The Qualitative Report

Volume 27 | Number 2 Article 3

2-5-2022

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Recommended APA Citation

Custer, D. (2022). A Father's Death: The Therapeutic Power of Autoethnography. *The Qualitative Report*, *27*(2), 340-347. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2022.5367

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Abstract

Autoethnography is a transformative qualitative research method that has the power to heal self and society after traumatic events (personal and collective). It is a bridge between the subjective inner world of spirit and memory with the outer world of objectivity and culture. Autoethnography is a powerful tool for manifesting change in the world. In this paper, I will address autoethnography as a transformative methodology in relationship to my father's death when I was a young child, demonstrate the therapeutic aspects of personal narrative, and quickly address some of the ethical challenges with the process.

Keywords

autoethnography, personal narrative, qualitative research, storytelling, transformative research

The Qualitative Report 2021 Volume 27, Number 2, 340-347
https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2022.5367

A Father's Death: The Therapeutic Power of Autoethnography

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Autoethnography is a transformative qualitative research method that has the power to heal self and society after traumatic events (personal and collective). It is a bridge between the subjective inner world of spirit and memory with the outer world of objectivity and culture. Autoethnography is a powerful tool for manifesting change in the world. In this paper, I will address autoethnography as a transformative methodology in relationship to my father's death when I was a young child, demonstrate the therapeutic aspects of personal narrative, and quickly address some of the ethical challenges with the process.

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Autoethnographic Alchemy

Storytelling has been around since the dawn of human civilization. Stories have been told around campfires, passed from one generation to the next as oral traditions, written in the form of poetry, prose, and lyrics, and most recently, transformed into the visual narrative we see in movies. Stories have the power to make us feel emotions, move us to organize, and make us scream and cry. Stories are also a magical alchemy. They can take basic ideas and turn them into radical action. One word or sentence can alter a person's belief system and worldview. The transformative power of storytelling is an awe-inspiring event that is both individualistic and communal at the same time. In this context, transformation is the regenerative process of reshaping psychological, emotional, and spiritual perspectives on events and memories to allow reconciliation and healing to emerge. Storytelling is an incantation of immense power that can reconstruct the author's past, present, and future experiences. The alchemist can use stories for good and for negative purposes. It depends on perspective. Political rhetoric is the art of storytelling to achieve a certain goal and can motivate millions towards one destination.

Autoethnography is a form of storytelling alchemy. It is a transformative qualitative research process that invokes reflection and integration of relevant narrative, reshaping the psychological, emotional, and spiritual perspectives of the researcher. This method analyzes individual stories and events through various lenses and in turn, their effects on society and culture at fundamental levels (Custer, 2014, p. 11). Autoethnography evokes vulnerability, reflexivity, and performance as individuals engage with memories and events form their past (Allbon, 2012; Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Custer, 2014; Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2016). It is a process of reaching into memory to reveal new ways of looking at events in the present and gaining insight about and re-storying the future. In essence, it is a form of time travel where time and space no longer hold meaning for the autoethnographic performer (Custer, 2014, p. 2).

In addition, autoethnography is a performative dance between both the storyteller and the reader (Denzin, 2006; Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2016; Spry, 2017). This dance requires a willingness to sometimes be led and at other times to lead. As in other modes of performance, there can be revelatory moments for individuals as they relate to autoethnographic narrative.

Insights into unknown ways of being and knowing can manifest in the dance. The author may uncover knowledge through the process of writing their lived experience, while the reader may integrate new worldviews as they reflect on external phenomena.

Year of the Bicentennial

It was the year of the bicentennial in the United States: 1975. Gerald Ford was president and people were listening to "Please Mr. Postman" by the Carpenters on the radio. It was also the year of my father's death. He had just turned 26 years old, and I was just about to turn 5 on February 2nd.

Saturday, January 24th, was a cold and blistery day in rural southcentral Pennsylvania. My mother and father had decided to hitch a trailer to our family vehicle and tow two snowmobiles to a property owned by my dad's coworker. The snow was fresh and had accumulated over several days. It was bitterly cold; the temperature during the day was about 28° Fahrenheit. I can still feel little ice crystals and snowflakes on my tongue as they flew around from passing gusts of wind.

I don't remember much of the trip to the coworker's house, but I vividly remember the events that unfolded after we arrived. The man who owned the property also ran a chainsaw repair company out of a large garage. The garage was a "man's den." It smelled of old timber, lubricant from machines, and a certain musky scent. It was oddly attractive.

