'They pass by themselves without wondering':
Using the self in, and as, research

Cheryl Hunt, University of Exeter, UK

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Background

This paper is written in the shadow of the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) which has dominated the ‘output’ of researchers in British universities for several years. It is not yet entirely clear how the next exercise will be conducted but, in my own department, procedures are already being implemented in order to achieve further ‘improvement’ next time around. These include annotating a range of papers according to the criteria used in the 2008 RAE so that academic staff can use them as models for assessing the quality of their own future papers. This begs questions not just about the nature of the evidence being sought/created in ‘good’ research and academic writing but about the extent to which this evidence may itself limit the nature of the research that educators feel encouraged to undertake, including the style in which they present their work.

The purpose of this paper is to question, in particular, the place and function of autoethnography in education and educational research. It builds on a paper given by Paul Armstrong at SCUTREA 2008 which points out that the British Education Index archive ‘Education-line’, and certainly its collection of past SCUTREA papers, seems to contain only one that refers specifically to autoethnography. Presented a decade ago by the late Valerie-Lee Chapman (1999), this is poignantly entitled ‘A woman’s life remembered: autoethnographic reflections of an adult/educator’.

Armstrong (2008: 44) notes his lack of surprise that the paper was written by a woman because: ‘by their very nature, autoethnographies critically challenge taken for granted ways of knowing, ways of thinking, and ways of making sense of the world, which bring the subjective and objective together’. As Chapman (1999: 30) herself noted: ‘Autoethnography has been inspired by feminist autobiography to risk writing about the everyday, about lives that were once not accounted as important enough for the researchers to bother with …’. The most commonly agreed definition seems to be that autoethnography is a form of self-narrative that places the self in a social context (Reed-Danahay, 1997). For Burdell and Swadener (1999: 22) it is ‘both a method and a text’. Essentially, it enables the researcher to draw
consciously on her/his embodied self as both agent and subject of research and writing processes.

Although I have only relatively recently acknowledged the label, I now recognise that much of my own research and writing has been in this genre. It has not only elicited comments from some reviewers (who have nevertheless recommended publication!) such as: ‘I find this an entirely uncongenial approach … very self-indulgent and navel gazing’; but it was also deemed (I quote) ‘too risky’ by my institution to be entered in the RAE. I have been advised fairly strongly that, in career terms, this is not a good way to go. That is no longer a real concern for me. Of more concern is that powerful gatekeepers, whilst apparently upholding an evidence-base of research that demonstrates ‘quality’, ‘rigour’ and so on, seem to be effectively excluding the ‘self’ of the researcher from the discourses of educational research.

I want to explore some aspects of this exclusion in the context of two very particular forms of research and teaching. The first is what Pelias (2004: 1) calls a ‘methodology of the heart’, located in the researcher’s body: ‘a body deployed not as a narcissistic display but on behalf of others, a body that invites identification and empathetic connection, a body that takes as its charge to be fully human’. The second is the teaching associated with the professional doctorate in education.

They pass by themselves …

Let me first comment on the title of this paper and how I associate it with autoethnography. It is derived is from the words of Saint Augustine: People travel to wonder at the height of the mountains; at the huge waves of the seas; at the long course of the rivers; at the vast compass of the ocean; at the circular motion of the stars; and yet they pass by themselves without wondering.

I chose it because this observation is evocative of the research culture that I first encountered as a psychology student in the late 1960s (Hunt 2009: 78-79): what was to be researched and understood lay in a world ‘out there’ that was quite separate from the researcher ‘in here’ – even when that world was constituted not only by the physical features of the planet and stars but by fellow human beings. My final-year dissertation was influenced by Michael Argyle’s (1970) work on interpersonal behaviour, especially the way in which eye contact was used in social encounters. I filmed numerous different two-person discussions in which the relative ‘status’ of the two people varied. After analysing hundreds of film stills, I was able to demonstrate that ‘higher status’ individuals looked more often at their ‘lower status’ counterparts, who looked downwards for more of the time. The discusants’ perceptions, feelings and observations on the process did not enter into the data. I moved into the field of education soon after graduation, sensing but not yet able to
articulate concerns about ‘objectivity’ and measurement in human relationships.

