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Two short As and a rolling R: autoethnographic reflections on a 'difficult' name

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Abstract

Names are an important aspect of our identity and sense of self. For those of us from minority communities, names may be particular, in some way, to our linguistic and cultural heritage, and thus may be at odds with their counterpart names from the dominant cultures within which we reside. The resultant tensions which ensue with regards to pronunciation and transcription can have a profound effect on the bearer of the minority name, inducing feelings of anger, disappointment, embarrassment, shame and despair. Mispronunciation can also occur at random, even within our own linguistic cultural context, and thus can be just plain annoying. In this autoethnographic article I draw on examples from my own biography to explore this phenomenon throughout my lifecourse.

Two short As and a rolling R: autoethnographic reflections on a 'difficult' name

Part 1: Prologue

"That's not my name, that's not my name" (White, 2008).

This song by the "Ting tings" could be my personal theme tune, because the lyrics reflect a concept which seems destined to be constantly on my mind. Curiously, and for reasons which I cannot quite fathom, my relatively short, seemingly simple name "Sara" is constantly being mispronounced and misspelled – including by people from my own linguistic and cultural minority community, who really ought to know better. Even more curiously, perhaps, is the fact that my particular derivative and pronunciation of the name, though obviously not its transcription, appears to be the most popular version, not just within a Welsh language context, but also in most languages across the globe - from my experience anyway, except for in one language – English. Thus growing up in the border-town of Wrecsam, where arguably one of the most prestigious languages on the planet, English, meets a highly marginalized language, Welsh, I encountered many instances where my name was misunderstood, mispronounced and misspelled. I then moved to England as a student and this became a daily occurrence. Worse still, when speaking in English I have found that my deliberately-manufactured, cut-glass English accent makes it very difficult to pronounce my name in the "Welsh way" – my mouth feels as though it is the wrong shape.

My name, spelled *"Sara,"* should be pronounced Særæ, in phonetic terms - two short "As" (Griffiths & Jones, 1995, pxxii) and a rolling "r" – or an alveolar trill, to give it its proper name (The International Phonetic Association, 1999, p.vii). This makes sense with regards to the Welsh language, in which "As" are usually "short," unless there is a circumflex accent above them to indicate elongation, for example in the name "Siân." We also generally roll our "Rs" although of course this is not always the case as some people are not able to

produce this sound. Reflecting on this however, it is interesting to ponder that other similar, and perhaps connected names, such as Lara (Croft or Antipova), Kara, Zara, Mara, are all at least pronounced, even in English by first-language English speakers, with two "As" of some sort, even if they do have an alveolar approximant (non-rolling "R") in the middle, e.g. La:ɹa. However "Sara" somewhat uniquely, appears to mutate in the English language to be pronounced variously: Sa:ɹə, Sɛəɹə, or, in layman's terms – Serruh. This isn't too problematic when the name is transcribed as "Sarah" as it is at least distinguishable from "Sara." However, I have encountered many people in the last few years who pronounce their name "Serruh" but spell their name "Sara" without a "H;" this does not help my situation. My name is frequently misspelled as "Sarah," even when I have written to people, for example in an email, clearly signing with the correct spelling of "Sara;" recently however, I have received short, follow-up emails from people explaining that the spell-check on their computer altered my name before sending the mail. This reveals that my name has entered a new realm of minoritization – one where the standard spell-checker on people's computers, most commonly set to default in the UK (and many other countries) to "English" has begun to signal my name as a "mistake."

In any case, all of this confusion regarding my name often leaves me in a quandary, which is often largely dependent on the suspected motives and likely reactions of those getting my name wrong. If it is a simple mistake, I may seek to put it right quickly by gently pointing it out. This can, however, be complicated if it takes place in front of other people and has the potential to cause unnecessary embarrassment. In other scenarios, however, negative connotations have included being perceived as vexatious, quarrelsome and precious, and also there is a risk of damaging rapport and future relations. So I often waste precious minutes ruminating over what best to do – time which could be spent doing something far more constructive and interesting. The quandary often includes pondering the fact that

"Sarah" isn't such a bad name after all, and not really that different; however it always comes back to the same point – it's not *my* name.

