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Autobiographical and researched experiences with academic writing: an analytical autoethnodrama

Abstract

The author identifies analytical autoethnography as an empirical methodology that synthesises autobiography and social critique in order to resist, and also change, dominant academic discourse. The data from twelve open-ended interviews with academics from a variety of subject areas at one university has been considered and the author has carried out narrative analysis in order to elicit autobiographical experiences with academic writing and the audit culture. Evidence from the author's autobiographical experiences and the interview data have been used to inform a short autoethnodrama set in a university on the south coast. This triangulation of **research-autobiography-script** seeks to prioritise the experiences of the people involved and maintain the balance between rigorous academic analysis and experiential autobiographical reflection via a creative and emotionally charged text. The autoethnodrama considers the 'impact' of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and current such exercises, and the possible and real effects of neo-liberalism and the audit culture on institutional culture and individual lives.

Keywords: autoethnography; autoethnodrama; higher education; writing; audit culture

Introduction

This article seeks to form part of the 'collective resistance' to the neoliberal management and audit culture outlined by Sparkes (2013). Neoliberal governance is particularly toxic because it gives an illusion of self-management and freedom, maintaining an aspirational desire for academic autonomy whilst allying itself with business models and management structures that undermine this very notion (Gilles, 2011). Sparkes argues that the normalising and naturalising features of neoliberal discourses and practices need interrupting in order to 'initiate the process of decomposing the neoliberal subjects we have become.' (Sparkes, 2013, p.13). Sparkes suggests that we must challenge those in positions of power and influence instead of complying with the audit culture and attacks on our professionalism and integrity (Loughlin, 2004). I am a positivist, humanist, feminist qualitative researcher in the humanities, seeking to engage readers in dialogues exploring the effects of the audit culture on academic(s) life and to use those discussions to imagine and facilitate ways of evolving beyond it. I identify autoethnography, and specifically autoethnodrama, as a methodology that can trigger such conversations and contribute to a strategy that critiques and also resists the neo-liberal agenda.

Davies and Bansell (2010) maintain that the most prominent feature of neoliberal government is that 'it systematically dismantles the will to critique, thus potentially shifting the very nature of what a university is,' (Davies and Bansell 2010 p.5). They further argue that the impact of neo-liberalism on Higher Education is not just evident here in the UK but also internationally. Whilst in this paper I detail my own experiences of capturing and storying autobiographical and biographical experiences with academic life that have been effected by neo-liberalism and the audit culture it has fostered, this work is situated in a broader global context of neoliberal forms of governmentality, which have been emerging in France and Germany since the mid-seventies, the US from the late seventies and in Australia and New Zealand at the beginning of the eighties (Davies and Bansell 2010 p.7).

Holligan (2011) identifies writers of fiction who 'frequently create dystopian perspectives in order to highlight disturbing trends affecting our society.' (Holligan, 2011. P.55). Whilst my own autoethnodrama does not seek to depict or project a dystopian state, as a fiction it offers a lens by which to examine potentially negative features and trends in one higher education institution (HEI) and it is hoped that this will be relevant to readers in and outside the UK. The assumption of this relevance is based on previous research outlining the anxiety and insecurity generated when working in a rapidly changing environment, in this case HE (Banks, 2007, McRobbie, 2003, Gill 2002, Ursell, 2000, Ross, 2003, Gill and Pratt, 2008). Sikes (2006) suggests that while there are shared experiences of the audit culture, its impact is also unique to every university and to every member of staff and these generalisations are problematic. She identifies the restructuring, fees and pressure to function as

a business as disturbing for the majority of academic staff, making them feel anxious and unclear about their professional identities and ‘leaving them feeling generally inadequate.’ (Sikes, 2006. P.563). Sikes’s research also indicates that while there are shared themes and issues with the neoliberal structure, tensions are also unique and personal, generated by constructs of gender, conditions specific to each institution/school/staff member and a shift in emphasis on administration/teaching/research.

