

Ethnography and self-exploration

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This article offers a review of the history of the somewhat contested relationship of autobiography and ethnography in anthropology and medical anthropology. The paper begins with Athena McLean's reflections on an event at a conference that sparked negative responses to apparent confessionalism by an anthropologist. In the second section of the article, McLean together with Annette Leibing describe other moments of tension in the use of autoethnography in anthropology's past. In the final section, they consider three ways in which ethnography and autobiography may be related in anthropology and medical anthropology today: (1) through exploring the influence of personal life on ethnographic research; (2) through exploring the influence of anthropology and ethnographic research on personal life; and (3) through the use of ethnography as self-exploration. While self-exploration may be an undercurrent of all three approaches, it is the explicit focus of the third. This review is also intended to be a 'teaser' for the forthcoming symposium "Ethnography and Self-exploration" December 2011.

[ethnography, autobiography, autoethnography, anthropological research, self-exploration, medical anthropology]

Autobiography in ethnography: A delicate relationship

Several years ago at a session that Annette Leibing and I organized at the AAA (American Anthropological Association), one of the key discussants was unable to be present. Very sick and unable to return to the United States to attend the conference, she was kind enough to fax her remarks to be read at the session. Her comments began with an elaborate description of her illness, how it was impeding her return, and the suffering she had endured. As she continued sharing the infinite details of her plight, the audience waited to hear her commentary about the papers. Ten minutes into her remarks, her comments continued to focus on her own experience. As I looked around the room, I observed physical unrest and impatience change to visible annoyance. Raised eyebrows, eyes catching one other in wonderment, and an uncommon amount of whispering revealed signs of discomfort in the audience. I felt torn between my appreciation of her effort to send us her comments even though she was very sick, and

my sense of disturbance and mild embarrassment that our session had become a forum to discuss her misfortunes. In the last few minutes, she finally offered a sentence or two about each paper. When the reading ended, another discussant commented with some annoyance about the “confessional” quality of her remarks.

As I think back to that event, I am struck by the ethnographic richness of those moments, and how much they likely revealed about anthropologists, our discipline, and its cultural sensitivity to acceptable academic practice. The event was particularly notable because the topic of the session, entitled “The shadow side of fieldwork,” was concerned with examining implicit, unspoken issues, contexts or phenomena that unconsciously shape our fieldwork and texts. In the edited volume that Annette and I eventually developed for publication (McLean & Leibing 2007), we never bothered to examine the events that took place at the session. Nor is that our intention today. Rather, as this article introduces the theme for the next symposium – ethnography in its manifold possibilities for self-exploration – I find myself remembering that event. During our discussions in the subsequent years while developing our volume, Annette and I never returned to those moments; they remained invisible to us (literally in the shadows), even as we deliberately attended to such issues. This is suggestive, we both suspect, of the powerful ambivalence we, as anthropologists, continue to have about the relevance and correct place of the ‘auto’ in our work and about the related acceptability of revealing it publicly without good cause.

Sociologist Andrew Sparkes describes how vulnerable and personally wounded he had felt when a colleague called the autoethnography of one of his students “self-indulgent.” Why not view it instead as, “self-knowing, self-respectful, self-sacrificing, or self-luminous?” he wondered (2002: 210). In a similar vein, Buzzard questions why autoethnography, in spite of the enduring interest it has commanded, has met with continued resistance (2003). It may be that there is an art to knowing when to hold back when ‘confessing’ in order to tell the audience just enough without collapsing into self-indulgence (Morrison 1998: 11, cited in Sparkes 2002: 215). Or, as Norman Denzin (2006) writes about researchers from the Chicago School (and against autoethnography as a novelty), “These researchers were self-reflexive but not self-obsessed.”

The art of knowing when to confess and when to hold back also needs to be considered *before* an ethnography is transformed into a text. Anthropologist Anne Lovell (2007), for instance, argues that confessions, or ‘getting personal,’ are an essential part of data gathering. The ethnographer without a history, who asks but does not reveal her own values and vulnerabilities, impedes the establishment of a mutually respectful relationship with our interlocutors and limits the possibility of deeper sharing and understanding. Indeed certain information may be revealed only after the anthropologist ‘confesses’ herself, as Lovell convincingly showed in her own research within different “zones of vulnerability”. Such mutual sharing opens the door to an experience-near anthropology (cf. Van der Geest 2007: 18) and fosters an intersubjectivity that, however limited as a research tool, is nonetheless the “best we have” (Van der Geest 2007: 13).

