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Getting Personal: Reflexivity and Autoethnographic Vignettes

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The original research contribution of this article is in its advocacy of autoethnographic vignettes as a means of enhancing the representational richness and reflexivity of qualitative research. A personal story of career change is used to illustrate how research accounts enriched by the addition of autoethnographic detail can provide glimpses into what Van Maanen called "the ethnographer's own taken-for-granted understandings of the social world under scrutiny." Although the overall aim is to respond to Dyer and Wilkins's exhortation to scholars that they should "try to tell good stories," the article also has general methodological implications for qualitative researchers seeking to enhance the reflexivity of their work, particularly those pursuing autoethnographic or autobiographical studies.

Keywords: autoethnography; reflexivity; vignettes

In this article, I both advocate and use autoethnographic vignettes as an alternative approach to representation and reflexivity in qualitative research. In the first section, I broadly review literatures addressing autoethnography as "an autobiographical genre of writing and research" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739), reflexivity as "the turning back of an inquiry or a theory or a text onto its own formative possibilities" (Macbeth, 2001, p. 36), and the use of vignettes that "ask readers to relive the experience through the writer's or performer's eyes" (Denzin, 2000, p. 905). The notion of an "academic career" is then examined before I present the story of my own post-Ph.D. career change. To enhance this story, I use three vignettes both as a means to "return the author openly to the qualitative research text" (Lincoln & Denzin, 1998, p. 413) and to overtly acknowledge my awareness that I am an "actor in my own life production" (Gray, 2003, p. 265). This narrative is discussed via a consideration of the issues of authenticity, authorial exposure, and reflexivity within autoethnographic accounts and their application in a wider research context. Conclusions are drawn that have career implications for new academics, particularly those facing the "dual crises of representation and legiti-

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mation" (Holt, 2003, p. 17) that characterize the professional lives of qualitative researchers.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND REFLEXIVITY

In a highly reflexive review, Ellis and Bochner (2000) defined the term *autoethnography* as "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 733). Acknowledging Hayano (1979) as the originator of the expression, they catalogued a range of closely related terms including *narratives of the self* (Richardson, 1994), *self-stories* (Denzin, 1989), *first-person accounts* (Ellis, 1998a), *personal ethnography* (Crawford, 1996), *reflexive ethnography* (Ellis & Bochner, 1996), and *ethnographic memoir* (Tedlock, 1991). It is, however, Reed-Danahay's (1997) notion of "autobiographical ethnography" (p. 9) that has the most resonance for the issues under discussion in this article, and I am strongly drawn to her definition of *autoethnography* as

a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. It is both a method and a text . . . [and] can be done by either an anthropologist who is doing "home" or "native" ethnography or by a non-anthropologist/ethnographer. It can also be done by an autobiographer who places the story of his or her life within a story of the social context in which it occurs. (p. 9)

I am also in agreement with Spry's (2001) argument for the epistemological and ontological centrality of the researcher to the research process and with Fine's (1998) claim that the first-person voice is essential in allowing movement to the left of the "Self-Other hyphen" (p. 131). Such "personal" accounts, according to Ellis and Bochner (2000), may take many forms including stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, journals, and social science prose. However, it is *texts*—which can be defined as "personal essays . . . fragmented prose [featuring] emotion, and self consciousness" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739)—that serve as the vehicle for my own reflexive autobiographic monologue in this article. I am here aiming to achieve what Saldana (2003) described as "a solo narrative . . . reveal[ing] a discovery and retell[ing] an epiphany in a character's life" (pp. 224-225) and in the process, illustrate the potential added value for qualitative research accounts.

As well as the wide range of definitions and forms, I am also aware of the seemingly limitless *topics* of autoethnographic writing in a literature that addresses such subjects as, for example, political resistance (Kideckel, 1997), prison life (Svensson, 1997), Corsican identity (Jaffe, 1997), anorexia (Mukaia, 1989), bereavement and grief (Ellis, 1993), Jewish identity in the workplace (Berg, 2002), teaching (Pelias, 2003,) and art as research (Bochner & Ellis, 2003). It is, however, perhaps surprising, as Reed-Danahay (2001) noted, that there has been "relatively little candid writing about ethnographer careers . . .

success and failure" (p. 418). It is my intention in this article to address this omission using episodes in my own working life to express my own "involvement and intimacy" (Conquergood, 1998, p. 26) with the academic world and to use my experience to exemplify how autoethnographic accounts can "illuminate the culture under study" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 740).