Nearly 30 years later, as an established adult educator undertaking a PhD that had strayed into the realm of spirituality, I was both startled and delighted to read John Heron’s (1996) introduction to *Co-operative Inquiry*. It contained striking parallels with my dissertation experience – and suggested that the unarticulated concerns about it might unconsciously have shaped my otherwise apparently serendipitous career in adult education and developing interest in spirituality. Heron writes:

The co-operative inquiry model was born, in my world, in 1968-69 when I started to reflect on the experience of mutual gazing in interpersonal encounters. … I also made the point that the conventional social scientist cannot properly inquire into the nature of the gaze by doing experiments on and gathering data from other people. The status and significance of the gaze can only be explored fully from within, by full engagement with the human condition.

… I felt that the human condition within myself, in relating with others, and on the wider canvas, was about increasing self-direction in living, in co-operation with other persons similarly engaged. And that this quest for personal and social transformation, for the interacting values of autonomy and co-operation, was at the heart of any truly human social science (Heron 1996: 1-2).

In my view, this quest and its underpinning principles also lie at the heart of adult education and lifelong learning (in the sense of learning through and from life and not simply, as government policy would prefer, as learning for work). Certainly, as English and Gillen (2000: 2) point out, in seeking to integrate material and spiritual needs for themselves and others, the pioneers of adult education built their work on clear ideals about ‘justice, service, caring, cooperation and the dignity of the person’. As a direct result of my own lifelong learning, including the PhD and funded research projects, I now understand ‘spirituality’ as a search for meaning and purpose in which there is implicit recognition of the interconnectedness of all things (Hunt 2001; Hunt and West 2007): in essence, I see it as synonymous with Heron’s ‘inquiry into the human condition’.

Autoethnography is an ideal vehicle in which to conduct such an inquiry. It enables us to ‘wonder about ourselves’, to locate that wonder within our social contexts and to share our embodied experiences with others. As Ashton and Denton point out, autoethnography:

… expands the horizons of our consciousness (Ellis, 2004). The researcher/writer’s interior inquiry and reflection mirror a larger human landscape, blurring the distinctions between the personal and the cultural. Such writing calls forth the possibility of dialogue, collaboration and relationship (Ashton and Denton 2006: 4).
Emergence/exclusion of autoethnography: signs of times?

Anderson (2006: 375-378) claims that qualitative sociological research has always contained an autoethnographic element. He traces it back to Robert Park’s encouragement of his students at the University of Chicago in the 1920s to conduct research in settings where they had ‘a significant degree of self-identification’ but notes that, despite this, students’ reports rarely contained evidence of ‘explicit and reflexive self-observation’. Research associated with the so-called Second Chicago School and the work of Everett Hughes in the 1940s-1960s often focused on students’ workplace settings and were ‘analytically more sophisticated’ but, in general, continued to ‘downplay or obscure the researcher as a social actor in the settings or groups under study’. As in my own early encounter with research in psychology, these researchers focused on ‘observing and analysing others in the settings studied, they had no “language of qualitative method” … that assigned particular merit to self-observation’. From the mid-1960s to 1970s, there was some experimentation with self-observation and analysis, but it was not until 1979 that a clear case was argued, in an essay on ‘Auto-ethnography’ by David Hyano, for self-observation in ethnographic research.

The emergence of autoethnography and other forms of engaging with the self as, and in, research (through life-histories and later auto/biographical methods) mirrored other ‘signs of the times’ in the late 1970s and 1980s: In the field of adult/community education, Freirean ideas about critical pedagogy were encouraging adults to understand their own experiences better in order to be able to participate in, and change, policies and services that powerful others had hitherto created for them; Schön (1983) was developing his case for professionals to reflect on, voice and take ownership of their own knowing; and feminist writers were exploring the notion of the ‘personal as political’.

