

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY, PERSONAL NARRATIVE, REFLEXIVITY

Researcher as Subject

◆ Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner

◆ Overview: Extending the Handbook Genre

"Hi, glad it's you," I say, relieved to hear Art's voice on the other end of the line.

"You sound upset. What's the matter?" Art asks.

"Oh, it's been a zoo in the office today—long distance calls, forms to fill out, a barrage of e-mail, one student after another. I'm feeling that end-of-the-semester panic. I'd hoped to finish reading class papers and turn in semester grades, but I haven't gotten to them yet. How's everything at home? Are the dogs okay?"

"They're fine," Art replies quickly, "but I'm not. I started working on our chapter for the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. The more I think about it, the more frustrated I become."

"I thought you really wanted to do this."

"Well, the first edition of the *Handbook* didn't sufficiently highlight autoethnography and personal narrative. So I initially thought it would be a good opportunity to show how important it is to make the researcher's own experience a topic of investigation in its own right."

"Well, the timing is right now to do that," I respond. "When the first edition was published a lot of academics were trying to figure out how to write their way out of the crisis of representation, but there weren't many examples of au-

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thors who made themselves and their personal experience a central focus of their research. Over the past 5 years, however, that's changed significantly, what with the beginning of the Ethnographic Alternatives series, Denzin's emphasis on personal writing in *Interpretive Ethnography*, Behar's *The Vulnerable Observer* . . ."

"Granted, there's been a wave of interest in more personal, intimate, and embodied writing," Art assents.

"So what's the problem?"

"I think we've underestimated the constraints imposed by the genre of the handbook chapter as a form of writing," Art continues, apparently deep in thought.

"But you've written many handbook chapters before," I point out. "Why is this different?"

"Because those chapters conformed to the conventions of the handbook genre. They were essays, not stories. But in this piece we want to *show*, not just tell *about* autoethnography. Look at any handbook on your shelf and what you'll find is that most chapters are written in third-person, passive voice. It's as if they're written from nowhere by nobody. The conventions militate against personal and passionate writing. These books are filled with dry, distant, abstract, propositional essays."

"That's called academic writing, darling." When Art doesn't laugh, I continue in a more serious tone, "But some of the authors in the first edition of the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* wrote in first person."

"Yes, but the 'I' usually disappeared after the introduction and then reappeared abruptly in the conclusion," Art replies.

"And the 'I' usually was a 'we,' and an ambiguous 'we' at best, which sometimes referred to the authors as writers of the chapters and sometimes included all of us, whoever we might be," I add.

"And the authors almost never became characters in the stories they wrote . . ."

"They couldn't," I interrupt, now immersed in the conversation, "because their chapters weren't really stories. They included little in the way of dialogue, dramatic tension, or plotline, for that matter."

"But, look, handbooks do provide a service," I continue, fearing that Art will decide not to collaborate on the chapter. "They provide citations and sources, a sense of history, and arguments others can use as justifications for their own work."

"I don't question that they serve an important purpose. Hundreds of students have been inspired to do qualitative research by the first edition of the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, for example."

"That's true, and we can't criticize handbook writers for failing to do what they're not asked to do."

"But we can ask why authors aren't encouraged to write academic articles in the first person," Art retorts. "Why should we take it for granted that an author's personal feelings and thoughts should be omitted in a handbook chapter? After all, who is the person collecting the evidence, drawing the inferences, and reaching the conclusions? By not insisting on some sort of personal accountability, our academic publications reinforce the third-person, passive voice as the standard, which gives more weight to abstract and categorical knowledge than to the direct testimony of personal narrative and the first-person voice. It doesn't even occur to most authors that writing in the first person is an option. They've been shaped by the prevailing norms of scholarly discourse within which they operate. Once the anonymous essay became the norm, then the personal, autobiographical story became a delinquent form of expression."

Just as I'm beginning to doubt that we can do this project, Art says, "This morning I wrote out some of my concerns in conventional social science prose. Maybe this will give us a place to start. If you have a minute, I'd like to read it to you."

Relieved, I say, "Sure, go ahead." I glance toward the large stack of term papers. They'll have to wait.

Art reads:

Like most social scientists educated in the 1960s and 1970s, I was socialized into the legacy of empiricism. I developed an appetite for generalizable abstractions and unified knowl-

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edge. The first social science handbooks were published when I was in graduate school, and they fed this hunger for received knowledge. My professors pressed the point that scientific knowledge is cumulative and linear, so every once in a while scholars have to step back and assess the state of the field. Ironically, these assessments sometimes were referred to as "state-of-the-art" essays (an art that was supposedly science). That's what a handbook did—it gave an objective, neutral read on the evidence. The authors were the experts, but they wrote as if they were anonymous. Because it wasn't important who gathered the evidence or who judged and weighed it, handbook writers followed the conventions of using a passive voice that erases subjectivity and personal accountability.