VIGNETTES

As an organizational ethnographer, I have searched for analytical and representational strategies and forms that would enable me to increase self-reflexivity and slough off any notion that I might be one of the "academic tourists who only manage to get to the surface of any inquiry they pursue" (Pelias, 2003, p. 369). In my doctoral thesis (Humphreys, 1999), I used narrative vignettes described by Erickson (1986) as "vivid portrayal[s] of the conduct of an event of everyday life" (p. 149) to enhance the "contextual richness" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 83) of ethnographic research both as an outsider in Turkey and as an insider in the United Kingdom. In applying a similar strategy in this article, I am attempting to construct a window through which the reader can view some of the pleasure and pain associated with an academic career change in middle age. My intention in creating a short story with embedded "performance vignettes" is to "elicit emotional identification and understanding" (Denzin, 1989, p. 124) in the spirit of Ellis (1998b) who used a set of three "vignettes of stigma" to both "bring life to research [and] bring research to life" (p. 4). In this context, I concur with Erickson who suggested that such narrative vignettes should be "based on fieldnotes taken as the events happened" (p. 150). As a diarist for the past 30 years, my own "micro-ethnographies" (Nowak, 2000, p. 129) are derived from sources described by Smith (1999) as "diaries and free writing, self-introspection and interactive introspection" (p. 267).

By directly addressing myself as an organizational ethnographer via my feelings, my personal involvement, and my emotions in such "meaningful life vignettes" (Saldana, 2003, p. 221), I hope to encourage readers to taste the flavor of a crucial period in my academic life (Tayeb, 1991) by placing myself as one of the actors firmly within the "play" itself (Butler, 1997). Accepting Louis's (1991) argument that "I am an instrument of my inquiry: and the inquiry is inseparable from who I am" (p. 365), my intention here is to provide access to some of my natural and spontaneous reactions and dispel any notion of a researcher as an independent, objective observer (Stacey, 1996). In creating what Saldana (2003) might call three mini "ethnodrama[s]" (p. 221), I am aiming to connect myself both as writer and subject with the reader via an autobiographical account that allows members of the academic community to engage with events in my professional life and with me as a person (Varner, 2000). My chosen audience is active qualitative researchers, and I am asking

them (you) to participate in my life drama by reflexively examining what Rosen (1991) referred to as the "enlightening and disequilibrating implications of viewing a world which is our own" (p. 15). This world is inhabited by scholars who teach, research, publish, and often conceal their presence within third-person research accounts and sterile, formulaic curriculum vitae (CV). In this article, I use my own "nonstandard" career as a vehicle to deliver a plea for a return of the author to the research text, and perhaps the human being to the CV.

ACADEMIC CAREER

Although any academic's CV could be regarded as "a site for self-narration" (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 410), it is more likely to be a rather skeletal autobiographical construction of a working life than a rich account of the self. Within the Academy, there seems to be an implicit notion of the "ideal" or "standard" career in which rising stars achieve their chairs as early as possible, often in their late 20s or early 30s. Their extraordinarily dense CVs burgeon with publications as they become increasingly valuable commodities in the university transfer market and their talents are exhibited at a range of conferences on the global stage. In my experience, deviations from the standard are relatively unusual; as Blaxter, Hughes, Lovell, and Scanlon (1997) noted, "Travellers who take the generalist path or who wander under the guise of inter-disciplinarity face certain dangers of becoming lost souls on the way to career success" (p. 507). Frost and Taylor (1996) confirmed this in *Rhythms of Academic Life*, a collection of personal accounts of leading organizational scholars' careers. Most of the stories are accounts of professional lives that began with full-time doctoral study, and the resultant early career Ph.D. is often dismissed in two or three lines (e.g., Erez, 1996; Nkomo, 1996). Indeed, Kramer and Martin (1996) were explicit in their dismissal of any attempt to see too much significance in the achievement of a doctorate: "Some people endow the thesis with more importance than it deserves, seeing it as a culmination of a life's work: a little silly at the age of 26" (p. 175). In this world, the Ph.D. is seen as something to be completed quickly and as early as possible to get on to real academic work, a mere apprenticeship in one's establishment of an individual academic identity through monograph, conference, and journal publications.

A notably refreshing exception here is Clegg's (1996) account of his doctoral research between 1971 and 1974 in which he described his selection of research site as "like many other things in my professional life . . . a random choice with chaotic implications" (p. 39). Clegg's rich account of his Ph.D. studentship resonates with my own experience of studying for a *part-time* Ph.D., which took 5 years to complete and which heralded the start of a new academic career in my 50s. In this article I am, like Clegg, setting out to pro-

vide an account richer than any CV by focusing on my own “untidy,” idiosyncratic “process of career creation, re-creation and improvisation” (Mallon & Cohen, 2000, p. 1). In a brief account of changes in my professional life, I have chosen “to come out from behind the safe and comfortable mask of [the] third person hegemonic voice” (Boje, Luhman, & Baack, 1999, p. 356) to create an autoethnographic window into the world of a late-starter academic and in the process, generate methodological insights applicable to, and by, other qualitative researchers. This exposed position may not be a comfortable place for academics writing about their careers, as Vickers (2002) noted in describing her experience of “authentic writing . . . this treacherous space . . . [producing] anxiety as I consider who might read this—colleagues, strangers, even enemies” (p. 608). Despite such fears, I am driven to seek my own voice as a researcher using autoethnography as a means to “move from the inside of the author to outward expression while working to take readers inside themselves and ultimately out again” (Jones, 2002, p. 53). My story is presented as a reflexive first-person narrative with three embedded present-tense vignettes that are designed to enhance the authenticity of the account and as Erickson (1986) put it, “Give the reader a sense of being there in the scene” (p. 150). Although my story of academic career change has some resonance with Holt’s (2003) autoethnographic account of “coming to terms with teaching at university level” (p. 5), my focus is on the tensions I experienced on becoming an organizational ethnographer within a *research*-led U.K. business school.