Background – the shift towards a neoliberal agenda

In the 1963 Robbins Report, academic freedom in the UK is described as the freedom to publish, to teach according to a teacher’s own concept of fact and truth and to ‘pursue what personal studies and researches are congenial’ (Robbins, 1963. p.229). In the 1988 Education Reform Act, the term was redefined to suggest that academic freedom enabled academics to ‘question and test received wisdom, and to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions, without placing themselves in jeopardy of losing their jobs,’ (Docherty, 2012. p 47). Seismic economic cuts that have resulted in an almost business-like efficiency becoming the driving force behind the management agenda in Higher Education (HE). This agenda has resulted in the creation of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) which measures the impact of an individual academic’s work and allocates funding to the university to which they are affiliated on the basis of this assessment. The increase in administration, pastoral duties and teaching has squeezed time available for research and writing. In my own university, we are advised to apply for funding to buy us out of teaching, funding that is often driven by a government agenda and policed by the peer review system.

Cuts to funding across HE but most specifically in the arts and humanities, means that academic research in these disciplines is increasingly restricted and yet we are still under immense pressure to seem relevant in terms of the REF and produce research that is deemed as having impact by a government hell bent on cuts and developing a Higher Education Academy (HEA) that is motivated by wealth-creation rather than academic integrity. The Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) has been managed by the state since it replaced the UK University Grants Committee in 1992 and the effects of this change have gradually spread through HE. In keeping with Foucault’s analysis of neoliberal governance (Foucault, 2000), many academics have consciously or unconsciously had to silently comply with pressure to do more for less and in the meantime, funding has all but evaporated, meaning that often ‘We no longer teach as we wish, but according to the logic of cuts and its attendant economics.’ (Docherty, 2012. P.52). Docherty issues a call to arms: ‘Academic freedom is at the core of democratic intellect and a free culture. It must be fought for.’ (Docherty, 2012. P.54). In many ways, my autoethnodrama is a response to this call.

Autoethnodrama – ‘Impact’

Performance texts seek to capture multi-voices and lived experiences without coding and framing data. I identify autoethnodrama as a methodology which allows the voices of the researcher and the researched to come alive. It is a methodology that brings data to life but also offers a critical knowing (Bagley, 2008). Performance and ethnography when brought together in this way can resist linear concepts of time and space and allow the fragments of meaning-making that occur during interviews or whilst writing field notes to be reconstructed in a way that can effectively represent and recreate the stories that were shared (Spry, 2006). Saldana (2003, 2011) adopts the term ethnotheatre as a methodology that draws on interview data and journal entries in order to imbue performance texts with a personal story that is also social and cultural. I have adopted the term analytical autoethnodrama as the process by which Impact was created uses a structure proposed by Anderson (2006) for analytical autoethnography for which he advocates the following criteria:

1. (The writer must be) A full member in the research group or setting,
2. Visible as such a member in published texts, and
3. Committed to developing theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena. (Anderson, 2006, p.373)

Autoethnodrama can encourage an empathetic reading of the research story that would be lost in traditional research analysis. As with other forms of experimental ethnography, the aim is to trigger meaning-making on the part of the reader (Grant, 2010) by juxtaposing social theory and dramatised accounts to recreate and create events that say something about the social world under study. In this way, autoethnodrama and performance texts become ‘a way of knowing, a method of revealing and generating meaning,’ (Bagley, 2008, p.63).

Writing and Creative Processes

Researcher’s memories and experiences

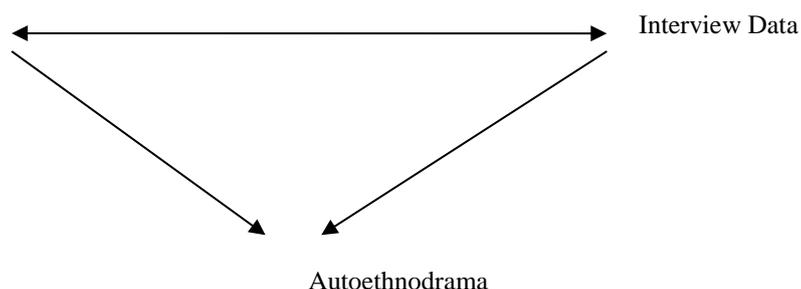


Figure 1 – Triangulation of Research

In order to maintain a professional standard of writing and fulfil Anderson's criteria for analytical autoethnography that demands dialogue beyond the self (Anderson, 2006), the script has been subjected to a rigorous feedback process having been read and critiqued by the playwright Phil Porter (Porter, 2003; Porter, 2007; Porter, 2008; Porter, 2008). As with the peer review process in academic writing, this dialogue has been useful in the editing and redrafting process and for refining my writing craft.

