

Journal of Research Practice
Volume 6, Issue 1, Article M2, 2010



Main Article:

The Crises and Freedoms of Researching Your Own Life

Caroline Pearce

12 Dewchurch Drive, Sunnyhill, Derby DE23 1XP, UK

pearce.caroline630@gmail.com

Abstract

There has been much work highlighting the benefits of autoethnographic research yet little acknowledgement of the demands researching your own life makes on the emotional and mental wellbeing of the researcher. This paper explores the consequences that can arise as a result of autoethnographic research by detailing the crises involved in researching a topic that the researcher has experienced herself. This paper discusses the re-emergence of my grief over the death of my mother as I researched into the experience of other young women who had experienced the death of their mother during their youth. The research process was a journey in which crises were experienced that conflicted and illuminated the emerging findings of the research. The role of the researcher and the researcher's subjectivity--emotions, feelings, actions--are highlighted as integral to research practice. Accepting vulnerability and problematic feelings and emotions can be seen both as an important part of grieving the loss of a mother but also a significant step in conducting research and being a researcher.

Keywords: autoethnography; motherloss; emotions; vulnerability; grief; narrative

Suggested Citation: Pearce, C. (2010). The crises and freedoms of researching your own life. *Journal of Research Practice*, 6(1), Article M2. Retrieved [date of access], from <http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/219/184>

Author's Note. In this article, star (*) marks are used to demarcate self-reflective free-style writing from the rest of the text.

1. Introduction

Autoethnography as a research practice has risen in popularity over recent years, particularly in providing insightful and illuminative accounts of individual's experience

of traumatic events such as illness (Frank, 1991), disability (Pillsbury, 2001), depression (Smith, 1999), and grief (Handsley, 2001; Herrmann, 2005). Telling stories and constructing a narrative about experiences can empower individuals by helping them to reclaim control over chaotic events and to build a positive sense of self (Kehily, 1995). However, these claims to an empowered sense of self only tell one part of a complex and emotionally draining research process. Autoethnography can also provide its author more questions than answers and leave open-ended or ambiguous conclusions (Herrmann, 2005; Ronai, 1996; Smith, 1999).

For my Masters degree thesis I decided to explore young women's experience of early motherloss. The fact that my mother died when I was 15 was unquestionably a primary motive for initiating the research. Admitting that this was the case, however, was far from straightforward. By writing and publishing an autoethnographic account of my experiences I believed I had overcome any problematic feelings concerning the death of my mother. This research was designed to move beyond my story into the lives of other young women. As I began the research however, I discovered I was unable to avoid involving my emotions and grief about the death of my own mother. The personal and sociological (Davidman, 1997) began to intersect and intertwine until I could not separate them from each other. The question of whether my personal connection was clouding or assisting my ability to perceive the other women's stories affected me deeply. I thought I was merely seeking to resolve my own curiosity and therefore my task was a self-serving one, not one in which I was perceptive to the experiences of others. I thought I had to justify my choice of research topic and this meant asking difficult questions about why I had still not resolved my own grief.

This article seeks to detail the journey of the research process (Noy, 2003) in which I sought to understand the cause of my problematic feelings and utilise my vulnerability as a valid and insightful research tool (Valentine, 2007). In the process of research I came undone by my grief but my ability to come undone also revealed the power of my vulnerability. The journey was one in which I faced a series of crises of confidence and insecurity in my role of researcher and in my sense of self. Feelings of inadequacy and feeling like a "fraud" over my choice of research topic at points overwhelmed me to the point of inactivity and withdrawal. I realised that I had to accept my own vulnerability not only as a researcher but as the young woman who had lost her mother. I found that I could not detach my emotions from the research but had to recognise they were an integral part of the research process.

