Reflection/Commentary on a Past Article: “Easier Said Than Done: Writing an Autoethnography”

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It is a surprise to me that I have become known as an autoethnographer and that my article, “Easier Said Than Done,” included in this special issue, has generated the interest that it has. I did not set out on this path, although I am pleased to have become part of the development of a fascinating, dynamic, and important methodological movement. My initial motivation to explore autoethnography arose out of a growing awareness that my experience as an adoptive mother did not fit with discourses circulating in the literature, fueling my increasing desire to speak into that literature from a place of experience. What I wanted to do was simply address gaps in the adoption literature from my unique perspective; what happened along the way was that I became (happily) drawn into the rising swell of the autoethnographic method.

Although my place as an autoethnographer was unexpected, my involvement in the growth of the method has fit into my career and impacted my work in powerful ways. I discovered autoethnography when I was a doctoral student. Between my master’s and PhD, I became an adoptive mother. A mentor told me at that time that I should be careful about spending too much time on “the adoption thing” since I would not be able to put parenting on my CV. His comments reflected the traditional worldview of the context from which I came; learning about autoethnography disrupted that perspective to the core as I came to see the power of being guided in my research by my own experience and trusting in both what I had to say and in my right to say it. In 2006, I wrote an article in which I explored autoethnography in a naive, basic, and wide-eyed way (Wall, 2006). Through that exploration, I learned that our personal lives and work lives are not bifurcated and became convinced of the value of starting with personal experience in sociological inquiry.

Being drawn to ethnographic methods and believing in the importance of theory as a way of connecting that which is immediately known with what our imaginations are reaching toward (Gordon, 2004), I knew I could start my own autoethnographic project with the methodological tools of ethnography, coupled with the foundation of theory. Yet, as I pursued my autoethnographic work on international adoption, I discovered just how many challenges accompanied such a project. These challenges had not yet been discussed in the literature, leaving me to learn the hard way. Once I finished my project, I took stock of those challenges and decided to write them down for the benefit of future autoethnographers. Those insights formed the content of the article, “Easier Said Than Done.”

My personal discovery of autoethnography and my learnings from the process of using the method coincided in the most symbiotic ways with the overall development of the method. It seemed that I was discovering and learning how to use the method in perfect step with others interested in personal experience research. At the time that I wrote my own autoethnography (published in two parts in Wall, 2012a, 2012b) and the methods articles (Wall, 2006, 2008), the method was an exciting, emancipatory idea without a lot of practical guidance. The state of the field created the perfect conditions for the sharing of and subsequent receptivity to my explorations and to the practical methodological experience I shared in “Easier Said Than Done.”

I am genuinely amazed at the impact that this article has had (as well as my 2006 article). In the decade since this article was first published, hundreds of people have cited it and the download rates, even now, remain high. From time to time, whenever I need a little self-esteem boost, I check the citation

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statistics. Yet, while the stats are fun to see, what is most satisfying is the qualitative impact my work has had. Over the years, many people have e-mailed me to say that they found my writing helpful to them. Some comments have been beautiful and profoundly meaningful to me because they remind me of what I felt like 10 years ago when I discovered the freedom of a method that “lets you use yourself to get to culture” (Pelias, 2003, p. 372). As an example of the feedback I have received, one person expressed how “… autoethnography helped me to explain my own compulsion to write in a fashion that includes my own voice rather than to pretend objectivity” (T. P., 2018). Another told me with relief and gratitude that “in the depths of my PhD angst and despair, I have found your writing on autoethnography, and it has given me the courage to find my writing style [and] my voice” (D. B., 2018). My journey has supported their journeys and this means a lot to me.

Autoethnography as a method has exploded in the years since I first wrote about it (Muncey, 2010). Today’s autoethnographers have more resources and guidance at hand. However, proponents of the method are increasingly divided along philosophical lines, representing both traditional (analytic) and avant-garde (evocative) approaches to research. Methodological discussions in the literature are polarized (Stahlke Wall, 2016). As a reviewer of many autoethnographic manuscripts over the years (both substantive and methodological), I noticed a trend toward more narrative, unstructured, and emotion-based autoethnographies, which was first identified and debated in a series of articles in the Journal of Contemporary Ethnography in 2006. This orientation to the method remains prominent, as evident in the recent Handbook of Autoethnography (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013), an influential text in the contemporary methodological landscape.

Although I may be holding on to the remnants of my earlier traditional research philosophies, I am concerned about the continuing movement away from analytical and theory-based autoethnographic work. In thinking about the future of autoethnography, I have proposed a moderate approach to the method that balances innovation with rigor (Stahlke Wall, 2016). Years ago, in the infancy of autoethnography, Ellis (1991) pointed out the power of questions generated by a social scientist who has lived through an experience and is consumed by the search for answers about something personal yet culturally relevant. As I conducted my own personal research, I believed in this. More and more, I believe in the “power of one” (Gibbs, 2013) and in the value of tapping into our unique knowledge to advance understanding. I continue to hope that this power will be fully realized within a context of critical analysis and theoretical thinking.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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