Somehow this "re-naming" does bring to the fore the "complex cultural, historical, social, and political ramifications of naming" (Rivera Maulucci & Moore Mensah, 2015). This Anglicisation of my Welsh name is a microcosm example of the wider political and cultural context I inhabit. It is in some ways reminiscent of the Anglicisation of Welsh place names, and the historical efforts to undermine and devalue the Welsh language in favour of English (Baker, Brown, & Williams, 2014; Commissioners of inquiry into the state of education in Wales, 1847). It is also indicative of the surprisingly resilient opinion that Welsh speakers (who are almost entirely bilingual and thus able to converse in English as well) should set aside their mother tongue in favour of English, because if everyone spoke English all of the time it would just be so much easier for everyone (if I was giving a reference for this it would be to several personal communications throughout my lifecourse – enough to be the root cause of several of my deep-set frown lines).

I do not have any solutions, grand theories or claims to make with this paper. However in part 2 of this paper, using "writing as a method of inquiry" (Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, 2005) I offer an evocative autoethnographic account of my experiences (Ellis, 1999; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011), presented, as is common within the autoethnographic tradition, as a series of vignettes (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2011; Humphreys, 2005; Pitard, 2015). These first-person accounts of the experiences may themselves serve as useful examples to others. I then re-visit them in part 3 to give them an analytical treatment (Anderson, 2006), locating them within the wider contextual literature. However I initially wrote these thoughts, as Feyrabend did with his study of Wittgenstein's philosophical investigations (Feyerabend, 1955), for "my own enlightenment" (Feyrabend, 1995, pp.93).

Drawing inspiration from Laurel Richardson's *"Looking Jewish"* (2003) I present a narrative structure which keeps the reader off balance, replicating my experiences (Richardson, 2003) of impromptu existential uncertainty caused by the randomly occurring need to respond diplomatically to being called by names other than my own – and the equally surprising situations where strangers, often from different cultures, *correctly* pronounce my name. The resultant narrative is reminiscent of Jean Rhys' steam of consciousness in *"Good night, Midnight"* (Rhys, 2000), as the narrative shifts backwards and forward in time, giving insights into snippets of my life experiences and emotions, as my name, a central aspect of my identity, is consistently a source of confusion.

This style of presenting may mean that the examples become repetitive rather than representative, and mixing the examples of misspelling and mispronunciation may cloud the significance of the rub between Welsh and English cultures. However, I feel that by presenting them in this deliberately jumbled fashion, I am conveying to the reader, as closely as possible, how I experienced each incident. Also, because there isn't a discrete line between problems caused by language and culture, and those which are not – as evidenced by the examples included which occurred within my own community, I feel that this style of presentation was the best way in which to enhance the readers' understanding of my experience – as they themselves experience something similar. This was very important to me, since one of the main aims, and measures of quality, of autoethnography and Creative Analytical Practice (CAP) ethnography, is the ability to convey these experiences in an authentic manner to the reader, expressing "a fleshed out, embodied sense of lived-experience" (Richardson, 2000a).

Part 2: Vignettes

1.

"Isn't that just her trying to be posh?"

My housemate is relaying her boyfriend's response after she corrected him for calling me "Serruh" (Sarah). I am mortified. And angry. And upset. How dare he? He has no right judging me like that – or if he is going to do it he should at least have the decency to say it to my face. I'm annoyed - at myself for letting it bother me so much. I feel bad for thinking this way because my housemate has noted the correct pronunciation of my name and did correct the offender – even pointing out that this is in fact, "just her name." But I'm annoyed because in this one sentence he is implying that I am precious, precocious and that my pronunciation of my name is an affectation. I wrestle with my self-righteousness because I have to acknowledge that about several other matters in my life he would have been right – the stupid transfer tattoos I used to wear as a teenager, along with the carefully painted ying-yang nail-polish and ridiculously pretentious clothes – all carefully orchestrated to convey a certain bohemian image – which was ridiculous really, given how shy, uptight and square I actually was during those years.

