

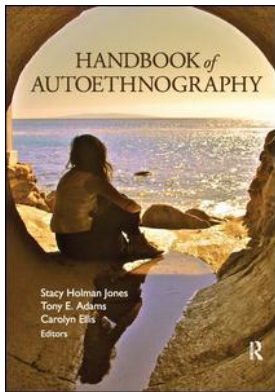
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## **Handbook of Autoethnography**

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### **A History of Autoethnographic Inquiry**

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## Chapter 2

# A History of Autoethnographic Inquiry

Kitrina Douglas and David Carless

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How to tell a history? How might we<sup>1</sup> write a story of what has gone before—concerning the origins and development of a research methodology we now know as autoethnography? How should we recount a history of something that, although it includes us, stretches far beyond us in terms of people, practices, places and times?

When we received an invitation to contribute to this Handbook, we were asked to write a chapter on the history of autoethnography. Of course, as the editors and other contributors would probably attest, *the* history of anything does not exist—it is instead an illusion, a fiction, or a fallacy because there can be no one definitive telling of any story, history or otherwise. History, like any other story, is subject to amendment, development, alteration, expansion and change—forever re-written as new insights, stories, perspectives, contexts or understandings are uncovered. *And history, like any other story, depends on who is doing the telling.*

So what we have here is *a* history of autoethnography. In fact—and we may as well be clear about it from the outset—it is *our* history of autoethnography. To do otherwise would be to write against some of the core premises that autoethnography is built upon. In particular, it would risk working against the realization that knowledge about the social and human world cannot exist independent of the knower; that we cannot know or tell anything without (in some way) being involved and implicated in the knowing and the telling. In addition, it would fail to capitalize on one of the unique opportunities that autoethnography provides: to learn about the

general—the social, cultural and political—through an exploration of the personal. Carolyn Ellis (2004) writes that autoethnographic researchers work to “connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social” by privileging “concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection” (p. xix). How might we draw upon this approach in writing this chapter? How might *our* (personal) experiences and stories regarding autoethnography contribute to a (general) history of the methodology? Stacy Holman Jones (2005) suggests that

autoethnography is setting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections among life and art, experience and theory, evocation and explanation... and then letting go, hoping for readers who will bring the same careful attention to your words in the context of their own lives. (p. 765)

We follow this counsel in our approach to this chapter by sharing stories from four key phases in our own histories of autoethnography. These moments—epiphanies if you prefer—relate to: (1) an initially ill-defined sense or awareness that *something was missing* from the academic writings and communications we were studying and accessing; (2) a significant exposure or *encounter* with autoethnography which signaled the possibility of a different way of working; (3) the *doing* of autoethnography, with reference to some of the practical and ethical challenges that can arise; and (4) navigating others’ *responses* to autoethnographic scholarship.

Our re-telling of these moments is like all the stories we tell of our lives and experiences: partial, situated, and incomplete. Nonetheless, it provides a starting place to consider why and how autoethnography has developed, while recognizing the kinds of challenges and rewards autoethnographers have and are likely to experience. This chapter also provides a kind of journey through autoethnography’s history as experienced by two particular researchers. In telling our story, we hold fast to the conviction that evoking the personal can illuminate the general,<sup>2</sup> and we hope that *our* history of autoethnography will resonate in some way for you, and perhaps chime with your own experience. We begin where it began for us, at a place that at once provides a stimulus and rationale for autoethnography.

### Something Is Missing

*Where and why?*

*What is the problem?*

*I feel a need—that is not being met*

*Now, you might not be wrong*

*I hear the tale you are telling*

*But it’s partial, incomplete*

*...something is missing*



“Before I begin, could we have a show of hands of who here has medical training?” The first speaker of the day, a slightly balding, slightly overweight professor of psychiatry, wears an immaculate gray suit topped off with a crimson tie. He steps out from behind the podium towards the front of the stage as he asks the question.

Should I raise my hand? Does a Bachelor’s degree in physical education, a Master’s in kinesiology, and a PhD in exercise and health science count as “medical training”? If I do raise my hand, does that separate me in some way from those in the audience who don’t? I look around the room, at the backs of the heads in front of me, the faces behind me and to the side, at the hands in the laps. Two hundred delegates—here to attend a conference advertised for users of mental health services, carers, family members, and health professionals—and see only a scattering of raised hands. “Ah, OK,” he says with a smile, “then I better mind my P’s and Q’s.”<sup>3</sup> He steps back behind the podium and clicks onto his first slide. “Let me start by looking at the symptomatology of mental illness...”



Some symptoms of schizophrenia, from the surgeon general’s report on mental health (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 1999):

*Disorganized speech/thinking*, also described as “thought disorder” or “loosening of associations,” is a key aspect of schizophrenia...Tangential, loosely associated, or incoherent speech severe enough to substantially impair effective communication is used as an indicator of thought disorder...*Alogia*, or poverty of speech, is the lessening of speech fluency and productivity, thought to reflect slowing or blocked thoughts, and often manifested as laconic, empty replies to questions. (p. 271)



Some moments documented in Stuart’s—a person diagnosed with schizophrenia and one of the participants in my PhD dissertation—medical records:

- Left school with no qualifications, government training schemes since leaving school, range of short-term jobs since
- Several relationships with women, one had bipolar disorder and committed suicide
- Six-month period suffering from loss of identity—prescribed Trifluoperazine
- Admitted to hospital—diagnosed with emerging psychosis with overlays of obsessional thoughts

And it is said (by some) that schizophrenia is genetically determined. But if this catalog of events—and more besides, in many cases—had happened to *me*, I remember thinking, I reckon I’d become psychotic, too. Reading the participants’ lengthy medical records, it sounded like everyone—genetic predisposition aside—had experienced a tough and challenging set of life events, enough to knock any of us off our stride.

