Putting me into the Methodology: Finding a way to facilitate a ‘peaceful’ co-existence between the personal and the academic

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ABSTRACT

According to Krieger (1991: 47,116) “Social Science is premised on minimising the self, viewing it as a contaminant, transcending it, denying it, protecting its vulnerability, yet nonetheless mobilising it as a tool for representing experience… As social scientists we paint pictures in which we hope not to exist; or, if we exist our role is presented as subordinate, or as nearly invisible”. In academia one is often taught to write in the third person, referring to oneself as the researcher personally disconnected from one’s text. This is not to suggest however that such a positivistic view is maintained by all those who engage in the pursuit of scholastic writing. There is a growing body of knowledge which, according to Ellis and Bochner (2000), explore more flexible and fluid forms of representation that allow for a greater degree of variation amongst practitioners. This paper will examine the practice of including one’s self in the research text when researchers are researching organisations, situations and groups of which they themselves are a part and the problems such courses of action may perhaps present. Written from a personal perspective, it details some of the dilemmas I faced in my search for a suitable methodology in which to situate my Ph.D.

Introduction

My field of study links directly to my own history and experience of growing up in a dysfunctional family unit. As a teenage girl, I was adjudged ‘delinquent’, in need of care and like hundreds of young girls before and after me, I was committed to the Training School for Girls at Parramatta, New South Wales (commonly referred to as Parramatta Girls’ Home or P.G.H.). This was for a period of what was defined in official terms as rehabilitation, but in reality bore little semblance to such treatment. For over forty years, I carried a burden of shame and never spoke of my experiences until 2003 when a reunion was held at P.G.H. My identification within the group as a former inmate allowed me to participate in discussions about the individual and shared experiences of the women present. Many bore marked similarities to my own and thus the seeds of my Ph.D. were
sown. My research was born from a desire to document those experiences, to explore the social contexts in which they occurred, to make sense of my own experience and to create a space for the women to speak-out and be heard.

**The Academic**

As an academic, one is often taught to write in the third person, referring to oneself as the researcher, as if personally disconnected from one’s text. As a first year undergraduate, I was made acutely aware of this by a tutor who deducted marks from an assignment containing the offending ‘language’. I was left in no doubt that when writing academically one was expected to excise oneself from one’s work. However, in observing these conventions my writing became disembodied, its author reduced to a state of near invisibility. This was a familiar role due to my experiences as a young girl, although I did not recognise it at the time, believing instead that I did not have the right to speak in my own voice. It did not occur to me that my earlier institutionalisation had ‘conditioned’ me to accept this subordinate or nearly invisible status without question, learning to subscribe to the belief that a higher authority must validate all action, one institutional practice reinforcing the other. I assumed, and did not question, that the only ‘legitimate’ answers would be impersonal, ‘objective’ ones.

**The Personal**

According to Goffman (1968: 2), the process of institutionalisation begins “with a curtailment of self”. People entering institutions first undergo a process referred to as mortification, or the loss of a person’s sense of self. Goffman (1968) argues that mortification does not just happen upon entering the institution; it occurs for the duration of one’s stay and takes many forms. Such things as the impersonal bureaucratic behaviour of the staff, timetables, rules, punishments, and the allocation of a number in place of one’s name all serve as assaults on self identity. Goffman’s work was particularly illuminating for me as it resonated with my own sense of self and issues of self-identity. The de-personalised, regimented structure of my institutionalisation internalised the message that I was of no value as a person, that as myself, I did not exist. This was consistent with the constant reinforcement of my worthlessness, low moral status, and innate wickedness by those entrusted with my care. Consequently, I felt
devastated, my self-esteem destroyed. Marianne James (2000) addresses the harm that emotional abuse can wreak by acknowledging that it can be extremely damaging for children who often adopt these negative self-concepts as core beliefs which can then have life-long consequences. This statement is one with which I identify strongly even to the present time. Judith Herman (1992: 105) observes that although the child in an abusive environment often, in order to survive, becomes a ‘superb performer’, attempts to do whatever is required of her, and may become an academic achiever and ‘a model of social conformity’, she nevertheless feels that none of her achievements add to her credit. She invariably perceives her performing self as inauthentic or fraudulent. Thus my perception of academic writing gave me the ‘shell’ of credibility and validity that I felt I lacked.