But if I were going to select a name for maximum impact I should think that I would select one with a bit more panache than "Sara." In fact I did go through a phase in my late teens of wishing I had a high-visibility Welsh name – ideally something using the Welsh specific letters of the alphabet – Rhiannon, Heledd, Fflur, Melangell (extra points for having two) – or even just plain old "Siân" with its "to bach."[1] I then went through a phase of trying to get people to call me by my middle name: "Louise." I was not successful, probably because it is really quite hard for people to separate the person they have come to know, from the name they have come to know them by, which is such an important indicator of who they are thinking about or discussing. At the time I felt this was a pity, since everyone can

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[1] This literally translates as "little roof" and is the colloquial term in Welsh for the circumflex accent

pronounce and spell "Louise" - though I have since encountered variations of the name, which no doubt cause similar problems for those called "Louise." However, this is also a far more "English" name than "Sara" and I have since come to value the cultural and linguistic significance of my name – though not quite the burden of misidentification that goes with it. All of these thoughts I pondered for months, even years, following the incident described above. I described them to friends, acquaintances, colleagues, and to anyone willing to listen whenever the subject of my "difficult" name comes up (which is quite often). But this is the first time I feel that I am doing something constructive to address it.

2.

I am browsing Facebook and I come across a photo of the Welsh actor Ioan Gruffudd, along with a quote attributed to him (which I later found on his IMDB profile (Ioan Gruffudd - Biography, n.d.):

I'm determined not to lose my name. It's who I am. It has neither aided my progress nor hampered it. It's just who I am. My character. My make-up. My culture and heritage is a very rich one. So what if it's difficult for people to pronounce? We all learned how to say Schwarzenegger.

This pleases me very much. I feel part of something bigger. I feel vindicated. I am definitely not just being precious. When I decide to write an article about my name I realise that this will be an excellent quote to include. I go in search of the quote, typing "Ioan Gruffydd" as in "Dafydd ap Gruffydd"[2] into the Google search engine, and discover that "Ioan Gruffydd" is actually spelled "Ioan Gruffudd." The irony! I spend the remainder of the

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[2] Prince of Wales, 1282-1283

article-writing process panicking about accidentally misspelling his name, thus undermining my own point. I have no way to verify if this quote is indeed from the lips of Ioan Gruffudd – but I very much hope that it is. Incidentally, I do not think that Ioan Gruffudd is necessarily claiming here that everyone has in fact mastered the perfect pronunciation of Schwarzenegger, and as I have noted above with my misspelling of Ioan Gruffudd's Welsh name, I by no means claim to be able to pronounce or even spell everyone's names correctly – that is not the point of this article. What I believe Ioan Gruffudd is saying here is that he refuses to *change* his name, despite the fact that some may find it problematic. He is pointing out that Arnold Schwarzenegger has chosen to keep his name, despite the fact that this may be problematic for some people to pronounce – particularly in the Hollywood film industry where he has chosen to build a career, where the dominant language is undoubtedly English. Furthermore, my interpretation of Ioan's statement, and the fact that he should feel the need to make such a statement, is that somewhere along the line, and perhaps more than once, it has been suggested to him that he should change his name, for the sake of furthering his career – or perhaps just to make every day interaction less problematic for him, again in the Hollwood milieu, where the Welsh language, culture and associated names are not that common. This is of course only my interpretation, however this is my sole purpose for having included the quote as it highlights tensions and experiences which are similar to my own and also to others around me.

3.

I am 20 and I'm working in the "Enjoy English" programme in Viladecanz, Catalunia – a one-month summer playscheme to help Spanish and Catalan children practice their English – somewhat ironic, given that I am Welsh and so proud of my mother tongue. The

children here all pronounce my name "the Welsh way", as I would call it. I marvel as, without question, they all use short As and effortlessly produce the roll of the R - in perfect alveolar trills. I am in heaven. It might be worth moving here mightn't it? I return to the "Enjoy English" programme the following year, this time to Mungia in the Basque Country. Again the children here, in fact the whole town, pronounce my name with perfect diction. I love it and feel completely at ease with my name. I am sad to leave.

