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Exploring Alternative Forms of Writing Ethnography

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Review Essay:

Carolyn Ellis & Arthur P. Bochner (Eds.) (1996). Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing. Walnut Creek, Ca.: Altamira Press, 400 pages, $24.95, IBSN 0-7619-9164-6

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ELLIS and BOCHNER have managed to put together a fascinating collection of texts that exemplify alternative forms of writing in the social sciences. They classified them under three categories-"autoethnography", "sociopoetics", and "reflexive ethnography". The reason for this, as they explain in the introduction (written in the form of a dialogue between them over the nature of the book, its aim and the different contributions) is that these texts "explore the use of the first-person voice, the appropriation of literary modes of writing for utilitarian ends, and the complications of being positioned within what one is studying" (p.30). Let's deal with each of these kinds of texts. [1]

1. Autoethnography

Autoethnographies can be understood in the context of the "crisis of representation" (see CLIFFORD [1986] and TYLER [1986]), as Mark NEWMANN suggests in his commentary (one of the chapters in the book). Briefly, anthropological work used to involve approaching some foreign (i.e. non-Western) social group in order to describe their practices, relationships with the environment and their cultural production. Traditional ethnography tried to record these *facts* objectively. These were attempts to look outward, at others, in order to understand them. Through the depiction of rich detail, these accounts made familiar the unfamiliar. The ethnographer invariably came back home and wrote according to the accepted scientific conventions. Later, sociologists began carrying out ethnographic work on specific groups within their own societies (normally, some marginalized group such as drug addicts), but although they did not travel far (geographically), and looked inwards, they found an other to observe and represent. A critical analysis revealed the troublesome network of

assumptions and power relationships. Such attempts to approach an other using the theories and methodologies of scientific disciplines fixed that other in particular positions and in texts over which they had no say. Researchers' authoritative voices dominated those texts as interpretations of those others' fragmented statements. The objective description was an illusion. They represented the self in as much as they represented the other, but most of the time representations of the other served to construct an identity for the Self. As a result of such fierce critique researchers began experimenting with various forms of writing. Literary genres were examined and found of great inspirational value: drama, poetry, fiction, journalism and of course, autobiography. In NEWMANN's view all these had been exploring the relationships of subjectivity and culture for centuries. So, for him there is nothing new in autoethnography, except that it is a form of discourse which allows social scientists to deal with the complexity of selves that cross cultural borders. Borders that "are always with us and *within* us" (emphasis in the original, p.195). For me much more is at stake, as I will try to suggest. [2]

Some of the autoethnographies contain personal accounts of excruciating pain that are indeed very painful to read. In particular, Lisa TILLMAN-HEALY's account of her life-long fight with bulimia, Carol RAMBO RONAI's stories of what it was like to live with a mentally retarded mother and her confessions of her feelings towards her and, how can I forget, Aliza KOLKER's struggles as a cancer patient. But, why write about them, and why should we as readers have to suffer (I have)? I can think of several reasons. [3]

Firstly, because by reading, let's say, Aliza KOLKER's detailed description of how her insurance company refused to pay for a new kind of bone marrow transplant one can understand the impact of bureaucratic decisions and policies on the patients lives. The changes in the provision of health care in some industrialised countries are shown to be directly related to the ways in which insurance companies manage such care. In consequence, not only do cancer patients have to fight the disease, but, at the same time, fight the system that fails them and turns its back on them. Of course, the bottom line is that there are unspoken policies to restrict expenditure as part of a vast cost-cutting exercise for the sake of making larger profits. Hence, autoethnographies depict events in a powerful way and generate a kind of understanding that traditional research reports cannot. [4]

Secondly, because the people telling these first-hand stories are researchers, i.e. colleagues, not participants in the traditional sense ("others"), the closeness increases. Readers and authors are equals. The pain is felt more strongly. Now, how, you may want to ask, can these authors explain what has happened to them when their feelings are so intense? In fact, the feelings are an essential part of the experience and who better than them to find the best ways to bring the whole experience into contact with theoretical categories which prove useful (or not) in understanding and coping with these experiences? The reader is therefore guided by insiders (in both senses: insiders to the experience and to the discipline). [5]

Thirdly, autoethnographies allow us as readers to exercise our imagination when we have never been exposed directly to certain situation. But, in some cases, we have been through similar circumstances in our lives and these accounts help us understand our own experiences (sometimes recover undervalued memories which have been buried in our pasts for a long time). Autoethnographies thus are means of understanding (and healing) ourselves. [6]