In sociology, where realist forms of representation are deeply entrenched, positivism persists as a dominant tradition, threatening to marginalize those who may be

attracted to more subjective ways of knowing. This may be because the dominant scientific perspective regards the self of the observer as an untrustworthy 'contaminant' (Krieger 1991: 47) that impedes the knowing of an externalized social world, and that thus should hardly be privileged. The power of this perspective has created a hostile environment for many sociologists challenging the subject/object divide, and the charge of 'self-indulgence' has effectively served to regulate against more autobiographical exploration. Bochner and Ellis, leaders in promoting autoethnography within sociology, similarly observe how antagonism within sociology against self-exploratory methodologies has served to reinscribe positivist methodologies (Sparkes 2002: 215), often with highly gendered biases (cf., Goslinga & Frank 2007; Andrews & Gupta 2010: 7).

Despite sharing similar methodologies and theoretical traditions with sociology, anthropologists' discomfort with an excessive focus on the self, at least in recent decades, stems less from a struggle with a stalwart positivism, which anthropology has long problematized (if not resolved) (Keane 2003: 22), than from a strong self-consciousness about the colonialist roots of our discipline in which 'the Other' has been the object of study. Given this self-consciousness, anthropologists have felt that they could not afford to forget the material differences that enabled their position of privilege vis-à-vis the Other. Nor could they forget to 'look back home' in order to be reminded that their own everyday world was also 'cultural' (e.g., Alsop 2002), not only in terms of background issues of ethnicity, but also of class, gender, and generation, among other distinctions.

Similar kinds of reflections can be found in both anthropology and sociology when the Other is unnecessary as a counter point to self. Some social scientists use autoethnography as a medium of intersubjectivity in which self and Other merge and finer understanding becomes possible. The difficult exercise of problematizing one's own life and what is taken for granted and unquestioned – tacit knowledge – can reveal hidden structures leading to an enhanced awareness of political and ideological elements in one's life at home.

The distinctive ways in which autobiography is used by the two disciplines, however, stem from the particular relationship of each to the self/Other dichotomy within their particular histories. Critical sociologists have tended to use autobiography, like emotionality (Ellis 2011: 3), as a deliberate tool for challenging the positivism naturalized by the self/Other divide (Okeley 1992: 3). For anthropologists the 'ethnographic imperative' has been more to understand and draw attention to the social worlds and experiences of inequalities of others; autobiography has been viewed only as a secondary tool to assist with that end, but never its focus (Coffey 1999: 37). When we highlight our own 'existential condition or malaise,' we ignore its theoretical and practical significance (Crapanzano 1987: 180) for gaining access to the world of the Other while detracting from the Other's plight. It is within this disciplinary backdrop of anthropologists' historical awareness of their exploitative relationship with the Other that the audience's reaction toward the absent discussant at the 2003 AAA panel may be better understood. This awareness only served to amplify preexisting cultural prohibitions against expressive displays of suffering and of narcissism already in place.

Some past tensions in exploring the self in anthropology¹

Anthropologists' ambivalence about autobiography long pre-dated its post-colonial sensibilities. In fact, it stemmed more from its early grounding (along with the other social sciences) in the positivist paradigm (Andrews & Gupta 2010: 7). As such, its focus was on making generalities that could in part serve the colonial agenda. British social anthropologists sorted through their data to find regularities and cohesion in the confusion wrought by colonialism, and reported these in finished texts, undisturbed by personal sentiment. In the United States, however, Boasian anthropology was promoting its appreciation for historical complexity and the particular. Boas's own grounding in German romantic idealism and materialism (Stocking 1974) molded his antipositivist leanings and willingness to support personal reflectiveness in his students (Frank 2000: 95). Nevertheless, the cautious mood of the time led even Sapir and Benedict to hide their poetry from their mentor (Clifford 1986: 4). Indeed, while Boas appreciated the unique access to local understandings achievable by native anthropologists and locals whom he trained, his realist sensibilities sometimes clashed with native ethnographers who had acquired a more textured view of ethnographic truth (anticipating the postmodern) as being partial, and shaped by relations of power (Leibing & McLean 2007: 10-11; Finn 1995: 140).