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Author's note: I should point out here that I am in no way claiming that I myself had perfect diction when pronouncing the names of the Spanish, Catalan and Basque communities I describe here. I am sure I did not and I am sure that I will have on occasion mispronounced some people's names, and they themselves will have engaged in the kind of face-saving, concealing of my mistakes as I describe in some of my vignettes. However, I did at least make an effort to get the pronunciation right – to ask them how and then to practice, and I think it is evident from my reflections throughout this article that I am in no way trying to portray myself as flawless, blameless or even competent – I do not speak Spanish. The point of this vignette, then, is just to capture how I felt in a certain place and time when my name was *not* constantly being mispronounced, and to reflect on the strangeness of this given that I was in a different country, where the Welsh language, culture and associated names are less well-known than in the UK.

4.

I am a small child and someone is calling me "Sarah." I shout at them that my name is "Sara" *not* "Sarah." I feel hot and tense and angry. It is the umpteenth time this week that I

have had to correct someone for getting my name wrong – what on earth is wrong with these people?

5.

I am in my mid-twenties and I am in the back of the car. My mum is talking to a woman through the window of the car and I'm not paying much attention. As she goes to leave the woman looks across to me and says:

"Bye S erm Sa um no Se…"

"Sara!" I say, slightly more forcefully and loudly than perhaps was necessary or appropriate.

The woman looks horrified and mutters:

"Yes, Sara, that's it."

I am incensed; this woman is as Welsh-as-can-be, how is it that she can't pronounce my name?! When she has moved away I am scoffing and muttering:

"What's so difficult about my name? And she's Welsh."

My mum looks around at me from over her shoulder and says:

"When you were little, she kept calling you "Sarah" then one day you shouted at her and said "My name's "Sara" not "Sarah" and I think she was remembering that."

I feel ashamed – poor woman, she was just trying to get my name right and it must have made her nervous.

6.

It is my graduation day for my PhD. After a truly ridiculous series of mishaps and buffoonery which almost saw me miss my graduation – the full saga of which can be read about on my blog under the nom de plume Alwen Jones (Jones, 2012), I proudly walked

across the stage only to hear my name pronounced as "Sarah." This was *despite* the fact that I had made several phone calls to the graduation office to try and ensure that my name would be pronounced properly; my little Welsh name was just too difficult to pronounce – more so than all of the Chinese names that proceeded mine, apparently.

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Author's note: I am not claiming here to have any knowledge of Mandarin or any other Chinese languages – I have no linguistic skills in this area whatsoever. I thus have no way of knowing whether or not the Chinese names, nor indeed names from other languages, which were read out before mine, were read out correctly or else horribly mispronounced. However, an effort was made. I had noted on the forms I had filled in for graduation that if we as graduands wished our names to be pronounced in a certain manner, which we felt might not be achieved otherwise, that we should contact the graduation office beforehand to explain how we wished our names to be pronounced. I had done this and had given many instructions on how my name should be pronounced. I was not looking for the full "Welsh way" here, complete with alveolar trill, but I had explained that my name wasn't Sarah (Sɛəɹə, or Serruh), and the As in my name should both be pronounced as As, as in apple, rather than like the E in Elephant. However, my name was pronounced Sarah, with no apparent effort made to use anything other than the English pronunciation. This particular incident now appears even more surprising to me since, during the course of preparing this paper and engaging with the review process, I became aware of the field of Onomastics[3] , and of research regarding the efforts made during graduation ceremonies to ensure the correct and sensitive pronunciation of students' names (Pennesi, 2014). I will return to this in part 3 of the paper.

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[3] The study of the origin, history and use of proper names.

7.

"Is it Sara or Zara" asks our new flatmate at University, as I cross the kitchen towards where everyone is sat.

"I think it's somewhere in between" whispers one of my flatmates with whom I have lived and socialised for the past two years. I am astonished.

8.

I am in a research meeting and our boss has just been explaining an aspect of the project to us. She rushes off to another meeting leaving a colleague and me in the room. My colleague turns to me and asks: "Does she always call you Sarah?"

I struggle with how to reply as I am not quite sure why I have never corrected her. In the end I simply answer: "yes."

9.

