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Main Article:

“Do Thyself No Harm”: Protecting Ourselves as Autoethnographers

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Abstract

Autoethnographers have grappled with how to represent others in the stories they tell. However, very few have written about the need to protect themselves in the process of doing autoethnographic writing. In this paper, I explore the ethical challenges faced when writing about a potentially-ongoing disorder, such as anorexia, when the research process triggers previously disengaged unhealthy thinking or behaviors for those involved. In the story-writing process, I felt a strong pull to go back into anorexia, as I immersed myself in my research on this topic. The compulsion to publish became intertwined with the compulsion of my anorexia, illustrated by the need to control both and present a certain “face” as a researcher.

Using a meta-autoethnographic format, I walk the reader through the choices I made in an attempt to protect myself as a researcher in the process of publishing an autoethnography about anorexia. I also explain the lessons I learned, which can be applied to persons doing autoethnographies on topics that may affect their own personal well-being. This paper reveals the importance of writing through our pain in an ethical fashion and that the ethics of doing autoethnography is not just about protecting those implicated in our stories, but also ourselves.

Keywords: autoethnography; meta-autoethnography; writing-stories; ethics; anorexia

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Author’s Note. Italics are used to indicate my inner voice or thoughts throughout this piece.

1. Introduction

Oh, how I've grown to love and hate that word "autoethnography." I love the method and how it allows a person to be free of the constraints of typical academic writing, but I hate what it has done to me (or rather what I have not been able to get it to do for me). No publication, no finished research project, nothing to show for all of the hours and hours I've worked on this project over the past 7 years.

In this "meta-autoethnography" (Ellis, 2009a) or "writing-story" (Richardson, 2001), I tell the story of how the compulsion to get published and the compulsion of my eating disorder became intertwined, teaching me about the ethics of doing an autoethnography on a topic that can harm a researcher's well-being. Protecting myself was integrally tied into the process of getting published and the ethical choices I made in representing myself and others in my own autoethnographic work. Although my work was eventually published (Chatham-Carpenter, 2009), I asked myself during the process and afterwards: "At what cost?"

Autoethnographies are often written without showing the struggles that took place during the writing itself (Tamas, 2008). Some authors address the ethics of writing an autoethnography in terms of how they represent the others who may be implicated in their stories (e.g., Ellis, 2007, 2009a, 2009b; Etherington, 2007; Medford, 2006; Poulos, 2008). However, it is not obvious whether the writing of these stories had the potential for harming the autoethnographers themselves, which is what this piece addresses. To do this, I chose to write in a style consistent with autoethnographic writing. My thoughts are often represented in italics, while the non-italicized prose which describes my experiences doing such writing is in first-person.

2. Choices Made About an Evocative Tale

When things started getting out of control in my life as an adult, I turned towards something I had always been able to control--food and exercise. Little did I know that I was free-falling into anorexia. My whole life became about what I was and was not eating, how much I weighed, and when I could exercise next. After having lost approximately 20 per cent of my body weight over a period of 6 months, my therapist gave me an ultimatum: "You either go into treatment for anorexia or you quit seeing me." After 2 months of treatment, I "graduated" and for several years afterwards maintained what the treatment center deemed a healthy weight for me. I thought I was "well" now. I was able to "control" my diet and exercise within a safe range and not be what I considered to be too heavy.

It was about that time that I read about autoethnography for the first time in Ellis and Bochner's (2001) chapter in the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, and I got excited about the possibility of telling my own story using this evocative method. I read others' autoethnographies, including ones about struggles with eating disorders and body image (e.g., Kiesinger, 1998a, 1998b; Tillmann-Healy, 1996), but found those autoethnographies lacking, as they did not provide much hope to the reader for recovery.

I decided mine would be different: a story of recovery, a “good” story, one that ended nicely, not one that showed continued confusion and struggles. I talked to my therapist about this possibility, and he cautioned me about writing my own story too soon after getting out of treatment. Inside, I said to myself:

What is he thinking? I'm doing great now. I'm in control now. Does he really think I would go back to my anorexia?

Disregarding my therapist's advice, I started writing the lengthy description of the facts and feelings surrounding my anorexic journey, with the goal of eventually publishing an autoethnographic piece on my story. I thought I was “recovered,” no longer affected by the thoughts and obsessions I had experienced so strongly a few years earlier. How wrong I was.

In treatment, they talked about research that showed just 3 minutes of looking at a fashion magazine or newsstand magazines with images of thin women triggers self-doubt and low self-esteem for women (cf. Champion & Furnham, 1999; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002).

Just 3 minutes.