At least as early as Malinowski, the anthropologist came to be seen as the instrument of ethnographic knowledge (cf. Ortner 1995), even though his/her subjective voice remained within the confines of his private writing, literary genres (e.g., Sapir's poetry), or journalistic outlets (e.g., Victor Turner, cited in Asad 1979: 90). Following World War II, particularly after the 1950s, this separation intensified as demands for a rigorous, neutral, value-free research in the social sciences had strengthened (Callaway 1992: 38) both in Europe and the United States. Academia became a male-dominated preserve that denied any writing that did not require the anthropologist to remain neutral and detached as insufficiently scientific. Meanwhile, a companion movement promoted writing based on an alternative research paradigm promoting an engaged intersubjective practice. Nonacademic outlets promoted works such as *Return to Laughter* (Laura Bohannon 1954, *nom de plume* of Eleanor S. Bowen), whose personal sentiments and anecdotes were regarded as too soft or even too 'feminine' (Bruner 1993: 5) for academic acceptability. This period produced many 'self-reflexive' (Clifford 1986: 14) confessional field accounts, separate from scientific ethnographies (Marcus & Fischer 1986: 33-34) that offered a glimpse of the backstage research process (Ellis 2004). Many of these personal accounts were written by women (often themselves professionally trained) like Edith Turner or Marjorie Shostak, whose anthropologist husbands wrote the traditional ethnographies (Callaway 1992: 31; Bruner 1993: 5). Given the line dividing academic work from less respected endeavors, well-known anthropologists like Hortense Powdermaker (1967) only dared to include autobiographical material in their writing late in their careers, and Barbara Myerhoff (1974, 1979), whose research is remembered for its deep reflectiveness, even wondered whether her work fully qualified as anthropology (Callaway 1992: 32-33)!

Turning toward reflexivity

Reflection about field work gained attention in the late 1960s and early 1970s as critics of postcolonial anthropology began to question anthropology's position as a neutral bystander in colonialism. Challenging value-free, positivist approaches that objectified disadvantaged 'Others' (Asad 1973), they turned anthropology's gaze onto itself, demanding a 'reflexive and critical anthropology,' (Scholte 1974), that could evaluate the consequences of its methodology (Hymes 1974; Diamond 1974). Bob Scholte compellingly argued that the subjectivities of both observer and observed result from the same processes of knowledge production. Challenging positivist understandings of ethnographic descriptions as 'objectively' captured by trained observers, he argued that ethnographic description is an 'interpretive' activity that results from an empathic, intersubjective understanding that rests in 'communicative interaction' (1974: 440-441; see also Diamond 1974: 409-413). For these critics, reflexivity was a "necessary, though not sufficient" part of a larger political and 'emancipatory' (pp. 446-449) anthropological praxis. However, they effectively shattered the self/ Other divide by revealing it as an artificial product of a particular type of positivist research. They also gave light to the flaws of the entrenched academic view that had long privileged only the objective public space of the Other against a delegitimized private subjective space of the self (Goslinga & Frank 2007: xiii; Andrews & Gupta 2010: 7). As Okeley argues, the fieldwork experience cannot be reduced to an objective "collection of data by a dehumanized machine" (1992: 3); the person as a relational being simply cannot be separated from formal ethnographic study in this way (Brunner 1993: 4). Rather, fieldwork is a 'totalizing' experience that penetrates the entire being of the ethnographer and the relationships sparked by her being.² Thus ethnography is inevitably connected to the autobiographical (Fabian 2001: 12, 32), which, Okeley argues, ultimately disrupts and "dismantles the positivist machine" (1992: 3).

Postmodern divergences

During this wave of positivist critique, Gelya Frank (1979) challenged the notion that the life history is an objective document that 'speaks for itself' as data for social scientific formulations (p. 77). She drew attention to the *dialogic, experiential* bases of its knowledge production that involves the blending of 'the consciousness' of both investigator and subject (p. 85), in contrast to autobiography, which she viewed to be a singular effort.

By the late 1970s experimental ethnographies (e.g., Rabinow 1977; Dumont 1978; Crapanzano 1980) incorporated the ethnographer's reflections and dialogues with interlocutors. *Tuhami* (Crapanzano 1980), e.g., by its unique form, provided a challenging alternative to traditional texts that were marked by the anthropologist's authority, invisibility, and purported neutrality. *Tuhami* included the author's heavily edited field notes in the text, inviting the reader to make his/ her own interpretation. Here, the ethnographer's field experiences provided the basis for understanding the phenomena being explored, while also conveying the complexity of Tuhami's experi-

ence (Marcus & Fischer 1986: 42-43) and the necessarily hypothetical basis of its author's interpretations of them (Crapanzano 1980: 148).

