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"Apparently Being a Self-Obsessed C**t Is Now Academically Lauded": Experiencing Twitter Trolling of Autoethnographers

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Abstract: Online hostility and mockery, often known as "trolling," is a phenomenon almost as old as the internet itself. Nevertheless, the rise in trolling aimed at researchers using non-traditional, creative methodologies, such as autoethnography, remains severely under-explored. This essay seeks to fill the gap in the literature and make a contribution to the discourse on autoethnographic research. Writing autoethnographically, I share my experience of discovering vile, misogynist, and cruel trolling of autoethnographers and their work on the social media platform Twitter. I reflect on the online hatred I received when I raised the issue publically. Many of the messages I received focused on my perceived inability to cope with opinions other than my own. Therefore, I finish by offering a brief response to critiques of autoethnography; albeit criticism that comes from researchers who raise their concerns in a constructive and scholarly manner. Above all, the purpose of this essay is to bring trolling of autoethnographers to the fore and encourage others to speak about their experiences. If we do not write about trolling, then it—and our story—remains hidden.

Key words: autoethnography; trolling; social media

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1. Prologue

Have you been on Twitter and searched for "autoethnography"? I have. There I found public shaming of autoethnographers, and sneering at journals publishing interpretive and creative research. The aggression toward autoethnographers on Twitter is best illustrated by the tweet that appears in the title of this essay: autoethnographers are "self-obsessed c**ts."[1] Sections 2 to 5 of this essay highlight the often gendered and misogynistic abuse aimed at researchers who utilize non-traditional methodologies, such as autoethnography. [1]

Not all of the tweets I found were hostile and venomous. Many engaged in healthy criticism, questioning the purpose and value of autoethnography as a research methodology. When I discarded the purely unpleasant personal tweets, looked beyond the hostile tone of some comments, and focused on the tweets containing healthy criticism I found three core

accusations against autoethnographers. In Section 6, I respond to each indictment. I do so autoethnographically, laying bare my own doubts, struggles, and charges against myself, in the hope of presenting a continuing challenge to traditional, restrictive notions of research and the way we have access to and understand the world. [2]

2. Hello Twitter

In my empty office, free from the distraction of students and colleagues, I am in the zone. Autoethnography swells around me. Increasing numbers of articles, book chapters, snippets of blogs, presentations, and papers make their way across my desk, covering it like wallpaper. Table-paper. [3]

And the ideas! The ideas come out of me and flow straight into my grubby desktop keyboard. The space bar is sticky, no doubt made slow by some remnant of foodstuff that crept in there many months (years?) ago. Type, type, space, type, space, type, type, type. On and on I go. At speed. [4]

I write about how I came to hear the word autoethnography in a chance conversation with my research mentor in our shared corridor at work. How, later that evening, I found myself watching and re-watching a YouTube video of professors Carolyn ELLIS and Arthur BOCHNER, entranced by a method with storytelling at its core. The sort of storytelling that would "evoke readers to enter [your] experiences and feel what [you] felt" (ELLIS & BOCHNER, 2014, n.p.). ELLIS and BOCHNER argued for the researcher's personal experience, emotions and interactions to be the center of the narrative. Throughout the video, as though to demonstrate this approach, both told stories about their professional and personal lives, how they came to autoethnography, and the question of legitimacy in social science research. [5]

Type, type, type, type, space, type. And now, I've moved on. I'm editing a PowerPoint presentation called "What's the story, autoethnography?" There's a staff research seminar coming up soon, and I'm going to talk about my chosen methodology publicly, in open forum, to my colleagues for the first time. Hesitating for a moment, I think of the hundreds of autoethnographic articles I have read since my evening in the digital company of ELLIS and BOCHNER. I start to panic. How am I ever going to impart all I have come to know about autoethnography in one short presentation? The question "what is autoethnography?" seems so simple. The answer is anything but. [6]

With a quick movement of my computer mouse and a barely audible *click*, the PowerPoint retracts and a Word document—filled with text—flies to the fore. I sigh internally, grateful I had the foresight all those years ago to create what has become my most useful document to date. There it is, my trusty list of commonly used definitions of autoethnography. Glancing at the contents, my eyes select:

> "Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)" (ELLIS, ADAMS & BOCHNER, 2011, §1).

> "... a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. It is both a method and a text, as in the case of ethnography" (REED-DANAHAY, 1997, p.9).

> "... uses a researcher's personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences" ... "acknowledges and values a researcher's relationships with others"... "uses deep and careful self-reflection" (ADAMS, HOLMAN JONES & ELLIS, 2015, pp.1-2). [7]

Panic subsides. Okay, I can use these definitions to help me explain autoethnography to my colleagues. I can draw out key themes, like the way autoethnography calls for rich, self-introspection which links the personal to the cultural. I can list just some of the many ways in which autoethnographic accounts are produced: field notes (JENKS, 2002), story (TAMAS, 2011), novel (ELLIS, 2004), poetry (WYATT, 2016), performance (SPRY, 2001), and music (BARTLEET & ELLIS, 2013). [8]