And I certainly have spent more than 3 minutes looking at this project. It's no wonder that thoughts of going back enter my head every time I write. Yet I really want to do an autoethnography about my experiences with anorexia and being in treatment, so others can know what it felt like to live the hell I experienced, and yet know there is hope for coming out of it alive. But can I continue doing this writing without going back to unhealthy behavior? Is there another way to go about doing research about anorexia recovery?

2.1. Researching Others Instead of Myself

To protect myself from further harm and quit doing the painful self-reflection that autoethnographic writing was requiring of me, I initially decided not to use my story at all, but rather collect the stories of others who had also “successfully” gone through treatment for anorexia. However, the more I read their interview transcripts, which detailed experiences of getting into anorexia, practicing unhealthy behaviors, and trying to get over anorexic thinking and actions, the more I began thinking about the behaviors connected to anorexia and how nice it would be to be thinner than I was--just not too thin, I argued internally.

This cauliflower-cheese soup for lunch is delicious. Oh, but I bet the cheese in my soup is filled with the “bad saturated fats” I just heard about in the exercise class I just came from. Oh man, I guess I'm not being careful enough. I need to start watching more what I'm eating. I could keep from getting too thin this time. I know when I'm getting dangerously thin, after all. I have a good support network around me. I could live with less food and exercise more and be okay. Let's do it.

And, just like that, seemingly all of a sudden, I would start cycling downwards into wanting, really wanting, to be thin again, and to do whatever it took to get there. I realized what I was doing, but liked thinking about the temptation. “*It’s okay, as long as I don’t act on it,*” I would tell myself. How was I going to do this research without being harmed by it? How was I going to keep myself from going down that road again if I continued to focus on anorexia so intently for my research. The internal arguments went something like this:

Ugh! Collecting the interview data was supposed to protect me, but that’s not happening obviously. I’ve got to let go of this data, and be okay with never publishing it to get back my sanity. If I walk away from it, maybe the voices in my head will stop. I just want them to stop and go away forever. It’s like my anorexia and research are having an affair with each other, right under my nose, and are not even concerned about me. I’ll just kick the research out of my life, and hopefully anorexia will move out as well, and my nice controlled life will be back. No one will ever have to know how much I have struggled.

And that is what I did, choosing to walk away from the interview data I had collected, as well as my own story. I chose to protect myself from going down the slippery slope of anorexia, and so to protect my “face” as a researcher. The anxiety attached to revealing my pain and not writing a simple recovery story was not worth it. But this did not silence the voice of my publishing obsession, who was in love with my anorexia. I wanted to silence them both by ignoring the research project for a time, thinking:

I’d like to just ignore you EDO [what I called my eating disorder] & pretend I am all done with you--that you are out of my life--except as a research topic. But your arrogant stubbornness and attractiveness makes it hard for me to resist you. (Chatham-Carpenter, 2009, p. 126)

2.2. Controlling My Writing, While Controlling My Anorexia

I’ve got to get back to doing research again. I’ve wasted too much time--what in the world am I going to work on next? Whatever happened to that anorexia project? Oh yeah, I quit it to protect myself. I wonder if there would be another way of approaching it that would be less threatening. Is there a way I could write about it without being too vulnerable? Others who write autoethnography don’t share all, do they? They control what is revealed (e.g., Wall, 2008).

As seen above, I felt compelled to do this research, much like I felt compelled to control my anorexia. I picked up the research topic again, trying to tell my story without writing too much about the pain and struggle I faced every time I stared at the computer trying to write, or when I walked across campus thinking about my study and suddenly became aware of how big I had gotten in the past year. I hated that I was struggling to control both my thoughts and my weight.

Somehow, I completed what I thought was a good draft, received some feedback from colleagues, and sent it off to a possible publication outlet. This is the response I received from a reviewer with the editor's rejection notice:

My experience in interviewing anorexic outpatients has made me keenly aware of how difficult it is for many of these women to publicly bear their souls and talk about their illnesses. It is not uncommon for every word or comment to be measured, guarded, and controlled--after all, control and image are at the heart of the illness, and anorexic women can be very conscious of the image they believe they are attempting to convey. (Peer Reviewer A, November 2003)

Control. I really hate that word. Of course, I'm a control freak. Isn't every academic? Will I never be able to get this published? I just want this paper and research project out of my life. Why did I ever start it anyway? I would've been much better off if I had done something that was totally outside of myself. Is there anything at all I can control--anything at all? And now they're asking me to give up this for my research as well?

Frustrated, I changed a few things in the story line without getting too personal and sent it off to another publication outlet, receiving the following response in return.