Stuart carried the extra weight well. He didn't let the sixty pounds he'd put on—one of the more visible side effects of antipsychotic medication—intrude on his game. Of course it slowed him down. But he adjusted his tactics accordingly, taking the role of vocal playmaker, occupying the midfield, calling the moves and making telling passes to other players.

"Andy, man on! You're alright, I'm with you," he called, drifting infield, eyes flitting between the ball Andy danced around and Len, who was trying to lose his marker with a break down the wing. The whistle finally went after Andy succumbed to an enthusiastic challenge, losing the ball and protesting, with mock-horror on his face, "*Referee!*"

Stuart turned towards me, clapping his hands in my direction. "Alright, Dave?" he shouted, a huge grin on his face, jogging towards the goal mouth. "I know you're new to the team, but come on, don't be shy," he said, with a hearty pat on my back. "We let our goalies in on the up-front action too! There ain't nothing wrong with breaks *right* from the back in this game, mate!"

"Alright, Stuart, thanks," I replied, laughing. "I'm waiting for just the right moment before I step into the spotlight!"

Stuart laughed and jogged back to take the free kick. Spinning the ball in his fingertips before placing it with precision on the ground, he turned towards me again. "We'll switch positions at half time, unless you want me to swap with you now?" he half-shouted, before chipping the ball into the air, towards the edge of the penalty box.

Stuart talked to me for two hours that day about his life. He'd showed me photographs of moments, people, places, trophies. He told me about when he'd first become "unwell," about the psychiatrist, about his father's funeral, how he'd become unwell again. He talked about being in the hospital, about the swimming teacher who'd helped him overcome his fear of the water, how he'd been unwell some more, about the football teams he'd played for over the years, and about his current team which he'd helped set up. He told about the flat he shared, his trip to America, how he'd been unwell again, about the people—"like family really"—who'd helped him out, about the sausages he liked to eat, the phone calls with his mother, and about how he was "nearly 100 percent now."

What did I *now* know about mental illness? How much did I understand of Stuart and his experiences? Not much perhaps? But then again, a lot more beyond the symptoms, deficits, and dysfunctions catalogued in the scientific literature on mental health. In fact, I wouldn't mind betting that I'd learned some things that the slightly balding, slightly overweight professor of psychiatry would do well to understand.

There was something missing from the story the professor had told. And there was something missing from the journal articles and books I was reading. *Something didn't fit*. And it wasn't only when I compared those stories to Stuart's stories. The academic literature on mental illness didn't tally with what I was learning through being with, talking to, getting to know a group of men diagnosed with severe mental illness. It didn't fit with my own experience of the ups and downs of life, either. And I couldn't *make* it fit: no matter how many journal articles and books I read, something wasn't quite right. Until, that is, I stumbled upon the work of Peter Chadwick (e.g., 2001a)—a psychologist who wrote about his own experience of psychosis, as he put it, “from the inside.”



But what is *the something* that is missing, that causes this lack of “fit”? We are not alone in coming to the view that it is understandings about the subjective dimensions of personal experience that are missing from many existing academic texts—subjective dimensions that are best expressed through the personal voice. A sense (expressed above) that people are *not like that* emerges as our personal knowledge of others collides with the more distant representations produced through traditional scientific methods. Arthur Bochner (1997) has reflected on how although he “had studied, theorized, and taught about loss and attachment for more than two decades,” he “didn't really begin to *know* loss until [he] experienced [his] father's death” (p. 424). Here, *personal experience* challenges theories, categories, and interpretations.

Related to this is a potential “reality clash” when individuals who come into contact with academic texts come away with the feeling “*I am not like that!*” Here, then, a dominant representation fails to fit the experiences of those it purports to represent. This kind of collision is not unusual, and numerous autoethnographic texts present a self who contravenes (in some important way) dominant representations of a particular experience or identity. Mental health is one field in which such issues have particular potency. Patricia Deegan (1996), Peter Chadwick (2001a), Brett Smith (1999), and Stuart Baker-Brown (2006) are among those who have published personal accounts of their experience of mental health problems that contravene or challenge medical portrayals of mental illness. While not always specifically presented as autoethnography, these accounts share some common ground in that they both *include* and *focus on* personal experience as part of the analysis/representation of phenomena. More recently, others have moved explicitly in an autoethnographic direction to provide insights into mental health problems on the basis of personal experience (e.g., Burnard, 2007; Grant, 2010; Grant, Biley, & Walker, 2011; Muncey & Robinson, 2007; Short, Grant, & Clarke, 2007).

Similar developments can be observed in other fields including health and illness (e.g., Martin, 1997; Sparkes, 1996; Spry, 1997; Tillmann-Healy, 1996; Vickers, 2002), gender and sexuality (e.g., Adams, 2006, 2011; Carless, 2010a,

2012a; Gust & Warren, 2008; Holman Jones & Adams, 2010; Pinney, 2005), sports and physical education (e.g., Douglas, 2009; Duncan, 2000; Gilbourne, 2010; Kosonen, 1993; Purdy, Potrac, & Jones, 2008; Tiihonen, 1994; Tsang, 2000;), and race and ethnicity (e.g., Gatson, 2003; McLaurin, 2003; Moreira, 2008a, 2008b). Scanning across these and other fields, it seems that the development and progress of autoethnography has, to some extent, been independent across disciplines, with some starting earlier, or progressing faster, than others. Across fields, however, is recognition of a growing need for a way to address, consider, and include what is found to be missing from writings based solely on scientific research methods: the voice of personal experience.

