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Easier Said than Done: Writing an Autoethnography

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Abstract

Autoethnography is an intriguing and promising qualitative method that offers a way of giving voice to personal experience for the purpose of extending sociological understanding. The author's experience of writing an autoethnography about international adoption has shown her, however, that autoethnography can be a very difficult undertaking. In writing her autoethnography, she confronted anxiety-producing questions pertaining to representation, balance, and ethics. As well, she dealt with the acceptability of her autoethnography by informal and formal reviewers. In this article she discusses the challenges she faced in her autoethnographic project to inform future autoethnographers and to inspire them to share their experiences and reflections. For the author questions linger, but she hopes that sharing issues that arise in autoethnographic work will strengthen our understandings of this challenging yet highly promising form of inquiry.

Keywords: autoethnography, reflection, representation, objectivity, data, ethics, legitimacy

Author's Note: I thank my husband and children for being such wonderful people in my life. It has been my great privilege and joy to create the story of my life with you.

Introduction

Autoethnography is an intriguing and promising qualitative method. Emerging from postmodern philosophy, in which the dominance of traditional science and research is questioned and many ways of knowing and inquiring are legitimated, autoethnography offers a way of giving voice to personal experience to advance sociological understanding. My experience of writing an autoethnography about international adoption has shown me, however, that autoethnography can be a very difficult undertaking because this form of scholarship highlights more than ever issues of representation, "objectivity," data quality, legitimacy, and ethics. Although working through these challenges can lead to the production of an excellent text, the intimate and personal nature of autoethnography can, in fact, make it one of the most challenging qualitative approaches to attempt. In this paper I reflect on the process of writing an autoethnography in an attempt to illustrate some of the issues that require consideration when this form of writing is undertaken.

My autoethnography

I have been the mother of an adopted child for 10 years. To explore my experience as an adoptive mother and to add my voice to the various bodies of literature on international adoption, I chose to use autoethnography. Autoethnographies "are highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding" (Sparkes, 2000, p. 21). In considering the use of personal stories in sociological work, Laslett (1999) has claimed that it is the intersection of the personal and the societal that offers a new vantage point from which to make a unique contribution to social science. "Personal narratives can address several key theoretical debates in contemporary sociology: macro and micro linkages; structure, agency and their intersection; [and] social reproduction and social change" (p. 392). My purpose in writing my autoethnography was precisely to consider the structural and personal motivators and enablers behind international adoption and to consider how, in my experience, I have dealt with the questions that adoption raises about ethics, kinship, culture, motherhood, and success in life.

Autoethnography begins with a personal story, in this case my[1] story about adoption and family. Within the adoption literature there is an acknowledgement that families have their own stories, with new narratives generated by movement into and out of each of life's stages (Honig, 2005; Johnson, 1998). Narratives told by members of adoptive families can be powerful stories in which meaning and identity are tested, adjusted, and redefined (Honig, 2005). The characters that the stories feature, the roles that they play, and the connection of those stories to the larger social context reveal the ways in which family stories can both create reality and be portals into a realm of greater sociological understanding (Ochs & Taylor, 1992).

Autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on *auto-* (self), *-ethno-* (the sociocultural connection), and *-graphy* (the application of the research process) (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Although some consider a personal narrative to be the same thing as an autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), others use autoethnography as a means of explicitly linking concepts from the literature to the narrated personal experience (Holt, 2001; Sparkes, 1996) and support an approach as rigorous and justifiable as any other form of inquiry (Duncan, 2004). Examples of this emerging method reveal that autoethnography has been used as a way of telling a story that invites personal connection rather than analysis (Frank, 2000), exploring issues of personal importance within an explicitly acknowledged social context (Holt, 2001; Sparkes, 1996), evaluating one's actions (Duncan, 2004), or critiquing extant literature on a topic of personal significance (Muncey, 2005). Autoethnography might be more of a philosophy than a well-defined method (Wall, 2006), so there remains considerable creative latitude in the production of an autoethnographic text (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

In an earlier draft of my autoethnography I emphasized my self and wrote a straightforward personal narrative. After putting the project on hold for a while, an opportunity emerged to revive it as part of the requirements of my doctoral program. In my program students are required to develop an alternative field of expertise in addition to a main area of interest (which for me is gender and work). I chose to work with a committee of faculty members to develop my capabilities in the sociology of family and adoption. The product of this endeavor was a lengthy autoethnographic manuscript, deemed to be publishable (but not yet published), about my experiences as an internationally adoptive parent that drew on a large volume of adoption literature, organized my personal experience conceptually, linked it explicitly to theory, and proposed new avenues for theory development and research. As well, I approached my autoethnography with a desire to "converse" with the literature rather than just to interject my perspectives into identified gaps in the literature.