The story seems to remain on the surface (perhaps the author is still "guarding" her feelings . . .). The author "tells" the story, but the reader needs to be able to see, hear, feel and touch it. . . . I want the author to explore her feelings on paper so I can feel the pain, too. . . . The author is promising to open up, but never really does. We have description, but it stays on the surface. (Peer Reviewer B, March 2004)

But if I explore my pain and really open up, who knows what will happen? If I go to bed with my research with the goal of getting published, I may also be getting in bed again with my anorexia. Yet I want to prove to myself that I'm strong enough to face both the demons of my anorexia and the need to be published, without getting crushed in the process.

Could I give up my goal of publishing a nice, neat little story on recovery from anorexia in order to write through my struggles? What impression of myself as a professional would I leave if I gave up control and let people know I still struggled? Would this lead to the type of shame and embarrassment I felt when I was in treatment, as a college professor, when I kept telling myself, "you should have known better"? I considered various options.

Hmm. Perhaps if I wrote hypothetically about the pain of doing autoethnographic research, it would sound like it wasn't me that was facing this pain. I could still get published without outing myself and my pain, while at the same time maintaining some control over what people know about me.

So I wrote my story as a "fairy-tale," with me as a teacher teaching about the ethics of doing autoethnography in a hypothetical research methods classroom. But this attempt at

controlling my image, while controlling my anorexia, had similar results as previous attempts. One reviewer wrote: “Overall, this piece would be far more useful/beneficial had the author actually shared her personal story with her students and then wrote about the implications of doing so” (Peer Reviewer C, March 2008).

A second reviewer said:

I think you are hiding from yourself, still, behind academic language, performing an academic self. . . . You tell us you are vulnerable but many times you don’t show us. . . . This means getting inside the feelings, feeling them, and then writing them. (Peer Reviewer D, March 2008)

But can I do this and still protect myself as a researcher? Is there such a thing as being too vulnerable for one’s own good, when doing autoethnography?

2.3. Performing My Anorexic Personae

The reviewer continued:

I am not yet convinced you have identified the personae that are at work for you. There may be more than you think. For instance, I think you give your anorexic voice short shrift. You work hard not to perform her, yet she peeks out everywhere. There is a way this whole manuscript is about how much of her to perform. Openly give her a seat at the table. This reviewer says, “Hey girl” and “Happy to meet you,” and “I sure wish this author would stop trying to stifle you.” . . . She has not just been an enemy, she has been your buddy too, helped you through a lot of stuff. Have gratitude for her, affection. Love her. Accept her. Share her with us. (Peer Reviewer D, March 2008)

Hmm. I guess I could acknowledge that anorexia has provided me comfort. But if I talk about that, wouldn’t I be embracing “her” (anorexia) even more? Wouldn’t that make me want to turn even more to her to face my current pain of unmet expectations in relationships and life? On the other hand, perhaps if I do realize what she did for me, I could write through my pain--this time not denying it, but rather bringing it out in the open to be explored and observed.

Choosing to do this, this time the writing seemed to just flow out of me--I realized I was multi-faceted in my experiences with anorexia, and now I allowed myself to show the different areas of my life where I have relationships with anorexia, personifying anorexia as a person who was talking to me:

Quit eating so much. Get your body under control. Exercise more. Start weighing yourself again every day--even more, several times a day, to make sure you’re not gaining any weight. We can work on it together, you know. I can make you more desirable. I can help you--come on, follow my ways--I know what’s best for you. I can make this better. Why don’t you trust me? My way is the only way. (Chatham-Carpenter, 2009, pp. 128-129)

Amazingly, in choosing this strategy, I was following the advice of one of my former therapists, who told me to think of anorexia as a voice outside of myself, a strategy I have since seen suggested for countering anorexic thinking (e.g., Lock, Epston, & Maisel, 2004; Lock, Epston, Maisel, & deFaria, 2005; Tillmann, 2009). Lock, Epston, and Maisel (2004) state it this way: “By separating anorexia from the person, it becomes possible to ask about anorexia’s tactics of voice, about its rhetorical strategies, the moves it makes, its attempts to cover its tracks in order to deny its effects” (p. 287). Separating out my voice from the voice of anorexia seemed to give me the freedom to choose which voice to listen to and “obey,” as is illustrated by the following excerpt from a poem I wrote.

*You were truly my friend, my confidant, my partner,
And I loved you.
And in loving you,
You entered into me.
I trusted you to love me.
To love me back like I needed.
But, instead, you betrayed me.
You became an abusive lover.
You became me,
And I became you.
And people began to accuse you
Of things that I was doing.
I no longer knew who I was.
I lost my voice,
As your voice became all I could hear.
(Chatham-Carpenter, 2009, p. 140)*

The decision to follow Reviewer D’s advice was a turning point for me, both in my relationship with anorexia and in my autoethnographic writing. I no longer had to hide my struggles with anorexia--I could bring them out in the open and look at them from various angles. Writing as I did freed me to both write and be real, all at the same time, something I had never experienced before.