If it is indeed the personal voice of experience that is an “antidote” to balance or reposition existing research texts, what led to this imbalance in the first place? William James was drawing on his own experience as a way to illuminate psychological phenomena in the 1890s (James, 1892), while Michel de Montaigne was offering meditations based on personal reflection as long ago as 1500 (see de Montaigne, 1991). These examples suggest there is little that is new in drawing on the personal to illuminate the general. Rather than appearing now for the first time, personal and subjective experience has instead *been systematically removed* from human and social science research over the course of the past century in response to calls for methods that more closely parallel research in the natural sciences. Thus, it is not by chance that “something is missing” from human and social science research texts of our times—this omission can be understood as a result of the dominant cultural (e.g., scientism, positivism) and political (e.g., neo-liberal) conditions of our times. This absence or gap can usefully be construed as a “problem” for which autoethnography offers a solution.

### Encountering Autoethnography

*The self appears,*  
*The textual self appears,*  
*We, writing the self*  
*And then*  
*The body appears*



*Instant porridge?* I never knew there was such a thing. “Just add milk and microwave for 60 seconds” it says. *Hmm.* I’m suspicious of “instant” anything, but I’m willing to give it a go. I pour the oat mix into the flimsy plastic bowl and put the bowl into the motel’s microwave, wondering why no other guests are taking breakfast this morning. I open the book of abstracts for today’s schedule and scan the text as the microwave whirs. “Panel P040, Autoethnography as Relational Practice” catches my eye, perhaps because I recognize the name of the panel’s

chair. I've heard about this guy—I've even read some of his work. What time does it start? 9:45, I can make that... I get up and look for a cup and saucer, or a mug, for coffee. I can't find one. Perhaps we're supposed to use these paper cups? Seems strange—it can't be that a paper cup is thrown away every time every person in this massive country finishes a drink. Can it? Surely it'd be better if the motel just washed... *Beep, beep, beep, beep!* I cross to the microwave, open the door, *Aaagh!* The porridge mix has bubbled over... *Ouch!* That plastic bowl is so hot! I half drop it, blow on my fingers, pick up the mess with a paper napkin, and quickly plonk it down in front of my seat. Should I clean the microwave? Probably. But after I've finished... "Tension plagues the relationship between me and my father especially when it comes to golf- and gay-related issues" (Adams, 2005). *Golf and gay?* Did I just read what I thought I read? Golf and gay in the same sentence? In a book of abstracts? At an academic conference? But there are no gay men in sports! Well, hardly any, it seems. Except me of course... and I'm not sure I want to label myself anyway. "My story interrogates the troubled relationship that separates us. It's a story of sexuality and sports, of gayness and hegemonic masculinity, of a fag and his golf clubs." *My story? Me and my father? Not them and their? Not those homosexuals?* This sounds different. OK, it doesn't relate to my PhD and it probably won't help us win an evaluation or research contract, but maybe I should give this a chance...

(*Later that morning*) I sidle in with four or five others, through the door at the back. It's quite an elegant room. *Huh*, it's quite a large room. *Ooh*, there's quite a sizeable audience, more than came to my session. *Hmm*, all the seats are taken. Well, apart from a few in the front row.

"Come on in!" a tanned, bearded, healthier-than-usual-for-an-academic-looking man in a colorful shirt says with a welcoming wave, "there are empty seats down the front here." *Err*, not sure I want to be *right* at the front, so I shuffle along the back wall and stand, leaning against it, in the far corner. The man with the tan introduces the next speaker, at the same time a young man stands up at the front and smiles, a little nervously I think. Why is *he* standing up? He's obviously not the... "My mom always told me that I'd either be gay *or* that I'd marry a black woman," he says. *He is! And he's telling a story.* More: he's *starting* with a story! What about the pre-amble? What about the stats on prevalence? What about the methods section? And the bit about the participants? I thought I was being bold using a story *in the middle* of a presentation about my *participants*. That caused enough reaction when I spoke at the department student conference. And he is *starting* with a story... and not just *a* story, but *his* story!

"I'm often asked how long I've *known* that I've been gay. Well, that depends. I've known that I've been attracted to men since an early age, but I didn't know that I fit into the category of 'gay' until..." *But this is my story!* Well, it can't be, can it, because I haven't *told* my story... but, but... yes... yes... and he's not an old guy looking back on harassment and homophobia and secrets and lies... he



isn't reminiscing about "the bad old days"... and he's not camp or effeminate either, like the gay men on TV. Instead he's standing up and telling stories, from the inside, about a life that is being lived now—a life that includes sports, being a student, being a son, and being sexually attracted and involved with another man. And the most useful paper (Sparkes, 1997) I've read to date on gayness in sports is a *fiction*—because the researcher *couldn't find any gay physical education teachers or students to interview!*

At the end, I wanted to speak with the presenter—to thank him for this honest, open, trusting, brave work. For those twenty minutes in which by speaking of *his* life, he had somehow spoken of mine: of experiences, doubts, separations, distance, desires, hopelessness, dreams, silences that I had never shared and that I had never heard anyone else speak of—in academia or beyond. I wanted to speak with him about the excitement and fear I felt experiencing and contemplating the methodology he had demonstrated: an approach that I had found so powerful, so affecting, so revealing; that had lifted a lid—for me—on what research could be and what it might achieve. But there was a crowd gathered now at the front, around him, around the other presenters, smiling, hugging, talking—ah, they seem to know each other. *Hmm*, I don't know any of them... perhaps I'll get in touch via email...