2. Beginnings

*

The bright crisp morning attempts to tear out my numbed limbs from the hideous sleepless cocoon that had smothered and enclosed them once again last night. The sky looks cartoon blue making a caricature out of the landscape. Walking, I become aware that my feet do not feel as if they are on the ground. In fact, I am not even controlling them. They keep walking, walking, one foot in front of the other and yet I cannot hear my

brain tell them to do so. And the ground, I can't feel it, as hard as I pound my feet, I feel nothingness, weighted air. The trees to the side of the pavement thin out and there is nothing but me and the bare cement. I see a lamppost ahead, about 10 metre away. I hurry towards it, but my feet detached from me, move autonomously, beyond my recognition. I suddenly become aware of my flailing detached limbs, my small head inadequate to contain all the information it requires, drowning in the surrounding nothingness. *I have no safety net.* Everything so much bigger than me, so much more, so much unknown. Everything so raw, bleak, futile. Faces and the sky--all--stripped bare. People so distant, in a different realm to me; I'm engulfed in my cocoon.

In my cocoon I am so conscious of my body; my mortal body. I am no transcendent being, cut me and I bleed, I feel pain. So much loneliness, emptiness, so many questions. *So little control.* No father no mother figure to make it better, no-one to protect but lots of other unknowing little people. And my head . . . my head is exploding, overwhelmed, splitting at the sides.

*

I was simply making the journey to work, to the café where I worked part time, and suddenly the world changed, an intense fear seized my stomach. Pure panic, despair and terror. But at what? I had no idea.

I was in the middle of my MA degree, something I had been so eager to do a city I found exciting and had longed to live. I was free from all that had haunted me in the past--my dead mother--and yet something was wrong. I was unhappy and I could not understand why.

Depression, anxiety attacks--these were familiar sensations and feelings. But I had progressed beyond those now I had even written about it:

Though my identity ruptured, *I did not.* Though my world was interrupted *it did not end.* Freedom will always be obstructed by others . . . the key is to realise that freedom is only given by the self. It is the knowledge that even when you have lost everything, you have not lost yourself (Pearce, 2008, p.145)

I had allowed myself to free and I had recovered. I had actually achieved something now. I was not 15 anymore, sitting by my dead mother's bedside puffy faced with tears of regret, neither was I 19, a university dropout, housebound due to panic attacks. Starting at university was not a conscious move for a career or anything in particular. Yet by learning I became excited about something outside of myself, something bigger than me. At the graduation ceremony I discovered I had won two awards, one for outstanding academic achievement and a special award for completion in the face of challenging circumstances. I was horrified.

I thought that if I got everything I wanted--to be recognised for my abilities--all my problematic behaviours and irrational feelings would fade away. Instead, I felt disappointment. Everything seemed average, unoriginal, no worthwhile cause, no desire. I felt alone.

3. Autoethnography as Research Practice

Personal life is a topic often deemed too parochial for the focus of sociological research, yet the recent “biographical turn” (Rustin, 2000) has sought to reposition the role of personal “interiorities” as central to understanding social experiences (Smart, 2007). As Stanley (1993) concluded in her exploration of her own personal writings about the illness and eventual death of her mother: “all knowledge of the world is rooted in the knowledge-production processes engaged in by inquiring and experiencing and therefore knowing subjects” (p. 214). Her recollections were not only (ontological) insights into the workings of her own individual mind or of her personal and social relations, but an epistemological claim on the very grounding of how knowledge is formed. This is the crucial underpinning of autoethnographic accounts that actively recall on personal experiences as a means to understanding and therefore making claims on the knowledge of wider social relations (Ellis, 1999, 2004). Creating autoethnographic accounts is a way to reconcile the divide between the individual and the collective by acknowledging that individual “embodied” remembering is always “embedded” in a social context (Mitzal, 2003, p. 77).

Autoethnography despite its popularity however is not always necessarily considered a credible method or indeed a critical form of analysis (Delamont, 2007). The alleged “laziness” of autoethnography is levelled against the often overly evocative nature of autoethnography. The goals of autoethnography--being evocative and achieving verisimilitude--make autoethnography an easy target for claims of navel-gazing and self-absorption. I would agree with these critics that autoethnographic research that simply strives to be evocative and achieve verisimilitude is both limiting itself as well as contributing little in critical analysis of social phenomenon. It is evident that writing autoethnography requires balance, and perhaps a development of the researcher’s analytic capacities (Anderson, 2006; Atkinson, 2006). Yet as I will detail further this is not always an easy task to fulfil. For example the research I discuss in this article was not intended to include my own experience. After reading Rowling’s (1999) article that alerted me to the ethical importance of monitoring emotions as a qualitative researcher of grief and loss, I had taken certain measures to ensure against any interference from my emotions by keeping a research diary, in which I expressed my thoughts and feelings concerning the research process, and undertaking regular counselling sessions.

