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## 7. INTRODUCTION TO WRITTEN INQUIRY

In this section practitioner-researchers use writing as a form of inquiry into a range of subjects, some that emerge from their therapeutic and other practices, some that arise from more personal connections, and others that hover between the two. Family relationships with the secrets, lies and loves that bind us; the frustration, pain and questioning of parenting a bullied child, illuminated against the backdrop of cultures—ancient and institutional—that do not bend easily; a questioning of how sexuality is defined—generalised perceptions that contradict the ordinary, lived, yearning life and one woman’s struggle to maintain and gain strength from her position at the borders of academia; a woman’s narrative in prose poetry patterned by the past to lead the reader through a spectacular breakthrough and two accounts of women’s ageing process—one presented in multiple voices (including an uncontrollable canine wit), the other through snapshots of the often under-acknowledged freedoms that accompany ageing.

The writers use prose poetry, fictions, dramatised scripts, autoethnographic, and epistolary approaches to show not only how the emotions and experiences they seek to express might best be represented but also to give the reader a sense of living through these highly visceral performative pieces. In some of the chapters more than one approach has been used, rolling from fact to fiction to poem and prose, using whatever form(s) appropriate for the retelling. What these diverse chapters have in common, alongside the use of writing as modality and means of exploration, is that they all trouble, play with and ask questions of time.

Freeman (2009) talks of hindsight as an opportunity for humans to garner insights into their life-space and reshape their lives in light of reflections on their experience. In this sense hindsight loses its more commonplace nostalgic and nihilistic qualities and becomes a source of hope, of ethical know-how about how our lives might be lived, of renewed agency and of hope for the future. In his earlier work (Freeman, 1998; Freeman & Brockmeier, 2001) Freeman also talks of the different qualities of actual, autobiographical and narrative time, to which we would add mythical, magical and geographical time (Speedy, 2011).

Thus the autoethnographic pieces in this section by Bradshaw, Gallant and Heywood stretch actual (or chronological) time differently across autobiographical time, expanding ‘epiphanal’ moments into long narratives and compressing long stretches of chronological time into seconds. Similarly, the fictionalised pieces from Ferguson and Scarlett ‘play’ with reality time and space, moving seamlessly, in a magical realist fashion, between different mythical and actual realities and geographical contexts. In the poetic texts it is as if you could hear a pin drop, and there is no sense of time. Meanwhile, in fictionalising their accounts, these authors say much that they would not otherwise have been able to say. Like Clough’s

(2002) fictions and narratives about the underbelly of life for teachers and students in secondary schools, the only way of successfully telling these stories in ways they can be heard or read is to fictionalise them.

#### WRITING AS INQUIRY

Writing as a recognised form of creative inquiry has come a long way since Laurel Richardson's (1997) struggles for recognition in the academy and writing as a research process in its own right (as opposed to a vehicle for 'writing up' that which has already been researched) is now a well established form of qualitative research. It is to Richardson that we owe the transformation of writing from a mopping-up activity to a research method (Richardson, 2000; Richardson & St Pierre, 2004) that embraces many forms, including in this section of the book, poetic inquiries, fictionalised inquiries and autoethnographies.

Speedy (2008, p. 145) writes of students who saw "research as the high ground" and her desire to take issue with those ideas to produce "troubling and incomplete texts: texts that explicitly invite ongoing conversation." Here, the writers take up that invitation by exploring the various ways of presenting embodied texts, linking the body inextricably with the physical, emotional and social landscapes out of which the experiences arise and offering the reader a means of entering those spaces.

Three pieces here are rooted in autoethnography (chapters eight, nine and ten), a genre that is not for the fainthearted researcher, evoking as it does criticisms of self-indulgence, laziness and the "narcissistic substitution of auto-ethnography for research" (Delamont, 2009, p. 51). Auto-ethnographers, straddling the spaces between self as ethnographic field of study, culture and context, need to produce exceptional "writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739) if they are to avoid such stringent critiques.

