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An autoethnography of a peace educator: Deepening reflections on research, practice and the field

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But I, being poor, have only my dreams;

I have spread my dreams under your feet;

Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

Yeats (2008/1899:*74*)

1. University of Cambridge, 2018

I am sitting at my desk, finalising this article. As I write, we are again in the midst of terrorist attacks that are bringing global conflict into the heart of our cities. The challenges for peace education are increasing at the same rate as the need for it. This article is written as an autoethnography of a peace educator. It tells the story of a journey, starting with memories of key events in my early professional life as a committed and idealistic young peace education worker, and ending with reflections on the paradoxes, disappointments and new directions that have arisen out of twenty-eight years in the field, latterly as an academic. It contains reflections on the Midlands Peace Education Project at its heart. The fresh opportunities for exploring space, time and emotion offered by autoethnography are put to use to attempt a synthesis of research, philosophy and personal history, as well as to find new ways of engaging with academic writing. The ultimate aim of this article is to influence change for peace educators (and teachers more generally) and peace education researchers (and researchers more generally).

I sit here reflecting on another article that I have published in the *Journal of Peace Education* about the dangers and opportunities facing peace education, and traditional social science more generally (Cremin, 2015). I talk about crises of legitimation, representation and praxis in qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Maclure, 2013) Peace Studies (Dietrich, 2012; Lederach, 2005) and peace education (Gur-Ze'ev, 2011, Bekerman and Zembylas, 2012). In the article I also talk about structural and cultural violence that inhibit efforts towards more inclusive global conceptions of peace (Galtung, 1969). Drawing on Denzin and Lincoln (2011) and Ellis and Bochner (2000) I call for qualitative enquiry into peace education that is existential, autoethnographic, vulnerable, performative, and critical. This autoethnographic article responds to the challenge that I set myself there. It attempts to integrate body, emotion and autobiography with aesthetics and ethnographic research in order to begin to find positive responses to structural and cultural violence in both peace education and peace education research.

I want this autoethnography of a peace educator to ground itself in an ethical, respectful and dialogic quest to understand the world. I am inspired by the writings of post-modernists, feminists and queer theorists, who show renewed appreciation for emotion, intuition, the arts, personal experience and embodiment. I want to draw attention to the way that the field of peace education in particular requires research methodology that avoids reproducing the kinds of structural and cultural violence that it seeks to address. As long ago as 2003, Zehr and Toews called peace researchers to account for failing to operate under principles that are consistent with their values; for viewing themselves as objective experts in the field; and for assuming responsibility for their research participants. They proposed a new form of 'transformative inquiry', capable of de-colonising the practices of peace education research though an emphasis on social action rather than 'pure' knowledge, and an acknowledgement that knowledge is subjective, constructed and inter-relational. More recently in this journal, Wetherell et al. (2015) have problematized social science's separation of the representational from the non-representational - and the affective from the discursive - and have called for research approaches that take account of feminist theory and the sociology of emotion.

It could perhaps be seen as rather risky to use an autoethnographic approach to argue for increased legitimacy in the field of peace education. Jess Moriarty (2014) autoethnodrama, for example, deals with the challenges and limitations of getting autoethnographic works published in a neoliberal age, as does Sparkes (2007) autoethnographic examination of audit culture and the research assessment exercise (RAE)[1] 2008.

This is not a promising start. There are, however, those who argue powerfully for the promise of this methodology (Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Freshwater et al., 2010; Wall, 2006). Ellis and Bochner (2000) suggest that autoethnographic studies should be evaluated, not according to whether or not they hold up an accurate mirror to the past, but by the extent to which they are able to write meaningfully and evocatively about topics that matter for the future. They propose new questions that could replace traditional questions of reliability, trustworthiness, significance and validity, including: What are the consequences my story produces? What kind of person does it shape me

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[1] A government-mandated review of the academic outputs of UK university departments linked to future funding.

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into? Is the work honest or dishonest? Does it convey a sense of emotional reliability? Does the story help in understanding the experience it seeks to convey? I can't imagine better questions for guiding this autoethnography of a peace educator.