MY CAREER STORY

I have been a teacher since 1974 but would claim to have been an academic for, at the most, only the past 10 of those 30 years. I was a teacher in the U.K. further education¹ sector for a decade before spending 17 years as a teacher-trainer in a higher education² college and latterly, 3 years as a lecturer at Nottingham University Business School. So my career has certainly not been the “standard” university scholar’s path. My part-time Ph.D. (Humphreys, 1999), which took 5 years to complete, was an ethnographic study of the organizational cultures of two organizations, one English and one Turkish. The period, from 1994 to 1999, involved my juggling with the competing demands of doctoral research and a full-time teaching position at Bolton Institute. My job as a teacher-trainer provided little formal space for any research activity, between not only the lecturing and its associated marking but also administrative work, teaching practice visits, and overseas consultancy. This was an intense and demanding time in my life physically, emotionally, and intellectually. As illustrated by an extract from the thesis:

I faced the loss of my mother who died in 1995 when I was researching in Turkey. In 1996 I was finally denied access to a research site (by the Vice-Chancellor) after prolonged negotiation with a UK university. In 1997 I had to deal with an ethical

objection to my research work within my own institution. The resolution of this dispute took a full academic year, leading to the creation of new institutional research protocols before I was allowed to begin data gathering. (Humphreys, 1999, p. 20)

As with any doctoral work, I experienced false starts, discarded material, rejected themes, and feelings of despair and disappointment as well as insight, creative breakthrough, new understanding, inspirational moments, and all the other emotions associated with the cultural interactions of ethnographic research. I submitted the thesis in January 1999 and in May of that year, I had a successful *viva* and immediately set about writing papers for journals. This was not easy working in an institution that did not value research, and I felt that I was living two very different academic lives. In one I was teaching more than 400 hours each year as well as dealing with student admissions, interviews, and teaching practice supervision. In my other life, I was a scholar of organizations researching and writing articles for international journals. Although I tried to merge these two roles by starting a research group, I was feeling increasingly overextended and often exhausted. When a job came up at Nottingham University Business School at the beginning of 2001 and I was invited for an interview, I was so physically debilitated by a chest infection that I withdrew from the selection board with rationalizing, self-justifying explanations to myself that I was "better off where I was as my students needed me" and "anyway, I wouldn't fit into an academic research department." Work in my own faculty continued to both intensify and diversify and although I was enjoying some aspects, such as an educational management consultancy in Lithuania and writing educational journal and conference papers, my prevailing state was exhaustion, and sometimes the pressure of work made me anxious to the point of desperation.

Then two significant things happened. First, a joint paper (Humphreys & Brown, 2002) derived from my thesis was accepted for publication by *Organization Studies*. This not only provided a tremendous confidence boost but also enhanced my value in the rapidly growing university business school academic career market. Second, another post as lecturer in organizational behavior was advertised at Nottingham University. This time I knew that I really wanted the job, aware that I needed to leave my current position if I was to have any success as a scholar. I prepared for the interview and although I was very nervous, I performed well enough on the day to be offered a position. I felt considerable relief and some joy at the prospect of working in a culture where research and publication was valued.

In the August before I took up my post in November 2001, I was able to go to Washington, D.C., to present another paper at the conference of the Academy of Management. This was an epiphany. I attended fascinating sessions run by Jane Dutton, Ken Gergen and Mary Gergen, Mary Jo Hatch, Majken Schulz, David Whetten, Dennis Gioia, and David Boje, to name but a few. I saw Edgar Schein, sat next to Geert Hofstede, and had glimpses of many other

authors that I had cited in my thesis and in subsequent publications. I felt as if I was living in a small suburb of Washington made up of the 6,000 Academy of Management delegates, a community where I could feel at home and yet simultaneously awed, challenged, stimulated, and excited. I had not, however, anticipated the fear generated by the presentation of the paper. Derived from my thesis, this was a joint effort with my Ph.D. supervisor Andrew Brown and my doctoral examiner Mary Jo Hatch, both of whom insisted that I, as first author, should be the presenter. Thus, on August 8th at 8:30 a.m., I found myself sitting at the front of a huge room in a Washington, D.C., hotel awaiting my turn as the middle of three presentations.