Autoethnography starts with personal life and requires paying attention to physical feelings and emotions, by actively encouraging emotional recall (Ellis, 1999, 2004). Unlike autoethnographic accounts, however, I was not open with my motives from the outset. I felt disclosing my own experience was unprofessional and my experience inadequate for analysis. Autoethnography also requires the author to write about the incident soon after it took place but a critical distance is required in order to understand

the experience, to describe it, to be in the situation, rather than simply writing one's feelings or judgements about it. I found I started writing trying to omit my self to maintain a critical distance, yet my self found itself seeping into the text. I could not extract myself from the situation.

Rowling (1999) recommends interviewers maintain an “emphatic distance,” to ward against entangling your own life experiences in “hearing” participants’ stories. The aim is to neither be “out” (too distanced from) or “in” (too overwhelmed by) the research but *alongside*. Yet I found that being overwhelmed by the stories I was hearing became the only way I could function. The experience of a panic attack was the first time I began to realise the intensity and burden of my grief over my mother’s death. It was at this point I recognised the toll the act of researching my own life was taking on my emotional, physical and mental state. My emotions felt problematic. They were distracting and diverting my attention from the research process and the data I was gathering (Woodthorpe, 2009). This was something I felt most sharply after entering the field.

4. Researching Vulnerably

The data of the study consisted of narratives from four in-depth interviews and two written narratives. The women that participated in the study were aged from 10 to 18 when their mother died. The women’s age at interview ranged from 22 to 39. The participants were recruited largely through notices placed in emailing lists across different faculties at the University. These reached both staff, and postgraduate and undergraduate students. Posters were also put up in cafés across the university campus. After initial contact through e-mail I sent information about the research to ensure all participants had full details of the research. After they replied with confirmation I sent further information which outlined details about confidentiality and anonymity. I also included the research questions and objectives of the research as I felt I wanted the participant to truly feel as if they were collaborating in the research, and also to give them a sense of what to talk about at interview. In correspondence I also mentioned my own background and the fact I had lost my mother at 15. This is something I later felt was an unwise move. At the time however I strongly believed that it would assist in providing a deeper and more empathic understanding between myself and the participant, as well as believing I needed to be completely transparent in my motives.

I made my role--as researcher not counsellor--clear before the interview and also reassured the women before and at the interview that they need only talk about what they felt comfortable with. I was very aware of the emotional nature of the research and the importance to allow the participant to feel as if they have control over the situation (Dyregrov, 2004). This also included the participants’ right to read and comment on the completed dissertation.

I took a narrative approach to the interviews--an approach increasingly used in research on grief (Gilbert, 2002). During the interviews I limited my participation, asking few direct questions and allowing the women space to build and guide their own narrative. This open-ended approach to interview provoked different responses in the participants.

In particular one participant Charlotte (name changed) had difficulty knowing what to say without direct questions. To assist Charlotte in recalling memories I shared a little of my experience, which I thought might help stimulate ideas. This however seemed to inhibit Charlotte's response. After the interview I wrote about the difficulties I experienced in my research diary:

How does the absence of "I couldn't imagine if my mum died . . ." affect the speaker? They no longer feel they are telling someone something they didn't know (being informative) but trying to avoid telling them something they already know (being irrelevant).