For adoptive parents writing about adoption, important methodological questions are raised.

> We live daily with the ambivalences and ambiguities of adoption, and we have struggled with how to position our research and writing: how to cast an eye that is both critical and sympathetic, attuned to our own profoundly personal connections to these questions and to an analysis of the cultural and political contexts within which adoption must be situated. (Volkman, 2005, p. 18)

As an adoptive mother, academic, and autoethnographer I have experienced the difficulties that emerge from such a complex intersection of social locations and have experienced the struggles identified by Volkman. Although the linking of my personal experience to the diversity of topics in the extant literature on adoption can provide insights into "motivations, emotions, imagination, subjectivity, and action in ways less available from other sources" (Laslett, 1999, p. 392), the route to such an outcome has required awareness, reflexivity, and care.

Writing about writing

Reflection and writing about the process of writing and the context in which that writing occurred creates a "writing story" (Richardson, 1994). Given the relative newness of the genre, a few other autoethnographers have also written writing stories about their experiences with autoethnography. Sparkes (2000) has reflected on the comments of the reviewers of his personal narrative (1996) and has discussed issues such as the legitimacy of story-as-scholarship and the criteria used to judge narratives of the self. Likewise, Holt (2003) has thought back on his experience of publishing an autoethnography (2001) and discussed questions about validity, motivators, and self as data. Muncey (2005) expanded on the question of data in autoethnography and proposed various sources of data, explaining how they add richness to autoethnographic stories. Writing from a conservative perspective, Duncan (2004) cautioned potential autoethnographers against emotional writing, a lack of honesty with oneself about motivators behind the research, and a failure to connect personal experience with theory. She acknowledged the need to deal explicitly with the validity, reliability, and legitimation of autoethnography within the dominant research culture. As autoethnography continues to emerge, define itself, and struggle for acceptance, it is important that those working with it reflect on the use of the method and share their experiences with others. My experience reveals many of the same issues as autoethnographers before me, but my writing story presents some additional thoughts pertaining to representation, objectivity, data quality, ethics, and evaluation criteria.

Representation, presentation, and performance

The matter of representation in ethnography is well discussed. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) have described the crisis of representation that occurred in the 1980s, when previously settled issues about the assumptions behind the presentation of ethnographic accounts and the criteria used to assess their validity were challenged. They noted that during this period new forms of truth and method were sought as ethnographers began to employ more interpretive, experimental, critical, and personal forms of writing. Clough (1992, cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) has noted that the writing of experimental ethnographies does not necessarily resolve the issues of representation. Autobiographical writing is part of a new writing imagination that is based on movement, complexity, knowing and not knowing, and being and not being exposed. This writing imagination deconstructs the unity of the autobiographical self (Clough, 1998). No subject can be a fully self-identified, fully aware, or fully intentional author because unconscious desire makes fully intentional subjectivity impossible (Clough, 1998).

During the production of my autoethnographic text, I experienced persistent anxiety about how I was representing myself in it. It was important to me to reflect in my paper the same sense of identity and self-understanding that I had established in my life. This included an understanding of myself as an autonomous social agent, my family as a "normal" nuclear family, both in appearance and in function, and my son as a resilient and healthy child. I wanted to present an authentic self, but I was also aware that brutal honesty might reinforce misconceptions and stigma about adoption, and I was afraid that my readers would think less of me if they knew what I "really" thought. As I read the adoption literature and compared the experiences, concepts, and research findings contained within it to my own experiences with adoption, I reacted to the ways in which my experience was or was not captured by the literature. I wanted to preserve my raw initial and unmediated responses to the literature and, at the same time, demonstrate that I was open minded and willing to learn something new about my experience.

As an example, one aspect that was particularly difficult for me in terms of self-representation was the topic of the birth mother. In an era in which open adoption is lauded as an important strategy to address the needs of the multiple parties involved (birth mother, adoptive parents, child), I wondered how acceptable it would be for me to say that I purposely chose international adoption so that I would not have to deal with my child's birth mother. She was seldom part of my consciousness and almost never mentioned in my home, and I was very comfortable with that. The more I read, however, the more my problem of representation grew. I began to understand her perspective, her circumstances, and, thus, the enormity of her decision to "abandon" her child. I started to empathize with her, and this created tension in how I might reconcile my long-standing exclusion of her from my consciousness with a new awareness of what her experience might have been. How could I continue to be happy with the way the "birth mother issue" had always been handled in my family, and how could I say such a thing in my paper?

