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Kenneth N. Cissna
Editor

Writing Autoethnographic Joy

W. Benjamin Myers
Guest Editor, Special Issue

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Guest Editor, W. Benjamin Myers

157 Introduction to Writing Autoethnographic Joy
W. Benjamin Myers

163 On the Joy of Connections
Ronald J. Pelias

169 Joy Notes
Christopher N. Poulos

181 The Joys of Autoethnography: Possibilities for Communication Research
Tony E. Adams

195 Joyful Moments of Sorrow: Autoethnography and Atheistic Joy
W. Benjamin Myers

209 Suffering Happiness: On Autoethnography's Ethical Calling
Arthur P. Bochner

231 Love and Happiness?
Sophie Tamas

The Joys of Autoethnography

Possibilities for Communication Research

Tony E. Adams

In this essay, I illustrate how autoethnography can make more meaningful, socially-relevant communication research possible. I also describe six interrelated joys of autoethnography, specifically the joys of (a) writing through pain, confusion, anger, and uncertainty; (b) illuminating nuances—complexities—of cultural phenomena; (c) creating accessible and engaging texts; (d) generating insider knowledge; (e) granting a person the ability to (re)claim voice on a taboo, silenced topic; and (f) making life better.

Keywords: autoethnography, qualitative research, qualitative methods, personal narrative

Autoethnography—a research method that uses personal experience in order to understand and critique cultural experience—occupies a peripheral place in communication research. Many communication research methods texts do not discuss autoethnography at length or at all (e.g., Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Merrigan & Huston, 2010; R. Rubin, A. Rubin, Haridakis, 2009), and most journals sanctioned by regional, national, and international communication organizations do

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not include autoethnographic work (for exceptions, see Boylorn, 2008; Foster, 2008; Pelias, 2012; Tillmann, 2009a, 2009b; Young, 2009). Some performance studies scholars find autoethnography important and desirable (e.g., Fox, 2010; Holman Jones, 2005; Spry, 2011), but the method has adversaries even among them (e.g., Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005; Madison, 2006). Further, given autoethnography's inherent critical bias, some scholars consider the method biased toward trauma and tragedy, particularly since few explicitly joyful autoethnographies exist (Chatham-Carpenter, 2010).

In this essay, I address these concerns. I begin by describing intersections between communication, ethnography, and autobiography. I then use my research and others' autoethnographic research to discern six interrelated joys of autoethnography, specifically the joys of (a) writing through pain, confusion, anger, and uncertainty; (b) illuminating complexities of cultural phenomena; (c) creating accessible and engaging texts; (d) generating insider knowledge; (e) granting a person the ability to (re)claim voice on a taboo, silenced topic; and (f) making life better. In so doing, I show how autoethnography can make more meaningful, socially-relevant communication research possible.

Communication, Ethnography, and Autobiography

Communication, ethnography, and autobiography complement each other well. In general, the purpose of communication research is to predict and control, understand, or critique texts, assumptions about relationships, and premises of human interaction. The purpose of ethnographic research is to provide "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973) of cultural phenomena—descriptions that should help us better understand and possibly change these phenomena. And the purpose of autobiographical, personal and performative writing is to use reflexivity, storytelling, and aesthetic devices (e.g., characters, poetry) to describe epiphanical experiences that contribute to the making of a life (Denzin, 1989).

Combined, the purposes of communication, ethnography, and autobiography illustrate one significant purpose—joy—of autoethnography: the ability to use reflexivity, storytelling, and aesthetic devices to investigate cultural texts, assumptions about relationships, and premises of human interaction. Critically-oriented researchers expand on this purpose by using personal experience to illustrate, interrogate, and disrupt lived instances of hegemony, oppression, cultural inadequacy, and other kinds of harm (see Spry, 2011).

For instance, Goodall (2006) uses memory, reflexivity, and storytelling to describe and disrupt toxic family secrets and harmful government conspiracies. Pelias (2011) uses personal experience to show his fear of and call attention to cultural narratives of gender and masculinity, narratives that promote relational harm and narratives that suggest that people, particularly men, cannot help being aggressive and violent. Ellis (2009) calls attention to the ways in which racial prejudice, fear, and bigotry can have an impact on human interaction, and Foster (2008) interrogates insidious heterosexist/homophobic assumptions of contemporary interpersonal communication textbooks, textbooks read by thousands of students every year.