By the mid-1980s, two influential texts built on this challenge to traditional ethnographies, with a focus on the problems of realist ethnographic representations of the Other. Prompted in part by Edward Said's critique (1979) of Western representation of non-Western cultures, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Marcus & Fischer 1986) articulated the need for critical reflection of ethnographers' social engagements in the field, their representations of those they studied, and their moral responsibilities to them. They drew attention to experimental approaches as offering potentially more sensitive representations of other cultures, along with reflexive self-critiques. *Writing Culture* (1986), a volume edited by Clifford and Marcus, addressed similar issues, with special attention to the politics of representation. Clifford saw potential in anthropology's literary turn to texts as offering more democratic representational possibilities than the traditional participant-observation whose texts had depended on the 'observation' of the ethnographer alone (Clifford 1986: 3-6). Their volume, however, had overlooked relevant contributions from feminists (Abu-Lughod 1991).

The attention placed on the textual positioning of the self led to an abundance of self-reflexive ethnographies that, to the regret of many proponents of reflexivity, had forgotten the intersubjective aspects and political praxis underlying reflexivity (Scholte 1987). By the 1990s, many writers justified their 'solipsistic' practices (Young & Meneley 2005: 7) by citing texts like *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Marcus & Fischer 1986) that had actually objected to such restricted practices (Fischer 2003: 12). While some scholars called for a return to a politically conscious, processual, dialectical, intersubjective reflexivity (Fabian 2001: 50; Fischer 2003), others felt that even self-centered reflexivity could result in a radical self-awareness that can affect the politics of conducting fieldwork (Callaway 1992: 33). Similarly, Victoria Sanford observed how researchers who achieve an understanding of the lives of others, e.g., those facing everyday violence and survival, often inevitably become involved in advocacy and political activism, even though that was not their original intention (2006: 14, cited in Purdey 2008). In both cases, the praxis of the ethnographer is altered because of his/her deep engagement and reflection about social and political impacts on the lives of others.

Autoethnography and its limits

Autoethnography "is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze ... personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience" (Ellis 2011). Although it reflects the self of the researcher, her emotional experience, and her influence on the research (Reed-Danahay 1997: 9), her experience is less the focus than the way in which it can inform the stories of others (Ellis 2004). By the late 1980s and 1990s, autoethnographies within anthropology provided vehicles for emotional expression (cf. Behar 1993, 1996) not only of the anthropologist but also of suppressed feminist and postcolonial voices (Leibing & McLean 2007: 12).

Autoethnographies vary widely (Buzzard 2003)³ from writings critiqued as overly self-celebratory, narcissistic and ‘navel-gazing’ to others seen as confessional in sharing the ethnographer’s background (Van Maanen 1988; Ellis 2004) to those that reveal a historical and consciously social reflexivity (Reed-Danahay 2005: 126). Fabian, however, considers *all* ethnographies to be autoethnographies since they inevitably implicate the autobiography of the writer (2001: 12). Whatever the approach they take, argues publisher Mitch Allen, an autoethnographer must “*look at experience analytically* (emphasis added)” (Ellis 2011).⁴ It is these theoretical and methodological tools and the research backgrounds of their writers that distinguish autoethnographies from just any other story that anyone might write.

Among the most controversial forms of autoethnography have been personally evocative narratives that focus on the ethnographer’s personal and professional life, with little analysis or reference to other scholarly work (Ellis 2011); these are the types of autoethnographies that have been accused of being narcissistic or overly confessional.

Such accusations came to a head with the publication of Ruth Behar’s *Translated Woman* (Behar 1993), the life story of Esperanza Hernandez, a Mexican street peddler. In the final chapter, “Biography in the Shadow,” Behar reflects on her own life, and makes subtle connections between the violence to which she and Esperanza both had been subjected. Given her position as a privileged academic, making such comparisons between her own feelings of oppression, rage and ambition and those of a poor woman was unconvincing to many readers and angered others. For a personal narrative to avoid being seen as narcissistic, Pelias argues, it must clearly “point beyond the self” (1999, cited in Lockhart 2002: 81), and that is the responsibility of the ethnographer.