In writing the autoethnodrama 'Impact' my intention was to offer an insight into my autobiographical experiences whilst carrying out the research and to also reflect the real experiences of my interviewees via a creative and evocative text. I offer the reader 'Impact' as a social and cultural critique of the perceived 'publish or perish' culture in one university at a particular point in time. The autoethnodrama explores the contention between the historic and romantic view of academia and the realities of the existing culture and suggests that our personal and professional lives overspill, overlap, and that this process is messy and has potentially negative, but also positive, effects. Fortunately I have never worked with 'Jan' but I am aware of colleagues who may identify with her character. Other characters in the script reflect real and imagined peers and colleagues whose ideologies and perspectives are represented here. 'Impact' also looks at the central character's lack of confidence and her struggle to accept herself as an academic.

Autoethnodrama is still a relatively new methodology in humanities and social science research so while I very much hope that readers take an enlightened approach to engaging with the story presented and are able to find meaning that is relevant and personal to them (Grant, 2011), inspired by the work of Carless and Sparkes (2007) and Sikes (2011), I have devised the following guiding questions that the reader may find useful:

- Does the story hold together in an intelligible and coherent manner?
- Do the characters and events seem plausible?
- Can we learn from the stories of others and their experiences with HE?
- Does the autoethnodrama contribute to understanding of the effects of the publish or perish culture in one university?
- Did the autoethnodrama affect the reader emotionally and/or did it resonate personally?
- Can the reader empathise with any of the characters or not?

With these issues and questions in mind, I now present a selection of scenes from the autoethnodrama 'Impact'.

Impact

Scene 1

JESS is in her early thirties.

JESS: My dad ended up going with me, mum was at work and Pete said he couldn't get the time off but I think he just couldn't face it. 'Don't worry Mrs Neston, it won't take long.' The doctor said, he was really nice, "It's Ms Neston, I said, I'm not married. It was silent then for a bit, which I thought was a good thing, I wanted him to concentrate. But then the nurse on my left asked, "Do you smoke?" "I don't now but I did, I used to smoke a lot." And I suddenly catch sight of the 18 year old me, and I remember how much I used to love smoking and I felt really guilty, as if it's something I needed to confess. "Well that's it then," she says happily, as if we have come up with the answer to the universe between us. "Now just you try and relax."

I went back to staring at the mural of a polar bear cub and its mother. And then a thought got into my head and it wouldn't go, on and on and on: *What if I can't have children? What if I can't have children?* And that's it then, because the thought of death has never really scared me, I fell off a balcony when I was seventeen and all I could think when they told me that I might have died was, 'Poor mum and dad. They must be really upset.' Cos if you're gone, you're gone aren't you? And I'm not religious or anything so...but out of nowhere, the idea that I might not have children really frightened me. And I wondered: *where has that come from?*

And then the doctor lifts his head and shakes something that looks like a black slug in a pot at me. "I think I got it all!" "That's great," I said "thank you so much." Doctor pats my hand and tells me not to worry, that he is fairly confident it will all be ok now. So I don't ruin the moment, I don't tell him that it won't be alright. How can I say, 'No Doctor, it won't be alright at all because I've just realised that I have to have a baby, today, right now and Pete won't agree.'

When Pete gets home that night there are no flowers, no chocolates. "Did you cook those chops?" he goes. "Don't you want to know what happened?" But he shakes his head. Says he doesn't want to hear about it, can't bear the idea of me being ill and just wants to forget the whole thing. I ask him about the flowers he didn't get me and he says, "What do you want? Fireworks?" and I say "No," I say "No Pete, I want a baby."

I ended up going for Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) because he said it was work that was making me stressed all the time, 'It can't just be me?' he said, and he was right, I was overworked and I was tired, just really, really tired. I started this thing where I kept saying yes to everyone and all the work they gave me, 'Yes, I'll write that article; Yes, I'll take on that support role without getting any extra hours; Yes, I'll organise an open mic night for the students and set up a magazine and do my doctorate, yes, yes, YES!'