Writing Through Pain, Confusion, Anger, and Uncertainty

In the prologue and epilogue of my book *Narrating the Closet: An Autoethnography of Same-sex Attraction* (Adams, 2011) I tell the story of the sudden death of Brett, an ex-boyfriend and close friend. Although I describe some of the calm and chaotic moments of our relationship and document my confusion about whether he died from suicide or diabetes, I illustrate my pain of missing him. I also try to show that overcoming grief is not easy and may not even be possible. I still feel paralyzed by Brett's embodied disappearance, noted by dreams I continue to have of him or when I see one of his shirts hanging in my closet or when I think about a friend who knew us as a couple.

My writing about Brett has allowed me to work through some of my pain and confusion surrounding his death and has allowed me to pay homage to Brett, maintain his legacy, and show how beautiful he was. For me, the writing was an act of emotional release, of working through grief, of coming to feel better; it helped me make a "mental break*through* out of a mental break*down*" (Spry, 2011, p. 120).

Other authors use or discuss writing similarly, as a way to heal and "keep a hold on life" (hooks, 1999, p. 12). For instance, the thrust of Goodall's 2006 book *A Need To Know: The Clandestine History of a CIA Family* deals with his confusion and uncertainty about what his parents did and who his parents were. Bochner (1997) describes dealing with his father's death, and Ronai (1996) documents the pain

of and anger toward being a child of physically abusive parents. Jago (2011) illustrates the confusion and uncertainty of cohabitation and parenting, particularly the dissonance tied to being an unmarried "partner" rather than a "wife" or "stepmother." And Foster (2010) describes contradictions of being both a career-oriented feminist and a woman–mother, taking readers through the complicated and uncertain attempts to have a child mid-career, later in life.

Another joy of autoethnography thus comes forth: the ability for a person to use writing or performance to navigate pain, work through confusion, express anger, and come to terms with uncertainty. To use writing and performing as therapeutic processes that can help a person better understand, reframe, or work through an experience. "After years of moving through pain with pen and paper," Spry (2011) says, "asking the nurse for these tools in the morning after losing our son in childbirth was the only thing I could make my body do" (p. 36).

Doing autoethnography may not help a person completely overcome or recover from confusion, pain, anger, or uncertainty. In terms of Brett, I continue to live with pain and confusion. I remember him almost everyday, and not just the happy and joyous moments but also the complex and confusing times of heartbreak, retaliation, and separation; I suspect that I will never be at peace with his death no matter how much I write. Tamas (2011) makes a similar observation in that the pain of abuse does not easily disappear, and recovery might be more of a life-long condition than a linear, predictable, and realized process. I only emphasize that doing autoethnography can help manage some pain and confusion, anger and uncertainty, love and loss; it can help us, as writers and performers, write through and interrogate sad, disturbing, and/or complicated experiences.

Illuminating Complexity

Volunteering is often perceived of as worthy and commendable—a good act. It is good to spend time donating to or working at a food shelter. It is good to spend time helping homeless youth create safe and meaningful visions of the future. It is good to spend time orchestrating a rummage sale for a school, church, or non-profit social organization, and although not all are allowed (e.g., gay men), donating blood to the Red Cross is a good act, too. However, positive perceptions of volunteering need to be qualified because volunteering can be a complicated act.

In 2005-06 I volunteered at The Florida Aquarium, a not-for-profit environmental education facility located in Tampa, Florida. Typically, I greeted guests as they entered the facility, although I also helped set up a few fundraising events. During my time there, I cultivated relationships with some of the paid staff members at the facility, persons who often had the same tasks as volunteers and who said they relied on their paychecks to survive. I learned that the number of paid staff at the facility at any time depended on the number of volunteers scheduled to work: If a volunteer was scheduled, a staff member could be sent home without pay. As such, the paid staff could never establish a set work schedule; their work was contingent upon volunteers. Further, staff members told me that pay raises were difficult to come by as well, particularly as volunteers would work for free.