On the other hand, how could I confess that I had had to reshape my perspectives about her because of what I had read? Would I be admitting that I had been wrong? Would my readers think that I had changed my position too easily? Would I be representing myself as fickle or ambiguous if I conveyed my lack of resolution about my feelings for her? Could I really put any of these thoughts down on paper? What if I changed my mind later? I began to see how "reducing a person's story to words on a page robs it of complexity" (Kraus, 2003, p. 284). Ellis (1999) has acknowledged the vulnerability experienced by the autoethnographer in revealing him- or herself, of not being able to take back what has been said, of not having control over how readers will interpret what is said, and of feeling that his or her whole life is being critiqued. Although the "whole concept of authenticity, of identity as coherent" has been challenged (Lovell, 2005, para.

17), it is very difficult to reconcile this theoretical assertion with the practicalities of writing about personal experience.

Tedlock (2000) has suggested that the kind of tension that I experienced is a feminist issue. She noted that "women's ethnographic and autobiographical intentions are often powered by the motive to convince readers of the author's self-worth, to clarify and authenticate their self-images" (p. 468) because women are constantly aware that they function under (what are often considered to be) male-centered conceptions of writing (orderly, self-assured, progressive, unified, finalized). She also noted, however, that the writing of an ethnographic text is really a continuation of fieldwork rather than a transparent record of past experiences, leading to the production of a historically, politically, and personally situated representation of human life (Tedlock, 2000).

Realist ideology in ethnography leads to an expectation that the copy (the ethnographic text) will be true to the original (the studied life) (Clough, 1998). However, because there can be no return to some original experience, experimental writing means rethinking representation to engage with subjectivity that does not depend on representation as currently understood and to shift from representation to processes of presentation without beginning or end (Clough, 2000). Perhaps this presentation can be seen as a performance. The self that appears to others is a performed character, a public self, attending to standardized social obligations while concealing its true desires (Goffman, 1959, cited in Hastrup, 1995).

Motivated agents create theatres of self. In these theatres representation is not intended to be an accurate reflection of life, measurable against reality. Rather, it is a creative process of defining worlds as they are discovered and evoking a previously unknown social space (Hastrup, 1995). Seen through this new lens, my own difficulties in representing the "truth" of my experience can be better understood. However, in practice I do still have trouble sorting through the "truth" in my story and deciding how best to tell it. It might be that it is indeed impossible for anyone to ever finalize a perfectly accurate story, but my desire to convey this story in the best possible way leaves me feeling as if it will never be finished and ready for publication.

Questioning my objectivity

The assumption that objectivity is at all possible has been solidly contested, and classic norms of objectivity in the social sciences have been eroded (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Postmodernists believe that the methods and procedures that are employed in research are ultimately and inextricably tied to the values and subjectivities of the researcher (Bochner, 2000). Any efforts to achieve objectivity are foiled from the outset because ethnographers always come with ideas that guide what they choose to describe and how they choose to describe it (Wolcott, 1999) and that are grounded in a "set of intellectual assumptions and constitutive interests" (Stivers, 1993, p. 410).

Nevertheless, a tendency toward a distanced observer role continues to exist within ethnographic work, presumably because ethnographers have a need to reassure themselves that they are behaving like "real" researchers (Wolcott, 1999). My experience as an autoethnographer, enmeshed in the study of my life experiences, prompts me to question the value of distance between the researcher and the field of research. If my lived experience can be equated to traditional ethnographic participant observation (being actively involved in the field), it is interesting to ask "how much participation is participation enough? Might one . . . become so involved as to make observation itself virtually impossible?" (Wolcott, 1999, p. 48).

From the beginning of the time that I worked on this project with a committee of faculty members, I was gently cautioned to guard against being a defensive adoptive mother in my writing. I was expected to engage with the literature unemotionally and to craft a text that portrayed balance and intellectual analysis. It had never been my intention to do otherwise but, because I had (have) considerable respect for my advisers, I proceeded to write with this warning in the forefront of my mind. When the first draft had been read, it was kindly suggested to me that I "tone things down a bit" because I was coming across as quite defensive. As I worked through subsequent revisions, incorporating the suggestions and ideas of my committee, I also continued to be mindful of any defensiveness on my part, working hard to use careful and balanced language.