Gelya Frank made the case that the problem was not in revealing too much to the reader, but that Behar had ‘underanalyzed’ (1995: 358) what she did reveal, without making explicit links between her self-disclosure and the production of knowledge. Frank argued that in this production of knowledge, no type or amount of information or autobiographical experience should be off limits from disclosure as it can lead to new understandings; however, it should be included “only to the point that the author shows its relevance.”^{5, 6} Such a conscious, deliberate self-disclosure results in what Lovell (2003) calls ‘discretion’ rather than ‘confession.’ This self-conscious exercise of ‘discretion’ in deciding what to reveal about the self and what to withhold transforms what might otherwise appear as ‘confession’ into a deliberate act in the service of producing knowledge.

Three pathways for integrating autobiography and ethnography in anthropology

Several writers have addressed the artificiality, indeed *impossibility*, of separating the researcher’s autobiography (or personal account of her life) from her or his ethnography (Okeley 1992; Bruner 1993; Fabian 2001). As the vehicle of knowledge produc-

tion, the ethnographer as person is inextricable from her ethnographic research and text. Personal experiences and emotions inevitably seep into the research, consciously or unconsciously shaping it – directing questions, attracting or repelling informants, determining what matters. Ethnographic research and training similarly impact one's personal life, helping to interpret life events and experiences through the lens of anthropological training. How one uses these experiences and insights in one's work and life will vary with circumstances and perceived necessity, and can hardly be prescribed. The extent to which past experiences and training will be more or less directed to better understanding one's research and work as opposed to achieving greater self-understanding will also vary with the researcher, the time and the context. Each direction will involve some degree of self-exploration and follow any of a number of pathways. However, the very way each person understands the self and its boundaries is itself culturally shaped (cf., Battaglia 1995). Similarly, ways of perceiving the necessity for, and means of self-exploration will also vary culturally, as well as by subtle disciplinary differences among academic milieus across nations, theoretical schools and periods of training. These differences will undoubtedly emerge and be discussed during the December conference.

To move forward the discussion we suggest three possible pathways for integrating autobiography and ethnography within one's work and life. Each approach varies in focus and the degree to which personal exploration by the ethnographer is deliberately sought. The pathways include:

- (1) Exploring the influence of personal life on research. This includes the selective sharing of one's life experiences in research and writing, as well as the unconscious ways in which they may affect that work.

- (2) Exploring the influence of research on personal life. Such an approach results from the reflexive use of insights from research and anthropological training both in the subsequent work setting as well as in making sense of one's life and one's research and other professional work.

- (3) Using ethnography as self-exploration. This is a continuation of the previous approaches, but explicitly foregrounds and deliberately addresses the issue of self-exploration through the tools of ethnography.

These approaches are intended to help structure our discussion, as well as to act as a teaser to spark debate about the relationship of autoethnography and self-exploration.

1 Examining the influence of personal life on research

In our edited volume, *The Shadow side of Fieldwork*, Annette Leibing and I similarly conclude that the ethnographer's personal data "are relevant only as they relate to, and help illuminate, the ethnographic process". We then call for a "measured economy of disclosure" of autobiographical material for discretely sharing "only what we must about our personal lives" for the purposes of advancing ethnographic knowledge (2007: 13). Our edited volume was inspired by personal experiences in our lives that somehow related to, or interpenetrated and affected our research. As Foucault once stated:

Every time I have tried to do a piece of theoretical work it has been on the basis of elements of my own experience... It was always because I thought I identified cracks, silent tremors, and dysfunctions in things I saw, institutions I was dealing with, of my relations with others, that I set out to do a piece of work, and each time was partly a fragment of autobiography (p. 458; quoted in Davies et al. 2004).

We intended through our book to confront those shadows directly. We hoped to explore those autobiographical experiences, relationships and research phenomena (which we called 'shadows') that influence and shape ethnographic research and texts, but are rarely acknowledged in ethnographic writings and may even be hidden to anthropologists. These could include, but are not restricted to, phenomena of an intrapsychic, intersubjective, social or political nature. They could be mysterious, taken for granted, and so, hidden from us, or implicitly forbidden or otherwise sanctioned. By addressing some of these shadows we hoped to achieve a fuller, more critical, and nuanced picture (cf. Strathern 2004) in our ethnographies.