As the day progressed, more people showed up to enjoy the snowmobiles, which was around the same time the drinking began. Out of the garage, you could hear the laughter and partying coming from my dad and a few other young men. I was strangely attracted to the idea of these guys having fun when the women weren't around. Granted, I was too young to know what homosexuality was, but I still had an affinity for other males that was emotional. Perhaps it was because I did not have a strong relationship with my father up to that point. I felt isolated and alone on many occasions. My father worked two jobs to support my mother, my brother, and myself. I'm sure he was using the day as way to release some stress.

It was getting late that evening and my mother began to gather my brother and I for the trip back home. The car was warming, and the snowmobiles loaded on the trailer. My father, however, was nowhere to be found. My mother instructed my brother and I to wait by the car while she collected my dad. She found him in the garage inebriated beyond any normal drunk person. He could not stand and was slurring his words. He may have even "blacked out," but was still interacting with people around him. The men who had been drinking with him helped my mother get him to his feet and dragged him out to the icy driveway where the car was parked. The exhaust from the tailgate was spiraling into the dark air of the evening and a chill went down my spine. I could not recognize my father in the fading light of the day and winter's icy fingers wrapped around my neck. The trees were quiet and bare of leaves. Their shadows were like death's fingers erupting from the frozen ground.

My mother learned that my father had consumed a large quantity of alcohol in a very short time. Was it a game? Was it a dare? Was my father trying to prove his masculinity? Those questions will never have an answer. I only have my assumptions about what my father was thinking on that dreadful day. It took four men in their mid 20s and my mother to get my father's body from the garage to the car. There he broke free of the support and stumbled for a few seconds before falling to his knees on the stony driveway. The sound of mumbling came from his gaping mouth. His eyes darted back and forth for a minute, and then they closed, as if he were falling asleep or praying to some strange god. He was like an animal caught in a trap, desperate for something to latch onto as he fell into a deep, dark cave.

My mother pulled my brother and me to her side and she wept. My dad's eyes opened, and he stared into my soul. He opened his arms and stretched them out to my brother and I,

beckoning us to come to him for a hug. I didn't see my dad; I saw a zombie with bloodshot eyes, dirty fingers, and stained clothes. He wanted to eat my brains. My father had become a monster, kneeling in a stranger's driveway, wanting his children to hug him. Was it a need for validation? Did he know he was dying? Was his body telling him his time was up? I will never know. My brother moved to him and embraced the husk of what was once a human being. I stood frozen. My father called for me again and I turned into my mother's arms. I was not going to go to him. I refused. He terrified me. He was traumatizing and horrific.

It wasn't long before my father fell into another trance as if he was fading in and out of consciousness. He mumbled and slurred more unrecognizable words. The four men who had carried him to the car, moved to get him up and loaded into the back seat of our family car. His dead weight was unwieldy, but they managed to get his legs in the seat and his upper body and head rested near the floor. It was an odd position. I got in the back with my father, my brother in the passenger seat, and my mother drove us home. Along the way, my dad managed to slip down to the floor even further than he had been already. He moaned and yelled. Other times, he was silent as death. His head had slipped under the front seat by the time we had pulled up to our house. My father was barely breathing, and my mother was hysterical. I don't know why we didn't go straight to a hospital. My mother never told me what she was thinking that night.

My brother and I were rushed into the house, and we watched the world go by from our bedroom window. The red flashing lights of an ambulance arrived, and my father was pulled from the vehicle. I distinctly remember a toy bubblegum machine next to me on the windowsill. It was filled with colorful balls of sugary goodness. I popped a coin in the slot and heard the satisfying ticks as I turned the handle and watched the balls of gum move. One was caught and rolled down the chute to my waiting hand. The smell of sweetness filled the air and my jaws ached until the gum was satisfactorily crushed enough to chew. I watched the ambulance outside pull away and figured I'd see my dad the next day.

The next day did arrive, but my father did not. He passed away Sunday afternoon from acute alcohol intoxication. Poisoned by spirits. The liquor drained my father of his cognitive functions, lowered his body temperature and heart rate, and eventually depleted and snuffed his life energy. I'm not sure if my dad went into a coma, but he was pronounced dead at 5:45 PM, just a week away from my fifth birthday. My father loved motorcycles and worked hard to support his family, but lived with ghosts and demons. His psychological and emotional health were never evaluated or diagnosed for specific cause or treatment. Soon after, my mother began her spiral into emotional and psychological darkness (although, it is possible that her mental health issues began before this event and may have even contributed to my father's death. He may have been unable to handle the immense pressure of the emotional and psychological challenges my mother presented).