Despite a sense that "something is missing," and even a seeking of an alternative way of working, it is hard to see how the step to actually working in other ways can happen without the spark and direction created by encountering a concrete example of autoethnography. We need, in Gubrium and Holstein's (1997) terms, a *language* that authorizes self-exploration. We have both—at different times and in different ways—been fortunate enough to be exposed to excellent examples of autoethnography, which crystallized and embodied a solution to the "problems" we were experiencing with traditional methodologies. This encounter might take the form of, for example, sharing a published autoethnography with a colleague or an academic witnessing autoethnography as a conference presentation (as in the preceding story). It might also come from an encounter with a work in the arts or performance studies (e.g., Pelias, 2004; Spry, 2011). Arguably, it is less likely to come through being taught autoethnography as part of a research methods course as many still privilege traditional approaches. Thus, each person's initial *encounter* with autoethnography—which might be through a range of different channels—is especially significant in terms of the uptake, development, and influence of autoethnography within the academy.

The uptake and development of *autoethnography* as an explicitly defined method can be traced back to the late 1970s where a more sophisticated and complex understanding of the field researcher and his or her connection to a particular phenomenon stemmed from post-Chicago School developments in phenomenology, ethnomethodology and existential sociology (P. A. Adler & P. Adler, 1987). Patricia

and Peter Adler (1987) mandate for an epistemology of membership roles whereby a researcher would value and document his or her own experiences and emotions alongside participants', using these insights to benefit members of a community to which the research relates. Of the types of membership roles described by Adler and Adler the *opportunistic* and *convert* complete member researcher seems most akin to a current understanding of what autoethnographers do, and perhaps provides some background for how field researchers began to embrace the importance of documenting their own subjective experience of a phenomenon prior to their being "concrete examples" to follow. Early examples of opportunistic approaches—where a connection to the subject or phenomena pre-exists a research interest—can be seen in David Sudnow's *Ways of the Hand* (1978) in which the author explored his experiences of becoming a jazz pianist. Another early example is the work of David Hayano (1979) who used the term *auto-ethnography* in making the case for self-observation in cultural anthropology and then later demonstrated this approach in *Poker Faces* (1982).

A decade after Adler and Adler (1987) set out their vision for field researcher roles, Ellis and Bochner (2000) documented how feminist (e.g., Behar, 1996; Kreiger, 1991; D. Smith, 1992) and indigenous or native (e.g., L. Smith, 1999) epistemologies have contributed to an explosion of personal narratives. They note how a continued and sustained interest with concerns over power and praxis has generated more reflexive, emotional accounts that challenge taken for granted assumptions as to what counts as knowledge and how this is presented. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that Ellis and Bochner identify over forty different terms that have been used to describe autoethnographic approaches between the late 1970s and 2000, which include, for example, *narratives of the self* (Richardson, 1994), *self-stories* (Denzin, 1989), *critical autobiography* (Church, 1995), *confessional tales* (Van Maanen, 1988), and *autobiographical ethnography* (Reed-Danahay, 1997).

As we now survey the scene it appears that the researchers who have included personal accounts, who have become visible in their work and who have begun to embrace reflexivity, have served—among other things perhaps—as trailblazers whose work has shown that there is another way of *doing* social and human science research. Encountering an excellent example of autoethnographic inquiry—as the preceding story portrays—can serve as a beacon which illuminates anew, not so much by adding to or building onto an existing picture, bit by bit or piecemeal, but instead by turning on a new light in a new room. This kind of striking experience or epiphany can, in our experience, cut through the clutter of day-to-day life as a researcher, academic, or student. In so doing it has the potential not only to inspire others but also to help legitimize autoethnography as a valid, useful, and important way of *doing* social research.

### Doing Autoethnography

*So you read my words  
 Sketched on the page  
 And learned of entanglement  
 Well, here now is my flesh  
 What say you, as I sing my song?  
 Where do you belong?*



It niggled,<sup>4</sup> it gnawed, it tugged, there was something in it. It unsettled me, it wouldn't let go, it wouldn't go away, it had me in its grip.

"You should include your autoethnography," was all Professor Andrew Sparkes had said before taking a sip of his beer and placing it gently on the table. Of course, his *Fatal Flaw* (1996) and *Telling Tales in Sport and Physical Activity* (2002) were ground breaking in our field, so he wasn't asking me to attempt something he hadn't already done. His huge hands made the pint glass seem small, and those five words, *You-should-include-your-autoethnography*, made the problem seem small—at least in the Highbury Vaults pub, one of six havens where scholars from our department regained their sanity *post-lecture*. So here we all sat, Andrew, our invited guest speaker at the student conference, David, Ken, Lucy, Mark, and Jim, with me staring at my orange juice contemplating what he'd just said as the conversation moved on around me. All I needed to do was to include my story alongside all the other stories being deposited in my vault. You would never have guessed his little provocation could start an avalanche. It was just a little whisper, a call, a crack. But...



A wry smile came over my face as I read, "Nothing like these forays out into the other world to make you realize how fortunate we are to have created what we have in the Communication Department" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 760). "Yes," I talked back to the text, "well I'm not in a Communication Department. I'm in the Exercise, Nutrition and Health SCIENCES department. We take blood samples, fit calorimeters, take anthropometric measurements, and estimate energy expenditure." I allowed the heavy tome to fall onto my lap and revisited the niggle as I lay awake in bed. Though late at night, I couldn't help line up Andrew Sparkes, Laurel Richardson and Harry Wolcott, as usual, at the end of my bed where I posed questions for them, and then listened to them debate with each other. "I'll tell you what I'm struggling with," I said. Andrew always answers first, perhaps because I know him more than the others. He taught me as an undergraduate, and he's a "piss or get off the pot" person. The other two are bodyless

texts as I know them only through their written words, and it is these words I bring to mind as I ask them questions. Although I don't know these people physically, they guide me, and even though I've never heard them speak, I hear their words in my head. I also give them bodies as I look toward the foot of my bed; Harry, sitting in the middle is wiry; Laurel Richardson is tall and skinny. All three are wise.