At last, I was willing to give up some control of what others thought of me as a college professor. The compulsive voice inside of me, to write about my experiences and to be published, gave me that as a gift. It told me I had to take this risk in order to be successful professionally, even while the decision to write in this way was potentially harmful to me personally. Would the benefits of a publication to me professionally outweigh the costs to me personally? Ultimately, I found they did.

The eventual publication did seem to quiet my publishing compulsion, and writing as I did showed me how anorexia did not have to control me. I was able to be more relaxed, with not so many voices “should-ing” me in my head. The new found freedom from these twin compulsions came from writing through my pain, separating the voice of anorexia from my voice, publishing my story, and dealing with other factors going on in my life at the time, such as my daughters growing older and looking to me as a role model, taking

on increased administrative responsibilities and experiencing success in my work, and settling into a mature marriage.

3. Choices Made in Protecting Others

Taking the risk to write through my struggles affected me in another way. During the time of my writing, both of my parents unexpectedly died within a year of each other. Their deaths brought me face-to-face with some of the influences on my anorexia from my past. With each of my parents' deaths, I realized as I chose to write in the way the reviewers were asking, I faced the dilemma of how to represent others who were implicated in my story. I began to realize how much the voice of anorexia mimicked the voice of my now-deceased mother. It was similar to what I would hear my Mom saying so often, with her desire for me to stay thin, a concern that she really reflected from a society obsessed by thinness. This realization, which came through writing, presented an ethical choice for me, as Ellis (2009a) says, "When we write autoethnographically about our lives, by definition we also write about intimate others with whom we are in relationships" (p. 307).

With the passing of both my parents, what ethical responsibilities did I have to present them in a certain light in my writing? Growing up, I always had to protect my father's reputation, so he could keep his job with the church. People thought we had the perfect family. At my parents' respective memorial services, they were both extolled for many virtues they indeed had. Yet I knew that all was not always well behind the closed doors of my own home. The process of controlling the pain of growing up contributed to my need to control my world--something both the anorexic and publication compulsions illustrate.

But did I need to go into all of that, just to tell a story of my relationship with anorexia? How could I honor and respect my parents and still be honest about the influence my mother in particular had on my story? I had to make choices of what to include and not to include, what privacy boundaries to keep and which ones to cross (Petronio, 2002). Ultimately, I only chose to present what I believed was absolutely necessary to show the connection between the voice of anorexia and the voice of my Mom.

However, I realize today I do not think I could have implicated her in my storytelling ethically, had she and my father not passed away. I still have not shared my now published piece with my sister. I wonder why? Would she think I had betrayed confidences of our family by sharing what I did? I did not betray any family secrets, I think, that would implicate my living sister or any living relatives. But I wonder--what would Momma think if she were here? I think she would be hurt that I portrayed her the way I did. That makes me feel badly to this day. Yet, she was a part of me getting published. Was it worth it? I am still not sure.

One of my colleagues read my published autoethnography a few months ago and commented that it was interesting what I chose to share and what I chose not to share. She knows a lot of the pain I have experienced in my current and past relationships,

which have influenced my choices to run into the arms of anorexia over the years. So, why did I choose to share what I did about my Mom, for example, but not about my current family? After all, the pain resulting from protecting others was also part of the reason why I have turned to anorexia as a friend over the years, with the anorexia offering me a false sense of control each time.

I thought I had been so honest--I told about the internal daily dilemmas I face as a professor and mother. I wrote with passion about my fears, the risks, the perceived consequences of my actions, and about my conflicted relationship with my own mother. But I did not write about my relationship with my husband. Why not? I did not even realize he had not been included until my colleague told me so. Subconsciously, I must have realized that the pain I would cause both of us was not worth it. Those are private boundaries that I did not want to cross (Petronio, 2002), private information the world at large should not be privy to see or hear. I believe I chose ethically, in protecting things that I know he would also want protected. These things are sacred to us in our marriage. I feel good about that decision, my choice to "hold relational concerns as high as research" (Ellis, 2009a, p. 316). Perhaps that is what this whole process has been about for me--learning I have choices and making choices that protect the ones I love, including myself.

