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1. CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND THE VULNERABLE SELF AS RESEARCHER¹

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents critical autoethnography as an innovative approach to conducting research in marginalized, vulnerable communities. Combining autoethnography, ethnography, and critical pedagogy, the researcher becomes a participant in the study, turning inward to examine the Self and the complexities of cultural perspectives through the lens of critical pedagogy. Intense reflexivity and introspection undergird this study of Self as participant, going beyond recounting facts as objectively as possible, as occurs with autobiography, to acknowledging that the researcher is interpreting the facts through cultural perspectives formed through years of sociocultural, socio-historical, socio-political, and socioeconomic events and circumstances. Subsequently, the researcher, more than likely a member of the dominant culture in some categories, is able to understand herself as an oppressor.

CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Critical autoethnography combines ethnography, autobiography, and critical pedagogy to shape a methodology that allows me to examine myself as a qualitative researcher who works in vulnerable, marginalized communities. As a member of the dominant culture, it is crucial that with every research project I come to understand my own cultural perspectives and that I communicate those perspectives to the people who read my research. I can write autoethnography that only investigates an event in my life, or I can integrate my autoethnography into an ethnography that investigates that same phenomenon within the context of the group being researched. In either case, I present myself as a participant in the study so that I can internalize the researcher gaze and thus examine my Self in the same way that I examine others. That is, with autoethnography, I situate myself as researcher within the study, whether as a separate study or integrated as another participant in an ethnographic study (Blanco, 2012). Intense reflexivity and introspection, examined through the perspective of critical pedagogy, help me to understand some of the cultural complexities that have shaped me as a researcher and a pedagogue.

Since I don't believe it is possible to function without preconceived thoughts and beliefs, nor to maintain a completely objective position for recounting events,

such as occurs with autobiography (Blanco, 2012), I make it explicitly clear to the reader that I am interpreting the data according to my own perspective. I openly expose my presence in the study, without trying to disguise it under the pretence of objectivity. Then those who read the work can form their own ideas, knowing that I am a participant in the study and that my interpretation reflects both my selection of the data to include and my decisions about how to present those data. With this methodology, as a researcher who is a member of the dominant class and culture, I can understand the danger of being, or in some cases acting as, an oppressor. This awareness can influence my positionality as I conduct research in communities that are not considered part of the dominant culture.

Other researchers have used critical autoethnography as a way to connect “evocative personal narrative to cultural criticism” (Ellis & Bochner, 2014, p. 10), or to connect autoethnography and intersectionality (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014). Robin Boylorn combines cultural and social phenomena to comment on personal experience from a “raced, classed, gendered, sexed, positionality, identifying the distinctions between her lenses for viewing the world and those of others” (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014, p. 13), using critical standpoints as a way to theorize about lived experiences contextualized in intersectionalities. In combining autoethnography and critical pedagogy, I examine intersectionalities, but rather than positioning myself as a member of a marginalized community, I acknowledge the insidious, pervasive power and privilege I possess due to my race, socioeconomic status, religion, education, and countless other cultural perspectives that have shaped me, regardless of the marginalization I sometimes experience due to gender and age. Like Boylorn and Orbe, I also acknowledge my subjectivity and positionality, but I also claim the possibility of my position as an oppressor when working in vulnerable community. In addition, whereas they position themselves within Communications as a home discipline, and I position myself in Curriculum and Instruction, which lends different focuses to our work as well. In other words, while our concepts of critical autoethnography share certain characteristics, they do differ in others.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Autoethnography has its roots in qualitative inquiry (Ellis, 2004), specifically in the branch of ethnography. As with any qualitative inquiry, the epistemological premise of autoethnography posits that reality and science are interpreted by human beings, focused on explaining some phenomenon and its interactions aside from numbers and statistics, with an emphasis on the quality rather than the quantity of the data. I can provide the reader with a human face, not only the statistics of the phenomenon. I use ethnographic methods such as observation, participation, and interviews to collect data. Autoethnography also combines ethnography with autobiography, “writing about the personal and its relationship to culture” (p. 37). With autoethnography, I include the data that emerge from my own reflexivity and introspection as a researcher. I can write this as a personal narrative, but by

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combining this personal story with the ethnography, I can examine the meaning I give to the phenomenon, while at the same time trying to understand it from both the individual and the group perspectives.

As a researcher, autoethnography allows me to examine an event, a practice, or a circumstance in my own life. Autoethnography is “research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” showcasing “action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection” (Ellis, 2004, xix). This method is “self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts” (Spry, 2001, p. 710).