"How can I include myself?" I ask with a shrug. "Which stories? How can I engage with autoethnography when I'm barely permitted a poetic chapter in my PhD?"

"Well, yes, the department you are in can cause problems, try not to worry about that just now," Laurel Richardson says. "You have to start writing!" Harry interrupts. "Get something down, and don't start judging it or editing it before you finish it."



Two bare pectoral muscles, beautifully shaped, came into view. Lucy's eyes enlarged and her mouth opened as she turned towards me at the moment a pink sheen began to spread across her face—her blushing made me smile even more as I watch her notice David stripping off his shirt in the August sun. We held our "research team" meetings on the lawn outside our department. Lucy and David agreed to be my "research team" after the ethics committee had refused me ethical approval.

Study E4972: *Motivation, High Achievement and Persistence in Women Professional Golfers* was deferred, on the grounds that:

The committee have serious misgivings about the scientific validity, methodology, and approach to subjects...please allude in the protocol [to] how reliable this data will be, and steps that will be taken to ensure that the data is [*sic*] not biased given that the researcher knows the subjects. (Chairman, UBHT Ethics Committee, 2001)

The study was resubmitted including a new protocol.

The committee now understands the reasons behind this research project, but still has concerns related to the validity of any findings in the sense that the researcher "knows" all of the subjects and therefore there is potential for a significant element of bias with qualitative interviews. (Chairman, UBHT Ethics Committee, 2001)

When you play sports people think: "Thick jock!" They make jokes about us. Even friends in the department made jokes about my participants not having "an intelligent thought between them." And here I was, the only person in the department refused ethical approval—kind of proving that *I* shouldn't be *there*. *Who I am* was the problem. So as well as allegedly being stupid, I was learning that I'm not reliable and that I'm biased. But there it was again: the niggle. I felt I knew something that they were missing, and it was hidden in my body.

Lucy turned to her notes—she'd been reading my interview with Kandy. "I was shocked that Kandy doesn't enjoy playing golf," Lucy said. "Comparing golf with a butcher who cuts meat isn't how I think of a professional athlete." Rather ironic, I thought to myself, that she and David were supposed to bring objectivity, and here she was full of assumptions. "What makes you think professional athletes would enjoy their work?" I asked.

Later that night I was drawn to revisit that moment. I wondered what I was doing while we talked. As I thought more about that moment in the sun with David and Lucy, I became more aware of how extracts from *my stories* had shown life "as a pro" differently; they began to open up political edges, and they persuaded Lucy. So, I began writing them down: little scenes, snippets and conversations, the things that niggled me, and then I began trying to understand why they niggled me.



I always run in the morning. There is something about the movement of my body, the rhythm of my stride, energy being channeled through my muscles, deep breathing, the slight breeze against my face. Sooner or later, as I run, words fill my head, pictures arrive, I see scenes, remember conversations, talk back, argue, cry, become upset, become lost in one story, laugh at another. Five miles pass, I begin to see, I see myself, a scene unfolds, a topic comes into vision, sometimes ten miles pass, sometimes I lose sight, become worried I'll lose the plot before I get back, and then I'm home. At that moment I want to unleash my thoughts on a page, something has been brewing, I must get it down.



"About bloody time, too!" was all my sister said. Well, that and: "You're so closed off." No wonder I am, I thought, retrieving the three short vignettes from her hand and retreating rapidly. As I waited, two years later, for her to call, I wondered what her response would be this time, because this time the stories included *her*. My story *Winning and Losing* (Douglas, 2009) described different aspects of our relationship—on and off the golf course—about her bullying and protecting me, trying to influence the presentation of my body, and included her miscarriage while she was caddying for me. While I ran, I practiced responses to what I imagined she would say. I hated feeling vulnerable as I opened my world to her. I hated feeling disempowered having to ask for her approval. I called her up.

"So, have you had time to read it?" I ventured. "I need to know. It's important to me to get your okay before I submit it." "Oh yeah, it's fine," she said, sounding like she was painting her nails or plucking her eyebrows while on the phone. "Carry on. I don't remember any of it actually. I'm not bothered." Yeah right, I thought. I think *I ticked the box...* but a tick was all.



I'd been around David for over a decade, watching him write papers, observing him hone and chisel evaluations, and I'd been there, in the background, while he wrote songs that embodied his life experiences, and those of others, playing music and singing songs. I also listened to him talk about song writing: "You've got to let a song breathe," he'd say, "give it a chance." "You want the melody and guitar to hold back during some parts of the song to let the words take center stage." My body absorbed his teaching; he was planting seeds he didn't even realize he was planting, scattering them on fertile ground. I began to thirst after working that way without even thinking. I knew our data was more than a list of logical categories, but I hadn't considered that writing a song could also be an embodied autoethnographic act, that when I wrote a song, my story, and the stories of others, may be there, too. So when it happened I didn't even notice it.