Feminist writers were especially influential in subsequently creating a turn towards what has become known as ‘evocative autoethnography’. Denzin (1997: 228) notes that this invokes ‘an epistemology of emotion, moving the reader to feel the feelings of the other’. Ellis and Bochner (2000: 744) elaborate, pointing out that, within this particular genre, ‘the mode of storytelling is akin to the novel or biography and thus fractures the boundaries that normally separate social science from literature … the narrative text refuses to abstract and explain’. As Anderson (ibid.: 377) observes, evocative autoethnographers have published fairly extensively during the past decade, including in what he calls ‘traditionally realist qualitative-research journals’ but ‘they remain largely marginalized in mainstream social science venues, due to their rejection of traditional social science values and styles of writing’. Education would seem to be one such venue.

As if to verify Anderson’s observation, Andrew Sparkes (2007) recently published a highly evocative ‘story’ about higher education (specifically the impact of the RAE on people’s lives and identities) not in a higher education
journal but in *Qualitative Research* (even there, Sparkes feels obliged to acknowledge the journal’s editors ‘for giving the paper a chance even though they are not enamoured with the genre’ [p.546]). The story is a direct response to Pelias’s (2004: 10-11) observation of a ‘crisis of faith’ amongst academics who have begun to feel ‘empty, despondent, disillusioned … spiritually and ethically bankrupt’, and his subsequent plea for a ‘methodology of the heart’ which allows greater connection between mind, body and emotions, and with others. Sparkes says of his story that it ‘seeks to speak from the heart about the embodied struggles of a composite and mythical (perhaps?) academic at an imaginary (perhaps?) university in England that is permeated by an audit culture’ (p.522). It provides no analysis but ‘simply asks for your consideration’.

Sparkes follows the story with examples of ‘moments of consideration’ given by a number of readers, including the anonymous reviewers. One notes that, although ‘I am usually not much of a fan’ of this kind of writing, ‘I resonated with this’. S/he goes on to say:

To overturn and overflow the received idea of ‘acceptable’ scholarship in a largely social science arena … is a worthy goal IF the enactment allows something to be seen that could not otherwise be seen. Somewhere Foucault calls this ‘increasing the circumference of the visible.’ (p.541)

The second reviewer refers specifically to the effects this ‘powerful’ story had on her/him:

… how have we let our institutions of higher education become what they are? How have we ever allowed arbitrary quantitative measures to determine value? … Forgive my rant, but the essay … made me think about how legislative policies have genuine consequences for individual lives. It allowed me to see more fully the complexity, both conceptually and emotionally, of the problem. … It persuaded me that change is needed. (*ibid.*)

Another reader referred to the way in which ‘the brutal and bullying aspects of an audit culture are exposed. …It speaks of the things that matter to those that care. What more impact could it have than that?’.

My personal ‘moment of consideration’ was triggered by a section of the story called ‘Tears of the Big Fellah’ (pp.529-530) which, although it evoked painful resonances with my own experiences, also offered a valuable piece of advice. The section takes the form of a dialogue between Jim, Director of Research in the School of Performance Studies (what nice irony in that title!), and the ‘Big Fellah’, Paul, an experienced colleague from the School of Educational Studies who, despite many years’ service, a huge teaching load, innovative curriculum development, excellent student evaluations, and the publication of three articles in refereed journals, is about to lose his job. Paul tells Jim:
'They say my history here doesn’t count for anything. They now say my research is not good enough. Not the right quality. Just not good enough.'
His voice thins and trails off.
He gasps, 'I’m not good enough.'

Jim gives Paul a hug and, repeatedly reassuring him that he is ‘good enough’, advises: ‘Don’t let them tell you otherwise. Don’t believe the shit they are giving you. … You are so much more than your CV’. It is advice which those who, in Armstrong’s (2009) terms, are currently ‘being displaced’ by financial and other pressures within their institution to retire early from, or to realign, their work might do well to heed. (I am reminded here of Sullivan’s [2003: 127] view that a better understanding of the intimate relationship between scholarship and spirituality might allow us to rise above ‘inadequate frameworks and impoverishing assumptions for academic work’.)