So here was I, a (privileged) person who did not worry about devoting unpaid time and energy to the organization, who, upon deciding when to volunteer, might force a paid staff member to leave work. My presence also demonstrated that a person would do certain tasks for free. As such, existing employees did not need additional compensation. The paid staff could search for more stable employment, but I want to emphasize that, in the context of the aquarium, *my* volunteering directly influenced *others'* work schedules and pay. Paid staff members were good, hard-working people, most of whom wanted, needed, to work as much as possible. While volunteering made me feel good, and although the organization profited from my presence (more by saving it money, though, than by my doing some specifically volunteer tasks), I learned that my free help hurt others, and I came to regard my volunteering as harmful and to resent the volunteer system the facility had established.

I use this example not to critique volunteering as a practice, but rather to encourage us to reflect on when and how volunteering might happen in particular contexts. I also use this example to show another joy of autoethnography: the ability to use personal experience to provide complex descriptions of cultural phenomena—an ability not typically possible with other methods. I could interview paid staff members about the problems of volunteering, but they might fear talking about these problems given that their critique of the volunteer program might jeopardize their jobs. I could interview volunteers about the problems of volunteering, but, unless they spoke with other paid

workers, they might not recognize any problems with volunteering. Further, given the culturally exalted status of volunteering, many people might find it difficult to speak against the practice. With autoethnography, I can use my experience to call attention to the complexities of commonly held, taken-for-granted assumptions, assumptions that might otherwise be difficult to critique.

Insider Knowledge

Self-disclosure—a topic of much communication research—is difficult to observe *as it happens*, uninterrupted by the presence of a researcher. I find it difficult to be present when a wife tells her husband that she is pregnant, when a father tells his daughter that he has cancer, or when a woman tells her boss that she is quitting the company. Consequently, I must rely on what people say about their disclosures in order to make sense of how self-disclosure can occur.

In some of my research (Adams, 2011), I illustrate struggles with self-disclosure, particularly struggles with trying to decide when, where, and how to come out of the closet—when, where, and how a person tells others that she or he is lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer (LGBQ). In doing this research, I learned that the act of coming out is a difficult act to observe; coming out, as an act of disclosure, is rarely witnessed by strangers—"outsiders"—and, as such, observation of the process *as it happens* is nearly impossible. Furthermore, even if I could be present at a person's coming out—often an intimidating and scary act for the person—my presence might disrespect the disclosure's addressee, further complicating the encounter. In other words, even if I am given permission by a person to be present when she or he comes out to someone else, the addressee may not be able to respond as desired; the addressee may have to temper her or his response in order to accommodate my presence.

Therefore, in order to understand when, where, and how people come out, I primarily relied on self-reports of the experience. But I also relied on my reports of the experience—reports that stemmed from coming out moments I've lived through, reports that while coming from myself, also utilize my academic tools and training—my knowledge of communication, ethnography, and observation, of relationships, self-disclosure processes, and stigma management. In other words, although I cannot observe others' coming out as it happens, I can observe how my coming out happened to a variety of audiences; I am the person—the researcher—who lived through and observed the experience. Thus, another joy of autoethnography: I am able to provide valuable, insider insight not possible with other research techniques (e.g., surveys, others' self-reports); in terms of coming out, I can use autoethnography to provide an account of what happened during and after the speech act.

In doing my research, I also noticed another relationship between autoethnography and insider knowledge: I observed that many persons who are LGBQ say that they are out always and everywhere. However, given my training in interpersonal communication, self-disclosure, and information control, I knew that complete out-ness was impossible because being out is contingent upon audience (e.g., I may be out to my mother, but I may not be out to the bank teller) and, as social beings, we come into contact with new audiences all of the time—new classes of students, customer service representatives on the telephone, and people walking on the street. Unless we "walk around wearing 'I am gay' t-shirts," a statement made by one of my interviewees, we cannot be out always and everywhere; my (insider) knowledge of self-disclosure and coming out contradicted what some of my interviewees said.