Vignette 1: Opportunity Knocks

This is really scary! What am I doing here? Why did I agree to present this paper? I am not an academic, I'm a teacher! Look at all those people in the audience . . . there's Andrew sitting next to Mary Jo . . . why did THEY have to come? I'm going to let them down, they're going to be really embarrassed at being associated with me as coauthors. The other two presenters look really confident, as have all the people I've seen do presentations in the last few days. I really shouldn't be here, I'm out of place, I'm not in their league. My God, some of the academics I've seen presenting papers are actually in the audience! Oh no, there are some of my new Nottingham colleagues coming in at the back of the room, what will they think when I freeze up and can't speak? I should have stayed in the U.K. and carried on working at Bolton, at least I was well respected there, small fish but in a very small pond; I feel like a minnow in a lake here, and there are some predatory-looking big fish around! OK, stay calm, I'm on my feet now, my dry mouth is subsiding, the script seems to be working, they are responding to me and laughing at my little jokes. This is going better than I could have expected, it's just like teaching a group of postgraduates, it actually feels alright, I am starting to get the familiar feeling of weightlessness and oneness with the group. People seem to be interested in what I am saying. They even want to hear more, everyone seems to want copies of the paper, they're thrusting business cards into my hand and asking questions that are giving me ideas for further work. This is a real buzz. Andrew and Jo smile encouragingly as they leave to give their own papers. I feel relieved but exhausted.

This is a story of transition. Between the acceptance of the paper and its presentation at the conference, the change in my career direction had been ego boosting but also confidence threatening. Although I had been successful in getting a post as a lecturer at a "good" university, I had not yet started the new job. Although 17 years of training teachers in a college had made me frustrated with the lack of opportunities for growth as a researcher and academic, I was very comfortable, perhaps even complacent, in my role. The successful Ph.D. and subsequent acceptance of an academic paper in an internationally rated journal had facilitated my career move, but this conference session was

the first tangible demand arising from the change and it forced me to “confront my self-image and become aware of [my] career anchors” (Schein, 1996, p. 81). This was a very uncomfortable position where I identified strongly with Carolyn Ellis (1998b) who wrote of her discomfort at presenting a paper at a communication conference:

She’s in a precarious position. While an old timer in sociology, she’s new in the field of communication. She’s not familiar with all the players, or the plays. She doesn’t know what to expect. (p. 2)

It is no wonder that I was nervous. For a couple of days, not only had I been surrounded by academics whose work I had read and cited but now some of them were members of my audience as well. I felt like a charlatan. In the end, I coped by falling back on teaching strategies that I had used in the past, but I was also aware that the performance was *too* teacherly, not theoretically exciting or creative, not enough of a challenge for the audience. I had survived, but in doing so I felt that I had not done justice to our paper. The next performer was much more innovative, challenging, and creative in her presentation (singing songs composed from interview transcripts) and this made me wish that I had taken more risks. Two years later, I was back at the Academy of Management conference but in Seattle this time, as one of a 14-strong contingent from Nottingham University Business School.

Vignette 2: A Good Gig

OK, there’s been a lot of change over the past couple of years. I feel that there has been much more acceptance of me and my work, by myself as well as others. My confidence has increased and this was reflected in how well the paper went yesterday. This was a duet with Andrew, who said afterwards that he thought that I had come of age as an academic, that I stamped my authority on the presentation, and that I answered the questions with flair and confidence. Praise indeed! Unusually, this was how it felt to me too. What a contrast to Washington. I knew what I was going to say, and I felt completely in command of my material and unintimidated by my audience. I was no longer the oldest “new kid on the block.” So, here I am sitting at the back of another session feeling very relaxed and a little fragile from last night’s celebration. Lots of academics that I know by sight and reputation in here. There’s always a good turnout to see scholars like Mary Jo Hatch, and I’m looking forward to it myself. See what I can learn about presenting a theory-rich paper. OK, Jo is on her feet now talking about corporate branding. She’s an impressive speaker, setting the scene, using SPAM brilliantly to illustrate the persistence of a brand. Then suddenly she says, “There’s even a Monty Python SPAM song, and I’m sure that Michael on the back row will give us a rendition” . . . OK, there’s no time for horror or nerves, and there seems to be no choice, so here goes . . . “SPAM SPAM SPAM SPAM SPAM SPAM. . . .” There’s some spontaneous laughter and applause, I get a warm feeling of acceptance that I hug closely to

myself, feeling at home and very comfortable in this room full of academics. Meeting John Hassard in a Seattle street later in the day, he says that he wished that I had sung another chorus because he wanted to join in! This gave me a further frisson of pleasure.