By the time the final draft of my paper was submitted, I felt that I was being positively magnanimous in my responses to certain adoption critics. For example, in my paper I discuss how media reports about the conditions in Eastern European orphanages spurred a flood of interest on the part of families seeking to adopt. As well, I cite authors who have analyzed and critiqued the public's response to these media reports. I note,

> Briggs (2003) considers images of the "imploring waif" (p. 180) to be the quintessentially manipulative depiction of need, which prompts an ideology of rescue and directs attention away from the political and economic causes of the situation. Through these images, potential parents apparently became players in "the collective fantasy of direct transnational crisis intervention" (Cartwright, 2005, p. 195), by traveling [abroad] to adopt.

I found it difficult to read suggestions that I was manipulated into perceiving need and that I was part of a collective rescue fantasy of rescue. My reaction to these assertions, as expressed in my first draft was

> Social scientists have made presumptions about the interpretations and motivations of potential and actual adoptive parents, characterizing them as gullible pawns, without acknowledging their capacity for intelligent agency and the legitimacy of their altruistic motivations.

By the time my final draft had been completed, I had introduced a number of caveats to preface and soften what I wanted to say in response to these critiques of adoption:

> My initial reaction to the discourse analysis literature was defensive but I do not wish to miss the point of what is said by these authors. There is no denying that individual action takes place within a complex socio-political context. Individual motivations and feelings of altruism are not the focus of interest for Briggs (2003) and Cartwright (2005). If I step back from my initial assumption that they intend to portray adoptive parents as dupes, I can concede that what they are appropriately concerned with, given that they are theorizing sociologically, is the structural evocation of that altruism and the desire to reach out and save children. It may be improper for me to suggest that they consider micro-level motivations in their analysis. Yet, I cannot shake the idea that there is a need for a less black and white perspective on this aspect of adoption knowledge. As I acknowledge the powerful influence of the social context in which my decisions are made, it seems fitting that any structural analysis recognize the individual agency side of the motivation equation. While I can no longer believe in a "pure" agency, divorced from an awareness of the way that information is manipulated by the Western media and the way we are socialized to think of families and children, I am suggesting that it is

> dangerous to make across-the-board assumptions about the ways in which adoptive parents enact their agency.

In this revised paragraph I used more than 200 words to distance myself emotionally from the critiques and to gingerly introduce my suggestion that there might be another perspective on adoptive parents' agency. It is ponderous to read, and the verbiage obscures the point. The tone, if defensive before, has become altogether apologetic, and my personal perspective is lost.

According to Thomas (1993), there can be a number of pitfalls in the doing of critical ethnography that can threaten the scientific merit of a study; these include seeing only what serves the researcher's purposes, placing passion before science, making claims beyond the evidence, and replacing reason with stridency. Thomas has claimed that the trick to doing "objective" critical ethnography lies in avoiding the traps of creating a product of assertions and imposing our views on our audience. However, the extent to which I was able to attain the objectivity that Thomas encouraged is open for question. I used relevant substantive and theoretical literature pertaining to altruism, ideologies of children, and agency versus structure to support my perspectives and thus avoided making unsubstantiated claims, yet I was never completely able to distance myself emotionally from my observations. As well, I continued to work toward my explicit goal of impressing my views on my audience.

It might be that, in my attempts to avoid emotion and defensiveness and thus to attain objectivity, I actually undermined the purposes of writing an autoethnography. Ellis (1999) explained that in autoethnography the writer tells a story that allows readers to enter and feel part of a story that includes emotions and intimate detail and examines the meaning of human experience. Autoethnography is a form of writing that should allow readers to feel the dilemmas, think with a story rather than about it, join actively with the author's decision points (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), and become co-participants who engage with the story line morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually (Richardson, 1994). In the world of traditional science objective distance seems to protect researchers and readers from the emotional and intimate details of human lives (Muncey, 2005).

In autoethnography, however, the goal is to convey a "patchwork of feelings, experiences, emotions, and behaviors that portray a more complete view of . . . life" (p. 10). By reconsidering traditional ideas about objectivity, we can see that "every view is *a* way of seeing, not *the* way" (Wolcott, 1999, p. 137, italics in original). Despite the fact that I have toned down my reactions considerably in my autoethnographic manuscript, readers will likely perceive a degree of emotion in my writing. How I see my adoption experience is my way of seeing, and this cannot help but include emotion. This might cause problems for me if I want to demonstrate that I am behaving like a "real" researcher , but it will serve a purpose that cannot be served by traditional approaches to knowledge sharing.