I was alone in Cornwall, and in a similar way to how David worked, I was simply playing songs. Then, after a while, I began experimenting and tuned one string differently, dropping the "E" string to a "D." That little change set the stage. I fiddled with a different strumming pattern. I liked how it felt, how it sounded. In my spirit, and in the work I'd been doing earlier in the evening, I was still searching for BIG answers, but a few words turned up and sat down next to the melody: "Light the candle, strike the match, open up that battened hatch, I want to see," seemed to fit my mood. I immediately stopped and wrote them down in case I forgot them. Then, I sang them again and again and carried on plucking the top string followed by the other strings when I got to the end of the line. In the space created by the resonating guitar my eyes gazed randomly round the room and, the next thing, I'm looking into the mirror: "In the mirror is this me, am I all you want me to be?" I wasn't thinking about my sports career, but it was present, in my body, and I knew where it had taken me, all those trophies and the costs, and carried on writing:

*Climb upon the mountain, too, but it's in the valley that I find you,  
and I see what is true  
In the mirror is this me? Am I all that I could be?  
They tell you follow a distant star, a journey that will take you far  
from all, that you might be  
In the mirror is this me? Am I all that I might be?  
Just imagine how it might be, if only we could see*



I lay back and looked out of my bedroom window; in the darkness the constellation came into view. My friends Andrew, Harry, and Laurel had disappeared, they seldom sit at the foot of my bed now. So many stars in the cosmos I thought, and like us, they appear at different times, arc different trajectories, share a similar

journey. We share pain, creative moments; we are searching spirits; we worry, become outsiders in our own solar systems, and attempt to remain true to some force that drives us on.



As we revisit the tales of those who have engaged with autoethnography and as we listen to other tales of doing autoethnography (e.g., Adams, 2011; Ellis, 1997, 2001, 2004; Ellis & Berger, 2003; Etherington, 2003, 2004; Martin, 1997; Muncey, 2010; Pelias, 1999, 2004; Richardson, 1997, 2000; Sparkes, 1996, 2000; Spry, 2001, 2011) it seems vulnerabilities and insecurities lurk at the door of each individual's journey. Even when our work is valued by others, most autoethnographers still appear to have questions, doubts, and ethical concerns. It seems this is our mantle. Autoethnographers claim no right to have "got it right" simply on the bases of linking the personal to the political and cultural or through attempting to use personally evocative texts, by employing artistic and creative methods, or because we can sing or dance our bodies. We live with tensions, and because our lives, bodies and stories are neither fixed nor finished, we are never certain of where our work will take us.

For those who come to autoethnography from an artistic or creative background, or from performance or communication studies (e.g., Law, 2002; Pelias, 1999), it seems that there is greater opportunity and possibility to be mentored, educated, and supported at an early stage. However, for individuals who perform autoethnography, sing songs or dance, there is the challenge of taking an embodied act of singing/dancing/performing and transforming it to a textual presentation if we are to resist silence (Pelias, 1999, p. ix). As Etherington (2004) points out, failure to publish for some academics will result in career stagnation, employment difficulties, and lack of tenure. In contrast, others come to autoethnography after being systematically trained to value neutrality and to distance the self from their subjects and selves (see Bochner, 1997; Brackenridge, 1991). Like many others before us and since, we were (academically speaking) birthed into a tradition and a history that seeks objectivity and to remove all aspects of self, including the body, from the research process in order to diligently focus on (different) others. It would be naive to think that these academic traditions leave no scars. As Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) reminds us:

What I am, therefore, is in key part what I inherit, a specific past that is present, to some degree in my present. I find myself part of history and that is generally to say, whether I like it or not, whether I recognise it or not, one of the bearers of a tradition. (pp. 205–206; see also Freeman, 2010, p. 123)

Whether we like it or not, and whether we recognize it, not only are we part of a cultural tradition in terms of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, but the type of department we are affiliated with, our subject areas, and our choice of scientific ways of valuing and "doing" research.

Given the profusion of experiences, backgrounds, and disciplines represented by those who engage with autoethnography, it is not surprising that practical approaches, the how we “do autoethnography,” differ. As we gaze across histories it seems many of us begin by using what we know best, or what is at our fingertips, and then blend, borrow, add to, adapt, and transform our approach as we gain understanding, experience and insight. In order to mine for personal experiences some autoethnographers have drawn on systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall, “memory work,” introspection, self-introspection, and interactive introspection, self ethnography, diaries, free writing, and song writing (for examples, see Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Carless & Douglas, 2009; Douglas, 2012; Laine, 1993; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Sironen, 1994). Autoethnographers have then used a variety of genres to share their experiences, including short stories, fiction, novels, layered accounts, poetry, memoirs, diaries, songs, dance, photos, and performances. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, it seems that as autoethnographers have become exposed to the work of others many have been inspired to experiment and take chances. This seems to have shaped how the field is maturing and developing, and it seems as though the process we each transverse feels to be simultaneously a refining in the fire and stumbling in the dark.

As a great deal of autoethnographic work centers on sensitive issues, taboo subjects, the sacred or hidden aspects of our lives, and on stories and bodies that have been silenced, marked, stigmatized, and forgotten, it shouldn't be surprising that autoethnographers are aware, or have become aware, of many ethical and moral dilemmas and challenges. The types of ethical consideration, however, may not be addressed or understood by traditional ethical approval forms or committees where beliefs and views are often polarized. Given that autoethnographies have been an act of witnessing (Ropers-Huilman, 1999; B. Smith, 2002), a testimony (Frank, 1991), a sacrament (Richardson, 2000), and an aid to healing and strength (Etherington, 2004), one thorny ethical issue to continually question is how it is possible not to implicate or include others, unwittingly or otherwise, in the weft and weave of *our story plot* (Adams, 2006; Ellis, 2001; Kiesinger, 2002).

