every arrangement is individual, of its time and place. The listener takes away their own unique interpretation. It’s something we ‘feel’ as well as think about. Each time we listen to a piece of music it has the opportunity of being heard in different ways.
These ideas of transforming and improvisation resemble conversations I’ve had with friends and colleagues. They have discovered that some of their ideas transform, they improvise and recontextualise what they already knew in light of new information, particularly information that comes from hearing about my life and the way I interpret cultures.

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How do I write? How am I to write? A further aim of my autoethnography is a wish to convey how it is to be me and my multiple selves and to do this I include many different ways I experience me and the world and culture that I inhabit. How can I offer my readers a convincing story of my particular research while suggesting that there are crucial limits to accountability and narratives? How can I claim to be making a significant ‘contribution’ to a field of knowledge while asserting that the production of such knowledge must be predicated on the ethical necessity of not-knowing? So my epistemological stance is one of uncertainty. Thank goodness for that.

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I am feeling nauseous as I read and re-read these passages. I do not like writing about me. I have moments when I like autoethnography and the possibilities it offers for new conversations. On other occasions I do feel selfish, self indulgent and narcissistic. I sit down at the pc and fool myself that I can ‘just’ write. Sometimes the impact on ‘just’ writing can be disturbing. It can be lonely and frightening. I regularly hear my parents telling me to sit down, be quiet and listen.

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I have an idea that when I think about something other people may be thinking along similar lines. My self-narrative is a critique of the situatedness of (my) self with others in social contexts (Spry 2001).
Other people will have very different reactions to the examples I provide later, but, I believe that what attracted me to this approach is that other people (might) feel and experience the concerns I have. My interpretations and appraisals connected to the experiences of others.

Authorial presence

The question of an authorial presence within a text has been a difficult discussion for ethnography and has often been managed as Geertz suggests (1988) by presenting work in a disguised form. The problem seems to stem from an epistemological position. Is it possible to present a subjective view without biasing the objectivity of the text? What is the truth? And who decides? My writing practices wove in and out and in between categories producing knowledge in the gaps between: I think that it is the reader of autoethnographic texts who applies their own objectivity to my writings.

Bochner (2000) contributes to this debate by inviting the reader to think about their own criteria when judging ‘alternative’ modes of qualitative and ethnographic enquiries. For example:
Is my work believable?
Is it authentic?
And is the work credible?

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12th March 2009. It’s my birthday. I visit my elderly Mum.
During our conversation she tells me that during the 1920’s she had attended the ‘Blue Coat’ school in southeast London. She had been successful in their scholarship exam and had been offered a place at this school. She then told me that to this day she still doesn’t know why she went to this school.

‘The place should have been offered to my Lily (her sister); she was a lot brighter (intelligent) than me’.

She thought she had been lucky on the day of the exam; the offer of a place at the school was a mistake surely.

‘It could not have had anything to do with my abilities’.

This sounded uncomfortably familiar to me. This could have been me saying these words. I began to realise where my ‘I’m not good enough’ might have begun its development.

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Van Maanen (1988) suggests that:

‘The idea is to draw an audience into an unfamiliar story world and allow it as far as possible (my bold) to see, hear and feel as the fieldworker saw, heard and felt’ (Van Maanen 1988, page 103)

Van Maanen (1988) continues:

‘The audience cannot be concerned with the story’s correctness, since they were not there and cannot know if it is correct. The standards are largely those of interest (does it attract?), coherence (does it hang together?) and fidelity (does it seem true?)’ (Van Maanen 1988, page 105)

Coffey (1999) calls for a re-examination of assumptions which have underpinned research and its social outcomes. As she says:

‘These are the established (assumptions) about the dichotomies of masculinity/femininity, male/female, objectivity/subjectivity, mind/body, reason/emotionality and so on’ (Coffey 1999, Page 11)
It is not that one side thinks that we have to make judgements and the other side doesn’t. Both agree that they have to make judgements about what is good, what is helpful and what is useful. The difference it seems to me is to do with epistemologies; one view seems to believe that objective methods and procedures can be applied to determine the beliefs and truths that are held and the consequences of these ideas. Another view, and this includes me, suggests that our understandings are inextricably tied to our values and our own subjectivities. Rorty (1992) says these issues are not issues to be settled but differences to be lived with. In addition I think that a continuing use of ‘binaries’, for example subjective versus objective, in describing autoethnography is an unhelpful concept.