Back to the PowerPoint. Back to being consumed by autoethnography. On and on it goes. Type, type, type, type, space, type. An hour passes quickly, and PowerPoint fatigue starts to set in. Time to check Twitter. Twitter is my favorite social media networking service, where registered users post and interact with messages or "tweets." Tweets are limited to 140 characters, and so are typically to the point. Registered users, of which I am one, create their own usernames that start with the "@" symbol. Many users remain anonymous, with no reference to their name, or any other identifying feature. My own username is a pun-filled reference to my life as a lawyer, and my natural inclination to rebel, although my profile shows my real name, the university where I work, and my photograph. [9]

I have over 700 "followers" on Twitter; users who will see my tweets appear on their own timeline (called a "feed") when they log in. Tweets can be forwarded or "retweeted" by other users to their own feed. Users can also "like" individual tweets. Users are notified when someone re-tweets, replies to, or likes one of their tweets. I follow mostly my own tribe: lawyers, academics, educationalists. I also follow news outlets, left-leaning politicians, and (truth be told) late 1990s Britpop bands. [10]

Twitter is my digital common room (CAMPBELL, 2016a), always ready for me to pop my head around the door to see what's going on in the academy. Access is immediate. "What's going on?," I mutter to myself. Scroll, scroll, scroll. I see a link to an opinion piece on a new UK Teaching Excellence Framework. Then a comment on gender equality in academia. A colleague is also re-tweeting practical tips for students sitting exams. Most of the tweets in front of me are concerned with academic practice, on way or another. But that's not what I'm looking for today. I'm in the zone. I want more autoethnography. I type "autoethnography" in the search bar at the top right corner of my screen. My fingers are tired and I keep having to go back and retype, deleting "autoethjngrapy" "authoethnograophy," until I get it right. I hit the return key, with purpose, and the "clunk" resonates around my vacant room. [11]

There's me! My smiling face stares back at the top of the screen. Alongside it, my Twitter profile: "Solicitor, Law Teacher. Writes on autoethnography and legal education. Yet to get over being mentioned in The Guardian Newspaper." Baffled as to why I'm looking at myself, I suddenly realize that it is because I have written "autoethnography" in my profile. I'm automatically elevated to the top of the search results. I emit a warm glow, happy that other Twitter users will be able to find me when they search for autoethnography. But there's no time for pride today. Move on. Short scroll down. There's a link to a blog talking about the autoethnography of learning. I've read it before, so I keep scrolling, all the while berating myself for not blogging more about autoethnography. [12]

Hang on. Back up. What was that? Scroll backwards. I stare at the screen, trying to take in what I've just read. I shift in the ill-fitting chair beneath me. My brow furrows. I wonder if I'm reading it wrong. Maybe it's like the time the assistant at the T-shirt printing shop, surrounded by garments adorned with personalized slogans and pictures, answered my request to have a T-shirt printed with "Oh no, we don't do *that* here" and I walked away unable to hear the mischievousness in her voice. Or the time my partner asked me who the BBC Radio 4 program Woman's Hour was aimed at and how long it lasted. And I replied earnestly "it's primarily for women, honey," followed by "and, well, it's usually just about an hour." And he stood there, cheeky grin and dimpled cheeks, finding my compulsion to give an accurate answer to questions amusing. I have the capacity to get things wrong, and to misjudge tone and mood. Perhaps that's what I'm doing here. But I don't think I am. [13]

This is what I'm staring at. A tweet, saying: "Writing an "autoethnographic" paper should lead to immediate termination." This is a response to another tweet by a user who self-identifies their account as being for intelligent, evidence-respecting academics. They have tweeted a screen shot of an extract from a conference paper where the author notes her work is autoethnographic. Alongside the screen shot, the intelligent, evidence-respecting academic Twitter user has written—seemingly to provoke their followers' ire—"This is an accepted conference paper." [14]

Quickly, I come across other tweets by the same Twitter user. Like ants, I see one, then another, then another, and then I cannot stop seeing them. Whomever is behind the account (it is anonymous) is on a roll. They have found an abstract from an article in an academic journal that publishes research addressing issues of social justice and education. The selected article explores the contradictions between the author's educational autobiography and the representations of schooling found in his school yearbooks. The Twitter brigade light up. "Look, here's a new research method. It's called going through your yearbooks and making up stuff," says one. "You've hit the nail on the head there. Its called 'autoethnography'. Its how idiots get PhDs" [sic]. Spurred on, others clamor to tell each other about the idiocy of the creative methodology that I love.

Some are mild: "man, autoethnography is the gift that keeps on giving, isn't it?"

Some are a little more aggressive: "Here's a definition of autoethnography for you. 'Creating a bunch of bullshit from something I did'."