The reactions of Sparkes’s readers open up another moment of consideration in the context of the present paper since they indicate clearly why it is in the interests of the audit culture to exclude a ‘methodology of the heart’ and its expression in autoethnographic writing. West (2001: 430) observes, in relation to auto/biographical methods more generally, that: ‘They offer enriched and nuanced insights into processes of learning and into the human subject: in short, into ourselves as well as the other’. Thus, as Sparkes’s reviewers noted, such methods do, indeed, increase the circumference of the visible and this can reveal and/or resonate with the uncomfortable emotional consequences of our own actions and/or the institutional policies to which we subscribe – and they can persuade us that change is needed. Whilst this would seem to be in keeping with ‘really useful research’ of a Freirean kind, it seems to be a sign of the current times that an evidence-base comprising shared personal accounts of the often-wounding impacts of policies and practices - and the need to change them - is unlikely to ‘count’ as a measure of ‘good’ research or academic writing.

I think that should be a matter for concern, especially for departments of education and in relation to professional doctorates.

Autoethnography, pedagogy and the doctorate in education (EdD)

In November 2008, I attended a conference organised by the Higher Education Academy in conjunction with the Quality Assurance Agency and other bodies. Its purpose was to examine the changing nature of the UK doctorate. There seemed to be consensus that the process in which doctoral students engage is now equally as important as their product, the thesis itself. While the bureaucracy of Research Councils and universities will undoubtedly interpret this in terms of recording/ measuring the kinds of skills training and supervision the students have received, I suggest that learning to ‘be’ a
researcher involves the *embodiment* of knowledge and, therefore, that the ‘self’ of the researcher is central to the research process.

Indeed, Willis (2004: 323) argued at a previous SCUTREA conference that doctoral learning is precisely about ‘deeper changes in the inner self of the learner/researcher. It is, to a greater or lesser extent, a road of transformation …’. He outlines three kinds of transformation which a student may undergo on the doctoral journey: organic, unitary and critical. The first involves growing to maturity as a scholar. Unitary transformation concerns the way in which “self stories” or personal myths may be identified and worked with or rejected: the transformative process here requires the embracing of one’s own and other subjectivities, including the associated struggles and epiphanies. Critical transformation is often a consequence of the first two and involves a different way of looking at, and relating to, the world.

Armstrong (2008) described at SCUTREA last year how he is working ‘toward an autoethnographic pedagogy’ in his teaching. Drawing on an account by Pennington (2007: 99), he notes how, in order to teach a critical perspective on race, she had explored her personal thoughts on race, broken her own silence and encouraged her students to do the same. This is risky business but, as West (2001: 429) has noted in another context, ‘it is a capacity to learn emotionally, including from “otherness” within – which lies at the heart of becoming more fully human’ and which underpins ‘good practice, both professionally as well as in personal life’. In the light of the issues explored in this paper, I think there is a strong case for the use of an autoethnographic pedagogy within EdD programmes. As Sullivan (2003: 134) points out: Our intellectual acts are inextricably embedded in and influenced by the life that accompanies them. The particular and complex combination of attitudes we bring to observation, critique, reflection and scholarship will colour, even to some extent condition, our discoveries, insights and reconstructions of reality.

Thus, in the programme that I currently direct, staff share their ‘research/life stories’ with students as well as the theories and methods underpinning their research. This is not only congruent with the values of adult education – but it works well and students comment repeatedly on their high levels of satisfaction with this approach. I think this is because, in the terms of one of Sparke’s’s readers, ‘It speaks of the things that matter to those that care’. There is a disjuncture, however, between this kind of modelling of what research involves and what is modelled in much of the educational literature. I fear that this will only be exacerbated by the long, selective, shadow of the RAE and its successor.

Sitting in these shadows and losing the will to live as I attempt with colleagues to evaluate research papers and allocate a score from 1* to 4*, I sense that we are once again wondering ‘at the circular motion of the stars’ and forgetting the self that is at the core of the educational enterprise. I think it is
time for educators to re-claim autoethnography: it seems to me not only to be a really useful form of research with which to challenge what counts as ‘evidence’ in and of ‘good’ research - but also a really useful approach to professional education and lifelong learning in its own right.

References


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