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This writing may not necessarily flow in a way that always feels comfortable for the reader or me. My mind goes off at many different tangents through the day and I try and represent this within the presentation. I paid attention to evocative experiences; in doing this I noticed strong images, strong feelings, strong memories or situations that in some way challenge my constructions of meanings and realities or when the meaning I have constructed for myself ‘doesn’t feel right’. For example I may hear a conversation at work that changes how I am feeling, I may hear something on the radio that recalls an earlier experience or I may be looking at a painting and experience evocative feelings.

My autoethnography then,
is a story that is based on experiences of me, with others, within a context. I think that by showing me in the text, this approach has helped me to become more self aware, more reflective and more reflexive (Short 2007a; Short 2007b and Short, Grant & Clarke 2007, Short & Grant 2009) and contribute towards my ever-developing role as a psychotherapist and teacher. I anticipate that continuously making improvements will improve the interactions I have with people that I see clinically as well as work colleagues. As I develop my story telling, it also provides an opportunity for therapeutic healing (Frank 1995) within an ideological context where to be human is to be damaged by life experiences (Grant, Mulhern, Mills and Short 2004).

Some Nigel moments

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1986.
Brighton Polytechnic (Now the University of Brighton). I was
studying for a Nursing degree. I had read in several course board meetings that there was regular objections to the development of a nursing degree. The main antagonists were the representatives from the pure sciences; physics, chemistry; people who may be described philosophically as positivists. The degree course incorporated modules about Biochemistry (Beezer 1980) and Physiology (Green 1969). A clashing of world views.

Every Monday during the first year the Bio-chemistry tutor asked me how my weekends had been. I noticed that he only ever asked me. One Monday he said ‘I see you had a good weekend’. I thought this was interesting. What did he mean? I asked him. He had read in a Sunday broadsheet newspaper that I had won an English Chess competition. It then became clear to me. He thought I was Nigel Short, the British Chess Champion.

He had presumably thought this for months. I told him I was not THAT Nigel Short. He looked disappointed and then verbally became very angry. He said, ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ I was not who he thought I was. When I reflect upon this, I accept that he may have been embarrassed and this might account for his anger towards me.

Autumn 1991
I am sat in the Brighton Centre. It is the annual Degree Awards Ceremony. An Usher approached me. It’s the Biochemistry tutor. He looked surprised to see me. He said ‘Fancy you getting through then. How on earth did you get through? I didn’t think you would make it’. My construction of this event left me thinking that his comments were unfriendly and unnecessary.

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Another moment
1965
I went swimming once with a group of friends to the King Alfred
Swimming Pool in Hove. I was a good swimmer and enjoyed diving. I dived in the shallow end. My mouth hit the floor of the pool. I knocked out a triangular shape of enamel from my beautiful front two teeth. It looked like I had developed fangs. The lifeguard was very gentle and told me that he would empty the pool to try and locate the lost triangle. Over the next five or six years and many different braces I eventually ended up with two crowns. There is a gap between these crowns. The gap has become part of me and influences how I speak, how I eat and importantly how I look.

Summer 2007
My dentist told me that my crowns are gradually becoming loose and will not last much longer. She said. ‘If I make you some new crowns would you like to keep the ‘gap’? A crisis of representation perhaps? (Denzin 1997) It is becoming clearer to me that the world can only be captured from individuals unique perspective. Perhaps there is still a crisis of representation and perhaps there always will be. I think I am best situated to describe my experiences. This new approach helps to remove the risks inherent in the representation of others and allows for the production of new knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln 1994). I think that my new knowledge, for example connections with people, knowledge about the function of stories, knowledge about selves, helps me to speak from different positions.

Discussion
Using autoethnography can promote discussions that consider connections between the different cultures people occupy and how an individual’s reflexivity can keep them stuck or liberated and emancipated with regard to their personal narratives. Whilst autoethnography does not intentionally set out to be instructional, storytelling can be instructive. By showing their vulnerabilities autoethnographic researcher’s work can be seen as a prism for the reader to reflect on their narratives and the cultures they inhabit. The text is not written to
persuade you to think in particular way or to necessarily educate you; although autoethnographers hope that you may learn new information; information which we have to accept, we may never know about, unless of course people communicate with us. Researchers are, I would suggest, interested in people’s reactions to their research, in this way we have a chance to co-construct new ideas.