Since I use literary forms, such as narrative, poetry, and drama, autoethnography permits the intersection of art with science (Ellis, 2004) to present what I learned as a researcher by practicing deep reflexivity and introspection. I use writing as inquiry (Richardson, 2000) to help me understand the sociocultural reasons that explain the situation I am examining. With autoethnography, I interpret the narrative according to my perspective, without the pretext of having eliminated myself as a participant in the study. With autoethnography, I am an actor and participant in the study, and in my other role as author, I write to “understand the significance of what [I think and feel and do]” (Ellis, 2004, p. 68) and the “significance or meaning that [I] give to [my] experience” (Tarrés, 2001), which allows me to deepen the knowledge I discover through reflection and introspection.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Critical pedagogy provides the theoretical framework that helps me in my efforts to push against the grain of sociocultural, socioeconomic, socio-historical, and socio-political influences that have shaped me and have caused me to perform and interpret life as I do. Like the rest of the world, I have my origins in a temporal and spatial context, which influences the way I construct the nature of the world (Kincheloe, 2005); that is, my race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, religion, gender, etc., have shaped my way of thinking and living. Of course, my way of thinking and performing life have changed through the years, but situations still occur when my reactions reflect previously forgotten and/or hidden beliefs from my cultural past. In other words, I examine some phenomenon and I reflexively interrogate my own relationships with the phenomenon, focusing on my own power and privilege compared with those of the group in which I am conducting research. Therefore, while I investigate the social, political, and economic contexts that have shaped my perspective, I can recognize myself as a potential oppressor, an important revelation that influences me as a researcher, especially in vulnerable communities.

Freire (1970) developed the concept that the oppressed need to come to a critical consciousness of the causes of their oppression. In this essay, I propose that as researchers, we must recognize our own cultural perspectives and how they are influenced by the dominant culture. Possibly we are not even conscious of our potential for participating in oppression. Such conscientization of my role

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as oppressor resonates with the plea of Freire (2005) that teachers be educated as cultural workers, but here, my suggestion is that we think in the same way about ourselves as researchers—as cultural workers who have the intention of including those voices that are often not heard, or even worse, that are ignored.

To conduct research that pushes against the grain of cultural norms that create oppression, it is necessary to recognize the people with whom we conduct research not as subjects or informants, nor even solely as participants, but rather as our collaborators in the research. This epistemology opens the opportunity to participate in emancipatory research (Street, 2003) in which we conduct research as a participant *with* other participants instead of *for* them. This causes us to have a counter-hegemonic and counter-institutionalized ethic that doesn't exacerbate inequalities, and that permits the documentation and denunciation of injustices in the same words as the other participants. In this way, research serves to problematize the representation of Others, and to create a bridge between the excluded and the included at the same time that it erases the separation between subject and object (Street, 2003).

CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY IN MY OWN WORK

Combining the methodology of autoethnography with critical pedagogy permits me to push against the grain of norms established by the dominant society, problematizing my own actions and practices from a sociocultural perspective. Since I conduct research with vulnerable and marginalized populations, it is important to incorporate a methodology that forces me to examine my own cultural perspectives as a member of the dominant society, and critical autoethnography permits me to do it, examining myself in a systematic and transparent way.

To arrive at a state of critical consciousness regarding my own cultural perspectives, I need to examine how I position myself within socially constructed categories (Banks & Banks, 2012) that create or erase power and privilege: race/ethnicity, religion, class, gender, sexual preference, language, etc. I can recognize myself as a member of the dominant and powerful culture only by first analysing how social norms position power and privilege, and then by understanding my own cultural heritage within the dominant culture. Through intense reflection and introspection, I can understand the insidious nature of power and privilege, and the way they “reach into the very fibre” of my being, and that “are inserted in [my] actions and attitudes” (Foucault, 1980, p. 39). Through critical autoethnography, I can position myself in the research (Behar, 1996) to critically examine my own practices as a researcher, navigating the vulnerable spaces that require me to examine my own words and actions with the same care that guides me as I examine those of the other participants in the study. My vulnerability also causes me to be more conscious of other people, which many times guides my selection of the data I want to include in the narrative. As the result of this intensified awareness of vulnerability due to my role as a participant in the study, I feel the necessity of

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obtaining the permission of each participant to publish the results of the inquiry and to present them in public venues. Ethics are integrated into the very fabric of study.

