

GRACE

NOTES XIX

DR SALMA SIDDIQUE looks at autoethnography as an increasingly used research approach

IF WE THINK about researching an event or situation, or more specifically our clients' situations – and how to describe and share our findings – then there is a wide range of research methodology to consider. The practice of research is generally seen as the systematic investigation of multiple materials and sources that identify the facts and help us reach an understanding. One significant and increasingly used research approach relevant for counselling practitioners is autoethnography, considered as the act of autobiography blending with ethnography. If we see research as collecting data and applying a method, auto (self) ethno(cultural) graphy (writing) is a research methodology (Ellis, 2004). It explores the individually lived experience to better understand the cultural context from which the self-story emerges into a socially-conscious act. Autobiography blends with ethnography to arrive at a way of knowing through attuned inquiry which offers a style of therapeutic writing, thus enabling us to make sense through an act of witnessing. This form of qualitative inquiry is relational through the act of (re)searching by (re)membering and (re)cognition of interpersonal connections through the writing process of being in the world which embodies creativity; it also recognises that sharing vulnerability with the researcher and the researched can be transformative.

This act of blending ethnography with autobiography can help us make sense of the lived experience between the therapist, client and the supervisor which (re)create relationships through dialogue and texts (Barthes, 1978). Autoethnography gives us a way of collecting artefacts of autobiographical memory and is a method of allowing the therapist and supervisor to really 'hear' the story for all to make meaning and record more fully. It can be a particularly useful tool for capturing the relationship and feelings as well as the event itself.

However, telling and making stories can carry the tension between fiction and fact which creates a friction. Translating observations through fragments and construction of knowledge can contribute to some understanding but 'Whatever sense we have of how

things stand with someone else's inner life, we gain it through their expressions, not through some magical intrusion into their consciousness [building]. It's all a matter of scratching surfaces' (Geertz, 1986). Stories are made and unmade through the values we place on our engagement with everyday objects, spaces and places that make sense of cultural values. The values also depend upon the viewpoint from where we stand. Berne (2010) speaks of the notion of viewpoints emerging from early childhood such as judgments based on and obscured by preconceptions learned from others within a cultural context. These viewpoints then influence our relationships and transactions.

We gather meaning through transactions which make up the experiencing of each other through dialogue (Hargaden & Sills, 2014). Transactions and interactions are experienced, repeated, forgotten, and reclaimed through introspection and self-observation (Polkinghorne, 2005). Transactional Analysis offers a structured and systematic approach to map these transactions and relationships (Berne, 2010). Transactions become a creative process of a mythological self, which comes into being through the researcher and researched, the client and the therapist. Recording the self-story is the making of a personal mythology. How the speaker actively creates a self-image can be seen in the language of the heroic journey of Erikson's (1968) concept of ego integrity. The encounter is created by the story embedded with a positive bias founded upon objectivities and fact becomes into being as a personal myth as 'an act of imagination that is a patterned integration of our remembered past, perceived present, and anticipated future' (McAdams, 1993: 12). As a form of self-expression storytelling gives meaning to the experience of everyday practice. Our relationship between objects create representations of common experiences shared and which offers material to make new forms of storytelling to create a research situation as a projective technique or fictional story that offers the self as a resource for assessment or treatment in psychotherapy. The challenge is to capture the story for research material and to present it in an accessible manner.

For me, the use of self as an ethnographical resource when writing up my reflexive account gave me a way of relating and understanding others as well as giving me more insights for my research. It was therapeutic and gave me insight as to how I create my social and cultural identity in the world. When writing up a recent qualitative inquiry on supervision I found the autoethnographical approach helpful in developing relational depth with clients. This approach captures well the self-story and the story of the other that informs the cultural script of research, while being aware that research can only ever scratch the surface of the lived experience.

References

- Barthes, R. and Heath, S., (1978) *Image-music-text*. London: Macmillan.
- Berne, E., (2010) *What do you say after you say hello*. New York: Random House
- Ellis, C., 2004. *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Rowman Altamira.
- Erikson, Erik H., 'Generativity and Ego Integrity', in *Middle Age and Aging: A Reader in Social Psychology*, ed. by Bernice L. Neugarten (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968) 85-87
- Geertz, C., (1986) *Making experiences, authoring selves in* Turner, V.W. and Bruner, E.M., (1986) *The anthropology of experience*. University of Illinois Press, pp.373-380.
- Hargaden, H. and Sills, C., (2014) *Transactional analysis: A relational perspective*. London: Routledge
- McAdams, Dan P. (1993) *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self*. New York: Guilford Press
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (2005). *Language and meaning: Data collection in qualitative research*. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52(2), 137-145.

If you are interested in autoethnography:

Doing Autoethnography, Aberdeen Conference 27/28 Oct 2017 <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/education/research/>

| | |
|--|---|
| | <p>Dr Salma Siddique CTA(P) PTSTA is a clinical anthropologist, researcher and academic in counselling and psychotherapy at the University of Aberdeen. She works with RTEs on a consultancy basis for research skills and CTA prep. groups.</p> |
|--|---|