The 2 years between Washington and Seattle had been transformational. I started my new post in Nottingham on November 1, 2001. During the subsequent year, I initiated two new research projects, had three "good" jointly authored journal acceptances, and began to get used to life as a lecturer in a research-focused institution. I was now working in an institution where the demands of the national university Research Assessment Exercise³ were paramount. The most important issue for any rapidly growing U.K. business school was, and is, research publication in international journals, and I was now part of this "game" at Nottingham (albeit as a coauthor with Andrew Brown). My life was much more comfortable than it had been in Bolton where my research had been regarded as an irrelevant sideline. Things were also changing in my personal life. My long-term relationship had foundered under the pressures of travel and work demands. I had moved house, and I was trying to forge a new social life for myself in North Nottinghamshire where I had grown up in the 1950s and 1960s, albeit in a radically different community that was now suffering socioeconomic problems associated with the demise of the coal mining industry. This was an exciting, bittersweet, and often stressful time during which I felt that I was, for the first time, being tested intellectually in an academic community that valued scholarship above all other activity. It was strange for me at first, coming from a background in which teaching had always taken the highest priority. This was the first job where I had my own office, and I often found it strangely lonely when sometimes no one would knock on my door for 3 or 4 hours. The notion that it was possible to write at work was a revelation. As I became used to the new levels of autonomy and creative space, so my research output increased and I began to feel more confident. I took on an administrative role as staff development officer for the business school and gradually became more and more attuned to the demands of my new life.

Vignette 2 illustrates the beginnings of my socialization into the wider academic community. At the Seattle conference, I was a different performer, bringing some confidence, presence, and creativity to my presentation. Still very nervous before the formal paper delivery, I felt very secure when presenting with my coauthor Andrew Brown, especially when our jazz-like "swapping back and forth of roles between soloists" (Hatch, 2002, p. 79) allowed me to take the lead in responding to audience questions about methodology and fieldwork. The day after, still on a high despite my slight hangover, when I was playfully invited to "jam" with Jo Hatch, I had no hesitation in taking a brief center-stage role. I was confident enough to take the risk of a little notoriety, willing to accept that a humorous role might be an appropriate one for me professionally, something that had always been true of my social

life. A lack of fear of exposure, and more confidence in general, enabled me to feel relaxed about “jamming” with people I saw as outside of my league and in fact, I felt flattered by the invitation. I enjoyed the informal creativity within the highly formal structure of the overall presentation, feeling that momentarily, I was working in the upper-right quadrant of the Hatch (1997) model where high spontaneity–high intuition can lead to genuine creative “improvization.” Recognition and acknowledgment by other academics later in the day emphasized to me the “rightness” of my small contribution to Jo’s performance. I felt that I had arrived in the academic community, and that I had started to develop my own recognizable style. I began to feel that my academic career had really begun. But 2 months later in Nottingham, my confidence was again put to the test.

Vignette 3: Gonged Off

Just received the telephone call from someone in personnel to tell me in a lugubrious voice that I had “been unsuccessful in my application for senior lectureship.” This was not unexpected, as I felt that I had made a mess of the presentation in the morning of the previous day. My material was good, I had arranged it all in a neat and what I had thought was an impressive PowerPoint presentation of my past, current, and future research, but it just did not work. There was no spark, no goose bumps, I never left the ground but bumped along feeling foolish at being unable to take off. I felt that my performance was amateurish, my voice was tremulous, my hands were shaking, my mouth was dry—Had I learned nothing during the past 2 years? What happened to the confidence of Seattle? How come I was so nervous? Was it the fact that I was presenting to my colleagues and peers, being judged by people I saw everyday at Nottingham? Was it because I had overrehearsed to the point of destroying any spontaneity? Is it a deep-rooted self-doubt? Was it an inner voice that continued to tell me that I was out of my depth here and that I shouldn’t be attempting to perform at this standard? At the postpresentation buffet lunch, everyone was very nice and encouraging, but I could only wonder what they were really thinking, and I had already resigned myself to failure before the interview in the afternoon. The interview seemed to go well, although my lack of single-authored articles was raised as an issue. Friday evening became a time for a few beers and reflection on lost opportunities! I will just have to wait until I’ve got a few more articles published, particularly a solo piece that I am working on currently. I need to convince them and probably more important, myself, that I am worthy of promotion. I think that I will feel embarrassed for a while at work, but that will pass.

I felt good after Seattle, coming back to preparations for my third academic year at Nottingham. In September, I had a successful week teaching M.B.A. students in Singapore and things seemed to be nicely on track for the year. The opportunity to apply for a senior lecturer position seemed to fit in with the general feeling of “good progress,” and I prepared my application and pre-

sentation with some confidence. Vignette 3 illustrates a further loss of innocence as I experienced another academic rite of passage. I have feelings here of scrutiny and exposure, feeling under the spotlight of an institutional "gaze" (Said, 1978) that had moved me to the right of the "Self-Other hyphen" (Fine, 1998). In musing on the difficult experience of the previous day, I am, as Stacey (1996) put it, using "my feelings in the situation to hypothesize what is actually happening" (p. 261). My reflective interpretation was that this had been a low point in my career, the equivalent for a musician of a bad gig or for a comedian, a flop. Just when I felt that I was making progress and when I needed to impress my peers, I dried up and fluffed the whole performance. The fear-and-flight effect of adrenalin had unexpectedly made my performance wooden. I felt really uncomfortable in front of colleagues that I worked with every day. The expectation that I should talk about how inventive and creative I was just felt too much like what my parents would have called "showing off." My own internal monologue of self-doubt took over, and I found it impossible to recover in what comedians call a "flop sweat." There was no spontaneity, no improvisation; unlike Washington and Seattle, the performance was flat, lifeless, and dull.