I am having second thoughts about whether I did the right thing in letting participants know about my experience. I am unsure whether it is a help or hindrance at this point. Am I using it to justify myself? As a smokescreen? As a way to connect? I still believe it needs to be two-way process--but does shared understanding necessarily come from shared experiences? I am beginning to think I approached this all wrong. People often like to talk to people who don't know--they learn about themselves in being informative, useful. Nodding in agreement might not reassure or show understanding but restrict what they feel they have to say, to share as knowledge. Perhaps if I gain another participant I will not mention my experience--see the difference? I feel racked with ethical uncertainties! Is my personal connection clouding or assisting my ability to perceive? (Author's research diary, February 22, 2008)

As a result I did not share my experience in the next two interviews and I avoided all mention of my personal relation in correspondence with the further two participants. I am not sure whether speaking of my own experiences really did inhibit Charlotte's ability to respond to the extent I felt it did at the interview. Charlotte mentioned at the close of the interview:

I haven't really spoken to anyone who, you know anyone like this. It's very strange. It's not strange, I never, I didn't I mean sitting here I hadn't really been thinking that at all and it hasn't like stopped me kind of from saying anything or . . . I don't know whether it's made me say more or whether . . . (Charlotte interview transcript, February 18, 2008)

The situation of talking to someone else who had also lost their mother was an unusual one for Charlotte and I felt that that the presence of my story overshadowed her ability to construct her own narrative. This was in contrast to another participant Sara (name changed) who felt more at ease exchanging experiences with someone who understood. At the first and second interviews I found I could not hold back my desire to share my experiences. I longed to talk to another person who had had a similar experience to mine yet I was unable to take responsibility for both my own and the participants' responses to the interview. After the two interviews I wondered what my motives behind the research were and whether they were purely selfish. I wanted answers from these women but I thought I had nothing to give them in return.

Hollway (2008, 2009) and Smart (2009) have both argued researcher subjectivity can be used as means to improving research practice. Understanding and recognising our responses to participants' narratives can enable further understanding of the subjectivity of participants by highlighting the intersubjective nature of the research encounter and the relational nature of identity construction and meaning. Interviews are encounters that even with the best planning are spontaneous, contingent interactions. The interviews I conducted with the women and the ways we interacted with one another produced meanings I could not anticipate. Narratives cannot be separated from the context in which they were produced nor can the emotions and feelings that resulted from them. Narratives are constructions that present the "displays" and "doings" of identity, and are used strategically to portray one's sense of self in a certain light (Riessman, 1990, 1993). In the interviews the participants were portraying their own narrative-identity, but also my absence (making myself purposely withdraw) or presence (making my identity as motherless daughter known) provided me with my own narrative, one I found was impinging on the women's narratives.

I felt a great deal of embarrassment acknowledging my own emotions in the unfolding research process (Valentine, 2007; Woodthorpe, 2007, 2009). Valentine (2007) discusses the integral role of a researcher's emotional responses to the findings in grief research. Similarly Davidman's (2000) honesty over the emotional effect of her research into motherloss on her own mental wellbeing revealed I was not alone in my mixed feelings of grief and embarrassment over my lack of "professionalism." Later I wrote in my research diary:

My recent revelations (neediness, rejection, separation anxiety) is colouring my thoughts in how I understand other's experiences. Need to be aware of this yet it is also assisting me in seeing things perhaps I would have been too stubborn to see or admit to before. By being open to my own vulnerability--accepting it--allowed me to see, understand, accept the problematic narratives of others. No seamless narrative--I never really embraced this fully before--going into what it really means is quite a terrifying experience. (Author's research diary, June 14, 2008)

As Mortimore (2007) describes, it felt "as if I were dropping the researcher's protective cloak of invisibility" (p. 9). I was becoming more visible and therefore more exposed and vulnerable. My feelings of insecurity were not only related to feeling inexperienced as a researcher, but the whole process of embarking on the research meant I had to justify it in my own mind. I had to justify my own motives and that meant asking myself difficult questions about why I still did not have any answers. In becoming vulnerable I had to face some hard facts: I had not recovered; I had not overcome my grief; I may never overcome my grief.

5. Coming Undone

As the research continued more and more questions revealed themselves. I was reading and thinking about motherloss all the time. I could not forget the details at the end of the

day; imagine that motherloss was an experience that was not relevant to my own life. What I was reading was describing my own life, my own subjectivity. These descriptions were rarely positive. The early death of a mother meant a daughter was prone to depression (Harrison & Harrington, 2001), was unable to form strong attachments (Hepworth, Ryder, & Dreyer, 1984), and had an insatiable need for love (Tracey, 2008). Even when the results of motherloss were positive (Schultz, 2007), I felt inadequate because I did not feel “resilient” or strong.