So I go and I loved CBT, it helps me think about all the behavioural patterns I have and the ones that are brilliant and the ones that have got me nowhere and I sift through all the crap and I work to evolve, to get better and he hated that. And I tell him that it's over, that I would rather be on my own than pretend that what we have will ever be enough.

So when the time comes for my follow up appointment, I go privately, I hope that the results will be quicker than on the NHS which has been decimated by Tory cuts. But the nurse is inexperienced, awkward and at the end, I ask if she can ring me when

they get the results cos I'll be at work. "You won't want to get bad news at work?" She says.

Before I reach the car park the tears have started, I am convinced she has seen something really bad and that the next ten days I'll just be waiting for the inevitable bad news that will take me back to the nice doctor and the polar bears. I call Pete. And I'm scared that he will be pleased, I am scared that he will think I might come back to him now that I probably can't have children but more than that, I need to hear his voice. He tells me that she is an idiot that she had no right to make me feel that way: that I should complain, that he'll come, right now, this minute, and demand to see her. And this makes me laugh and I tell him, "I'm OK. I'll see you at home."

When I get back, he is already there. There is a bunch of flowers on the table and he says he doesn't know what to say. That he is scared of getting it wrong. That he wants to make it better the only way he knows how.

Blackout.

Scene 2

Office at the university. JESS sits at her desk with her back to the door, typing furiously. Her e-mail pings and she stops work to look at whatever has arrived in her inbox.

JESS: *(laughs)* Oh that's a good one!

JAN enters the office. JAN is also in her 30s and head of the school that JESS is in; she grimaces as she sees JESS laughing and not working.

JAN: Something funny?

JESS: *(turning round)* Oh, hello Jan, I didn't hear you knock?

JAN: I didn't. We run an open door policy.

JESS: Of course.

JAN: I've just come from a strategy meeting...

JESS: ...another one?

JAN: Yes, it seems you're on the radar.

JESS: The radar?

JAN: *(leans against the desk)* People know who you are.

JESS: And that's good is it?

JAN: It's good for you, not so good for your colleagues who don't appear to have done any research for the last 5 years.

JESS: Everyone knows that our teaching load is higher than in other schools, there are only so many hours in the week!

JAN: Then how have you managed it?

JESS: I don't know. No life I guess!

JAN: And you did have to go to counselling last year didn't you?

JESS: CBT.

JAN: Yes...for stress?

JESS: It's all in my file.

JAN: I'm not here to talk about that now; I just want you to know Jess that the department is in a very vulnerable position at the moment. I have to save 5% on staffing costs this year alone, and that's just the start, anyone not seen to be making an impact is at risk.

JESS: Doesn't good teaching and feedback from the students count as 'impact'?

JAN: It does, of course it does, but funding and research, they count too. Not that you need to worry, you carry on as you are! A real high flyer aren't you?

Uncomfortable silence.

JAN: There is one thing; a lot of your work doesn't have anything in the title that can directly tie you to the school.

JESS: It's mainly about creativity and personal development.

JAN: That's what I mean. It isn't always relevant is it?

JESS: Oh?

JAN: I just wanted to ask you if you could put the word 'Literature' in some of your titles.

JESS: I could...

JAN: ...after all, you don't want it all to be meaningless when it comes to the REF?

JESS: Meaningless?

JAN: Not meaningless! It must mean something to someone, but from our point of view, well, we're worried if it will count.

JESS: Even my thesis?

JAN: Yes, that too. *(pause, puts her hand on JESS's arm)* You understand? I'm just thinking of your profile? I can really see you going somewhere at the university and I want to do all I can to support you.

JESS: Of course, no, no, that's great Jan, thanks. I'll er, I'll have a think and see what I can do.

Blackout.

Scene 3

Office at the university. GERALD sits at his desk facing JESS who is sat in a chair across the room. GERALD is in his early 60s.

GERALD: I don't know why you're surprised. The woman eats babies.

JESS: She isn't that bad.

GERALD: Jess, Jess, Jess...