Too much rehearsal driven by the possibilities associated with success (and failure) had dulled the flavor of the piece, creating a jaded and unattractive, humorless performance. Despite reassurances from my colleagues, I felt that I had let myself down, and that I could have done so much better. However, in the end, I also realized that the ability to perform under pressure was an important factor in gaining recognition and promotion, and I resolved to do better next time, perhaps by preparing less and allowing myself more room to extemporize. The catharsis of the evening socializing helped me put things in perspective. I had been "gonged off," but as Peplowski (1998) argued, "The only way to really learn is by doing it, by climbing up on the bandstand and failing and learning how to deal with your failures" (p. 561). I resolved to prioritize and push hard with my single-authored reflexive piece about autoethnography (*this article*) so that in the next Research Assessment Exercise, I would be able to say that this was entirely my work, another rite of passage experienced by many academics in their 20s and 30s, but for me in my 50s. I realized that although physically middle aged, as an academic I was still young.

READING THE STORY

I now ask *you* as readers of my own autoethnographic narrative to examine how you *feel* about it. Has this brief account of episodes in an academic career been enriched by the autoethnographic representational strategy? My hope is that, as Ellis (1998b) put it, "these vignettes, even without their larger contexts, have moved listeners . . . to sense some of the evocative power,

embodiment, and understanding of life that comes through the concrete details of autoethnographic narrative" (p. 4). But have the vignettes provided *you* with further insight into processes of reflexivity? How can this, if at all, be applied to other qualitative research accounts? Has my autobiographical narrative allowed "the subject to gaze back into [his] own multi-storied life space" (Boje et al., 1999, p. 349) and hence, focused your gaze in the same direction, seeking mutual insight into the processes of qualitative research? Or is this for you just another one of the "self-indulgent writings published under the guise of social research and ethnography" (Coffey, 1999, p. 155)? Have you felt any resonance with my "self-conscious engagement with the world" (Ball, 1990, p. 159), or is it, for you, just "navel-gazing" (Sparkes, 2001, p. 215)? I address these questions under headings of *authenticity*, *exposure*, *reflexivity*, and *application*.

Authenticity

I begin with a consideration of the value added by autoethnographic fragments in an account of career change. In an attempt to "perform the magical feat of transforming the content of [my] consciousness into a form that others can understand" (Eisner, 1997, p. 4), I suggest that this autoethnographic story provides at least some of the small details the "mundaneity and everydayness . . . the everyday things that people get up to in their everyday lives" (Bate, 1997, p. 1164) that endow it with authenticity. My aim is to provide living flesh for the CV skeleton, using personal details to create a plausible story. There is emotion here, feelings of failure and success with which readers can identify. As an academic, I am a human being experiencing fear, laughter, sweat, and perhaps most significant, uncertainty and ambivalence. How often in our job applications, seminar presentations, and interviews do we reveal our own emotional fragility? Wearing masks of certainty and clear direction, we intimidate those around us, especially those new to the academic game. This story removes the mask from the only academic I have the right to expose as unsure of himself, doubtful of his own ability, and "engaged in a dual quest for self-identity and empathy" (Humphreys, Brown, & Hatch, 2003, p. 6).

In presenting my self-portrait, I concur with Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997) who argued that "the portraitist's reference to her own life story does not reduce the reader's trust, it enhances it. It does not distort the responsibility of the researcher and the authenticity of the work, it gives them clarity" (p. 96). I also do this, in part, because it would have been helpful if someone had done it for me. At an early stage in my academic life, I needed evidence that other academics were also human beings with their own frailties; as Bruner (1986) noted, "Arguments convince one of their truth, stories of their life likeness" (p. 11). I tell my own autoethnographic story *pour encourager les autres*, to show that not all academics have the "standard" career that

begins with an early Ph.D. and continues with smooth and rapid advancement to a chair.