Writing in this way feels risky, however. It is easy to forget that traditional genres of qualitative and ethnographic writing are not the only, or even the 'natural' way of academic writing. Although Atkinson et al. (2003) point out that impressionistic or literary writing styles are valid alternatives to traditional scientific writing styles, and adopt genres that are rather conventional in the world of literature, theatre and biography, they are often positioned as experimental. Arguing for autoethnography in medical research, Freshwater et al. (2010:505) note that "an individual story presents as a fiction in a world that reveres facts," but that the language used to communicate evidence and best practice "may serve to isolate" (2010:499) those for whom it is intended. Changes towards a more healthy lifestyle occur because a message gets home, not necessarily because people are persuaded by the evidence. The means of communication may be at least as important as the advice itself, and academics limit their impact if they only use traditional academic writing styles that many find hard to understand or relate to. I do not wish to limit the impact of my work in this way.

I remember reading an autoethnography by Monica Prendergast in 2013 in *The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*. It reviews a prison theatre production, and is grounded in poetry, emotion and insightful analysis. It certainly meets the criteria for quality research identified by Ellis and Bochner (2000) above. From my own point of view, its impact included inspiring me to write this article, and to take up an offer of a prison visit later in the year (in all honesty, I can't recall many journal articles having these kinds of consequences). Writing about the emotional aspect of this work, Prendergast (2013:314) reflects that "writing these poems has allowed me to access my deeper affective responses to this experience. It was an experience that feels as much about grief as joy, as well as finding unexpected sources of courage and wisdom in this process". If my article is able to articulate similar complex emotion, and inspire action, I will feel that it has been successful.

There was one part of Prendergast's poem that had particular impact for me. It recalled the times when a partner or a child mindlessly stroked my hand with their thumb. There is something incredibly poignant about these moments, especially when they are unconscious. Being reminded of them in a journal article about a prison theatre production deepened my response, and prompted me to reflect for some time on issues of incarceration, gender, shared humanity, embodiment, punishment and creativity:

the actor
in rehearsal
        mindlessly stroking
        the back of my hand
        with his thumb

his focus is on
his lines and
on this moment
I know
        but there is
        such intimacy
        in this touch
i have to keep it
together to get
        through

(2013:321)

This integration of affect with cognition brings about a certain vulnerability for academic writers and researchers. Out of vulnerability, however, comes the possibility of change, and even perhaps transformation. As Ellis and Bochner (2000:742) point out "if you let yourself be vulnerable, then your readers are more likely to respond vulnerably, and that's what you want, vulnerable readers". Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006:189) suggest that vulnerable readers "reflect critically upon their own life experience, their constructions of self, and their interactions with others within sociohistorical contexts". Vulnerability does not mean that anything goes. Weak autoethnographies have been criticized for navel-gazing (Coffey, 1999; Sparkes, 2000), or using creative writing as a mere "decorative flush", or "exposure for its own sake" (Behar, 1997:13–14). Strong autoethnographies, like Prendergast's, however, use emotion as part of a sophisticated mix of research, reflexivity and academic writing, and influence others to reflexively think about change.

I wish, then, to use autoethnography here to reflexively illuminate culture and practice in the field of peace education using methods of writing that have aesthetic as well as pragmatic appeal (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). I wish to produce evocative narratives that contrast with more traditional representational forms of social science, and to avoid "the airy inefficacy of the bloodless angels that inhabit the heights of scientific rationality" (Maclure, 2013:665), recognizing that "we, like the texts we write, can never be transcendent" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011:1058). As I find myself deciding whether my main identity here is that of a creative writer (autobiography) or a social scientist (ethnographer), I note that I wish to press into service any skill that I may have as a published poet and writer of fiction to punch through to a level of meaning which, whilst liminal, contingent and elusive, may nevertheless be capable of pointing towards transformative research and practice.

In order to do this, I have decided to enable the different versions of myself over time to stand in conversation with each other. My choice about which of these different selves to privilege here in my writing is made as much through emotional resonance as anything else. I rely on an embodied sense that they make up a gestalt that is meaningful, certainly to me, hopefully to others. My 'self' as a peace education worker in schools, as a project co-ordinator, an academic and an ex-partner all make an appearance, as do various settings such as a school, charity offices, a restaurant and a labyrinth. Each of these spaces have their own particular emotional resonances in space and time, and it is these that I wish to explore in this journal in particular.

As Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006:10) point out, autoethnography enables "the reflections and refractions of multiple selves in contexts that arguably transform the authorial "I" to an existential "we"". It draws on the ways in which the 'I' of autobiography has been unsettled in recent times. In particular, as Pollock (2007:240) notes, Joan Scott's seminal work in the 1990s "dispensed with the authority of the "I," deconstructing the foundational category of experience, and making it next to impossible to argue from experience or by the evidentiary logic