Data in (my) autoethnography

Data in ethnography traditionally arise from interviews, participant observation field notes, document and artifact analysis, and research diaries (Mayan, 2001; Morse & Richards, 2002). Thus far, the data sources accessed by autoethnographers have followed these traditions for the most part. For example, Sparkes (1996) drew data from medical records, diary extracts, and newspaper articles about himself to discuss his sporting career and the chronic condition that ended it. Similarly, Ettorre (2005) consulted a diary, letter, articles, and medical laboratory results to support the analysis of her illness experience. Holt (2001) relied on data found in his reflective

journal for discussions about his teaching practice. Duncan (2004) used an extensive reflective journal as well as e-mails, memos, and sketches to support an evaluation of her professional work. However, none of these autoethnographers explicitly depended on memories as data in their work, although Ettorre has acknowledged remembering as part of the process of analysis.

Generally, the expectation persists that "hard" data be available from which to generate interpretations and make claims. Muncey (2005) has suggested that the use of snapshots and artifacts can be "important [for the legitimation of autoethnography] if memory and its distortions appear to be critical features of the process" (p. 1). Similarly, Duncan (2004), a conservative autoethnographer, has called for the use of multiple sources of evidence to support personal opinion, suggesting the need for "hard" evidence to support "soft" impressions.

Although I have access to photographs and archival documents to support my memories, I did not refer to these during the writing of my autoethnography. Instead, I relied on the memories of my lived experience. In an effort to help me defend my work, my supervisory committee asked me to justify my strategy of using memories as data. It seems that unless data about personal experience are collected and somehow transformed by another researcher, they fail to qualify as legitimate. Sparkes (2000) related a story about the use of his published autoethnography in an undergraduate class, explaining that his students do not consider his autoethnography to be research. However, when asked whether it would be research if someone else had interviewed a man named Andrew Sparkes; collected his medical records, diary excerpts, and newspaper stories; analyzed the collection, and written it up, the class says yes. Likewise, if a researcher had interviewed me about my experiences as an adoptive mother and had recorded and transcribed it, it would have legitimacy as data despite the fact that both the interview transcript and my autoethnographic text would be based on the same set of memories.

The significance of memory in the process of ethnography has been acknowledged. During ethnographic work, memories are collected about the experiences of being there and of the social actors in the field (Coffey, 1999). "Ethnography is an act of memory" because fieldwork and the resulting texts cannot be separated from the memories that shape them (p. 127). Even when interview transcripts and field notes (or, in the case of autoethnography, diaries and journals) exist, these become combined with headnotes, which are memories of the field (Coffey, 1999). Headnotes include the impressions, scenes, and experiences of the field that are far too numerous to record (Ottenberg, 1990) and provide the sense of the whole that the ethnographer alone carries around in his or her head (Lederman, 1990). It might be that headnotes are more important than field notes.

Margaret Mead, the famous anthropologist, was aware of the importance of her headnotes, observing that it was her long acquaintance with her field of study and her individual consciousness that made it possible for her to perceive and record aspects of lived experience that nobody else could (1977, cited in Sanjek, 1990). Entire ethnographies (Marshall, 1970, cited in Sanjek, 1990) and autoethnographies (Yang, 1945) have been composed from headnotes, or memories, alone. Perhaps unexpectedly, it might also be that headnotes are more reliable than field notes or other written records of the field. Field notes are written to aid memory but might actually become a threat to it because they can contradict the remembered voices of the people from the field (Lederman, 1990). They might also mediate and alter the accuracy of memory as they are continually reread (Sanjek, 1990).

The privilege given to observations and "factual" descriptions is based on realist ideology. The need to objectify data and record the facts in writing reflects the thinking of a positivistic age when personal impressions were not seen as important (Ottenberg, 1990). Given that there has

been a move away from realism in ethnography toward a more critical stance, it might be appropriate to give up on traditional data collection to some extent (Clough, 1998). There is demonstrated value in relying on memory in ethnographic work, so, like Ottenberg, I use my headnotes, my memories, when I write, even when I cannot corroborate them with written data, because "I remember many things . . . [and] I am certain that they are correct and not a fantasy" (p. 144).

Acceptability to others (and to myself)

As autoethnographers before me have learned, there continue to be significant issues in the legitimacy granted to autoethnography and the credibility of this genre as scholarly work (Holt, 2003; Muncey, 2005; Sparkes, 2000). My autoethnographic project has continually evolved over four years in my attempt to balance my purposes with my interest in responding to the assessments of others.

As previously mentioned, my initial attempt at autoethnography involved the writing of a personal narrative, a form of writing that is considered to fall under the umbrella of autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). This narrative offered a synopsis, organized in part chronologically and in part conceptually, of my experiences as a parent of an internationally adopted child. In it I told of my motivations to adopt, the adoption process and the arrival experience, ongoing issues in parenting, and the reactions of others to my child and family.