And finally: "Just Googled autoethnography. Apparently being a self-absorbed c**t is now academically lauded" [15]

Journals publishing autoethnographic research are not immune from the Twitter hostility either. "I looked into this autoethnography. It gets over 400 hits in the journal 'Qualitative Inquiry'," exclaims a user in horror. Another replies (sarcastically I suspect) "That's one of the leading journals that promotes this 'innovative' methodology." Finally, a different user notes that the journal in question is "like a psychiatric ward that academics think is a resort. They can't wait to go there." I am not sure what this means, but I sense it is not a positive critique. [16]

The outpouring of venom is exhausting. I see a photograph of an extract of an autoethnographic paper published in a journal I admire greatly. Next to the photo, a user tweets "This is an academic with a PhD. Yes, really." The tweet prompts a comment that the journal in question is not a valid venue for research. This one stings. I am in the fortunate position of having an article accepted for publication in that journal. I think of the pages and pages of detailed, penetrating comments from the two anonymous reviewers, challenging me to deepen my work, develop my critical thinking, and widen my reading. I dive into my electronic "draft articles" folder and start scrolling through the article. I count. 27 pages, 94 footnotes, and 50 texts listed in the bibliography. Knowing full well it is ridiculous to base an article's merit on the number of footnotes, I push that to one side as I keep counting. Indignation takes over. How is this is "not research"?, I growl to myself. How dare someone dismiss it so. [17]

My head feels warmer. My cheeks go numb. The space behind my eyes starts to ache. Am I upset that someone is finding fault with autoethnography? No. I am not in the slightest bit surprised that criticism of autoethnography exists on Twitter. I have spent hours reading carefully crafted academic articles that argue autoethnography contributes to a reduction in qualitative standards (BUZARD, 2003; DELAMONT, 2009; FINE, 1999). I enjoy wrestling with that critique. It forces me to think intensely about how I can construct robust responses to questions about my methodological approach. No, I'm not upset by criticism. My body is reacting to the toxic nature of the intimidating tweets. The sarcasm, the sneering, the mockery. The public shaming. [18]

3. Trolling

Finding a consistent definition of trolling is an arduous endeavor. There is a lack of "clarity and agreement" about what constitutes a troll or trolling behavior (FICHMAN & SANFILIPPO, 2016, p.6). Differences occur in academic representations, and our understanding as to the nature of and implication of trolling diverges on a generational level (ibid.). Put simply, your version of trolling may be very different to mine. [19]

FICHMAN and SANFILIPPO provide a comprehensive list of scholarly and popular understandings of trolling. The differences are stark. HERRING, JOB-SLUDER,

SCHECKLER and BARAB (2002, quoted in FICHMAN & SANFILIPPO, p.8) describe troll behavior as luring other users "into discussions that are pointless and distracting, particularly drawing inexperienced or naïve users by posting an incorrect or inappropriate, but noncontroversial, message." Trolling as a harmless distraction technique, if you will. Contrast that with SHACHAF and HARA's (2010, quoted in FICHMAN & SANFILIPPO, 2016) declaration that trolls "engage in intentionally repetitive and harmful actions, often in violation of policies, out of boredom, attention seeking, and the pursuit of entertainment, and in doing so, damage the community, content, and other people" (p.8). [20]

The fast-paced changing nature of technologically driven platforms may account for the differences in the way trolling is treated. In their list of definitions, FICHMAN and SANFILIPPO (2016) reported that Reddit—a website where users engage in numerous discussion boards—had this to say about trolling:

> "Please remember what trolling is. The art of deliberately, cleverly and secretly pissing people off via the internet, using dialogue. Trolling does not mean just making rude remarks: Shouting swear words at someone doesn't count as trolling; it's just flaming, and isn't funny. Spam isn't trolling either; it pisses people off, but it's lame" (pp.7-8). [21]

I went to Reddit to locate the original source for the paragraph on trolling. I could not find it. I performed a website-wide search of the site for "troll" and "trolling" (using Reddit's own search engine). I found this:

> "On any website with user-generated content, trolls will appear. The truth about the internet is that negative comments are unavoidable. If you receive completely unmerited negative comments, don't feel obligated to respond. Don't feed the troll. Some people get a rise out of annoying people, and if you see a comment like that, you're better off ignoring it than giving it attention. Other Reddit users will also see these as trolls and will downvote these comments" (REDDIT, 2017, n.p.). [22]

Reddit's need to update its guidance on trolling so swiftly may be indicative of the speed with which we alter our comprehension of online behaviors. [23]

Bearing in mind the diversity in our understanding of what trolling is, I offer my own perspective. Not all of the Twitter users posting negative tweets about autoethnography could rightly be described as trolls. Some users raised interesting questions about rigor and validity, and engaged in meaningful pleasant discussion. However, where a Twitter user is specifically targeting a community, systematically mocking that community, and encouraging others to do the same, then this surely is the epitome of "trolling." It is behavior designed to damage and silence individuals and communities. [24]

4. Back to Twitter

I think about responding to the tweets as they flood my feed. Hovering over the reply button on the "c**t" tweet, my brain attempts to construct a response. But nothing works. My first reply is too whiney. Another too angry. And then I wonder if I want to spend my afternoon watching my cell phone light up with notification after notification. Do I want to get into an online fight? Not today. And in any event, I can't say what I want to say in the 140 characters Twitter demands. [25]