**Finding my way in the field**

Against all my dire predictions and negative expectations, I was accepted into the University Honours program, researching the experiences of ten former inmates of P.G.H. before, during and after their incarceration. As a novice researcher, I approached the interview phase of the study with a degree of apprehension and nervousness. Would I ‘do it right’ as prescribed in the text books, or would my research be riddled with bias and problems of validity? The image of the researcher who remained uninvolved and disengaged loomed large in my mind, a role I initially embraced with a large degree of enthusiasm. However May (2000: 135) describes this as “a one-way process of gaining answers from people, but not answering their questions”. Moreover, traditional methods of interviewing in which the interviewer elicits and receives information, but does not impart any in return has been soundly criticised by Oakley (1981). She questioned the text-book advice that advocated the adoption of an attitude towards interviewees which allocated them a narrow and objectified function as data. She suggested that this traditional practice created problems for “women who interviewed women”. Oakley (1981) concluded that interviewing, which breaks down the barriers between researchers and their subjects, is preferable to ‘masculine, scientific’ interviewing. As May (2001: 135) cautions us, “To expect someone to reveal important and personal information without entering into a dialogue is untenable”. This point was clearly illustrated for me during my Honours project when I was left in no doubt that had I not been a former
inmate of P.G.H. I would not have been privileged with such open, direct, and at times soul-baring narratives from ten courageous, amazing women. My identification as a ‘Parra Girl’, granted me status as an ‘insider’, affording me insights which may not have been accessible to an ‘outsider’. This was facilitated by my ability to reflect along with my participants on different aspects of our experiences; anecdotes of day to day happenings, reminiscences about long lost ‘friends’, a sense of shared camaraderie and a myriad of other memories.

It has been argued that researchers are never entirely objective and must be aware of the predispositions and preconceptions that they themselves bring to their interpretive work (Rubin and Rubin 1995). Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln pragmatically state:

> Any gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity. There are no objective observations, only observations socially situated in the worlds of, and between, the observer and the observed (Denzin and Lincoln 2003: 31).

According to Chase (1997), the researcher can never be a completely neutral outsider. Our own life experiences orientate our interpretations and the life-story to be interpreted orientates our life, even if only by evoking minor memories and past incidents. The need to listen to other people’s life-stories awakens a desire to consider one’s own biography. Nevertheless, despite reading numerous journal articles, books, papers and academic advice detailing the pragmatics of including my own experiences within my research I steadfastly maintained my distance. My background constructed me as worthless, challenging me to speak in my own right. How could I articulate this in a creditable manner, one which would attain academic merit? When writing up my honours thesis I deliberately created a ‘barrier’ between the researcher and the researched by stating:

> What do I bring to the research process? What do I share in common with the participants of this study? Like the participants, I am a middle-aged woman and I am a former inmate of P.G.H. Whilst I recognise that I share membership of the same minority group, and have shared similar experiences, our lives have followed different trajectories. It is for that reason that I have not located any of ‘mystery’ within the research. (Aitken 2004: 23).
I held that the rationale for not locating my story within my research stemmed from the fear that my work would lack credibility if it was too subjective. In one sense, it was valid to disclose my status as a ‘Parramatta Girl’ in a way that, as DeVault (1997: 218) argues, “…is merely a warrant for the analysis to follow…” (‘I was there; I know what I am talking about’), in another sense, it was crucial that my work didn’t appear as though presented through the “distorted lens of my own experience” (Penglase 1999: 27).

Listening to the women whilst they spoke of their experiences, recounting horrific details of what they had endured during their lives, much of which had left them emotionally and to some extent physically damaged, I felt that even though I was one of them, I was not one of them. In a sense it validated my decision to remain voiceless; after all, I was not physically nor sexually abused whilst I was an inmate at P.G.H., nor was I subject to corporal or any other forms of cruel physical punishment. I was afraid what I had to say was of no value, that my experiences were not ‘interesting enough’. What I failed to grasp however was that our stories were inextricably linked by the collective experience of institutionalisation. Recognition of this did not occur however until seeking a suitable methodological framework in which to locate my Ph.D., a deeper analysis of P.G.H., the experiences of its former inmates and workers, and the social context in which the ‘Home’ operated.

**Breaking down the Barriers**

How does one who is part of the population she is studying, write an account of the project which “expresses its personal and emotional dimensions (Church 1995: 3)? This was the dilemma that Church experienced when she realised she would have to include her story as part of her thesis, or otherwise distort what her work meant.

Critical autobiography gives me permission to do something which academics rarely do: write myself into my own work as a major character. This plunge into the autobiographical is also unexpected. I fully intended to be ‘objective’ about my work but the realities of genuine engagement made it virtually impossible not to take up subjectivity (Church 1995: 3).

For Church, critical autobiography was the tool which allowed her to become a major character within her work, facilitating the location of her story as a legitimate field of
inquiry. Confronted with a similar quandary when writing up her thesis in 1999, Penglase states that she not only began her writing intending to be objective, but also essentially “excising the autobiographical from what was obviously an autobiographical topic” (Penglase 1999: 18). She recounts her struggle with what she knew she must ultimately confront, the realisation that without her presence in the text it would lack meaning, validity and authenticity. Using feelings and thoughts as major epistemological tools, Penglase drew on her own experience to, as she cogently states:

Chart the terrain of the Home experience generally in an attempt to give serious weight to it as a category of life experience. In the process of trying to deconstruct the sociological dimensions of the status ‘Home child’, I have had to come to terms with the personal dimensions of what it means to be one (Penglase 1999: 17).