While Athena hoped to emphasize the impact of the researcher and her personal shadows on the research and the interpenetration of research and private life, Annette stressed the historical embeddedness of research data (and of the researcher herself) and its concomitant shadows. We envisioned our research as *dia-ethnographies* (Rabinow 1996) that moved back and forth along a continuum of two poles during both the course of research and our later reflections on it. One pole focused on the ethnographer and her shadows as a means of better understanding social phenomena; the other pole, on relational phenomena and the ethnographer's negotiations with the social world (from intersubjective to global) and the shadows encountered there. While these issues are relevant to all ethnographic writing, most of the contributors came from medical anthropology, perhaps because so much of it deals with compelling issues related to the fragility of life. Some of the writers focused mainly on their personal struggles as a means for understanding their social world. Others focused more on external phenomena, or shadows they encountered in the field and their relation to them. Most addressed both to some extent.

The idea for the volume was inspired when Athena was in the process of writing an ethnography based on intensive fieldwork in dementia care at a nursing home (2007b). In the midst of her fieldwork, her mother showed signs of dementia and eventually moved into a nursing home for dementia care. During this period Athena was pulled between her formal research, studying dementia care, and her private life, living it through her mother. Problems with her mother's care, similar to those she had observed at the research site, led to her mother's precipitous decline. As she painfully witnessed her decline, she became intent on formally documenting her mother's experiences with the nursing home (and her own, as her mother's legal guardian) by means of a formal case study, both to valorize her mother's suffering and to derive insights that would amplify her previous findings to better inform future research and social care policy. She was unclear, however, how to proceed since she had intended to hide her mother's identity, having never received her permission to publicly discuss her personal life and she did not wish to embarrass her. Presenting her mother's 'case' as

someone else's, however, felt dishonest, if not unethical, given her extraordinary personal investment in it. She further worried that a public disclosure about her mother's case might question her credibility as a dementia researcher. That was too much to risk, given the importance she had placed in that research. The question about how she might approach such a project propelled her to think about other kinds of research quandaries as well. She discussed these with Annette, who suggested they organize an AAA session (the one described at the beginning of the article), and later develop an edited volume where other researchers could examine the shadow sides of their fieldwork. The project generated considerable interest, even though some scholars worried about the consequences on their professional lives from revealing deeply personal or less orthodox aspects of their research. After all, anthropology has its own rigidities, and unlike positivism – the enduring nemesis of sociology – its ambiguities and shifts over proprieties have made the profession that much more intimidating.

As for writing the case study about her mother, that never materialized for the volume. In keeping with the focus of the volume, Athena instead described the process of conducting research while being pulled emotionally between the dementia unit she studied and the one in which her mother resided (McLean 2007a). She reflected on the difficulties of separating personal sentiments from her research, and how she gradually came to appreciate the special insight these mutual realities afforded, in spite of their muddiness. In what she thought was a measured, restrained analysis, she focused on these two worlds and how the crossover between them affected her research findings and interpretations. She was thus surprised to discover that an astute reader had nonetheless perceived her 'rage' (Verwey 2010: 35).

Shadows concludes in its introduction that the person of the ethnographer, though central to processes of knowledge production, "is rather beside the point" (p. 20), and that the knowledge production itself and an understanding of obstacles must be central. The *Shadows* collection, however, raises the question of whether this focus was misguided. Must the production of knowledge always be the premier focus of ethnography? Must the researcher *always* be marginalized to the research task? Might there be times when the exploration of the self should rightfully become the central focus? Or, given our professional training, must self-exploration always remain secondary to the research effort? Furthermore, if that is the case, must researchers always be cautious and measured whenever revealing personal data and feelings? Or, do some situations and events demand more self-disclosure than others? Finally – returning to the discomfort described at the beginning of this article – are there cross-cultural differences in perceiving and valorizing the self and thereby allowing the self to be part of an academic text? These questions and others will hopefully encourage readers to join the discussion at the December conference.

2 The influence of research on personal life

In *Doing and living medical anthropology: Personal reflections*, Rebekah Park and Sjaak van der Geest (2010a) reverse *Shadows'* focus from the influence of personal life on research to *the influence of research on personal life*. Some contributors to the

volume examine “how their study of medical anthropology has impacted their work and life – primarily outside of academia” (2010b: 1). As with *Shadows*, they focus on the “overlap of research with personal life” because they see it as “a crucial but under-exposed space where medical anthropology is done” (p. 4). Like *Shadows*, they also compare their experiences “on the intersection of autobiography and fieldwork” with Foucault’s observation on autobiography. Their volume tries to capture the typically undefined ways in which “personal reflections on the mundane become a part of the analytic framework” (p. 4).