I returned to interviewees to ask about this contradiction. However, most felt as though the contradiction didn't exist—they were out always and everywhere. One interviewee even said, "I am out always and everywhere," and then, "I don't come out to my students until mid-semester"; he did not recognize any contradiction. As much as I tried to explain the impossibility of perpetual out-ness, interviewees adamantly refused to be stuck in the closet or trapped by contradiction. I recognize that their acknowledgment of being unable to figure out how to come out always and everywhere might tarnish their character and credibility—others might perceive them as self-hating, insecure, not-out failures—but I also knew that coming out always and everywhere was an impossibility, especially when they described moments in which they still tried to figure out what to do and say in terms of their same-sex attraction.

I sent an article about the impossibility of perpetual out-ness to a journal for review. Reviewers liked the article's premise, but seemed uncomfortable with my use of interviewee commentary: If an interviewee believed that he was out everywhere, how could I

suggest otherwise? I explained the situation to the journal editor. He understood and suggested that I use my experience, not interviewees' commentary, to describe the impossibility of perpetual out-ness, the impossibility that my interviewees failed to acknowledge; I seemed to frame their experience in ways in which interviewees disagreed. This publishing experience thus directed me to additional benefits of insider knowledge of cultural phenomena (e.g., coming out, gay identity).

Accessibility and Engagement

In 2005, I began dating Josh, a doctoral student in psychology at the University of South Florida (USF). At the time, I was a doctoral student in communication at USF. I remember many early dates consisted of talking about what communication was and what I studied.

One of the more memorable discussions happened the first time I visited Josh's house. I entered and walked directly to his bookshelf. There I saw *Catcher in the Rye*, books by David Foster Wallace, and Lisa Tillmann-Healy's *Between Gay and Straight*.

"Where did you get Tillmann-Healy's book?" I ask.

"*Tower Records* [a now-defunct record store chain]," he replies.

"I know her," I say. "She graduated from my program. This book is from her dissertation. It is the kind of work I aspire to do."

"I loved the book," he replies. "It was such an important read—it helped me better understand and accept my sexuality."

A mundane moment that not only made me further recognize Lisa Tillmann's important work but also helped me realize the kind of work I wanted to do: I wanted a book, my book, to appear in a mainstream record store. I wanted my book in local bookstores. I wanted my book read by more than just a few people.

I subscribe to every regional and national communication journal. I am a life member of the Central States Communication Association and of the National Communication Association (NCA), and I have attended every conference of each association for the past 10 years. All of my academic training has been in communication, and I consider communication my academic home. I am also an avid reader who tries to read a book or a few journal articles each week.

However, most of the essays I find in the communication journals are boring and inaccessible. Unfortunately, I know this is a common sentiment among some of my communication peers. I often hear stories from established scholars who, after receiving a communication journal in the mail, read the table of contents and abstracts, and then put the journal to rest on their bookshelf, never to return to it again (e.g., Pelias, 2000). I also know that leaders of the NCA worry that research never gets mentioned in public discourse or used in concrete, everyday situations. I am sympathetic to this desire: I too would like larger audiences to access my writing. However, the communication discipline—at least as evidenced by the regional and national journals—seems to suppress the "sensory, emotional, and bodily life" of research (Tamas, 2011, p. 73), which seems ironic for a discipline whose primary object of study is human interaction, sense-making, and ways of getting by together.

Autoethnography can help ease this situation: With its emphasis on and valuing of creative writing and aesthetic texts, more people might access our work. Given that autoethnographies value personal experience, much of what is said happened in concrete contexts, thereby offering lessons applicable to everyday life. Autoethnography thus embodies the concept of praxis—a melding of theory and practice, form and content—and, in so doing, offers engaging and accessible texts for others to easily comprehend and use.

Breaking Silence, (Re)claiming Voice

Another joy of autoethnography is the method's ability to disrupt traditional norms of representation and to allow researchers to break harmful cultural silences about taboo topics. This disruption and breaking happens in two ways: the inclusiveness of autoethnography's form, and the traumatic and tragic characteristics of the method's content.