The concept of resilience has recently become a common way to describe how individuals emerge from “chaos” and into a positive narrative (Edwards, 2005; Richardson, 2002; White, Driver, & Warren, 2008). Resilience is the ability to “bounce back” from setbacks and maintain a resistance from experiencing future negative events. Resilience is often seen as a trait or characteristic innate to an individual’s being and so is a way to explain how people recover from trauma. However, the whole idea of resilience began to feel like an oppressive label imposed on me by “others.”

Yet resilient was also a label I had adopted myself. I felt I should be resilient; I felt obliged to recover in order to act as an example that recovery against the odds is possible. Through fear of disappointing others (and myself) I strove to fulfil the obligations of the label I was given. At supervisory meetings I disguised my emotions and feelings of despair as I was fearful of showing my inexperience and “weakness.” Yet stifling my feelings only meant others could not help me and thus served to isolate me further. The demands of this label were becoming an overwhelming burden that led to feelings of inadequacy, compounded by the struggle I had in reconciling the growing gulf between the reality of my feelings and behaviours and the resilient self through which I would engage with others outside. The feeling of guilt and shame I felt inhibited me further from speaking out about my true feelings. In truth I was falling part; I wanted to give up.

The only opportunity I found to really let my vulnerability be visible was in the counselling sessions I attended once a week, which had at this point become a lifeline. One particular session could be described as my “breakthrough.” It was a simple statement, but it was the first time it was voiced verbally. We were talking about needing unconditional love, needing reassurance, and my constant search for this:

Counsellor: But you have to realise you may never find this . . .

My response: (bursts into tears)

6. Detaching Self (Withdrawal)

*

I can’t breathe, so suffocating. Fittingly it begins to rain and it pours luxuriously over me, soaking my dress, my hair, my skin. Letting the rain devour me just to feel. *Walking home alone, no rescue.* The rain mimics the tears that just won’t come out.

*

It was while walking home alone in the rain one night that my reaction to the counsellor's comment finally became clear to me. As the rain fell, exposing me and the emotions I felt inside, acting as tears when I could not form any; I realised that the saviour I so craved for (my mother) that I was waiting to rescue me, was never going to arrive. I realised I would never find the unconditional love and reassurance of a mother I longed for, I realised I would never recover and I felt I would remain forever in chaos. In rejecting ideas of resilience and recovery, I started to become obsessed with the idea of "no recovery" as the flipside to resilience. I began to question what happens when the story ends badly; do you have no story to tell?

No recovery articulates a situation in which mourning is no longer recognised to be a transitional state, but is, rather, a condition of human existence . . . No recovery is not a neutral state. It is a state of disorder . . . (Kauffman, 2008, pp. 74-5)

Chaos is not a liveable state; it is a situation of no future, no choices, and a limited and negative sense of self (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). In this chaotic state I began to withdraw from the world around me and from the research. I abandoned routine and organisation, creating my own chaotic sense of time that left me disorientated as I escaped through watching films, staying inside my room during the day with the curtains closed. I could not read or engage with anything, everything became smaller. The world became distant as I convinced myself I did not exist, disappearing into nothingness.

The task of transcription lay before me yet I avoided it, at first thinking it was simply laziness, but there was something that I was not willing to face. I could not bear to listen to the tapes or write up the transcripts. I felt scared as if the words the women spoke would reveal something I was hiding from. Or worse they would reveal nothing, they would not provide any answers. In the interview setting I recognised how I withdrew my presence through fear of overwhelming the participant's narratives. Yet this withdrawal was also a means of avoidance. Withdrawing my narrative/self was a way to repress the overwhelming emotions I felt, that were now beginning to seep out of my control. In this withdrawal I was avoiding accepting the fact of my mother's death, whereas making myself present meant accepting her absence. It was easier to disappear than accept this difficult, hideous truth: the fact that I was present and my mother was absent.