All the contributors had either taught or been students at the University of Amsterdam’s Master’s in Medical Anthropology, which draws in students from diverse professional, national and cultural backgrounds. Because many of the contributors did not work in academic settings, or formally as anthropologists, the volume’s focus was on the life and work of persons trained in anthropology rather than on academic texts. The difficulties many confronted in these non-anthropological settings in trying to introduce and apply insights from their training intensified their challenge to do so.

Some of the contributors reflected on their positions as clinicians, in public health, or as policy-makers trying to promote anthropological methodologies within a variety of constraints. Most appreciated the genuine value of anthropological training in dealing with the limitations of their employment situations. While one clinician had some misgivings about the direct usefulness of the training to her clinical work, another viewed it as invaluable in lending meaning to his work as a physician. Most agreed on the difficulties resulting from the epistemological gap between the world of medicine and medical anthropology, and the challenges of persuading clinicians and policy makers to accept their insights; others inadvertently managed to succeed in doing so. Most poignant were the contributions from people suffering from disease who examined how their anthropological training had impacted their personal lives as they dealt with illness or even coming to terms with dying.

As we consider future topics of particular interest to our upcoming symposium, the contributions of three scholars (Shahaduz Zaman 2010; Michael Golinko 2010 and Els van Dongen 2010) in this volume are particularly relevant. They used their personal experiences as “starting points for reflections on medical anthropology.” They did so by focusing “less on experience as a way to do better anthropology and more on how they used their anthropological ‘worldview’ to interpret their own lives” (p. 6).

This use of “*ethnography as self-exploration*” is a topic of particular interest for our symposium next December. We hope we can ‘tease’ you into joining the symposium to share your own experiences about how research has influenced your personal life (or vice versa), or, better still, your ideas on this new topic, *ethnography as self-exploration*, briefly discussed below.

3 *Ethnography as self-exploration*

Lesa Lockford has suggested that ethnography should be regarded not “as a type of scholarship so much as a mode of inquiry, a way of access” (2002: 77). Thinking about ethnography this way frees us from necessarily feeling tied to using it exclusively within

the strictures of an academic enterprise. It perhaps even frees us to turn it toward ourselves, not as a means for broader anthropological knowledge, but as a way of gaining personal knowledge and understanding one's self via the roundabout way of the other.

As we get older and/or experience illness, disability, loss or trauma, our training in ethnography may be a valuable tool for coming to terms with our own decline and losses within the human condition. Our professional training in ongoing reflexive examination of what we experience may prove to be a gift at such times. Being attuned as observers to minute details, to the complexities of social relations, institutions, power and context can help us understand more deeply as we cope with difficult times and circumstances. Our training can also be a gift to explore during life's celebrations or even during its mundane moments.

Using ethnography that way raises many questions in light of our earlier discussion of anthropology's political history. Ethically, how, if at all, must we share the process or product of our self-exploration with others? This point has also been raised by scholars in film studies, since in films the 'I' of the filmmaker is a central element. The increasingly popular genre of autobiography in film – where fiction and reality are sometimes inseparable (Monty Python's *A Liar's Autobiography* comes to mind) – leads to a reflection on the relevance of the private for the public:

Autobiography becomes ethnographic at the point where the film- or video-maker understands his or her personal history to be implicated in larger social formations and historical processes. Identity is no longer a transcendental or essential self that is revealed, but a 'staging of subjectivity' (Russell 1999).

Is it incumbent upon us to share the outcomes of self-exploration because of potential lessons that might be lost if we chose instead to withhold them? Are we ever *permitted* a reprieve from social and ethical practices we understand so well given our training (e.g., Els van Dongen in Park & Van der Geest 2010a: 7)? Can we ever retreat, responsibly, into interiority, by means of ethnography? Might there come a time when we must refocus interiorly as witness to ourselves and family as part of a vital self-exploration? Further, are there particular circumstances and conditions under which we should look beyond academic purposes in using our ethnographic tools? Is it ever permissible, or even conceivable to ignore sociality? Finally, might ethnography help us come to some peace regarding these questions? Below are a few areas where ethnography as self-exploration may be particularly relevant.