In considering this ethical dilemma, Ellis (2001) suggests, “You have to live the experience of doing research on the other, think it through, improvise, write and re-write, anticipate and feel its consequences” (p. 615). For some, the fragile nature of a relationship means relationships could be irrevocably damaged by sharing (e.g., Kiesinger, 2002), while at other times relationships may be cemented and we feel greater communion and comradeship. Ultimately, Ellis (2007) acknowledges that writing about others in our stories can be a “muddle” that we must attempt to work through. On this point, Kim Etherington (2004) urges autoethnographers, at the very least, to be transparent about how we come to make our decisions and to document the factors that led to our choices (see also Tullis, this volume).



But the ethical dimension of autoethnography is not static and continues to expand to include not only relational ethics, but moral ethics, ethical mindfulness, an ethic of trust, an ethic of care, and an ethic to look out for the well-being of ourselves as well as the other as we engage in emotionally laden journeys (Adams, 2008; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Ellis, 2007; Etherington, 2007). For Alec Grant (2010), the ethical journeys autoethnographers are now encouraged to chart are ones where we not only tell our stories, but take lessons from our stories in order to “live the person that is storied” (p. 115), all the while working towards a better world.

## Responding to Autoethnography

*I remember:* I had been invited to lead a one-off creative methods workshop for a small group of academics who were interested in arts-based research and—perhaps—the possibility of using such approaches in their own work. The organizer suggested I share an example of arts-based research to give those who may not have experienced it an idea about the form that it might take. Following an introduction in which I described some of my own reasons for turning to arts-based methods, I planned to share a short performance autoethnography I had been working on (Carless, 2012b). In the performance, I draw on my own biography to voice and explore experiences of same-sex attraction and desire which often remain “taboo” and unspoken within sports culture.

Because I have generally received supportive responses to my autoethnographic and arts-based work, I felt fairly positive towards the task. However, I harbored some doubts and concerns about possible responses related to sharing aspects of my own experience of same-sex attraction to an audience of sports scholars *and* my use of an arts-based/poetic/performative methodology before an audience more used to traditional scientific methods.

Eight academics attended the workshop—five female and three male—some of whom I knew and some I didn’t. I performed the piece and invited responses, comments or questions. A (male) professor in the audience was the first to respond:

*Professor A:* “I didn’t learn anything from this. It didn’t tell me anything about homophobia...”

Next, a (male) senior lecturer:

*Dr. B:* “I couldn’t see me ever using this with students...”

Third, the response of another (male) lecturer:

*Mr. C:* “You said you weren’t sure if they were poems. I can tell you they definitely are. But I can also tell you that they are not research...”

Bang. Bang. Bang. The most senior professor immediately dismissed my work. No questions, no doubts. Certainty. Would he be that dogmatic about a quantitative study? Or a grounded theory study? Or a phenomenological study?

Perhaps he set the tone for the next person, the less-senior Dr. B, to dismiss me. Did the pair of them authorize Mr. C to step in and follow-up with his finalized perspective on reality, art, and research? The three of them had got their bit in before any of the women spoke. How can I defend myself/my work in this context? Should I “do a Germaine Greer” and say: “My only stipulation is that the first question must come from a woman”? But then, some women might be similarly aggressive. How can I—after that—go on to share my experiences of *creating* this kind of work? I left the campus that day feeling I should perhaps keep my “taboo stories” to myself.



Some weeks later, an email conversation ensued after sharing a written version of the same piece with a colleague:

**From:** Grant, Alec, **Sent:** 13 April, **To:** Carless, David

Dear David,

I love your attachment. I felt a whole range of emotions, including sadness while reading it. Thinking and feeling with it, it took me back to my days as an adolescent/young man in the RAF [Royal Air Force] in the late 1960s. The tension between living and working in a forbidding oppressive normative sexual discourse for many people was absolutely cruel. Not much has changed, even arguably in competitive sports. More power to your ethical and representational elbow David. Speak soon.

**From:** Carless, David, **Sent:** 14 April, **To:** Grant, Alec

Dear Alec,

Thank you for your response on my “autoethnographette” (I’m citing your term now!) That is valuable feedback, particularly after a creative methods workshop I ran a couple of weeks ago in which this piece was rather slated by (interestingly) the 3 male (straight identifying, white) academics in the room (the 5 female academics were much more positive). One said he learnt nothing from the piece, which was disappointing to hear... So, I’m glad it reached you in some fashion—and I appreciate you articulating that for me. Keep well Alec—and keep writing!

**From:** Grant, Alec, **Sent:** 15 April, **To:** Carless, David

I’m saddened to hear about the reaction to your piece. I’ve been thinking and feeling a lot with it over the last few days. There’s loads in it, and load of obvious theory in it (corporeality, Bourdieu, Foucault and on). And it’s great, and moving, performance ethnography. I’m tempted to speculate that it may have triggered defensiveness (institutional Homophobia?) among the white straighties, but perhaps that’s too much of a gloss. Anyway, don’t let them get to you... Very best for now.



Over the past few years, we have both created a number of autoethnographies (e.g., Carless, 2010a, 2010b, 2012a; Carless & Douglas, 2009; Douglas, 2009, 2012; Douglas & Carless, 2008) that we present at conferences and through seminars and lectures. The story above portrays just an example of the strong responses this work can at times evoke from academics, students, practitioners, or friends. These responses range from “inspiring” right through to “useless.” And we are not alone in this. Other proponents of autoethnography have documented comparable responses—both favorable and critical—to their autoethnographic work and/or the creative or artistic approaches that this work often relies upon (e.g., Adams, 2011; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Richardson, 2000; Sparkes, 1996). It seems to us that often the same work has the potential to lead to extremely positive responses *and* extremely negative or hostile responses—sometimes simultaneously. In a sense, an individual’s response perhaps tells us more about that individual—about his or her assumptions, beliefs, orientation—than it does about the quality, contribution, or value of the research itself.