Months go by. I highlight the issues of Twitter trolling online in two magazine articles (CAMPBELL, 2016a, 2016b). The second is picked up by an anonymous account dedicated to exposing "idiotic" research and my work is disseminated to its 50,000 followers. What transpires feels like an unending (but is probably only a month long) period where I receive numerous direct and indirect online comments about me, my life, and my desire to "make my sociology degree work for something."[2] I am sent derisive and goading statements about my inability to withstand criticism. I am told that I am bound to feel bullied because my work is bullshit. My cell phone vibrates over and over again as more and more messages come flooding in, tidal wave after tidal wave. [26]

I am shocked at how quickly the comments turn personal. Individuals I do not know, and

cannot identify, encourage their followers to scrutinize my Twitter account. I start to worry about being so visible on social media and making elements of my life public. I become paranoid that a photograph of my kitchen is still visible on my Twitter timeline and I delete it. I continue to go out running alone but spend the entire time planning how I would escape should a stranger jump out and attack me. I lock the door firmly when I get home each night. [27]

The bile feels never-ending. Comments start to appear on other forms of social media, not just Twitter. "Elaine Campbell should be relentlessly mocked," I read one evening on Facebook. Such statements receive digital applause in the form of "likes" or replies of a similar ilk. It hits me hard. I try not to look, but cannot help but spend my evenings trawling through the abuse. [28]

Ironically, it is when I am sitting quietly in my kitchen, the morning light spilling through the windows, that the most shocking comment arrives. I am not a woman of color. Yet one Twitter user assumes that I am. The focus of their negative critique of me and my scholarship is based entirely on gender and race. It is utterly unpleasant. Seeing this, my partner takes my cell phone from my hand, goes to my Twitter settings, and blocks contact from any user I do not follow. My notifications fall silent. [29]

5. Online Misogyny

Autoethnography offers a forum for researchers whose stories are often left out of traditional discourse. By engaging readers in first person accounts of experiences that are different, marginalized, or ignored, autoethnographers "help give a voice to the voiceless, the invisible to become visible and to make the differences noticeable" (SHORT, TURNER & GRANT, 2013, p.xi). I spent one afternoon looking at a Twitter account set up specifically as a bastion of "real" research, noting who and what was targeted as a subject for mockery. My list included (though was not limited to) the following examples: scholarship by queer black women, lesbian narratives, explorations of gender norms in hypermasculine spaces, autobiographical accounts by transgender persons, experiences of women of color in the academy, proponents of queer feminist theory, research into social construction of gender, and accounts of sexual harassment. Feminists and proponents of feminist theory were particular targets. Many of the academic papers referenced by the Twitter account were accompanied by comments such as "no evidence here, please—we're feminist scholars." Female academics were by no means the only recipients of this sarcasm. One man who had identified as a feminist was held in equal contempt. It strikes me that the marginalized experiences and complex insider accounts which autoethnography (and other creative methodologies) provide an insight into are the very narratives these online accounts and their followers are looking to shut down. In addition, there is a gendered bent to the online mockery, raising broader social questions regarding equality and discrimination. [30]

Online misogyny and hostility toward feminists is, sadly, widespread. In the UK, where I am based, I am especially aware of the experiences of the journalist Caroline CRIADO-PEREZ. In 2013, the Bank of England decided to replace Elizabeth FRY with Winston CHURCHILL as the historical figure on the English £5 note, leaving no women represented on the reverse of bank notes. CRIADO-PEREZ successfully lobbied to have Jane AUSTEN appear on a £10 note, replacing Charles DARWIN. She subsequently received approximately 50 sexually abusive tweets every hour (CRIADO-PEREZ, 2013, n.p.). At its peak, she reported getting one threat a minute, with men discussing how they will rape her, which parts of her body would be penetrated and how they were going to kill her. Writing in the New Statesman at the time, she said: "They are still coming in now—the latest: a death-through-gang-rape threat where I'm told to 'KISS YOUR PUSSY GOODBYE AS WE BREAK IT IRREPARABLY'" (ibid.). [31]

Women who engage in video gaming have reported similar experiences. There is a growing body of literature commenting on the "symbolic annihilation" (HUNTEMANN, 2015) and positioning (BLODGETT & SALTER, 2012; TOMKINSON & HARPER, 2015) of women in

game culture. An increase in the visibility of woman in the video gaming community has sadly been accompanied by a rise in misogynistic rhetoric (TOMKINSON & HARPER, 2015, p.617). I was not aware of the extreme levels of online abuse aimed at women "gamers" until one of the reviewers of this paper alerted me to it. I find the experiences of those women interesting for two reasons. First, it is a clear example of technology being utilized as an extension of the patriarchy (WAJCMAN, 2004, quoted in TOMKINSON & HARPER, 2015, p.626). Power structures are being played out online (TOMKINSON & HARPER, 2015, p.626), and those who seek to attack women or other minority groups are able to do so from the comfort of their own home behind a wall of anonymity. Secondly, within the gaming community I found another example of abuse directed at a woman seeking to work for gender equality and representation. Following the launch of a crowdfunding campaign for a series of short films exploring sexist gender stereotypes feminist gamer Anita SARKEESIAN was subject to a relentless online assault. In her 2012 TED Talk, SARKEESIAN noted that she had "sadly gotten used to sexist slurs and sexist insults" but this time she found herself targeted by a "massive online hate campaign" (2012, n.p.) with sexual assault, rape, and death threats. Her online accounts were consistently reported as spam and containing terrorist content. Her personal details, including her address, were circulated. The attackers even created an online game where participants could "beat the bitch"—the photograph of SARKEESIAN would become more battered and bruised with every "hit." Today, four years later, the comments on SARKEESIAN 's TED Talk on YouTube are disabled, with the following message: "WHY ARE COMMENTS TURNED OFF? This talk comes from a woman who was targeted by an online hate campaign. Predictably, the same campaign has targeted this talk, so comments have been shut down" (ibid.). [32]