After I earned my Ph.D., I became increasingly circumspect about the possibilities and limitations of the human sciences. In the mid-1970s, one of my colleagues, who was teaching a graduate seminar on "the rhetoric of science," suggested that I study the growing literature on "the crisis of confidence" in social science. I began by reading Kuhn (1962), who showed that the building-block model of science lacked foundations; then Rorty (1982), Toulmin (1969), and other philosophers who illustrated how the "facts" scientists see are inextricably connected to the vocabulary they use to express or represent them; Lyotard (1984) debunked the belief in a unified totality of knowledge, questioning whether master narratives were either possible or desirable; poststructuralist and deconstructionist writers, such as Barthes (1977), Derrida (1978, 1981), and Foucault (1970), effectively obliterated the modernist conception of the author, altering how we understand the connections among author, text, and readers; under the influence of Bakhtin (1981), the interpretive space available to the reader was broadened, encouraging multiple perspectives, unsettled meanings, plural voices, and local and illegitimate knowledges that transgress against the claims of a unitary body of theory; feminist critical theorists such as Clough (1994), Harding (1991), Hartsock

(1983), and Smith (1990, 1992) promoted the unique and marginalized standpoints and particularities of women; and standpoint boundary-crossing textualists such as Trinh (1989, 1992), Anzaldúa (1987), and Behar (1993, 1996) opened our eyes and ears to the necessity of exposing how the complex contingencies of race, class, sexuality, disability, and ethnicity are woven into the fabric of concrete, personal lived experiences, championing the cause of reflexive, experimental, autobiographical, and vulnerable texts.

In the wake of these developments, I doubt whether a handbook chapter can help guide the work of those who have turned toward autoethnography and personal narrative if it holds to the voice and authority of a form of writing that this work seeks to transgress. How helpful would it be to list references, define terms, abstract from and critique exemplars, formulate criteria for evaluation, or theorize the perspective of the "I," so readers can make our knowledge theirs? No, we need a form that will allow readers to feel the moral dilemmas, think with our story instead of about it, join actively in the decision points that define an autoethnographic project, and consider how their own lives can be made a story worth telling.

When Art stops reading, I say, "Well, that's clever. Although you started with the 'I,' you quickly fell into using the handbook genre to argue against writing in the handbook genre." I can't stop laughing. "Reminds me of how so many of our texts argue in postmodern abstract jargon for greater accessibility and experimental forms."

"See how powerful the conventions are?" Art agrees, now chuckling as well. Then he adds more seriously, "Let's just write to Norman and Yvonna and bow out. Think of the time we could spend on the beach instead. Get some immediate gratification for a change."

"It's tempting, especially given how we've been feeling lately that our life is too dominated by our work—but no way. Not after I've already agonized over writing the section on 'what is autoethnography?' You know how I resist doing this kind of writing. At the same time, I know it's important," I reply, as I hear a knock at my door.

"I don't think I'll be satisfied, nor will you, unless we find a way to transgress the conventions. What if we were to create a story that would work within the handbook genre but also outside it, showing what we do as we tell about it? That could be fun," Art suggests playfully.

"How delightfully paradoxical," I add in a mischievous tone. "But we'd have to be careful not to give the impression that we're being oppositional and advocating that everyone should write the way we do," I warn, expressing something we hear often and try hard to dispel. Then I get back into the irony of Art's idea. "Won't our critics love it—you know, the ones who already accuse us of being irreverent, self-absorbed, sentimental, and romantic?"

Before Art can answer, I tell him I have to go. "Someone's at the door. Bye—Come in," I say in one breath, in response to the third knock.

♦ *Introduction to Autoethnography*

A woman in her mid-40s opens the door and hesitates in the entryway. A large-brimmed, floppy straw hat covered with purple bangles hides her face. A matching scarf hangs loosely around her neck. "Professor Ellis?" I nod. "My name is Sylvia Smith. I'm a Ph.D. student in the Psychology Department. I'm planning to do my dissertation on breast cancer, and your name was given to me as a social scientist interested in research on illness. I'd like you to be on my dissertation committee. Three members of my committee are from the Psychology Department and the fourth is a research oncologist."

"Hold it," I say, my hands extended in front of me to slow down her monologue. "Back up. Have a seat and let's talk about your project."

Sylvia removes her scarf and hat with a sweeping crisscross motion of both hands and continues speaking as rapidly as before. "I want to interview breast cancer survivors to understand how they're adjusting after cancer. I hope to combine qualitative and quantitative ap-

proaches. Send out a survey and then interview . . . oh, maybe 30 women and include African Americans and lesbians, older and young women, professional and working-class women. That way I can generalize . . ."

"How'd you get interested in this topic?" I interrupt.

"Well, uh," she says, now slowing down and looking at me quizzically, "I've had breast cancer." Then, going back to her rapid-fire, assertive style, "But I won't let that bias my research. You can count on that."

"Of course you will," I say, and she immediately assumes a downcast, defeated posture, before I add, "as you should."

"What do you mean?" she asks, looking straight at me with penetrating eyes. "I thought I had to keep my personal experience out of my research. If I want my study to be valid, I can't mention to my participants that I've had cancer, can I?"

"Hold that question," I say again, and move my chair closer to hers. "Would you be willing to tell me a little about your breast cancer first? It'll help me understand more about your academic interest in the topic. Are you okay talking about your own experience?"

"Of course," she responds, "but I didn't think anybody at the university would be interested in my personal experience." She breathes deeply and slowly begins her story about the lump she discovered 7 years before, her mastectomy, and follow-up chemotherapy. Then, "And it's had a big impact on my family, especially my relationship with my daughter, and how I see myself . . .," she says, her voice trailing off.

"How has it impacted your relationship with your daughter?" I ask quietly.

"She has to worry about getting cancer as well now. You know, the genetic link, and we seem to have trouble talking openly about the risks and about our feelings."

Sylvia continues to talk about her daughter, and after a while, I ask, "And your self-image?"

"I could write a book about that," she says, shaking her head back and forth. "You know, I'm a therapist. I thought I could deal with it all. But it's hard to feel like a whole person. I don't mean because I lost a breast. Good riddance, I say to

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