At the same time, however, the responses of others clearly *do matter* both in terms of the well-being and professional prospects of the individual and of the development and prospects of the methodology. Besides personal and/or public snubs (see, e.g., Richardson, 1997; Sparkes, 2007), some academics have sought, on various grounds, to exclude autoethnographic methods from social research on the basis, for example, that there are more relevant and pressing issues to research (e.g., Walford, 2004). Other scholars, while acknowledging that autoethnography has a place, criticize moves towards evocative and emotional autoethnographies (e.g., Ellis, 2004), which, to them, neither challenge/transform public life nor offer theoretical “development, refinement and extension” (Anderson, 2006, p. 387).

A number of scholars have reflexively documented and explored the costs—both personal and professional—of these kinds of attacks on their (autoethnographic) work (e.g., Bond, 2002; Flemons & Green, 2002), which has been criticized as being—among other things—self-indulgent and narcissistic (see Coffey, 1999; Sparkes, 2000). In response, a number of authors (e.g., Church, 1995; Eakin, 1999; Freeman, 1993; Gergen, 1999; Mykhalovskiy, 1996; Sparkes, 2000; Stanley, 1993) have critically and comprehensively addressed the charges and, in the process, reminded us of the important contribution that autoethnography makes. Others have reflected on the potential consequences of eliminating autoethnographic methods (particularly their focus on the personal and their utilization of alternative forms of representation) might have on the development of particular topics or fields (e.g., Bochner, 1997; Chadwick, 2001b; Pelias, 2004).

In light of both these arguments—that excluding autoethnography harms research *and* researchers—the existence of journals (such as *Qualitative Inquiry*) and international conferences (such as the *International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry*

in the United States, *Contemporary Ethnography Across The Disciplines [CEAD] Hui* in New Zealand, and the *Arts Based Educational Research* conferences in Europe) are critically important. These venues have, for a number of years now, provided a fertile seeding ground where non-mainstream methods such as autoethnography can be shared, explored, developed, and nurtured. Like many others, we have found these venues to be essential to the development of our autoethnographic work.

At the same time, for autoethnography to grow and develop—and for the insights this approach can bring to be more widely appreciated—it is essential that we present and publish our work in other, more diverse venues, too. In our fields, journals such as *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *Sport Education and Society*, *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, *Sociology of Sport*, and *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing* have proved receptive to autoethnographic work, while conferences such as the *International Human Sciences Research Conference*, the *International Qualitative Conference in Sport and Exercise*, and *The British Sociological Association Auto/Biography Conference* have offered us a warm welcome. In these venues, readers/audiences are not necessarily familiar with autoethnographic inquiry, so a more extensive review and/or rationale for the approach may be requested by editors or reviewers. Given the importance of continuing to widen acceptance of autoethnography beyond the current “strongholds” into “fledgling” venues, we take the view that this work is well worth the effort.

In this sense, the history of autoethnography as we have outlined it here is not so much a fixed thing of the past, but instead something that is continually relived, revisited, and revised. As we write, some are as unaware of—and uninformed about—autoethnography as we ourselves were as students in the 1990s. There are others who are experiencing the kind of awakenings—now through, perhaps, encounters with our own work—that we experienced ourselves in the 2000s. And there are others still who have now been practicing the art for two decades. As we write, there are students fortunate enough to be taught the skills and philosophy of the approach by experienced proponents. There are other students—experiencing frustrations with the distanced, “neutral,” and “objective” methods they are being taught—desperately searching for an alternative. And there are others still who will tomorrow submit their autoethnographic doctoral dissertations. All of these scholars and students—positioned at different places along our articulation of a history of autoethnography—exist, relate, and interact in the present chronological moment.

In this light, all of the “past” contested and marginal moments in autoethnography’s history are happening now—again and again, over and over. Given the current political and cultural context that underlies academic research, we would suggest they are likely to do so for the foreseeable future. The kinds of trailblazers who populate autoethnography’s history are still needed now—and will be tomorrow. New scholars will be asked to step forward and take their place—and they must do so if the autoethnographic tradition is to continue. At the same

time, methodological innovation will be required if autoethnography is to remain fresh and relevant. Indeed, perhaps methodological innovation is a hallmark of the approach and a requirement in *every* autoethnographic study. From this perspective, we might see the past, present, and future history of autoethnography as a continual “coming out”—over and again—for each new student, colleague, editor, and conference delegate we encounter. Moments of autoethnography’s history are thus happening simultaneously and repeatedly (in different contexts, for different people). And so the future of this always contested, often marginal methodology hangs in the balance, as autoethnography itself seems to be always and at once a threat and a promise.

## Notes

1. During discussion sections of the text, we use the first person voice (“we”) to communicate our shared perspective. During autoethnographic sections, we use first person singular voice (“I”) to designate either Kitrina’s or David’s personal experience.
2. We hold the view that autoethnography should reach beyond the author’s experience to, in some way, speak to the experiences of others.
3. In post-Victorian Britain this axiom is used as an abbreviation of “mind your manners” or, more specifically, to say both please (p’s) and thank you (thank-q). The phrase “mind your p’s and q’s” is used to remind people, especially children, to speak politely.
4. *Niggle*, or *niggled* (past tense), means to cause, or have caused, a slight but persistent annoyance, discomfort, or anxiety.

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