My father left an indelible mark on my psyche and spirit. Had he lived, I often wonder what our relationship would have been like. Would he have accepted me as a gay man? Would he have continued to fall into the trap of emotional and psychological pain and suffering? Would he have been physically abusive towards my mother, my brother and me? I'll never know. I'm now twice as old as my dad was when he passed away on that cold January day in 1975. My mother is also dead, but the generational trauma lives in my bones. In my muscles. In my mind.

Trauma, Reflexivity and Re-Storying

Trauma can take many forms. It can occur in childhood or adulthood. It can come in the form of death, disease, violence, abuse, religion, politics, war, occupation, or relationship. Trauma is a shadow that moves in the night, creeping towards its destination like a slithering serpent – a specter cloaked in smoke and ashes. It is intangible, yet it is very real. It lives in the

back of our minds, out of reach, and avoiding recognition. It grows roots in our bodies and our souls.

Autoethnography is a light that shines on trauma, revealing its authentic nature, and allows us as the writer to reflect on the past, the present, and potential future. It gives us the ability to meditate on deep secrets and events that we hold in our cellular memory. Autoethnography is a doorway into other worlds where we have control over the narrative, the characters, and the emotions that are linked to them. Our perspective is free to change and evolve as we work with these stories, reshaping the dialogue and relationships to create a revised history. This is what is known as re-storying (Allbon, 2012; Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Jones, et al., 2016; Raab, 2013). Many qualitative researchers, writers, and artists have used autoethnography to translate, configure, integrate, reform, and expose their trauma for themselves and society (Amarpreet, 2018; Barley, 2020; Collins, 2021; Custer, 2014; Gabriel, et al., 2017; Gildea, 2021; Javaid, 2020; Nikischer, 2018). Autoethnography is a powerful method that positions the researcher directly in the middle of the research. They are the primary participant who is studied. They write the past and bring it to life so that others may connect with the transformative effects that reflexivity and re-storying have on trauma.

Retelling the story of my father's death allows me to connect with his spirit and memory while at the same time reflecting on topics such as death and dying, relationships, family, and alcoholism. This act of meditative performance through writing enables the healing properties of autoethnography in my psyche. These therapeutic characteristics are noted in numerous articles. Rossetto (2014) and Shamai (2003) discuss the healing aspects of the qualitative research interview process. Haynes (2006) shares the positive effects of the intimate relationships that can develop between researchers and participants. Wright (2009) examines expressive and reflective writing as a form of art therapy. Finally, Rose and Hughes (2018) identify ways that coconstructed narrative addresses sex and sexuality in occupational ecosystems.

Personal Narrative and Storytelling as Therapy

Custer (2014) reflects,

> Writing and telling a story about myself opened old wounds, but also manifested the energy needed to heal them completely. I had to be available to the past as I wrote about pedophilia, sexual, emotional, and psychological abuse, and discrimination in the form of homophobia. (p. 9)

Storytelling, personal narrative, and autoethnography are cathartic in nature because they bring a level of healing to the psychological, emotional, and spiritual aspects of one's personality. They cure the effects of negative embodied memories by shining a bright light in the darkest corners of the mind and heart. They challenge a person to face their monsters and empower themselves in the face of adversity. Autoethnography becomes a sword and a shield at the same time – destroying the energy that allows shadows to exist in the first place and protecting the spirit and mind from further harm.

This form of self-inquiry is not for the faint of heart. Great resolve is required to avoid re-traumatization and creating a more severe situation than before. A meditative mind can buffer some of the recurring emotions, nausea, and despair of reliving traumatizing events, but it is not full proof. Facing monsters and demons, even when they exist only in memory, can still hold tremendous power over the experiencer. A guide should be sought out when individuals embark on the path of autoethnography. A guide who can support the writer when they struggle. A guide who is wise about the undercurrents and eddies of a river that may seem

peaceful on the surface. A guide who can say when to pause and hold space for the past and the present moment. An autoethnographic guide teaches their students the art of intuition, sensibility, and awareness.