Compared to SARKEESIAN and CRIADO-PEREZ, I got off very lightly. My notifications are back on. Many of the tweets directed at me have since been deleted. You may have had a similar experience to mine, or perhaps you suffered worse. However, I do not know because, as people pursuing creative methodological approaches to research, we are not speaking about the online mockery we are subject to. Twitter abuse of autoethnographers has received little attention in the literature. As JANE (2014) notes, this may well be due to the fact that abuse of this nature is "heavily laced with expletives, profanity, and explicit imagery of sexual violence; it is calculated to offend, it is often difficult and disturbing to read" (p.558). I am, of course, aware of the mantra "do not feed the troll"—the implication being those who engage in trolling live off getting a response or rise. However, aggressive, toxic online discourse towards autoethnography exists. If we do not write about it, then it remains hidden —"blinding us to its existence and proliferation" (ibid.), or, worse, sanitized and accepted. The cruelty I have seen online would not be accepted at a conference or seminar. Bullying needs to be called out. If sharing my story helps to bring this issue to the fore and encourages others to speak about their experiences, it will be worth the inevitable "e-bile" (ibid.) I may receive as a result. [33]

6. Healthy Criticism of Autoethnography: My Response

Not all of the tweets about autoethnography were bullying in tone. Many were questioning. Some were cynical. Others were humorously dismissive. Together, they projected "healthy criticism." When I discarded the purely unpleasant personal tweets, looked beyond the hostile tone of some comments, and concentrated on the tweets containing "healthy criticism" I saw a pattern emerge. Autoethnography was being rebuked for three reasons: narcissism, lack of scientific prowess, and dullness. [34]

What follows is my response to those grievances, and to the academic critique which—with greater skill, and less vulgarity than some of the tweets I viewed—identifies similar problems with autoethnography. To be absolutely clear, I do not equate scholarly criticism of autoethnography with trolling. It is one thing to be utterly against a methodology and present an articulate argument as to why you feel it is misguided. It is another thing entirely to call an autoethnographer a c**t. I have had doubts about autoethnography. Those doubts intensified when I read some of the tweets I have referenced in this essay. Initially, I was going to leave

my thoughts on some of the criticisms of autoethnography to one side, and concentrate on my trolling experience. However, the tensions I have felt, and the way in which I have come to terms with the accusations I have made against myself are a fundamental part of this story. I have had many an internal conversation, going backwards and forwards, and struggling to reconcile my concerns. The following part of this essay sets out in writing for the first time my response to some of the criticisms made of autoethnography. [35]

6.1 "Diddling your pet hamster": The accusation that autoethnographers are narcissists

One twitter user noted that autoethnography was the "selfie" of academia. Along the same lines another—and my personal favorite—said that autoethnography was akin to "diddling your pet hamster." These tweets neatly sum up the principal criticism of autoethnography: self-indulgence. [36]

Focus on the self, according to FINE (1999), transforms "the intensive labor of field research into the armchair pleasures of 'me-search'" (p.534). While it was clear to me that FINE was using "me-search" as a rebuke, I rather took to the phrase when I first came across it. For many months, I used "mesearch" as shorthand when trying to explain autoethnography to those struggling to understand what my research was about. Having a cute go-to-phrase when discussing my work with colleagues and friends often provoked smiles, and sometimes a giggle. However, I soon started to feel uneasy about reducing my methodological approach to such a simple moniker. I grimaced when it appeared in the media, even when, as in the case of REES' (2015) *Times Higher Education* article "Self-Reflective Study: The Rise of 'Mesearch'," the piece was designed to inspire the use of personal experience in academic work. In making light of autoethnography, I wondered whether I was encouraging others to conjure up an image of me lying feverishly back on a chaise longue, pen in one hand, the other laid on my forehead, overcome with the toil of narcissism. [37]

Rejection of self-representation in academia is not new. RICHARDSON (1990, 1992, 2000) in particular has written extensively about the suppression of creative, subjective voices in academic literature. She refers to the perpetual stream of "passive voice, absent narrator, long, inelegant, repetitive authorial statements and quotations; 'cleaned up' quotations, each sounding like the author; hoards of references; sonorous prose rhythms, dead or dying metaphors; lack of concreteness or overly detailed accounts; tone deafness" (RICHARDSON, 1992, p.131). In many ways, any writer adopting or replicating the values RICHARDSON riles against can appear "as a kind of unexcited peeping tom or voyeur" (GRANT, 2010, p.112) due to their dispassionate description of both purpose and experience ("This article aims to ..,," "The researcher argues ..."). [38]