This methodology emerged organically as I was writing an article to examine my own pedagogical practices. My work includes poetry and narrative, as well as more traditional research. In the examples that follow, I include illustrations that demonstrate how critical autoethnography allows me to interrogate my research as well as my pedagogical practices. Conducting research and writing within the theoretical framework of this methodology has caused me to become aware that conscientization is not a static state. At the same time that I arrive at a state of conscientization in one aspect of my work, my perspectives based on my heritage in the dominant culture surge forth in another situation, and once again I act from that ingrained perspective. While I interpret my own work, I visualize conscientization as a process that occurs repeatedly insofar as we remain open to being vulnerable through introspection and to admitting our roles as oppressors. With these illustrations, I show the potential of critical autoethnography for helping us as researchers to distance ourselves from the perspectives of the dominant culture that shaped our beliefs and practices as oppressors. This perspective leads the way for listening and hearing words and their diverse meanings that are based on the cultural context from which I come and against which I push.

GOOD INTENTIONS PAVE THE WAY TO HIERARCHY

I began to combine autoethnography and critical pedagogy without knowing that I was inventing an innovative methodology. That is, I knew I was using autoethnography as a methodology and critical pedagogy as a theoretical framework, but it had not occurred to me that this combination was a different methodology. I had already read extensively about both autoethnography and critical pedagogy, and when I began to write my text, it seemed natural to refer to both to establish my methodology. The text emerged from three liminal moments over a seven-year period. The first occurred in the context of the research study that informed my doctoral dissertation. I had been working as an interpreter in a public health clinic for Spanish-speaking women for their prenatal care and their family planning appointments. I was spending 20 hours a week working with them, and since I was the only English speaker they knew and trusted, they called me constantly to ask for help with doctor appointments or teacher conferences, or to ask if I could help them with getting some basic support. I attended a church where people were always ready to share, and they donated mountains of clothes, furniture, etc. I stored everything in my garage, and after a while, I realized that this project was more than I could handle alone, especially with my fulltime work in the university, my work at the clinic, and my doctoral students. The idea occurred to me to design a course that would include service-learning. After a year of listening to class discussions and reading student reflections, I decided to examine the reciprocal friendships I observed developing between the students and the families with whom they spent

50 hours per semester. I also decided to establish a work day on the first Saturday of the semester when the students came to my garage to separate and divide the donated articles and to deliver them to the families, who referred to this as *la dispensa* [gifts of help and love].

The second semester that I did it, the students reacted less than favourably. They told me they had not liked the practice because it was “like observing animals at the zoo” when we went in a truck to deliver the items. As part of the narrative for my dissertation, I included the story of the workday without mentioning the students’ comments. Then when I defended my dissertation, two committee members questioned the practice. One commented, “Kris, I don’t think you understand what you are doing with this practice.” You are establishing social hierarchy, with the students as the “haves” and the families as the “have-nots.” Her words shocked me. They caused my second liminal moment.

The third moment occurred at the end of my first semester as a tenure-track professor when I had my end-of-year evaluation. The Director of the School of Education and my Department Head had read an article (2003) that I wrote based on my dissertation research (2003). In the article, I presented only the positive aspects of the service-learning experience, and they asked me about the “dark side” of the program. Then I remembered the words of my students and my doctoral committee members, and once again I felt the shock of a liminal moment. So I began a period of reflection and introspection, and from that time came two articles, both of which examined the practice of the workday using the lens of critical pedagogy: “Troubling the Tide: The Perils and Paradoxes of Service-Learning in Immigrant Communities” (2009) and “Good Intentions Pave the Way to Hierarchy: A Retrospective Autoethnographic Approach” (2009). Since I was already familiar with autoethnography as a methodology, I wrote both articles from a personal perspective, examining my practice and trying to understand my actions through a detailed examination of the sociocultural environment that had caused me to establish the workday. This article was my first experimentation in combining autoethnography with critical pedagogy, which I presented as two distinct methodologies.