Moreover I felt I was only present as a result of her absence. My withdrawal was therefore also due to feelings of guilt I held over conducting research into motherloss; research that was only possible because she died. My successes--such as receiving awards at my graduation ceremony horrified me because I was made instantly present and I felt this presence was an exploitation of her absence.

7. Making Self Integral

Reading the following description of grief by Butler (2004) helped me begin to understand the emotions and chaotic feelings I was experiencing:

I am not sure I know when mourning is successful, or when one has fully mourned another human being. I'm certain though, that it does not mean that one has forgotten the person, or that something else comes along to take his or her place. I don't think it works that way. I think instead that one mourns when one accepts the fact that the loss one undergoes will be one that changes you, changes you possibly forever, and that mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation the full result of which you cannot know in advance. So there is losing, and there is the transformative effect of loss, and the latter cannot be charted or planned. (Butler, 2004, p. 18)

Butler describes grief as something that continually makes an individual "come undone." It cannot be "charted" or "planned" in advance but involves feelings often outside of the individual's control and awareness. My increasing lack of control over my emotions in the research process was a sharp illustration of the unpredictable nature of grief. Grief is an ongoing process, something I will experience in varying proportions for the rest of my life. The grief over my mother's death is a permanent feature of my emotional landscape.

Similarly, research, especially that which deals with the intimate and personal aspects of life as autoethnographic research often does, cannot be "charted" or "planned." Despite my best intentions and my attempts to apply myself to the various tasks the research demanded, I felt something larger take hold, and this something emerged from the indeterminable space between myself as researcher, the participants' stories I was exploring, and the continual grief over my mother's death.

As these confusing emotions surfaced, my instinctive reaction was to detach myself and my story, in order to sanitize the research data from my messy personal complications. This was an action that was intended to both prevent the research from becoming "contaminated" by my seemingly unprofessional and irrational responses but also to protect myself from confronting the lingering guilt I felt over my mother's death. Yet I discovered detaching emotions from research was not feasible or realistic as I simply ended up withdrawing from life altogether. Ultimately it became apparent that even though the research was not "about" me, I had to acknowledge my integral part in the research process.

Avoiding the research and withdrawing from the world was a way of protecting myself from problematic feelings. In contrast, writing was a crucial step in beginning to make myself present rather than trying to omit myself from the research. In my research diary I described how it felt when I began to attempt to apply myself to the task of analysing the data:

Writing has always been something for me that has felt so arduous, but now it has this rawness--as if my vulnerability is seeping into the page. It can often culminate in incoherence or inconsistency--but when it's the right subject--it is as if I have wings and I am soaring--but this tension is holding me back--this constant fear of too much, or my emotions that feel too much.

Of walking home alone, and no rescue; avoiding the big space inside, wanting to shield myself once again . . . (Author's research diary, August 2, 2008)

As I began to write again I could no longer avoid the overwhelming emotions that I had been withdrawing from. Writing was a painful process, as writing and giving myself a narrative made everything permanent and real. Writing made my narrative part of chronological time and space. As Frank (1995) describes, trauma often provokes a narrative imperative to speak, to narrate, to make sense of one's experience. I thought I had given voice to my narrative and resolved my feelings of grief. Yet I realised a narrative is never finished, or at least the creation of a new narrative does not necessarily mean past narratives will not re-emerge and entangle themselves in the present.

8. Unlearning My Privilege

In some respects it felt as if the whole research endeavour was a necessary and inevitable part of coming to terms with my grief. I sought answers, and the freedom that those answers would provide. But I just received more questions, questions I was too afraid and ill-equipped to answer. The research process unravelled desires and emotions that I did not know I had or felt. I was not openly aware and conscious of my motivations before entering into the research project. What did I want to discover? What did I hope to gain? These were not questions I honestly asked myself. I was too embarrassed to admit that what I hoped to gain was not completely selfless.