In stark contrast, researchers who write from an "emotional, first person stance" (TILLMANN-HEALY, 1996, p.80) directly call on readers to feel, react, discover, and care. Come into our world, they say. Come and experience what it is like, and then examine how you feel about it (CAMPBELL, 2016a). The examination part is important. The autoethnographic researcher does not want their work to be passively consumed (BOCHNER & ELLIS, 1996, p.24; TILLMANN-HEALY, 1996, p.8); they explicitly invite response. Embracing "The Ethnographic I" (ELLIS, 2004), writers can simultaneously create new understandings for themselves and for their readers. [39]

Traditionalists view the inclusion of a subjective, personal view as a contaminant, spoiling an otherwise pure piece of research. I see two problems with this line of reasoning. First, I question the narrative that contamination has thoroughly negative consequences. For me, WAKEMAN's (2014) work on the lives of heroin and crack cocaine users/dealers is an excellent example of positive contamination. Drawing on his own experiences of participant observation, WAKEMAN's autoethnography calls on "moments of emotionality" (p.709) derived from his experiences as a former user and dealer. By embracing his past and the emotions generated by his fieldwork, WAKEMAN helps us to *feel* an understanding of the drug users he encounters and the events in the field he recalls. His contamination adds

depth, enriches understanding, and proffers insight. It leaves the blood in (MORIARTY, 2013). [40]

Secondly, I query whether it is possible to create authentically objective research, containing no trace of the author. Prior to starting our research, we are making choices when we consider the question(s) we are asking, the methodological approach we may seek to use, and the ethical ramifications. During the research, the language we adopt, the time we spend, and the way we approach analysis are all controlled by our individual characters and background. Who we are infuses every stage of the research process. We may metaphorically hold a metal tea strainer across our research filtering out our personality and experience, but inevitably some part of us will fall through the gaps. For me, adopting contamination as a badge of honor is a way forward. "Yes, this is subjective," I say with a smile. "Yes, these are *my* experiences." ELLINGSON (1998) follows a similar line when she reassures her readers that her findings are "thoroughly contaminated" (p.494). As she notes, our personal and academic lives intersect. So, why try to keep them apart where this inhibits complex, rich, emotional research? [41]

In one sense, the Twitter user who equated autoethnography to taking a "selfie" is right. Autoethnography does require you to turn "the ethnographic lens" on yourself (O'REILLY, 2012, p.130). However, I am inclined to agree with SPARKES (2002) when he warns that labeling all autobiographical ethnography as self-indulgent is "a dangerous and threatening move" (p.213). SPARKES proposes that we might be seeing a new form of ethnographic practice "more firmly rooted in a social context and the situatedness of author-self" (ibid.). I hope this is the case. As we produce and consume more autoethnography our challenge is to champion deep and complex reflection which links to socio-cultural contexts and advances our understanding of the world. This should be how autoethnography is judged. Dismissing written self-portraiture outright is a disappointingly one-dimensional reaction that neglects to see the value in reflective scholarship. [42]

6.2 "Is it just "stuff that happened to me"?": The accusation autoethnography is unscientific

I saw a number of tweets raising concerns about autoethnography's value as science. Reading those tweets, my mind's eye was instantly pulled back through time, quickly landing on the moment I first encountered DELAMONT's work. I saw her words in front of me, and, once again, felt worried about my place in the research world: "Of course a narrative can be entertaining or frightening or have a pedagogic purpose or be a great basis for poetry or drama or fiction ... but those are not the proper concerns of social science" (DELAMONT, 2012, p.544). [43]

DELAMONT is not the only academic to question the scientific merit of autoethnography. FINE (1999), for example, rallies against "personal reminiscences" (p.533), instead calling for "powerful and secure knowledge" (ibid.). BUZARD (2003), while noting that autoethnography is the "natural successor to discredited ethnographic modes" (p.61), concludes that autoethnographic practice is "uneven and under-theorized" (ibid.). [44]

FINE recounts the struggles facing ethnographers during the period when finding ethnographic work in leading journals was a "rarity" (1999, p.532). Promotion was unlikely. He recalls the need for "steely diligence" throughout such a "dour situation" (ibid.). Given that backdrop, I find it interesting that the strongest voices questioning the validity of autoethnography are ethnographers. [45]

If we look, even briefly, at the history of autoethnography, then there are clear parallels with the encounters FINE (1999, 2003) describes. My understanding of the rise of autoethnography comes primarily from ELLIS (2004), whether writing alone or with others (ADAMS et al., 2015; BOCHNER & ELLIS, 2016; ELLIS et al., 2011). She notes that only four decades ago, the accepted view of research practice focused on the separation between the researcher and their research. Even in sociology, "little or no attention" (ELLIS,

2004, p.15) was paid to the researcher's experience, "except to establish guidelines for how they should act so as to not bias their stories" (ibid.). Researchers were explicitly encouraged to rid their work of any trace of subjectivity or personal view. ELLIS (2004) draws on artifacts from her past to evidence this. Her ragged, smudged handout from a 1975 graduate class states: "Ideally one's field notes should be such that an independent reader could take them and arrive at the same inferences and explanations as oneself" (pp.15-16). Exploration of the researcher's experience was not a legitimate path to pursue, not in your published work at least. [46]