Given that this genre evokes such hostility, why are we advocating it as a genre for practitioner researchers who surely have enough straddling to do? Partly because there are some fields of human experience that can only legitimately be made sense of through the combination of autobiographical and cultural weaving back and forth that autoethnography affords, and partly because no other form of research brings to the fore the complex, thorny and disjointed relationships between narrative, memory and identity (see King, 2000). In doing so autoethnography effectively describes how we recall incidents and make sense of our experiences, not to make them into a consolidated homogeneous statement but to make known the differences, the angles, that make up the prisms of our lives, retold through that most unreliable of narrators, memory.

Ellis et al. (2011) describe the epiphanies or moments of hindsight that constitute the 'data' of autoethnography. All the autoethnographic authors (Bradshaw, Heywood and Gallant) establish their writing motivations as confusion, anger and frustration, from positions of being misunderstood and unacknowledged, either misunderstood culturally or sexually or as a family, or only seen through this

one dimension. Here the writing not only provides another version but invites the reader in, through storytelling and a mixed poetics writing approach, to the family, the alpine bunk, the pain of parenting and the lonely heart.

In their very different fictions, Scarlett and Ferguson take us into more dramatic forms. Scarlett's powerful fictionalised narrative leaves the reader turning the page both in anticipation and fear of what they might be told while Ferguson's exploration into academic research belies the words of one of her alter-ego characters, Paula: "you are, to put it kindly, a terrible writer lacking anything resembling a creative imagination."

Chris Scarlett's account is a fiction, but is based on accumulated accounts from her doctoral work on sistering, work that she was in the end only ethically able to represent in fictionalised forms in order to protect the identities of the people she writes about. As Sikes and Piper (2009) maintain, writing about people's lives always carries a heavy ethical burden, not least because of "the truths that some readers might construct and read into our stories" (Piper & Sikes, 2010, p. 572). In this case Scarlett has not chosen to produce composite identities or symbolic equivalents (see Sikes & Piper, 2009; Yalom, 1991) but rather has written one fictionalised and dramatised, performative narrative of her own life story. In this way, she has changed, enlarged, left out, 're-performed' and re-arranged details of lives, including her own, whilst at the same time keeping her writing true to the roots and spirit of sistering relationships that she has encountered. In this sense her 'truth claims,' like those of Spry (2001) in writing about performative autoethnography as a genre, are of verisimilitude or trustworthiness and what Geertz would call 'being there' but also, with more than a nod to Carolyn Ellis (1995), about producing writing that performs on the page and engages readers:

Being There is a postcard experience. It is Being Here, a scholar among scholars that gets your anthropology read ... published, reviewed, cited, taught. (Geertz, 1988, p. 130)

Ferguson seeks to evoke verisimilitude and to engage, but also to amuse, a rare phenomenon in academic research, by her use of 'theatre of the absurd' techniques to highlight the absurdities of the human condition she witnesses around her. In order to gain altitude on the position and visibility of older women, she takes her research team up into outer space and includes amongst them Boris, a talking Glaswegian dog, bringing to mind in the most extraordinary way the words of Cixous (1994, p. 132) "we are never more human than when we are dogs."

In so doing, however, she quietly introduces contemporary discussions about the forgotten Scots dialect and makes pertinent methodological points about the uncertainties and impermanence of qualitative research texts. Ferguson is working within different dimensions and truth claims to writers of traditional social research texts and as Richardson (2000, p. 926) writes:

Claiming to write 'fiction' is different from claiming to write 'science' in terms of the audience one seeks, the impact one might have on different

publics, and how one expects 'truth claims' to be evaluated. These differences should not be overlooked or minimized.

Meanwhile in the final group of texts, Bell and Kemp take poetic representations to very differing limits. Bell, drawing in different ways on Riessman (1993) and Richardson (1997), uses the episolatory texts gathered for 'research' to fall into prose poetry, where refrains emerge apparently effortlessly out of the correspondences to draw the reader's eye and ear to 'talk that sings' (Bird, 1997). The contrast between the narrative and the poeticised extracts invites the reader to listen carefully, impacting far more than communications transcribed 'verbatim' could allow. In the final piece of the section, Kemp offers the opportunity to take a rollercoaster ride across elements of her own life stories, into a series of poems that are at times raw and stark and at others everyday dialogue. The piece ends, quite aptly, with a visual poem that offers no answers. Like Prendergast et al. (2009), Kemp is using poetic forms as a writerly and exploratory form of arts-based inquiry with an intention