Autoethnography shows the significance of being conscious of reactions, responses, thoughts and feelings no matter how small or insignificant they may seem. I learnt that I had to claim my prejudices, my weaknesses, limitations, and strengths, and realistically evaluate my contribution to the research encounter. Coming undone by overwhelming feelings took me by surprise and interfered with my ability to conduct good research. As it turned out, the process of coming undone allowed me to understand ever more clearly and poignantly than before, the nature of grief. But this was not a discovery I could comprehend at the time, or even when I had completed my thesis. I was left exhausted mentally and emotionally by the process but with even less answers than I began with. This was obviously not a desirable predicament to be in.

As a researcher I had a responsibility to the women that participated in the study to listen and provide space for their stories to be heard. Providing space in order for the participants to be heard did not have to entail devaluing or repressing my own responses. Instead I had to accept my emotions, prejudices, and memories will always be present, much like my grief, and seep into the narratives I listen to. What was required was a vigilance to recognise and critically examine them, opening myself up for analysis. This was achieved by questioning. Questioning my privileged position of researcher, questioning my position as a motherless daughter, and questioning how these *positionings* framed and shaped how I perceived the participants and the narratives I sought to understand.

As Ezzy (2010) highlights, self-awareness on behalf of the researcher can assist in finding communion with the participant. Communion does not seek to conquer but find a mutually shared space of understanding, empathy, and intimacy. Achieving communion creates space for communication to flow both ways.

This is true of autoethnographic research as well in which we seek to understand ourselves in order to provide a shared truth to others. This can only be achieved by recognising what is valuable in our responses and our experiences. We can only know what is valuable to others by listening to what they say.

I was unable to listen clearly to the women who participated in the study because I was always centred. I could not hear their narratives because I remained fixed on thoughts about my own experiences and memories about my own mother. It was only when I managed to unlearn my privilege (Spivak, 1988) and find a critical distance from the world (and grief) with which I was familiar, that I could embrace the participants' worlds, hear and listen to their voices and finally begin to learn their stories.

References

- Anderson, L. (2006). Analytic autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(4), 373-395.
- Atkinson, P. (2006). Rescuing autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(4), 400-404.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing gender*. New York: Routledge.
- Davidman, L. (1997). The personal, the sociological and the intersection of the two. *Qualitative Sociology*, 20(4), 507-515.
- Davidman, L. (2000). *Motherloss*. California: University of California Press.
- Delamont, S. (2007). Arguments against auto-ethnography. *Qualitative Researcher*, 4, 2-4.
- Dyregrov, K. (2004). Bereaved parents' experience of research participation. *Social Science and Medicine*, 58(2), 391-400.
- Edward, K.-L. (2005). Resilience: A protector from depression. *Journal of the American Psychiatric Nurses Association*, 11(4), 241-243.
- Ellis, C. (1999). Heartful autoethnography. *Qualitative Health Research*, 9(5), 669-683.
- Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.

- Ezzy, D. (2010). Qualitative interviewing as an embodied emotional experience. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(3), 163-170.
- Frank, A. W. (1991). *At the will of the body: Reflections on illness*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Frank, A. W. (1995). *The wounded storyteller: Body, illness and ethics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gilbert, K. R. (2002). Taking a narrative approach to grief research: Finding meaning in stories. *Death Studies*, 26(3), 223-239.
- Handsley, S. (2001). "But what about us?" The residual effects of sudden death on self-identity and family relationships. *Mortality*, 6(1), 9-29.
- Harrison, L., & Harrington, R. (2001). Adolescents' bereavement experiences. Prevalence, association with depressive symptoms and use of services. *Journal of Adolescence*, 24, 159-169.
- Hepworth, J., Ryder, R. G., & Dreyer, A. S. (1984). The effects of parental loss on the formation of intimate relationships. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 10(1), 73-82.
- Herrmann, A. F. (2005). My father's ghost: Interrogating family photos. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 10, 337-346.
- Hollway, W. (2008). The importance of relational thinking in the practice of psycho-social research: Ontology, epistemology, methodology and ethics. In S. Clarke, P. Hoggett, & H. Hahn (Eds.), *Object relations and social relations: The implications of the relational turn in psychoanalysis* (pp. 137-162). London: Karnac.
- Hollway, W. (2009, February). Using researcher subjectivity as an instrument of knowing. Paper presented at Methods in Dialogue: Researching Emotions, University of Manchester, UK. (Slide presentation: <http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/realities/events/dialogue/emotions/index.html>)
- Kauffman, K. (2008). What is "no recovery"? *Death Studies*, 32(1), 74-83.
- Kehily, M. J. (1995). Self-narration, autobiography and identity construction. *Gender and Education*, 7(1), 23-31.
- Mitzal, B. (2003). *Theories of social remembering*. Milton Keynes, UK: Open University Press.
- Mortimore, T. (2007). The secret life of a research project. *Qualitative Researcher*, 4, 9-11.