The traditional representation of qualitative research offered little to ELLIS and others like her, who—during what has become known as the "crisis of representation" (MARCUS & FISCHER, 1999, p.7) or "crisis of confidence" (ELLIS et al., 2011, §2)—in the 1980s and 1990s looked to interpretivist forms of research which placed the researcher at the heart of the research. Yet, importantly, at first ELLIS was committed to showing what she was doing was scientific. She was "significantly affected" by DENZIN's review of her article (ELLIS, 1991) which referred to her writing as schizophrenic (BOCHNER & ELLIS, 2016; ELLIS, 1995). DENZIN made the point that ELLIS seemed to be "caught between two camps" (BOCHNER & ELLIS, 2016, p.30); she was at simultaneously trying to be scientific *and* fight for interpretive inquiry. The review appears to have been a seminal moment for ELLIS, who wrote that it contributed to her own transition "to trust the work that gave meaning to [her] life" (BOCHNER & ELLIS, 2016, p.30). [47]

I continue to struggle to reconcile the tensions I feel about autoethnography as science. On the one hand, I want to argue that drama, narrative, and fiction can be valid forms of science. Crafting the words that fully realize my story takes much longer than any traditional research essay I have written. Rather than lacking intellectual rigor, as DELAMONT (2007, 2009) charges, my experience is that autoethnographic research requires robust patience, deep introspection, and the ability to regularly (re)visit and (re)view your own epistemological and ontological position. Those were the words I wished I had found when I was asked if my research was "just Bridget Jones's Diary." Moments before the question, I had finished the first public presentation of my proposed autoethnographic doctoral research, and I was secretly very proud of my performance. The room was small and packed with eminent researchers and senior members of staff called upon to listen to and support new entrants to the doctoral program. I stood in the center of the room, my A3 poster stuck on the wall directly behind me, strong and focused and passionate about my work. Eschewing the traditional poster design, mine had a large red heart right in the middle containing the word "autoethnography." The audience was so close. Waving my arms around like a conductor as I spoke, I pulled my colleagues into the new world I had uncovered. My questioner , of course, was only trying to help. The inquiry was completely reasonable, especially given the novelty of the methodology. But the laughter that accompanied the reference to FIELDING's infamous fictional diary (1996) hurt. The heart, a visual representation of my love for autoethnography, instantly became silly. My passion transformed from powerful oratory into childlike enthusiasm. [48]

On the other hand, I find myself battling again the notion that my research needs to conform to labels such as "science." I am not alone. BOCHNER (2000) explains that there is no right way of doing social science research (and, in our preoccupation with rigor, we "are neglectful of imagination" (p.267). Perhaps we are constrained by the limits of our imagination, only finding substance in research that reflects our own ideals. FINE (2003) explicitly uses this language to explain his thoughts on autoethnography. He notes that other forms of ethnographic research do not "reflect the ideal" (p.58) by which he thinks research should be undertaken. Other forms of ethnography simply "diverge from [his] own ethnographic program" (ibid.). [49]

Some days I pursue validity through scientific "status." Other days validity is a false icon. In this middle place, wanting to be part of the club but then rejecting externally-imposed criterion, I embody the impossible struggle of attempting to "do" the "right" research. [50]

6.3 "I get it's writing about yourself, but what if you don't have anything interesting to say?": The accusation that autoethnographers are uninteresting

Some tweets focused on the notion that writing about yourself led to dull and boring research. DELAMONT (2007) makes a similar point when she notes that "we're not interesting enough to write about" (p.3). Of course, what one person finds fascinating, another will balk at, and it may be that the autoethnography the twitter users and DELAMONT have read would fail to capture my imagination too. However, classifying all autoethnographers' emotional experiences as uninteresting strikes me as being unfair. [51]

I documented my first experience with an autoethnographic text in CAMPBELL (2016b). There, I included a vignette which captured my experience reading ELLIS and BOCHNER's (1992) abortion story . It was, for me, a visceral experience. I was with the authors as they twisted and turned through their decision to terminate a pregnancy ten weeks into their relationship. I was with them as they entered the hospital. I felt all of the conflicting emotions and the physical pain. In the end, I was so overcome that I had to find a seat on the train I was traveling on. It was the closest I have ever come to passing out. ELLIS has said that the goal was to "lead readers through a journey in which they have an experiential sense of the events and know what it must have felt like" (ELLIS & BOCHNER, 1992, p.80). In me her goal was realized. [52]

I omitted one fact from my vignette. I thought I could be pregnant. But, in the back of my mind, I knew the truth—I was not. Why is this important? Why choose to tell this story now? For me, motherhood is an unlikely event. Multiple persistent symptoms, ovarian scan data, blood tests—all foretell fertility problems. ELLIS and BOCHNER's (1992) autoethnographic work magnified my conflicting thoughts on parenthood. Would it change my outlook on my working life? Would I become less ambitious? How would I fit in my morning writing routine? How would I complete my PhD? Would I end up rushing to pick up my child from the nursery rather than reading the latest research? Would my known identity disappear to be replaced by "mum"? I spent the journey reading the story and asking questions of my own. Selfish, trivial, but honest questions, relating to a life that did not exist. [53]