JESS: If you're going to make some patronising comment then just stop right there.

GERALD: I was just going to say, that if you want my opinion...

JESS: Do I have a choice Professor?

GERALD: ...as soon as she finds out you're pregnant, you'll be written off.

JESS: Don't be ridiculous.

GERALD: I'm serious Jess.

JESS: You're just trying to frighten me.

GERALD: You can be an academic or you can be a mum. But both? (*shakes head*)

JESS: And is that what you think?

GERALD: (*looks wounded*) I may have been here since the dawn of time but I like to think I've managed to remain outside that male, hierarchical culture.

JESS: A maverick?

GERALD: If you like.

JESS: Haven't you heard? 'Mavericks and free thinkers no longer required'.

GERALD: Must be why they want me to retire.

JESS: Don't you want to?

GERALD shrugs.

JESS: What? No more e-mails? No more meetings? No more pissing REF?

GERALD: No more students hanging on my every word? No more standing ovations at conferences? No more doctoral students begging me for advice?

JESS: I promise I'll still beg you for advice.

GERALD: Just whiling away the days watching Countdown until the inevitable happens and I'm weeing into a bag and struggling with the crossword in *The Guardian*.

JESS: You do that now.

GERALD: Not the peeing in the bag...

JESS: You'll be fine. Just stop feeling sorry for yourself and start enjoying the prospect of retirement? You're not in God's Waiting Room! Why don't you book a holiday? Do some writing? Spend some time with your grandchildren?

GERALD shudders.

JESS: Besides. I still hang on your every word don't I? Now what did you think of the chapter?

GERALD: I have always wanted to travel and Agnes has been going on about it...

JESS: Gerald. The chapter?

GERALD: Yes! Quite. Honestly?

JESS: Of course.

GERALD: I thought it was boring.

JESS: Oh. That honest.

GERALD: I'm sorry. It's just...

JESS: What?

GERALD: It doesn't feel like you. It doesn't feel like you care.

JESS: Oh God.

GERALD: I mean it's alright but...

JESS: ...it sounds like I'm trying to sound like someone else?

GERALD: Exactly!

JESS: I wanted to sound like an academic.

GERALD: You are an academic.

JESS: But I wanted to sound like a real one.

GERALD: Oh Jess!

JESS: Don't.

GERALD: You've really let them get to you?

JESS: I just want to be taken seriously.

GERALD: Then write in your own voice?

JESS: What if it isn't good enough?

GERALD: It will never be good enough for some of these morons, but so what?
To thine own self be true?

JESS: Even if it's meaningless?

GERALD: It is not meaningless. Stop letting Jan ruin your confidence with her
own issues and insecurities and rewrite this chapter.

JESS: Was it really that bad?

GERALD: I stopped reading it to listen to what they were saying in a budget
meeting.

JESS: I hope you do have to wee in a bag.

GERALD: Charming.

Blackout.

Scene 6

GERALD'S office. GERALD sits behind a desk. RAY enters.

GERALD: Why don't you come in Ray?

RAY: Open door policy Gerald.

GERALD: Is that actually enforceable?

RAY: *(looks back at where he entered from and smiles at GERALD)*
Apparently it is.

GERALD: Is it legal I mean? To tell staff that they must operate an open door policy 'or else'?

RAY: No-one else has complained.

GERALD: No, too scared of The Ice Maiden.

RAY: You mean Jan?

GERALD: You are still Head of Personnel are you not Ray?

RAY: Yesss.

GERALD: Then it wouldn't be very bright of me to tell you I meant Jan, if indeed I did.

RAY: Ahh! Very good Professor, very smart.

RAY sits down across the desk.

GERALD: Won't you sit down? Or do we operate an Open Chair Policy now? We probably do, I must have missed that e-mail.

RAY: We still need a date from you. When is your last day?

GERALD: Oh, that.

RAY: Yes. That. You've been ignoring my e-mails.

GERALD: Not ignoring Ray, I'm still not sure, I mean Jan says...

RAY: Jan says you can go whenever.

GERALD: Really? That's not what I understood last time we met.

RAY: And when was that?

GERALD: Sometime before she moved offices.

RAY: Oh yeah, she's in the new building now isn't she? Lucky thing.