To reveal the sometimes hidden intersections between the scholarly and personal, often found in the overlapping landscapes of experience and memory (which also happens to be the landscape of poetry). (Prendergast et al., 2009, p. 1373)

#### WRITING SOCIAL RESEARCH DIFFERENTLY

The texts in this section of the book cover topics that are explored routinely within the canon of social research and other genres of practitioner research. Family lives and relationships and experiences of domestic abuse, social relations, living 'other' lives within a heterosexual society, tensions between marginalized and dominant ethnic groups within academic life (and within life in general), and the subjugated visibility of older women and/or taken for granted assumptions about these visibilities. The literatures of practitioner research are littered with studies of these phenomena, most usually written offering insights into the lives of others rather than the lives of practitioners themselves. This literature, often covering much larger populations and drawing much broader conclusions, offers a backdrop and context for the writing you will find below, but what is written here is shaped, and therefore shapes its readers differently. The writing as inquiry you find in this section of the book is best suited to small intimate studies and provides descriptive, evocative evidence of the particularities of imaginative, scholarly and/or conversational practice. It illustrates and suggests but it does not explain or evaluate. As such, it is not intended as a replacement for, as an alternative to, or as an oppositional force pitted against, more traditional positivist studies exploring, for example, evidence-based practice. 'Writing as inquiry' extends the repertoire of available research genres. It is an approach that is likely to appeal more to, and perhaps be conducted more by, practitioners and their service users than by policymakers, agencies and health care trusts. Nonetheless, as attention to the art and craft of writing becomes more of a consideration, the whole field of social

research may become more concerned with writing in engaging and interesting ways, with the inclusion of the 'wounded practitioner' alongside the wounded client as a legitimate researcher stance. We can but hope.

#### CRITICAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS RAISED BY CHAPTERS 8-13 OF THIS BOOK

The first question that 'writing as inquiry' evokes from researchers steeped in the propositional discourses of traditional research, is 'is this research?.' Bond (2002), a colleague from the University of Bristol and a fellow psychotherapy practitioner/researcher, asks the question: 'naked narrative, is it research?' which begs the question that Kemp asks of us, by implication, in chapter thirteen: 'naked poetry is it research?.' Kemp does not go to the lengths that her colleague Bell does in chapter thirteen, to quote Prendergast et al. (2009) Richardson (1997) and the relevant literatures of poetic inquiry. Donna Kemp simply presents us with a poetic account and implies by situating her writing in a book about research methods that this naked poetic inquiry into her life is sufficient unto a research text. Is context all that matters, then? Does the fact that Kemp (a published poet) has presented her poetic inquiry here under the 'research methodologies' list and not the 'poetry' list make all the difference?

And what of the slippery and contested (Speedy, 2008) territories of autoethnographic research, as exemplified here by Heywood and Gallant? Are such excursions into personal forms of narrative mere self-indulgence or does the lived-first-person nature of these accounts engage with us as readers in a different way and allow us a different relationship with the texts? Are we left with radically different 'insider' understandings of what it means to grow up gay in our society or what it means to be bullied and what it means to live alongside a bullied family member, or are we merely voyeurs twitching our net curtains onto the experiences of others? Scarlett also offers us an autoethnographic account, albeit one that she has fictionalised, so what are we to make of this disturbing tale? Did this four year old really witness a murder? Can the testimony of a child this young, not admissible as legal evidence, be permitted here as a research text? What does this piece bring up for us as social and educational researchers about doing research with children and allowing the voices of children to be 'heard'?

Research into the intimate spaces of people's lives, particularly the intimate lives of researchers themselves, brings up different questions about ethical boundaries and the implications for family members, in this case the children, parents and erstwhile 'love objects' of autoethnographers. Is this possibly unintended implication and exposure of other people in our research writing justified on the grounds of readers gaining from 'personal/insider' perspectives'? Sikes and Potts (2008) believe that it may not be. Ellis (2009) apparently believes that it is. What do you think?

None of these questions are asked lightly or answered easily. Swimming in the deep waters of what have become known as the 'new ethnographies' (Goodall, 2000) is not for the fainthearted and asks different questions of researchers and research participants alike.

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