Having been socialized into quite conventional disciplines in my professional career (operating room nursing and health services management), I was uncertain about whether the writing of a personal narrative was appropriate if intended for an academic audience. I felt compelled to contribute a counterperspective to circulating discourses in the adoption field yet remained doubtful of the value of doing so in this way. To assess the quality and potential contribution of my narrative, I sought feedback from a respected academic mentor. I was overwhelmed by her reaction:

> What a gift. This is not what I am supposed to be reading right now, but I could not turn away from it and it helps me in more ways than I can explain. I really thank you for sharing it.
>
> I would not touch it. It is your story and you have told it so beautifully. It is the "adoption counter-narrative" that we all need to hear so much more of and by its telling, you highlight so many "accepted stories" about every kind of child that need to be challenged and questioned because they are stereotypes that parents have to struggle against in a cookie-cutter world.
>
> It really seems to me that it is a story about finding home—home for [your son], home as a family together, home in the world by being treated and accepted and loved—each of us—for the amazing, unique beings we are. (used with permission)

When I wrote the personal narrative that received such a positive endorsement from my mentor, I was as yet unfamiliar with basic concepts in qualitative methodology and completely unfamiliar with the genres of personal narrative and autoethnography. Looking back now, having become much more knowledgeable about qualitative methods, I can see in my mentor's comments a rich example of the usefulness of autoethnography. It seems to me that the credibility and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of my story were apparent to her and that she saw in it the "use of narrative as a source of empowerment and a form of resistance to counter the domination

and authority of canonical discourses" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 749). I was greatly encouraged by her comments and spurred on in my quest to share this adoption story more widely.

In my efforts to have the story published, I connected with two relevant academic journals to explain the format and purpose of the paper and ask whether such a paper would be interesting to them. Both indicated that the topic was appropriate and that they would gladly consider such a piece. One noted that its acceptability would depend on the quality of the writing and the extent to which implications for practice could be drawn from my personal experience. I structured the paper to include points for practical application and submitted the paper to the first of the two journals. After the article had been in review for some time, I received a response from the editor, saying:

> Your submission is well written and certainly interesting but I'm afraid that, concentrating as it does on a single case, it is not the kind of article we publish in the journal. (used with permission)

This was a surprise to me because they had previously indicated interest in a well-written narrative piece. However, I was undaunted and moved on to the second journal. Again, following peer review, I heard from the editor. He said that although my story was compelling and interesting and although I dealt with some issues in a way that challenged the received wisdom of the field, the reviewers did not recommend it for publishing, noting that it would be more appropriate to target it to an audience of parents.

For the editors and reviewers of these journals the engaging nature of the writing and the recognition that the paper contained unique potential contributions to extant knowledge in the field were not enough to overcome their methodological questions about the paper.

Even well-established qualitative research methods continue to meet with resistance. They are seen as lacking, in comparison to quantitative methods, because they do not adhere to traditional notions of objectivity, reason, and truth (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Personal research methods, such as autoethnography, are that much more marginalized because of their emphasis on the researcher's self as subject. There is a concern that

> although there may be good stories, these by themselves do not, and cannot, constitute good scholarship . . . something must be added to stories in the form of theoretical abstraction or conceptual elaboration. Such acts of boundary maintenance seem to hide a deep suspicion and fear of "personal accounts." (Sparkes, 2000, p. 24)

Likewise, Stivers (1993) observed that although personal narratives might be entertaining and even edifying, they fail to qualify as useful knowledge because they are not logical or scientific.

Richardson (2000) has noted that traditions in writing hold a great deal of power over researchers and that adhering to established conventions can increase the probability of acceptance even if it does not actually increase the truth value of the writing. It became increasingly clear to me that I would have to connect my personal experiences explicitly to relevant theory and "legitimate" method if I intended to proceed with this project. The response from the editor of a third journal that I contacted demonstrated support for my realization by saying,

> The paper you describe sounds interesting, and substantively, falls within the mission of the journal. However, for publication consideration, you would need to demonstrate your study has a theoretical basis and is methodologically appropriate. If you can demonstrate your treatment of international adoption is indeed systematic

> and contributes to the literature, then I would say your paper would have a better shot. (used with permission)

The purposes and character of my autoethnographic venture evolved over time to conform to academic convention. In its current form, my penultimate draft is entirely different from my first attempt simply to tell the story. I have to say that I am not entirely distressed about the way my work has drifted toward the conventional. Although I have been quite intrigued by the potential power of personal narrative and autoethnography and highly motivated to share my personal story for the unique contribution it would make to the adoption literature, I have also struggled with how this genre should best be incorporated into academic work (Wall, 2006). Like others in the world around me (for example, Duncan, 2004), I have a comfortable familiarity with the conventions of my academic discipline and tend toward working within them, even when attempting to include myself overtly in my work. Over time, conventions may change as the boundaries between literature and science become increasingly blurred (Richardson, 2000). In whatever time I write, however, I want to speak a language that my audience can understand so that what I am saying can be heard.