4. Lessons Learned

Writing about your experiences is so tied to your life course that you have to be in a certain space to feel comfortable to write. Autoethnographers have to be willing to do the hard work of feeling the pain and learning through the process of writing, approaching autoethnography not as a project to be completed, but as a continuous learning experience. One of the reviews of my work contained this comment:

I think there is a certain element of "timing" in the construction of autoethnographic work. In my own experience, trying to write narrative before I have fully processed the experience I wish to convey culminates in what reads like personal journal writing and thus, does not yet have the ability to connect to larger ideas, theories, people, communities. Although writing before one has fully processed an experience is helpful, even necessary at times, it does not necessarily make for good autoethnography. (Peer Reviewer C, March 2008)

In the process of trying to keep anorexia at bay, I kept coming face to face with the ultimate ethical question about this type of research--at what cost am I willing to be published about such a personal topic? Is the pain involved for me as the storyteller too much to make the storytelling worthwhile (cf. Ellis, 2000)?

To make the benefits from doing this work greater than the costs, I needed to protect not only the people I was writing about, but also myself as an autoethnographer. I have learned more about how to do that, using writing to uncover the pages of my life in such a way that I could be ethically open and honest and real, waiting until I was in a good

enough space to write over time, while continuing to live my life as an academic professional, wife, mother, daughter, and friend (cf. Richardson, 1997).

I had to experiment with how much I was willing to tell, and risk not telling all, being “rejected” from certain publication outlets as a result, and then decide whether to ultimately pursue the advice the reviewers gave me. Their advice ended up useful, in helping me understand the voices behind my pain, and in separating those voices from myself. But it took several years before I was healthy enough to follow through with this. By that time, I had surrounded myself with supportive individuals who knew my background and pain, to whom I could confide the twin compulsions of anorexia and needing to be published on this topic.

For me, the research was an insistent little thing, much like my anorexia. It kept knocking at my door, telling me I needed to get published, while tempting me to start eating less and exercising more, perhaps as some sort of unconscious exchange, making my vita fatter while making my body thinner. Ultimately, I wrote through my pain, risking my reputation and personal well-being in doing so.

With the publication came self-disclosure to persons who would normally not have access to such private revelations. Perhaps this is another reason why anorexia is not as attractive an option as before--my hidden control issues and compulsions are now even more in the open. In the hiding was a perceived sense of control, but in the open, the compulsions have lost some of their power. Autoethnography bestowed on me the privilege of that openness.

5. Conclusions

In writing this piece, I wonder if there is something unique about the telling of some autoethnographic stories that creates the type of compulsions or pain I experienced in writing my story. Do all autoethnographies center on issues of control in the writing and choice-making process? Do stories about past experiences necessarily require revisiting the pain in the ways I had to do so?

Certainly when a person is dealing with a potentially ongoing disorder, such as anorexia or another type of addiction, they may face these types of control issues, since many addictions have such issues as one of their roots (Griffin-Shelley, 2009; Padulo & Rees, 2006). Controlling the image one presents is also a common experience of researchers in general--deciding which “face” to show in the process of writing and publishing.

Revisiting the pain is necessary in many types of autoethnographies, when recounting traumatic events, when remembering death experiences, and so forth. However, without authors re-telling the process they went through in their writing, potential effects of such writing for autoethnographers is not always clear. More meta-autoethnographies are needed which talk about the process of writing itself and how it affected the autoethnographer. Laurel Richardson (2001) explains:

Writing about your life brings you to strange places; you might be uncomfortable about what you learn about yourself and others. You might find yourself confronting serious ethical issues. . . . Who might you be hurting? How do you balance “fact” and “fiction”? How do you write a “true” ethnography of your experiences? These questions, of course, are the ones that contemporary ethnographers ask themselves when they try to write up their “data” about other people. How different it feels when it is you and your world that you are writing about; how humbling and demanding. How up-front and personal in-your-face become the ethical questions, the most important of all the questions, I think. (p. 38)

In attempting to “revisit my original representation[s], consider responses, and write an autoethnographic account about autoethnography” (Ellis, 2009a, p. 13), I think I may be “over” the need to publish about my experiences with anorexia. I have since moved on to different research topics, ones that are not so personal. For now, it is as if I have had surgery and need to heal before I embark on another project related to anorexia; therefore, I am choosing to not pursue the data I collected from others on their stories at this time. I can let it rest--I can rest.

The process of writing and re-writing helped me come to terms with my compulsions to control my anorexia and my writing. In doing so, I have learned about writing, writing through uncertainty, writing through pain, letting go of control in my writing, the ethics of writing autoethnographically--all leading to writing a new plot about my life (Richardson, 2001).

Thank you, autoethnography and anorexia, for giving me these gifts. I can let you go now. I can move out and move on with my life.

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