An English colleague is showing an interest in how to pronounce my name. We are speaking in English. I begin trying to pronounce my name "the Welsh way," but my mouth feels as though it is the wrong shape. Mortified I realise that when I speak in English I myself mispronounce my name. I try to explain to my colleague and spend at least 2 minutes repeating my name in as much of "the Welsh way" as I can muster. My colleague looks increasingly baffled. She then spends the next few weeks trying to get my name right, but struggling to roll the "R." Meanwhile the "As" are correctly pronounced in a short manner, and as two "As" rather than a soft "A" and an "urh" on the end, or even worse the dreaded "E" and then an "urh" sound (Sarah). The overall effect seems to make the name be produced faster and harsher, and somehow sounding more like "Salla."

10.

I am a sabbatical officer in the students' union and my office today is full of international students with whom I have been working to organise some events; they have gone well and there is a thoroughly jolly atmosphere. It is one of the greatest pleasures of my work that I am the contact for international students. Greek, Spanish, Arabic, Nigerian, Saudi Arabian, Indian, Bangladeshi - it doesn't matter, they all pronounce my name "the Welsh way." How perplexing that the only language where this is not the case is English – the dominant language of the UK, which emanates from our closest neighbours.

11.

One of the international students gives me a CD with a song on it, which sounds as though the singer is singing "Sara, Sara." Years later, when I decide to write an article about my difficult name, I Facebook him to ask about the song and his answer surprises me:

"Hello!!! The singer is Eros Ramazzotti. He is Italian. The song was called "L'Aurora". The lyric says "Sara, Sara l'aurora," Sara is the future tense for "Will be." The song was about his daughter who was about to be born. Aurora I think is something like…positive, good energy etc." So the song was not about my name after all.

12.

I am in my early thirties and a friend is proudly telling me of the very Irish name she has selected for her first born child, when she has one, complete with Irish spelling - despite not being Irish and living in England all her life. I struggle with how to convey to her what a

nightmare that will be for her child. I struggle with my own thoughts on the matter as does this not show that Anglicisation has won, if we give up and all conform to anglicised spellings and middle-of-the-road-names? And yet, is life not hard enough without having to waste precious time and energy worrying about one's name? Years later my friend has a daughter to whom she gives a lovely, elegant, easy to pronounce name; I am very pleased for her daughter.

13.

My friends and I are in HMV[4], browsing the racks of CDs and DVDs. I see a Bob Dylan CD and notice a song called "Sara." I draw my friend's attention to it, marvelling that Bob Dylan's "Welsh way" spelling. My friend shifts awkwardly and says: "Um it's about his wife who's called Serruh." I am disappointed and no longer wish to buy the CD. Years later, as I sit on the glacis[5] writing these words, I decide to check on Youtube; somewhat bafflingly, Bob Dylan first pronounces the name "Sarah" before repeating the name more as "Saera." So no further clarity there then.

14.

I am a PhD student and I am chatting with one of my Welsh colleagues. She has a daughter to whom she has given a distinctly Welsh name. She tells me a story of how she

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[4] HMV is a chain store which sells DVDs, CDs and film merchandise – the store mentioned here is in Liverpool city centre

[5] A Creole Patois word Jean Rhys uses to describe the "paved roofed-in terrace" that runs the length of the house at Coulibri. I use the word to refer to a sandstone patio at the bottom of my Dominica-style garden where I have a wooden picnic table and a large sun-parasol which in some ways emulates the best aspects of a porch.

took her young daughter to see the doctor. The doctor asked her daughter what her name was. After asking it three times, he apparently looked towards my colleague and said (as though to the daughter):

"Well isn't your mum mean, giving you a name like that?"

I am annoyed. My colleague seems pleased by my reaction but then laughingly says:

"And the weird thing is, the doctor was Indian and had a long, difficult to pronounce name himself!"

I am confused, baffled, bewildered – people are strange and inconsistent.

15.

It is just an average afternoon during my undergraduate days and I happen to ask my Greek friend:

"George, why are there so many Greek guys called George?"

My friend looks at me in what must have been disbelief and says:

"Of course, they're not really called George."

"What?! But you're called George?"

"No no, my name isn't really George."

"What?!"

Silence.

"Well then why have I been calling you George all this time? I'm sure you told me your name was George?"

"Well yes, when we come to the UK we are advised to adopt an English name, so I chose George."

"What?! Why?"

"Well because it is thought that people in the UK won't be able to pronounce Greek names."