Sparkes (2002) has acknowledged how difficult it can be to grasp research traditions that are different from those into which we are socialized professionally and academically. Beyond how difficult it can be to accept them, judging them can also be problematic. Criteria for evaluating personal writing as sociology have barely begun to develop (DeVault, 1997), and personal narratives might simply be dismissed as self-indulgent in the absence of alternative ideas about how to appraise them (Atkinson, 1997; DeVault, 1997; Sparkes, 2002). Although the word *criteria* itself is a term that separates modernists from postmodernists, some scholars have attempted to develop ways of evaluating "experimental" writing that are subjectively based (Bochner, 2000). Ellis (2000) has offered some new ideas for evaluating narrative ethnographies. When reading one, she wants to be fully engaged, immersed in the flow of the story, unable to put it down, and reminded of her own experience through someone else's story. Clearly, this was the experience of my academic mentor, who first read the story. Whether my current, much more theoretical version might evoke these feelings is uncertain but, I suspect, is much less likely.

However, other criteria that Ellis (2000) suggested are much more likely to apply to my work. Her questions about the goals, claim, and achievements of the author are useful to me in evaluating what I have done. I have, as she hopes, offered something new that is intended to help others understand the world of which I speak, made claims that I can legitimately make, presented a complex and nuanced story, and promoted dialogue. Above all, I am most aware of her expectation that the author learn something new about him- or herself. By approaching my autoethnography as a two-way conversation with the literature, I not only challenged the received wisdom of the field but also learned to think about my experience as an adoptive parent in a way that challenged and changed me.

Does this confirm Atkinson's (1997) charge that the goal of a storyteller is therapy rather than analysis? Am I left with something that is ultimately all about me? I undertook this project, not because I wanted to heal or indulge myself but, in spite of a strong reluctance to draw attention to myself, because of a relentless feeling that it was important for me to share my insights into families formed by international adoption. The fact that I learned something new in the doing of it was a wonderful bonus on the way to making a scholarly contribution.

Ethical questions about autoethnography

Ironically, my sense that it was right for me to want to add to the adoption literature led me to undertake a project that generated ethical dilemmas for me. At the outset I naively assumed that writing about my experience eliminated any need for ethical consideration, although I was limiting my conception of ethics to that which is governed by traditional research ethics approval processes in academic settings. A comment made by one reviewer about the difficulty of publishing work in which the anonymity of my child could not be preserved and his/her suggestion that I write anonymously prompted me to question my assumptions about ethics.

Lovell (2005) has stated, "There *is* a power relation at play in writing a biography, and history accords the balance of the power quite emphatically to the biographer" (para. 6, italics in original), and I became suddenly aware that the same applies to autobiography. There is a need to be concerned about the ethics of representing those who are unable to represent themselves in writing or to offer meaningful consent to their representation by someone else, especially someone with whom they are involved in a trust-based relationship (Couser, 2004).

With ethical issues raised, I approached my university department's research ethics committee to seek its input on the ethics of my work. They approved my autoethnographic project without any apparent hesitation. Although my ethics committee did not deem it necessary for me to write anonymously, I wanted to proceed cautiously. When I presented my narrative paper at a qualitative research conference, I did so under my mother's maiden name. This proved to be practically awkward as I was registered for the conference under my real name, and people had trouble knowing how to identify me and associate me with my presentation. I also felt vaguely inauthentic by using an alternate name. As well, perhaps because of the way in which rewards are traditionally conferred in academia, I wanted to be sure that my work would be recognized and attributed to me.

Despite the straightforward official approval I had received for my project from my research ethics committee, I had a persistent and significant sense of anxiety about the tension between proceeding with an academic project and telling a story about my life that was inextricably intertwined with my son's. In my autoethnography I discuss many topics about being an adoptive parent. Although I speak exclusively from own perspective, I also automatically reveal things about my son that he might see as private. The committee members that approved my paper as a component of my doctoral program assured me that I had proceeded ethically in my paper. With such assurance, what is it that causes me lingering anxiety about this? How can I do otherwise than to feel the guilt of making use of another person's life, of borrowing another person's identity, to tell my own story (Kraus, 2003)?