Bochner and Ellis (2016) utilized collaborative autoethnography as a form of therapy for their decision about having a child together. A two-way dialogue unfolded. They write,

> A coconstructed narrative process emerged spontaneously. First, we wrote independently about our experiences. Then we exchanged our stories, read each other's, and had many conversations about our responses, interpretations, and increased understanding of this joint experience. Finally, we set about writing a coconstructed story about what had happened, one that we both could live with, that would describe our complex thoughts and feelings alone and together. (p. 178)

While the dialogue and storying between Bochner and Ellis was not directly linked to a traumatic event, it does show the powerful, positive, and therapeutic effects that narrative can have between two or more people. It illustrates empathy and compassion in a poignant and demonstrable technique.

In a way, I had a dialogue with my father as I wrote the story about his death earlier. His voice was in my head and heart guiding the translation and perception of that event over 45 years ago. Time and space were transformed in the field of autoethnographic energy. Custer (2014) writes,

> Time, as a linear procession of past, present, and future increments of experience, undergoes a metamorphosis. It becomes a dance without boundaries. Space includes all of the elements that an individual utilizes to construct their identity. Those elements can be corporeal objects (e.g., their body, a house, a loved one, etc.) or non-corporeal manifestations (e.g., beliefs, personality traits, ideas, etc.). Our perspective of these two factors can fundamentally alter the view we have of our lives. (p. 2)

The ability to change time and space is what gives storytelling its power. If we think of a theater play or movie, we can see how memory and experience juxtapose with perspective, perception, and reality. In dialogue with our memories, we are transformed and transported. When those memories are shared with the world through narrative performance, they reshape our collective understanding and alter culture and society at fundamental levels. The therapeutic nature of autoethnography can change the world.

Ethical Concerns with Autoethnography

There is a shadow side to consider when working with autoethnography as a transformative qualitative research method: autoethnography is one person's perspective. Others who experienced the same or similar event as the author most likely have a very different set of ideas, images, and memories about the event. The ethics of autoethnography (e.g., validity, reliability, subjectivity, re-traumatization, vicarious traumatization, etc.) must be considered before using this approach in formal research.

Autoethnography has been debated for many decades over its subjective nature and the idea that researchers who use this methodology are egotistical, self-centered, and indifferent to the impact that their stories have on others (Andrew, 2017; Dauphinee, 2010; Lapadat, 2017, Nikischer, 2018). It cannot go without saying that negative behavior has probably occurred on

various occasions with some qualitative researchers. However, the argument that the researcher cannot be separated from the researched has gained a lot of support in recent years as science learns more about interconnectedness, systems dynamics, and collective consciousness (Montuori, 2011; Sakdiyakorn, et al., 2021; Sarikaya-Şen, 2021).

As a qualitative researcher, I must be aware of the subjective nature of my thoughts and memories about events in the past and how they affect the present. My choice to perceive another human being in a different light can radically alter the events as they objectively played out. However, I am comfortable knowing that my "truth" is just as valid as that of the other individuals who witnessed my father's death. Like an alchemist or wizard, I can weave the energies of my embodied experiences to support my present circumstances, build resilience towards future traumatic events, and encourage others to take a similar approach to understanding their psychological, emotional, and spiritual constructs.

Conclusion

Ways of being and knowing change over time and the beauty of autoethnographic writing is its alchemical properties. Horrific, traumatic, and negative events can be utilized to strengthen and encourage the individual who experienced them. When consideration is taken and the researcher is prepared to be vulnerable to their emotions, re-traumatization can be avoided. Autoethnography as a transformative research method enables individuals to share their darkest secrets and the stories, they weave can impact society in a multitude of ways. The ongoing repercussions of storytelling ripple across the vast ocean of human consciousness, connecting with other stories and memories. This interconnected web of relationship not only heals the individual consciousness, but also enhances and fortifies the collective.

Storytelling is as old as when the first human experienced an event or emotion and communicated that message to others. It is raw and timeless. It is not limited by boundaries, borders, culture, or race, and is unfettered by time and space. Storytelling can literally change the past to inform the present and alter the future. Our courage to be vulnerable to its effects will determine its capacity to reshape and transform us from the inside out.

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Article Citation

Custer, D. (2022). A father's death: The theraputic power of autoethnography. *The Qualitative Report*, *27*(2), 340-347. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2022.5367