Exposure

In claiming that my account is richer for its "I-witness" nature, I agree with Richardson (2000) who argued that "the ethnographic life is not separable from the self" (p. 253). This autoethnographic story, with its embedded vignettes, is an attempt on my part to "deconstruct borders" (Rosen, 1991, p. 6) between myself as author, my identity, my career, and my readers in an acknowledgement of Reed-Danahay's (1997) claim that "the telling of life stories whether to others or to self alone, [should be] treated as an important shaping event in social and psychological processes" (p. 409). Here I am supporting the idea of Boje et al. (1999) that "people tell stories to enact an account, or ideology of themselves" (p. 341) but more important, I am in agreement with Reed-Danahay's argument that "personal, autobiographical modes of writing are vital for knowledge production in the social sciences" (p. 411). In interpreting aspects of my own unusual academic career "story," I have used autoethnography as a strategy to enable other academic readers to vicariously experience its "more erratic, circuitous rhythms and patterns" (Mallon & Cohen, 2000, p. 10). It is perhaps unusual for academics to expose their doubts, fears, and potential weaknesses in such accounts, as Vickers (2002) observed, "Writing on the edge—and without a safety net" (p. 608); but by exposing my own shaky career start, I may assist other new academics starting out in their own careers. Caplan (as cited in Plummer, 2001) expressed my feelings very well: "Writing a personal narrative is perhaps worth a try because the prize is very great: that of some degree of transcendence of differences, of reaffirmation of common humanity" (p. 395).

Reflexivity

I would also argue that the use of vignettes is explicitly reflexive. Although the insertion of such present-tense micro-narratives into an already brief story could be interpreted as "messy text" (Marcus, 1998, p. 390), I suggest that it provides an interesting approach to "the existentialist dilemma of interpretation" (Rosen, 1991, p. 18). I am offering this "idiosyncratic mode of sense-making" (Chia, 1996, p. 56) to other researchers as an alternative representational strategy. Using insights provided by writing my *story*, I am extending Rosen's (1991) argument that "ethnographers study others in order to find out more about themselves and others" (p. 2) to claim that an autoethnographic approach enables the researcher to look inward, studying himself or herself to create a reflexive dialogue with the readers of the piece.

Richardson (2000) is also an advocate of such autoethnographic practice, arguing that "self-reflexivity brings to consciousness some of the complex political/ideological agendas hidden in our writing" (p. 254). I am in agreement here with Cary (1999) who wrote that "just as ethnography is a means of representation . . . so is life history a means of authorization" (p. 426). Although Golden-Biddle and Locke (1997) have argued that "authorial character is constructed by authors in the text even in our 'scientific' journal articles" (p. 72), I am suggesting that the overt reflexivity of autoethnographic accounts reveals not only the "net that contains [the researcher's] epistemological, ontological, methodological premises" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 26) but also their "personality" (Punch, 1998, p. 162). In taking such a "positionally reflexive view" (Macbeth, 2001, p. 38), I have acknowledged that there are dangers arising from the charge of self-indulgence and narcissism but would argue strongly that this risk is outweighed by the potential in autoethnography for "acts of witnessing, empathy, and connection that extend beyond the self of the author" (Sparkes, 2001, p. 222).

Application

Finally, the question arises as to where the use of autoethnography and first-person vignettes can take us as qualitative researchers. Is it applicable as a strategy for increasing the richness, reflexivity, plausibility, and authority of *all* our empirical research? Or is it of only limited use in special cases such as an autobiographical account of my academic career? In arguing for wider application, I agree with Ellis and Bochner (2000) that autoethnography "stimulate[s] more discussion of working the spaces between subjectivity and objectivity, passion and intellect, and autobiography and culture" (p. 761). I argue that the use of autoethnographic vignettes in any qualitative research account would enrich the story, ethnography, or case study and enhance the reflexivity of the methodology.

Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2001) supported this in their advocacy of the inclusion of "evocative fieldnotes" in research accounts, as they can "provide particularly rich accounts of the processual nature and full complexities of experience" (p. 361). Such autoethnographic fragments become a means by which the researcher can explicitly question and highlight pertinent thoughts and emotional experiences. They enable an almost Joyce-like "stream of consciousness" that adds depth unavailable to a hegemonic third-person narrative. They also enable a more fluid, descriptive, and insightful means of writing, which can be simply more interesting than "standard" prose. As Spry (2001) noted, "Autoethnographic texts reveal the fractures, sutures and seams of self interacting with others in the context of researching lived experience" (p. 712). I consider that *all* qualitative research accounts would benefit from the explicit and overt presence of the first-person "I" of the researcher.

As Jenks (2002) observed, "Who I am affects what I observe, what I write, and how others will react to what I say" (p. 184). I am arguing that auto-ethnographic vignettes, in directly addressing the "who I am" issue for both the researcher *and* the reader, enable "another person's world of experience to inspire critical reflection on your own" (Sparkes, 2001, p. 221).

CLOSURE

According to Van Maanen (1979), "A principal aim of ethnography is to uncover and explicate the ways in which people in particular work settings account for, take action and otherwise manage their day to day situation" (p. 540). In its original inception, this article was intended to be an examination of lessons to be learned from a late-starting academic career. Inspired by the use of autobiographical vignettes in my own Ph.D., the intention was to provide help to other doctoral students and their supervisors to avoid some of the pitfalls I had experienced during the 5-year period from beginning my research to a successful viva. However, as Frost (1991) noted, "We and what we do are, after all, always works in progress" (p. 351), and in the 5 years since the *viva voce*, the focus of my professional life has moved toward new concerns with research, publication, and academic career. I have found, as Holt (2003) did, that my recent career story's "plot hinged on a series of clashes between my personal teaching history and the . . . ideology of the research institution I had joined" (p. 5). Hence, inevitably, it is the issues of *postdoctoral* teaching, research, and scholarly outcomes that have come to dominate my working existence. This article, therefore, has been a reflection of my life and career direction in its discursive turn toward qualitative methodological issues, particularly reflexivity and "alternative forms of data representation" (Eisner, 1997, p. 4).