Questions about ethics in autoethnography have scarcely been raised, and there is little guidance in the autoethnography literature for dealing with these issues. Personal experience methods, such as autoethnography, justify themselves by observing that individuals do not exist apart from their social context, and for this reason personal experience can be the foundation for further sociological understanding. Ironically, it is the intricate connection between the personal and the social that made it impossible for me to speak of myself without also speaking of others, thereby creating my ethical conundrum. Ellis (1999, 2000) touched briefly on ethical considerations in personal narrative or narrative ethnography, especially when speaking of others in the telling of one's own story. She asked questions about whether the author received permission to portray others or gave them a chance to contribute their perspectives to the story. Although I do have my son's permission to work on a "story about being his mom," this falls far short of what I need to feel ethically comfortable with this work. Giving my son the opportunity to consent to the project,

however sincere and well-intentioned I am, does not satisfy me that his consent is truly informed (Couser, 2004). Does the deeply personal nature of my work distort my ability to judge its ethical sensibilities? Ultimately, as Ellis (2000) also asked, "does the contribution of the story outweigh conceivable ethical dilemmas and pain for characters and readers?" (p. 276). I feel uncertain about the answer to this question, and until it is more fully resolved, I am reluctant to publish my manuscript.

My reluctance also relates in part to an interesting observation about voyeurism and how "personal stories indulge our culture's perverse curiosity about the private, peeking in on damaged selves" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 749). Couser (2004) noted that although "parental memoirs" might be valuable resources for others, they also depend, to some extent, on the "market value of the pathos" (p. 57). I have found over the years of living and writing this story that whenever I present, lecture, or casually discuss my adoption experience, people are more fascinated by silly, exotic, or private details of my son's story than they are with the ideas I want to convey about family, kinship, and culture. They want to know if he has an accent when he speaks English, if he knows about his "real" mother, if he has suffered damage as a result of early institutionalization, if he looks "different." To risk sharing private and personal feelings and experiences just to have people gawk at my family life is abhorrent to me and gives me great pause when I consider making my story public. That would simply demonstrate support for the suggestion that autobiographical writing can be the "literary equivalent of gossip" (Evans, 1999, cited in Lovell, 2005, para. 3).

Another, although relatively minor, ethical issue arose for me during the production of my autoethnographic manuscript. Throughout the writing of it, I was cautioned, as previously mentioned, by my committee to guard against defensiveness while, ironically, feeling that I should be careful not to let my critical perspectives arouse defensiveness on the part of my advisers, who were professionally invested in the topic. Although autoethnography is a useful vehicle for injecting personal knowledge into a field of expert voices (Muncey, 2005), resisting dominant discourses (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), or promoting dialogue (Ellis, 2000), theoretical ideas about autoethnography as counterdiscourse take on new meaning when those who are situated in different places within a contested or complex field come face to face. This discovery supports the notions that all knowledge acquisition is personal (Stivers, 1993) and that intellectual debate should be conducted respectfully.

After all is said and (not) done

The process of preparing this writing story (Richardson, 1994) has revealed to me once again the value of experience and reflection. Several anxiety-producing questions arose during the preparation of my autoethnography, questions about how to represent myself, how I was able to see given my proximity to the "field," how various kinds of data are valued, how others would respond to my story, and how to work ethically within autoethnography. The opportunity to reflect on these questions has been a learning experience that has shown me how I might think differently about these issues than traditional ethnography and social science have previously encouraged. Alternative conceptions about truth, reality, and method are required to support the autoethnographic turn. My search for new ideas to inform my questions about the doing of autoethnography has been productive and helpful in generating new ways for me and others to understand our autoethnographic work. My autoethnography remains unpublished, and I do not know if I will ever seek to publish it. For me, questions remain, particularly those pertaining to ethics, for which I will continue to seek answers so that I am able to assure myself and the ultimate readers of my story that my project is well-considered and justifiable. Ongoing work and dialogue will strengthen our understandings of this challenging yet highly promising form of

inquiry. I hope that the discussion I have presented about the challenges I faced will inform future autoethnographers and inspire them to share their experiences and reflections as we move toward greater understanding of this empowering and compelling method.

Notes

1. Although I speak of this autoethnography as "my" story, I must acknowledge that my husband and children are also "authors" of this story. I use the first person singular to avoid speaking for them, but I wish to acknowledge fully their participation in making my life story what it is.

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