Like mercury, autoethnographic texts may move around; sometimes hard to ‘catch’, refusing to keep still. Imagine blowing a small amount of air into a balloon, not inflating it completely. Then imagine squashing this balloon in the palm of your hands, not knowing where the balloon may ‘pop out’ in between your fingers. The evolving writing of the text has been like this. Never quite knowing what will ‘pop out’ and when.

Using an autoethnographic methodology the researcher is able to recollect their personal stories, by utilising reflection and associated reflexivity. These personal stories are the researcher’s own stories – in this sense the researcher is the only participant. Their stories are drawn from their lived experiences. These stories of past experiences in turn provide us with powerful insights and can contribute to our professional development and the development of others either through the written word or verbal performances.

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As a personal experience it has been valuable and has opened my thoughts to a wider perspective on research, beyond the traditionally accepted methodologies, and has affirmed to me the necessity of reflection and associated reflexivity to increase understandings of interactions I experience as, for example, a psychotherapist, an educator and a parent. This justifies that autoethnography is really very important for the professional development.

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Autoethnography holds the view that knowledge is something which has to be experienced personally and shared socially. Autoethnographic researchers regard that knowledge is temporary, developmental, non objective, internally constructed, and socially and culturally mediated. As mentioned earlier, the experience of the researcher is the data text in autoethnographic research and all the readers have the equal right to interpret the data text as the writer.

Experiential learning, as defined by Kolb (1986) is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. In this way, autoethnography
similarly, calls for introspection and retrospection of reflection that helps us to understand our professions opening alternative ways of understanding and looking into our practices. I would suggest that we can only remain professional if we regularly update not only academic knowledge but also personal knowledge; only when we look back into our evocative landscapes can we deconstruct and reconstruct our lives.

It is also a hope that autoethnographic studies have at least two benefits. Firstly, as a way of self-knowing; to try to understand the experiences we live through. The hope is that by exploring our lives we can enhance new understandings. I have noticed that as I make changes that are becoming more self-soothing and compassionate, that my clinical practice is changing and my teaching practice is changing. I am more confident in my understandings of stories and my contributions to the stories that people tell me. As I gain a better understanding of an evolving and ever changing me I am having different types of conversations with work colleagues and with clients. Secondly we do not exist in a vacuum and our life stories are not isolated accounts. This process is a social activity influenced by whom we interact with. From a social constructionist view, the self is relational and challenges the dominant ideology of the self-contained individual that underpins the notions of self-indulgence.

As Bochner and Ellis (1996) ask:

‘If culture circulates through all of us, how can autoethnography be free of connection to the world beyond the self?’

(Bochner and Ellis 1996, page 24)

In this way autoethnography allows another person’s world of experience to inspire a critical reflection of one’s own. Rorty (1999) has referred to this as the ‘inspirational value of reading’-what is already known by the reader is re-contextualised in the light of their encounter with someone else’s life or culture. Originality in this form, as in all relationships, is never a sole act. It requires readers. While Autoethnographers write about themselves the goal is to touch a ‘world beyond the self of the writer’ (Bochner & Ellis 1996: page 24).

It is my belief that autoethnography not only creates new knowledge, but is a new way of knowing. I also believe that new ways of knowing advance human knowledge. Rorty (1999) suggests that truth is only manifested through language, language is human, and therefore truth is constructed. I have found Autoethnography liberating and it has removed some of the constraints of the
dominant realist representations of empirical ethnography. Richardson (2000) argued that the way researchers are expected to write will then influence what they can write about. I think autoethnography could be a useful way for examining my life experiences in a self-reflexive manner.

An autoethnographic standpoint offers opportunities for the production of alternative ways of knowing, reconsiders existing dominant accounts and opens up the possibilities for different relationships and new conceptual directions.

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‘…the human interface between writing and reading. Sometimes the two elements mix, sometimes they curdle and sometimes they stand like oil and water, resolute and opposed’ (Armitage 2003, page 36)

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I think this type of personal and cultural investigation can be used as a very helpful and effective way for professionals, of any discipline, to become more aware of who they are and in this way use their selves in their therapeutic encounters. The advantages in engaging in this type of study cannot be underscored; however, autoethnography has the potential for inducing fear, vulnerability and uncertainty. I would suggest that anyone who embarks on the autoethnographic seek out a supportive network. I have been supported by colleagues, friends and an empathic supervisor who has been available for me when required.

We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time

TS Eliot
Little Gidding
Four Quartets
1942
'In the end,' said WH Auden, ‘art’ is small beer. The really serious things in life are earning one’s living and loving one’s neighbour.'

References


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