- Noy, C. (2003). The write of passage: Reflections on writing a dissertation in narrative methodology. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 4(2), Art 39. Retrieved August 10, 2010, from <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0302392>
- Pearce, C. (2008). World interrupted: An autoethnographic exploration into the rupture of self and family narratives following the onset of chronic illness and the death of a mother. *Qualitative Sociology Review*, 4(1), 131-149. Retrieved August 10, 2010, from http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/Volume9/QSR_4_1_Pearce.pdf
- Pillsbury, G. (2001). Refusing to fight: A playful approach to chronic disease. In S. Cunningham-Burley & K. Backett-Milburn (Eds.), *Exploring the body* (pp. 55-77). Houndmills, UK: Palgrave.
- Richardson, G. (2002). The metatheory of resilience and resiliency. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 58(3), 307-321.
- Riessman, C. K. (1990). Strategic uses of narrative in the presentation of self and illness: A research note. *Social Science and Medicine*, 30(11), 1195-1200.
- Riessman, C. K. (1993). *Narrative analysis*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Ronai, C. R. (1996). My mother is mentally retarded. In C. Ellis & A. Bochner (Eds.), *Composing ethnography* (pp. 109-131). Newbury Park, CA: AltaMira and Sage.
- Rowling, L. (1999). Being in, being out, being with: Affect and the role of the qualitative researcher in loss and grief research. *Mortality*, 4(2), 167-181.
- Rustin, M. (2000). Reflections on the biographical turn in social science. In P. Chamberlayne, J. Bornat, & T. Wengraf (Eds.), *The turn to biographical methods in social science: Comparative issues and examples* (pp. 33-52). London: Routledge.
- Schultz, L. E. (2007). The influence of maternal loss on young women's experience of identity development in emerging childhood. *Death Studies*, 31, 17-43.
- Smart, C. (2009, February). The allure of restraint: Doing emotionless sociology. Paper presented at Methods in Dialogue: Researching Emotions, University of Manchester, UK. Audio and slide presentation: <http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/realities/events/dialogue/emotions/index.html>
- Smart, C. (2007). *Personal life: New directions in sociological thinking*. Oxford: Polity.
- Smith, B. (1999). Exploring depression through a narrative of the self. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 5(2), 264-279.

- Smith, B., & Sparkes, A. C. (2008). Changing bodies, changing narratives and the consequences of tellability: A case study of becoming disabled through sport. *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 30(2), 217-236.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271-313). London: Macmillan.
- Stanley, L. (1993). The knowing because experiencing subject: Narratives, lives, autobiography. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 16(3), 205-215.
- Tracey, A. (2008). *Surviving the early loss of a mother: Daughters speak*. Dublin: Veritas.
- Valentine, C. (2007). Methodological reflections: Attending and tending to the role of the researcher in the construction of bereavement narratives. *Qualitative Social Work*, 6(2), 159-176.
- White, B., Driver, S., & Warren, A.-M. (2008). Considering resilience in the rehabilitation of people with traumatic disabilities. *Rehabilitation Psychology*, 53(1), 9-17.
- Woodthorpe, K. (2007). My life after death: Connecting the field, the findings and the feelings. *Anthropology Matters*, 9(1), 1-11.
- Woodthorpe, K. (2009). Reflecting on death: The emotionality of the research encounter. *Mortality*, 14(1), 70-86.

Received 28 February 2010

Accepted 29 July 2010

[Copyright © 2010 Journal of Research Practice and the author](#)