GERALD: You like the new building do you? Ray?

RAY: Bloody marvellous. Do you know they can fit three thousand students in at any one time?

GERALD: No tutorial rooms though.

RAY: Do they need tutorials? They have e-mail? On-line classrooms? They don't even have to come in any more from what I understand. They can get hold of you day and night can't they?

GERALD: Yes, weekends, evenings, holidays.

RAY: You should get a Blackberry Gerald. Jan is trying to get funding so that every member of faculty can have one.

GERALD: Whatever for?

RAY: So you're always contactable. In case they need you.

GERALD: I don't want to be needed. Wouldn't it be simpler if she just had us all tagged?

RAY: I'm not sure...

GERALD: Let me get this straight, Jan is trying to get us all these new-fangled gizmos so we're never off the map but she's cut the library budget due to lack of funds?

RAY: I guess she thinks it will be more useful. Put your name down for one Gerald.

GERALD: No point. I'm leaving.

RAY: Yes Gerald. But when?

Blackout.

Reflection on Process

Essentially, the research process and creation of the autoethnodrama *'Impact'* has helped me to navigate and understand my often bewildering and stressful experiences with the 'publish

or perish' culture and how this ultimately affected my personal and professional life. The writing process enabled me to reflect on, better understand and learn from my experiences and whilst I still suffer with occasional bouts of anxiety I feel stronger and more confident as a result of the research and writing processes. Stronger because my interview data helped me understand that I was not alone and that my own feelings of stress and panic were shared by many early career academics. Stronger because my interview data with professors and journal editors suggested that these feelings are likely to diminish as I progress through my career. Stronger because I have learnt to be mindful of the overflow and merging of professional and personal experiences and to try and retain perspective despite the messy and complicated co-existence of these two worlds. Similarly to Muncey (2005), the writing and telling of my story has provided clarity and been ultimately cathartic. The writing about and reflecting on my own experiences and those of my interviewees has made me angry, angry because the pressure to do more for less was damaging, angry because this experience is not unique to myself, my HEI or even the UK and angry because there is no sign of it stopping. But creating *'Impact'* has made me want to contribute to a strategy that will engage readers in dialogues exploring the effects of the audit culture on academic(s) life and to use those discussions to imagine and facilitate other ways of being in HE.

Creating *'Impact'* was not a minor or secondary aspect of the research process, instead it provided a method of understanding the social world under study that is supported by Richardson (2000) who reasons that "Writing is also a way of knowing – a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable," (p.923). When I began the research and writing processes for *'Impact'* I felt isolated, outside the HEA and as if I would have to change in order to fit in. I now feel as if I am contributing to a strategy that encourages conversations about the audit culture and this is indicative of how the process of production has been transformative and ultimately empowering.

Presenting reviews of the autoethnographic texts can be used to suggest ideas for analysis or to demonstrate how the writing contributed to meaning-making by specific individuals, but essentially every autoethnographic text can only ask for the consideration of each individual reader. "A characteristic of a good story therefore is a degree of openness that allows different readers to make use of the story in varied ways," (Carless & Sparkes, 2007, p.28). I acknowledge, however, that this openness is potentially problematic when attempting to produce a qualitative inquiry that at some point logically defines what is understood as a

result of the research process. I further acknowledge that qualitative research, which employs traditional approaches and is not seeking to resist dominant academic discourses and ways of knowing, is useful and necessary. Rather, what I do argue is that this need not be the only way of telling that exists within social sciences and humanities research. Autoethnodrama offers the possibility of empathetic scholarship with the ability to connect “person to person in the belief of a shared and complex world,” (Pelias, 2004, p.12). Autoethnodrama offers the potential for these connections not to be signposted via analysis but lived and experienced through the telling and sharing of evocative and emotional texts.

For you the reader, I do not suppose that *'Impact'* projects a version of life in a HEI that exactly mirrors the culture you have or you are experiencing in your own life but I do hope that audiences and readers might engage with the text and think ‘yes, that is what life could or can be like’ and for this to encourage and drive the resistance to neoliberalism and the audit culture which for many of us, is in danger of eroding the pleasure and passion of our academic and indeed our personal lives.

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