4/16: PUBLIC TRAGEDY COLLIDES WITH PERSONAL TRAUMA

I continued experimenting with autoethnography as a methodology that did not intersect with critical pedagogy. I wrote about the shootings at Virginia Tech, the university where I teach and where I am an Associate Professor, in order to understand what had happened. I was in my office when 4/16/2007 occurred. The event affected me in an unexpected way, leaving me desolate and inconsolable, almost at the point of not being able to function in either my personal or professional life. After spending time trying to understand why it had affected me so gravely, I began to read the work of Carolyn Ellis and Laurel Richardson, and I realized it was possible to write as a way of understanding my situation. From that period of

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intensive reflection and introspection, I came to understand that I was suffering from having not taken time to grieve the death of my mother, who had died in January 2006. I used the literary techniques of narration and poetry to write a text about my personal experience (2011), which served as a cathartic experience that led me into a state of peace and consolation. “[I] narrated my own experience, because through it, [I] could understand more deeply what had seemed incomprehensible [to me]” (Bénard Calva, 2014, p. 18), and thus I could resume a normal life. As it has turned out, many people who have read this essay have written to tell me that it helped them to understand their reactions in the face of some tragedy, whether public or personal. As Stacy Holman Jones (2005) says:

Autoethnography is a blurred genre ...a response to the call ...it is setting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections between life and art ... making a text present ...refusing categorization ...believing that words matter and writing toward the moment when the point of creating autoethnographic texts is to change the world. (p. 765, cited in Denzin, 2006, 420)

I said in my own text:

Therapy and healing through powerful academic writings.
I dissected the things I didn't do but should have, the things I did but shouldn't have.

Trips to conferences: Tampa, San Juan, San Francisco, Mexico.
To the tune of the death dirge that accompanied every thought every day.
Too much busyness.

I lived in yoga clothes. I ate organic food. I followed the workbook's advice and detoxed my system. I practiced serenity. I breathed so deeply I felt light-headed.

The emptiness filled with peace. (p. 147)

Only after the publication of my text, “4/16: Public Tragedy Collides with Personal Trauma” was I able to move on.

THE COAL MINER'S DAUGHTER GETS A PH.D.

My next autoethnographic text, which once again uses the lens of critical pedagogy, resulted in a poem, “The Coal Miner's Daughter Gets a Ph.D.” (2011a). Using poetry, I examined my trajectory as a coal miner's daughter who through the years came to be an associate professor in a university. Through the methodology of performative autoethnography, I examined the influences that had caused me to perceive myself as an outsider in the university community. I also examined how the mystery has influenced my work with the Latino community. I questioned how I position/reposition the essence of my Self as I move with certain fluidity between my roots and my academic position:

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I write to understand mystery.
To grapple.
To struggle.
To accept.
To release
Notions of self-doubt.

...

I am a coal miner's daughter.

...

Conducting research in the Latino community.
Still ...
Interrogating power, privilege, and whiteness.
I am now a university professor.
Reflecting, writing, and performing as inquiry. (Ellis & Bochner, 2001;
Richardson, 1998)

Just as with my text about the shootings, many people have told me that reading this poem has helped them to know that other people were able to obtain professional position in the academy despite their working class backgrounds. I have performed this poem in Mexico, Chile, and the United States, and in each place, people have commented to me, "That was my dad. He was a miner/migrant worker..."

CROSSING THE BORDER: (AUTO)ETHNOGRAPHY THAT TRANSCENDS IMMIGRATION/IMAGINATION

The next text in which I used autoethnography in combination with critical pedagogy has an ethnographic context. I presented and interpreted what I had learned from a research trip to Mexico. I interviewed the families of five women whom I had been interviewing for the seven years they had been living in my city. I collaborated with those women to design a study to investigate the impact their immigration had on the families that stayed behind. The women gave me the questions they wanted me to ask their families, and they spoke with their families to pave the way for the interviews. Their families opened their homes and their hearts to share with me the pain of losing a daughter/sister/aunt, because without legal immigration documents, it was not possible for them to return to Mexico to visit their families.

First I wrote a narrative essay about the research, and when I submitted it to *Qualitative Inquiry*, I received a letter from Norman Denzin, telling me "There is too much telling and not enough showing. I want a manuscript that enacts its own reflexivity as your poem does [The Coal Miner's Daughter Gets a Ph.D.]," just as

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Bud Goodall (2008) tells us in his advice for writing qualitative inquiry narratives. I returned to the essay, and I removed all the words that weren't necessary for communicating the power of the data and interpretations that had emerged from the transcribed manuscripts. As I did so, I became aware of my own power and privilege as compared to the women and their families, which I include throughout the resultant poem, "Border Crossing: (Auto)Ethnography that Transcends Immigration/Imagination" (2011b):

Lina left San Juan Bautista, Oaxaca;
Marisol left Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua;
Lupe left Tonalá, Jalisco.
Laura left Santa Fe, Jalisco;
Gisela left Santa Fe to join her sister Laura;
Me. I never left anywhere I couldn't return to.
Never. (pp. 386–387)