I have also been concerned with an avoidance of any "pretence that research is value-free" (Janesick, 1998, p. 41). My original contribution over and above Gergen's (2001) idea that "it is the autobiographical voice that informs major movements in scholarship since the discursive turn" (p. 74) is in the advocacy of a highly reflexive representational form for qualitative research texts that exposes "the mechanics of its own production" (Rhodes, 2001, p. 32). In advocating the use of autoethnographic vignettes as an enriching representational strategy for *all* qualitative research, I am arguing for the construction of "a multi-layered text which allows rather than specifies a wealth of insights reaching well beyond the author's particular predicament" (Sparkes, 2001, p. 221). I hope that it is clear that my autoethnographic story and its vignettes have, as Spry (2001) put it, "encouraged me to dialogically look back upon my self as other, generating critical agency in the stories of my life" (p. 708). Hence, in seeking to create an "'aha' experience" (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991, p. 617) for readers, I am using personal micro-narratives to

increase both the plausibility and the verisimilitude of the story. The embedded vignettes also present reflexive and poignant illustrations of "being there" (Geertz, 1988, p. 6), allowing the reader to enter the story and vicariously experience the events portrayed (Bruner, 1990).

My intention has been to illustrate the rich methodological insight that can be created via glimpses into "the ethnographer's own taken-for-granted understandings of the social world under scrutiny" (Van Maanen, 1979, p. 547) and to encourage readers "in interpreting the autoethnographic text [to] feel/sense the fractures in their own communicative lives" (Spry, 2001, p. 712). I am aware that some readers may find this piece too much of a "confessional tale" (Van Maanen, 1988). As Saldana (2003) pointed out, "A problematic choice is the researcher's inclusion as a character in the ethnodrama. Does the principal investigator have a role to play . . . is he or she a major or a minor character?" (p. 221). In creating such an overtly reflexive narrative with me as *major* character, I am conscious of the dangers of a "decay into narcissism" (Keith, 1992, p. 558), which Hatch (1996) suggested is "most likely to occur if the teller of the tale does not fully grasp the difference between self-reflexivity and self-consciousness" (p. 372).

However, as Spry (2001) noted, "Good autoethnography is not simply a confessional tale of self-renewal; it is a provocative weave of story and theory" (p. 713). I agree with Gabriel's (1998) observation that "ultimately the truth of the story lies not in its accuracy but its meaning" (p. 136). Hence, my intention has been to interweave an autoethnographic career story with methodological theory and to "draw an audience into a collective experience in which a version of truth is demonstrated for the collective to judge" (Butler, 1997, p. 928). The presentation of this article could be seen as a performance itself, "one interpretation of my life story" (Varner, 2000, p. 456) with internally embedded performances (vignettes) acting as discursive sequences that strive to construct a narrative version of a researcher's "drive for individuation within a social group" (Humphreys et al., 2003, p. 8). Finally, I must note that removing my "academic armor" (Lerum, 2001, p. 470) and exposing the ambivalence and uncertainty in my life and career is both cathartic and quite vertiginous. I am left with great empathy for Jenks (2002) when she wrote, "First I feel a little odd calling myself an ethnographer. . . . Second I feel awkward calling myself an *autoethnographer*. It's taken me a long time to write about my experiences, and I'm still not sure my own narratives are appropriate 'data' for analysis" (p. 171).

POSTSCRIPT

One week after the interview, I was offered (and accepted) the post of senior lecturer when one of the external candidates withdrew. One of the major issues raised in my interview and subsequent feedback was the lack of

single-authored articles in internationally rated journals. The acceptance of this piece by *Qualitative Inquiry* addresses that issue.

NOTES

1. The further education sector in the United Kingdom caters to students 16 years old and older. It operates between the school and higher education sectors. "Its very diversity makes it difficult to pin down. . . . The curriculum spans not only study and qualifications which are uniquely offered in colleges, but also those offered in parallel in school and in higher education" (Lumby, 2001, p. 2).

2. The U.K. higher education sector includes all universities and a number of degree-awarding institutions such as Bolton Institute whose long-term aim is to achieve university status.

3. The Research Assessment Exercise assesses the quality of research in universities and colleges in the United Kingdom. The main purpose of the Research Assessment Exercise is to enable the higher education funding bodies to distribute public funds for research selectively on the basis of quality. Institutions conducting the best research receive a larger proportion of the available grant. The next exercise will be held in 2008.

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