2. Sociopoetics

Sociopoetics is another fascinating form of writing and this section contains a heterogeneous collection of texts, all of which explore and exploit the links between art forms and ethnographic writing. Different readers will be able to relate to some more than others, not only on the basis of their theoretical background, but also on a more sensuous level. What is quite clear is that they vary in the degree to which their authors make explicit their own views in the form of commentaries that link poems or scripts to broader issues or disciplinary frameworks and debates. So, while some authors let the text speak for itself, others are openly more analytical and declare and discuss their intentions. Examples of the first group are Judith HAMERA's highly evocative dialogues with members of a Cambodian family, Laurel RICHARDSON's recollections and reflections on the importance of acting in her life and Carolyn ELLIS's moving description of the "maternal connections" that emerge between her and her terminally ill mother. In the second group, that is those that declare their theoretical allegiances and relate ethnographic materials to wider debates, is Debora AUSTIN's "Kaleidoscope", a long narrative poem about her friendship with an African academic, and Jim MIENCZAKOWSKI's description of two projects using ethnodrama to depict issues surrounding alcohol dependency and mental illness. Finally, there is no doubt that all the texts in this section are powerful depictions of human experiences aimed at doing something to the readers/viewers, but it is not always clear how they are to be transformed by these aesthetically rich texts. Only MIENCZAKOWSKI discusses this at length. The nature of the two projects he was involved in, was clearly emancipatory, they were aimed at engendering individual and social change. Clients were given voices through the extensive usage of verbatim material, students and health care professionals were involved at various stages of the construction of the script and the rehearsals, and performances were delivered to other key audiences. These forms of participation were all designed to promote reflexion and insight. In fact, I have known of few projects that aim so purposively to inform specific groups and even engage members of the public as active audiences in order to maximise its impact. [7]

3. Reflexive Ethnography

Finally, the texts included in the section entitled "reflexive ethnography" share a number of features with the ones in the previous two sections. They are strongly autobiographical and have strong intentions to generate change, at least in the readers' opinions on the importance of recognising the researcher's involvement in the research process. Of course, all of the chapters in the book take reflexivity into consideration. Perhaps, more important is the role that reflexivity has in these different texts. Some authors focus "inwards" as they reflect on some personal experience that happened in an earlier stage in their lives and attempt to reconstruct it and make sense of it, like Carol RAMBO RONAI (mentioned above); others, like Carolyn ELLIS, builds reflexivity into the research itself, and still others put their previous research under scrutiny. It is the latter kinds of texts that need to be discussed briefly here. Marc EDELMAN examines the various forms of bigotry that he has encountered as a Jewish researcher during his field work project. His reflections lead him to realise that while being aware of his ethnicity he has so far avoided dealing openly with anti-Semitism as a research topic. Why? Perhaps, because he is not a religious Jew, or, as he puts it, because carrying out research in Central America seems to have put him in contact with more pressing realities. EDELMAN also admits to having concealed his Jewishness and questions the extent to which it is necessary (and ethically sound) to turn a blind eye to bigotry for the sake of salvaging a given research. For EDELMAN, and for his readers now, reflexivity offers a chance to examine a very important issue, that of the researcher's own ethnicity and its implications for the research process. While EDELMAN does not believe in reporting research in an "author saturated" (GEERTZ, 1988) style, and he tries to distance himself from postmodernist forms of writing, Tanice FOLTZ and Wendy GRIFFIN fully seek to "heal the artificial separation of subject and object, modulate the "authorial voice", and acknowledge (their) subjective involvement in the creation of social knowledge" (p.301). Although theirs is not strictly speaking a research report, since the report had been published in the form of an article (LOZANO & FOLTZ, 1990) some time before, it tells us a lot about what separatist feminism and witchcraft are about. And it does so through the very process of personal change experienced by the researchers, in their own voices, frequently in the form of extracts from their field notes. In this sense, FOLTZ and GRIFFIN deal with the separation of subject and object quite effectively, at least in writing,—there is sufficient evidence in their text of how much more difficult it was in the field. [8]

4. Concluding Notes

Briefly, the articles contained in Carolyn ELLIS and Art BOCHNER's *Composing ethnography* illustrate the kinds of writing that many of us in more traditional disciplines would like to see more widely used. The "crisis" in social psychology (my own field) posed similar issues to those voiced by anthropologists around the "crisis of representation", but our crisis had a mainly epistemological dimension (e.g. PARKER, 1989). And, although social constructionist, critical and discursive psychologies now feature prominently, the range of alternative forms of writing

that we see in this book cannot be found in social psychological writing today. In this sense, these articles serve to encourage us to experiment. Reading autoethnography will help many realise that it is valid and effective to draw on personal experiences as an aid to explore a topic, as well as a prime source of data. Not only does closeness not have to result in "bias" (an expression derived from the belief that subject and object need to be kept separate), but it may foster a privileged point of view (an "insider's" perspective) that can be offered to the reader so that deeper understanding in conveyed. Most qualitative research now incorporates a level of reflexivity in that data are not presented as accurate representation of some reality and in that accounts do not pretend to be objective (i.e. neutral and necessarily inferred from facts by a an invisible observer), but as social constructions of reality. However, as several of the chapters of this book demonstrate, what we do as well as what happens to us, as human beings, can be subjected to close scrutiny when we write about our qualitative research. The chapter by Tanice FOLTZ and Wendy GRIFFIN, mentioned above, is a brave account of how with the increase in participation came greater vulnerability as the personal began to spill out in situations with the participants. Most importantly, in addition to the changes in the researcher role, these authors acknowledge the development of a new form of consciousness that was spiritual and political. This new understanding is several times described as "visceral" or "at a gut level". These are terms many would traditionally hesitate to use in writing about their research. [9]

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