I also gave the details of my encounter with the immigration guard at the airport in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, which is on the border with El Paso, Texas, because I wasn't carrying with me the paper I had filled out on the plane and in which I gave information about my stay in Mexico. The guard cancelled my passport, saying:

"My people need them to travel to your country
So you need them to travel to mine."
...
Two cancelled passports.
"Illegals.
You can go to jail for being in Mexico without papers."
The same as Lina, Marisol, Lupe, Laura, and Gisela,
Never in jail
Except the prison of their own fear
Of getting caught
And put in jail.
Not the same at all.
I do have rights.
I do have papers.
I do have power and privilege.
I can cross the border whenever I want
From north to south to north to south to north
One angry border guard.
Two cancelled passports.
Not the cancellation or negation of our rights
As human beings
As US citizens

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Our white selves free to roam anywhere in Mexico
Or the US
Or almost anywhere else. (p. 395)

While I was changing the narrative to a poem, more questions than answers appeared. I began to articulate the doubts that had been bothering me since the time I began conducting research in the Latino community. I realized that I don't have the right to speak for anyone, and even my right to interpret the words of anyone is limited:

(Auto)ethnography
The auto is correct.
I can try to analyse/understand/interpret
My own words/thoughts/perceptions
But I can't even be sure of that.

Ethnography.
I can report what I heard/translated/interpreted
When I heard/translated/interpreted it.
Would they have said the same the week/month/year before?
Would they say the same next week/month/year?
I can only report what I heard/translated/interpreted
At that specific time.
And nothing more.
I can't determine what people mean
By their words.
Their subtexts
Filtered
By my perspective.
My subtexts.
I can only report what I heard/translated/interpreted.
At that specific time
In my life and theirs. (p. 400)

I realized it wasn't possible for me to ever know the Truth, since for me, a single Truth doesn't exist. I became aware of the complexity of the human being and of my inability to interpret the words of other people. I can report what someone says in an interview, and of course, I am the researcher who chooses what to include in the text, but for me, fixed interpretations don't exist.

This text represented a liminal moment in my development as a researcher. Since the time I began to study for my doctorate, the idea of being an expert with the right to interpret the words of others, of analysing their actions and coming to conclusions regarding their true motives, had bothered me greatly. This text served

to help me realize, in an unforeseen way, that by combining autoethnography and critical pedagogy, it's possible to interrogate and problematize any situation or circumstance.

THE BAPTISM/EL BAUTIZO

After writing "Border Crossing," I continued to think about my positionality in the Spanish-speaking community, especially after my Mexican American grandson was born in 2010. Once again I wrote as a way of conducting research, this time to examine my own positionality/power/privilege, but also to interrogate socially constructed borders. Throughout the text of "*The Baptism/El bautizo*," (2013), I refer to the friendships/relationships that I described in "Border Crossing," contrasting my position as mother/surrogate grandmother for the women with whom I collaborated to conduct that research project with that of being the grandmother of my daughter's baby. Although I had attended the baptisms of those grandchildren of my heart, this time I was attending the baptism of my grandson by blood:

Insider-outsider.
Surrogate grandmother/mother.
Friend.
This time, there's no surrogate status.
This time, I am the grandmother.
By blood.
Not just by heart.
This time, Dan and I
Witness the baptism of our grandson
David Isaac Hernández. (p. 2)

Thus I was able to connect "the autobiographical and the personal with the cultural and the social" (Ellis, 2004, p. xix).

During this time, I have developed my desire to write as inquiry, and I have also developed my passion for writing in literary forms, probably the result of my specialized studies in Spanish literature. When I write my poems, I hear in my mind the voices of Miguel de Unamuno, Pablo Neruda, Gabriela Mistral, Federico García Lorca, and many more, drowning me in a deluge of words and images, at the same time that critical spirit becomes reality with the combination of autoethnography and critical pedagogy. As T. S. Eliot says:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time. (Eliot, 1971, p. 144)

NOTE

- ¹ This chapter is based on and adapted from an earlier version which appeared as Tilley-Lubbs, G. A. (2014). La autoetnografía crítica y el Self vulnerable como investigadora. *REMIE: Multidisciplinary Journal of Educational Research*, 4(3), 268–285. <http://dx.doi.org/10.447/remie.2014.014>. Also in Spanish: Tilley-Lubbs, G. A. (2014). La autoetnografía crítica y el Self vulnerable como investigadora. *Astrolabio, Nueva Época*, 14 (with permission). Translation into English by the author.

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