Persuading someone that a piece of writing is interesting is a complex, some might say futile, task. What I would argue is the power of the personal story should not be underestimated. Naturally, we will be drawn to stories that resonate with us. I, for example, specifically seek out autoethnography situated in the educational world. Nevertheless, that is not to say other autoethnographic works provide little reaction in me. CUSTER's (2014) autoethnography on the sexual abuse he suffered as child is one of the most difficult pieces of research I have ever read. For a long time, I could not revisit it, and only did so because I wanted to speak about it in a staff seminar on autoethnography I was leading. The first person account of the abuse was not the part that I struggled with. Rather, it was the conflict within the 11 year old CUSTER as to how he felt about the abuse. Lines like, "The callous touch of Tom's hand on my penis is making me feel excited and also disgusted, but I give into the sexual tension of the moment" (p.5) are incredibly challenging. Alongside "sacrilegious" (p.3) descriptions of Jesus Christ, CUSTER invites us into his "raw and uncouth" personal narrative. In doing so, CUSTER reveals what he calls the "true beauty" (p.7) of autoethnography: a means to convey life. His autoethnography reminds me of BRIDGENS' (2007) thoughtful comment that stories can be "ignored, distorted, or silenced" (pp.4-5) due to the discomfort they cause. [54]

7. Farewell, and Hello Again

"I'm really nervous about this one" I say, shifting from one leg to another as though trying to keep warm.

"You'll be great," says Lisa, my colleague and fellow ethnography enthusiast, "You're a really good speaker."

She means it. I know it's true. Yet we continue the dance of praise and modesty.

"Hmm, but I'm normally so organized. And I don't feel ready. And look who's here. God I feel sick," I say, trying not to look my colleagues in the eye as we wait for the lecture hall to be free. They have not heard me speak about autoethnography before.

Lisa counters, "You know autoethnography. No-one else here *knows* it like you!."

I smile. I know it's true. "God I feel sick," I repeat.

"Sick, sick, sick," I sing to myself. [55]

We wait, Lisa and I, in silence for a few moments, wondering when we'll be able to go in and get ready for our presentations. I have not asked Lisa how she feels about speaking for the first time about her research. I won't realize this omission until later on in the evening, when it pops into my head while I'm curled up on my sofa at home listening to the children playing in the street outside.

"Hey," I say, "Do you want to see something I found on Twitter?"

"Yeah," she says, glad for the distraction. [56]

I gesture to a nearby table, and we quickly walk over to it. I open my laptop, click on the Google icon and then the Twitter shortcut at the top. Up comes my Twitter timeline. Both of our eyes dart to the list of "trending" topics, momentarily side-tracked by the latest news and celebrity gossip.

"There's this account," I say, "This awful account. It's about research. It shames people for their research."

"What? That's mad," Lisa says, watching me type the name of the twitter account into the search bar.

"Yeah, I know. I'm finding it now. Wait 'til you see it." [57]

But the account does not appear on the screen. The "waiting" icon twirls round and round and round. We stare at the screen, seemingly possessed by the rotating circle. Eventually it stops and a new screen appears: "Account Suspended: This account has been suspended. Learn more about why Twitter suspends accounts, or return to your timeline."

I grimace. "It's not here," I say, "It's been ... suspended?" I try searching for it again, but get the same message.

"I need to find it," I say. [58]

Lisa looks at me. She is both bored and anxious to get on with her presentation. Seeing another colleague approach, she says "Erm, there's Nick. I need to speak to him before he goes to Berlin. I'm just going to have a quick chat with him, okay?"

"Hmmm," I murmur, not really listening to her anymore. I'm still typing different phrases into the Twitter search, desperately looking for any trace of the account. Aha! There's someone moaning about it disappearing. "Where's it gone?," they ask. Good question, I think. [59]

Biting the inside of my mouth, I keep searching for more references to the suspended account. I see accounts which have similar names, but I ignore them. Eventually, it dawns on me that I should take a look at them.

I look. Annoyed with my lack of common sense, I give myself a mental kick.

Of course. Of course others would take up the mantle. Cut off one of the Hydra's heads, and two more emerge from the fresh wound. And here they are, snarling and twisting and snapping at me. Pointing and shaming. Laughing and mocking.

Chatter around me increases. People are moving forward, through the doors of the lecture hall. I glance around for a friendly face. No-one notices me. I feel small, an outsider in my own faculty. I wait until most have gone in. My head lowered, I push on the heavy wooden door, taking a deep breath. I silently repeat the words. My name is Elaine and I'm an

autoethnographer. My name is Elaine and I'm an autoethnographer. My name is Elaine and I'm an autoethnographer. [60]

Notes

1) The day I searched for "autoethnography" on Twitter, I came across a multitude of hostile tweets. I wrote some down. I could barely look at others. The tweets I refer to in this essay are constructs, amalgamations, and modifications of tweets I came across that day, and have subsequently seen. There was indeed a tweet that referred to "self-obsessed c**ts." That tweet did not include asterisks. <back>

2) I have a law degree. <back>

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