The moral responsibility of witnessing

Despite the temptations to consider autoethnography as a unitary act (as just suggested), and the criticisms it has received for promoting self-absorption, it can also be seen as a 'call to witness' that is 'never a solitary act,' but a 'social act' that implicates both author and reader (Sparkes 2002: 221-22). As such, witnessing involves responsibility from the ethnographer – a certain moral responsibility towards knowledge transfer – particularly where revelations may lead to better lives of those who will read these texts. In the case of medical anthropologists, giving witness to one's illness

offers testimony to a condition that might otherwise go unrecognized, (Arthur Frank 1995: 137, cited in Sparkes 2002: 222). Exploring one's life experiences through autoethnography may thus become an inspiration for others and their own critical reflections (Sparkes 2002: 221). One may even wonder whether self-exploration through ethnography is possible in the absence of witnessing.

Anthropology of home as self-exploration

Efforts during 1980s and 1990s to study familiar settings 'at home' (Messerschmidt 1981; Jackson 1987; Van Dongen & Comelles 2001; Comelles & Van Dongen 2002) led to more reflexive, personal explorations as researchers were forced to engage with the familiar (Okeley 1992: 11; Seppilli 2001; Young & Meneley 2005: 7). Conducting anthropology at home, however, provided no guarantee to self-knowledge (Hume & Mulcock 2004; Strathern 1987), and often created unforeseen obstacles; these experiences propelled researchers to further self-exploration. The potential fruitfulness and seductive temptation of home as the enduring, even 'natural' site for self-exploration, with its apparent epistemological point of access to knowledge (the shadows of the taken for granted) may reveal unexpected surprises (cf., Andrew & Gupta 2010: 9-10), and thus prove misleading. Such occurrences provide invitations to further examination of familiar places and one's relation to them.

Ethnography and public anthropology: Advocacy and activism as a form of self-exploration

Public anthropology has received increasing credibility and popularity (Low & Merry 2010) over the last fifteen years. As early as the 1960s scholars such as Herb Feith rarely separated their research from their engagement as advocates and activists (Purdey 2008: 2-3), even though most researchers felt the need to divide their political and academic lives into separate spheres (e.g., Victor Turner, cited in Asad 1979: 90-91). Despite the debates of the 1970s challenging the artificiality of such separations, controversies over political engagement of scholars remained fierce throughout the 1990s (cf., Scheper-Hughes 1995; D'Andrade 1995; Biehl, Good & Kleinman 2007). Today, however, such engagement is viewed as inextricably tied to the self of the researcher and is increasingly seen as central to ethnographic work as meaningful praxis and moral responsibility (Johnston 2010). Indeed for Edward Said (1999) the observation of cataclysmic events in his life "combined with personal witnessing" proved to be "life-changing" (Purdey 2008: 3). The sufferings we witness inevitably draw us in as human beings, given our own autobiographies and vulnerabilities, often converting our research into moral acts of witnessing that move us and our readers into political action. These acts are not only political engagement, but also potential vehicles for self-exploration.

As we look forward to the forthcoming symposium in December, we hope this teaser stimulates your own imaginings about the relationship between autobiography and ethnography, and that it will help us to pose new questions about this existential and sometimes disturbing aspect of our works as anthropologists.

Notes

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- 1 Parts of this section are the product of a rethinking and rewriting of parts of the introductory chapter (Leibing & McLean 2007) in *The Shadow Side of Fieldwork: Exploring the blurred borders between ethnography and life* (McLean & Leibing 2007); there will be some overlap of language and ideas.
- 2 This captures Marilyn Strathern's idea of the fieldworker as a related presence that triggers ongoing relations with others (Andrews & Gupta 2010: 8).
- 3 See Ellis 2011 for an extensive, current, overview of the variations in autoethnographies.
- 4 Stated in an interview with Carolyn Ellis, personal interview, May 4, 2006.
- 5 Letter from Gelya Frank to author, 27 December 2005.
- 6 Other authors however, especially those in favor of more 'performative texts,' argue that relevance is not within the provenance of the author at all, but the result of the reader engaging with a text (e.g. Denzin 2003). In such cases, sorting out when to follow a more performative direction and at what point the analytical voice of the author must be read is a subject open to discussion.

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