Penglase’s work resonated strongly, her feelings and thoughts reflective of my own. As I read about her childhood and the feelings of loss, abandonment, desolation and worthlessness that her experiences had engendered within her I knew that eventually I too would have to engage with my own experiences and emotions, dismantling the barriers I had constructed. This decision was made amid some degree of apprehension with the realisation that this would be a difficult process as I still carried the ‘internal scars’ of my institutionalisation. The stigma of ‘being a Parramatta Girl’ is one that all the participants in my Honours thesis mentioned as being a shameful factor in their lives which the following quote clearly illustrates:

My experience in the welfare system, police and courts has left me feeling that there could be no help and that I didn’t matter anyway. The compounded effect of childhood abuse and neglect has damaged all aspects of my being. I have carried the internalised stigma of being a ‘Parramatta Girl’, the shame of being ‘bad and wicked’ all my life (Aya, quoted in Aitken 2004: 34).

It is this sense of shame which constructed me as a silenced subject, the effects of this self construction evident in the struggle I now find myself engaged in; to allow ‘mystory’, my experience and emotions, to become part of my research. After all, as Krieger (1991: 55) asserts, “We have a right to be part of what we know”. As a subject and a researcher, I am in the unique position of telling and listening, of observing and
explaining. However, by locating me within my research, it is crucial to ensure that in legitimising my own voice I do not marginalise the voices of other participants.

**The Personal and the Academic**

Writing from a personal perspective in sociology and other associated disciplines is not a new development nor is it one of the more ‘traditional methods’. There are a number of terms used to refer to such works including critical autobiography, narrative, autoethnography and reflexive ethnography. In this genre, the researcher assumes the dual position of academic researcher and personal self to tell autobiographical stories about life experiences (Ellis and Bochner 2000). The researcher appears as if seeking to understand the ‘self’ in order to understand more fully the ‘other’. Ellis and Bochner (2000) argue that in effect, they are showing rather than telling. Reed-Danahey (1997) views autoethnography as an act of self narrative, a work of self reflexivity through text, a method that places the self within a social context, connecting the personal to the cultural, examining the self within the context of the cultural forces that act upon it. This aspect holds particular significance for my research as the life experiences of the population which I propose to study was enabled by particular attitudes, social norms and constructions of young girls’ needs prevalent at the time in which they occurred. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many of the girls who spent time behind the walls at P.G.H. came from family situations of sexual abuse, incest or domestic violence. When they ran away or otherwise expressed their despair they were stigmatised as sexually promiscuous (‘why else would they be on the streets?’) and charged with being ‘in moral danger’. This then became the rationale for their incarceration, and explanations were seldom sought from the girls as to why they exhibited such behaviour. It is through the use of research processes such as autoethnography that marginalised groups, such as former inmates of P.G.H., have the chance to tell their own stories, as histories such as these also give us information about the type of subject who is shaped by such experiences. Hence, according to Ellis and Bochner (1998), autoethnographies depict events in a powerful way, generating a depth of comprehension that is lacking in more traditional ways of writing.
Autoethnography has not been without its critics, attracting claims of narcissism, self-absorption, exaggeration and self-indulgence by the researcher using life experience as a central focus of their project (Coffey 1999; Ellis and Bochner 1996; Holt 2003; Sparkes 2000). Holt (2003: 17) argues that autoethnography “…has been received with a significant degree of academic suspicion because it contravenes certain qualitative research traditions…” He added that autoethnographic writing requires resilience, persistence and a strong belief in the value of the genre due to the criticisms and rejection that may be encountered in presenting it as scholarly work. However, by using autoethnography or a similar genre of writing, it will allow both my own and the experiences of others, our feelings and emotions, to be presented as ‘valid data’, adding a deeper dimension to the study of a marginalised population.

**Peaceful co-existence or mutual recognition?**

Initially, the model of impersonal Social Science that Krieger (1991) wrote about offered me a legitimate way of masking the personal issues involved in my topic. I realised however that it also perpetuated my role as the ‘silenced subject’. The knowledge which emanates from my experience as a ‘Parramatta Girl’ should be seen not as a barrier, but rather as a contribution to understanding and analysis, because as Ellis (1998) argues “Our understanding of others can only proceed from within our own experiences”. I contend that by placing ‘me within the methodology’, exploring my life story in conjunction with the other participants, whilst it may not facilitate a peaceful co-existence between the personal and the academic, engenders a mutual recognition that each has a valid place within the Social Sciences.

**References**