Numerous scholars have critiqued the esoteric, racist, and patriarchal research practices that still dominate many academic settings. hooks (1999) describes the criticisms she receives for writing too much, writing in diaries rather than more legitimate academic outlets (e.g., journals, books), and writing about racism, sexism, Black women, and class rather than more "serious" and "scientific" topics. Lorde (1984) argues that in order for a person to be heard, recognized, and valued academically, the person must rely on prose rather than poetry as well as conform to rigid and regulatory academic standards. Blair, Brown, and Baxter (1994) and Hendrix (2005) highlight similar kinds of problems, particularly in academic peer-review processes

and in contexts that favor so-called objectivity more than personal experience. Non-White, non-male, and/or non-heterosexual ways of knowing, speaking, writing, and performing are still often marginalized, disregarded, and evaluated as unworthy and undesirable (Diversi & Moreiri, 2010). However, autoethnography welcomes a variety of media to represent cultural phenomena—not only writing but also performing (Spry, 2011), not only prose but also art (Minge, 2007), music (Bartleet & Ellis, 2009), and poetry (Pelias, 2011).

Autoethnography excels in breaking silences tied to content, too. Although traditional research methods disregard or silence personal experiences of traumatic and tragic events, autoethnography does not; such neglected events are important. There are autoethnographies of eating disorders (Tillmann, 2009), depression (Jago, 2011), child abuse (Ronai, 1996), and rape (Minge, 2007). There are autoethnographies about families and secrecy (Goodall, 2006), Alzheimer's disease (Fox, 2010), gender, disability, and sport (Lindemann, 2010), and diseases such as irritable bowel disorder (Defenbaugh, 2011) and HIV (Blinne, 2011).

Making Life Better

Near the end of my book, after analyzing and reflecting on the mundane contradictions of same-sex attraction and the rampant heterosexism and homophobia that pervade many mundane situations (e.g., college classrooms, restaurants, barber shops), I offer strategies a person can use to disrupt ascriptions and assumptions of heterosexuality in order to improve the experience of the closet—an experience with which I continue to struggle (Adams, 2011, pp. 130–144).

For instance, I now implement new relational strategies in my everyday interactions in order to avoid exhausting paradoxes tied to same-sex attraction. One strategy is to try to come out to others—to let others know about my same-sex attraction—in innocent, mundane ways. In everyday conversations, I do not just make sure to mention my partner (e.g., "My partner and I went to the movies this weekend"), but also mention that my partner is male, either through the use of a male pronoun (e.g., he, his, him) or by using his name, (e.g., "Gerardo"). In other words, I do not just say, "My partner and I went to the movies this weekend," but might also add, "He didn't like the film." I do so hoping that the person or people with whom

I converse will recognize me as male, recognize Gerardo as male, and recognize that I am not talking about a business partner or close friend but rather about someone with whom I am in an intimate and meaningful relationship.

My life has also changed from reading others' autoethnographic work. For instance, Pelias's (2004) account of academic life encourages me to regularly and reflexively critique my pedagogy—of being critical and political in the classroom, evaluating students, of coming across as the authority on a particular subject. By introducing complex ways in which race infiltrates everyday life, whether in graduate school, on a reality television show, or in a grocery store, Boylorn (2006, 2008, 2011) encourages me to attend to mundane moments when race matters, and, consequently, to interrogate seemingly innocent academic practices, media representations, and comments made in public settings. Every time I write about intimate others, I hear Ellis (2007, 2009) telling me to write these others carefully and respectfully.

Conclusion

Communication research can benefit from the greater use of autoethnography, in recognition of the many joys of doing autoethnographic work.

A good autoethnography allows a person to write through pain, confusion, anger, and uncertainty, illuminates cultural phenomena in complex ways, and makes research more accessible.

A good autoethnography shows how and why the individual and the cultural, the micro and the macro, the personal and the political intertwine; addresses "gaps" in research; fuses personal experience with abstract theory; provides an account to complement or counter pervasive cultural narratives; and offers a story to think and live *with* rather than sterile facts and findings to think *about* (Bochner, 1997; Coles, 1989).

A good autoethnography functions as "equipment for living" (Burke, 1974), turning harm and loss into "hope and beauty" (Spry, 2011, p. 22) and offering audiences "alternatives for living" (p. 12).

A good autoethnography helps make life better.

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