"Well what is your name?"

"It's Yiorgos."

"Yiorgos."

"That's right."

"Well I can pronounce it can't I – Yiorgos."

"Yes. Okay, well from now on, call me Yiorgos."

"Great, fine, yes I will."

I look at "George" and begin trying to reimagine him as "Yiorgos." It took several months but I eventually succeeded. However, reflecting on this, perhaps I should note that I cannot be sure that I have ever successfully pronounced "Yiorgos" correctly – I do not speak Greek. However at least now I was treating my friend with the proper amount of respect by using his actual name, rather than an anglicized version.

16.

I am at a departmental meeting as a new member of staff. The head of department quite innocently calls me "Sarah." My new line-manager somewhat forcefully corrects her

"it's *Sara* not *Sarah.*" A mix of emotions sweep over me – I feel proud, and glad, and grateful, vindicated, delighted and protected, but also fearful, mortified, embarrassed, regretful. I am confused. I begin joking about it – telling them all that I used to get annoyed about it, but now I answer to pretty much anything in the realm of "ara" and "era". I chuck in the anecdote about having trouble myself in pronouncing it "the Welsh way" when I've been speaking in English. I talk and talk, until I reach one of those moments when you become aware that you've completely dominated the conversation and people seem to be desperately trying to find a way to steer the conversation onto something else.

17.

Okay, this isn't good. I'm at a BBC Christmas party in Cardiff in a very large room. There are groups of people dotted about the place, chatting and having great fun. I had received an invitation but I can't see anyone I know and I feel ridiculous. Somehow I end up talking to some very important Welsh people. One of them asks my name and I pronounce it very precisely as "Sara," the "Welsh way," two short As and a <u>very</u> rolling "R". They talk to me for a while then quite suddenly one of them turns to the other and begins speaking in Welsh. The person not speaking looks at me in a perplexed manner and the speaker turns to me and asks "You don't speak Welsh at all then, no?" I am perplexed as it can only have been my accent which led him to this totally incorrect conclusion. The accent I manufactured for myself as a small child, blending together Mary Poppins, Mrs Anna and Obi-Wan Kenobi, for the perfect BBC British projection (and given the context in which I was interacting it is little wonder that I had accidentally "put it on," despite having deciding years ago that it was entirely inappropriate – and not at all in-keeping with my Welshness.)

I explain, in Welsh, that I am in fact a Welsh speaker. The person who had been listening rather than talking laughs and says he had thought as much, because of the way that I had pronounced my name. Writing about this incident, years later, I notice the contradictions in my presentation of myself – deliberately pronouncing my name the "Welsh way," whilst pronouncing everything else in BBC British. Yet this is indicative of the contradictions inherent in Wales. Some of the very Welshest people have the most extraordinarily posh English accents, when speaking in English; you would never know they spoke another language, much less that that language may in fact be their mother-tongue. But a party like this one brought to the fore the contradictions, and I had tried to be both in the same context. Interesting.

18.

"Dear Sarah" – so many emails arrive that begin this way, including those which are replies to mine where I have clearly signed my name "Sara." This is THE most ridiculous form of getting my name wrong, and there really is no excuse. Somewhat childishly I begin adding a "h" to the end of everyone's names when they do this. Nobody seems to notice, so I begin pointing out "Sara not Sarah" or "no h." Then I give up. Then, within a couple of weeks of each other, I am sent emails with my name spelled "Sarah" followed by short "corrector" emails, explaining that the spell checker changed my name just before they pressed "send".

19.

I am being shown around a department and introduced to people. It is all lovely, but I am being introduced as "Sarah." I decide not to point out the mistake because it might cause embarrassment. I realise too late that it would have been less embarrassing if I had pointed it out in the first instance. I act out (by myself) how I would have done this, finding myself taking a cringing facial expression and mumbling:

 "Oo, erm, Sara, yeah, the "Welsh way", sorry yeah, unusual…"

I even find myself bobbing my head and making ridiculous hand gestures, as though to make myself seem even more awkward and humble. The story later comes out when I am presenting at a conference within this department and I am talking about how the Welsh language has been minoritized; I go quite off on a tangent and ramble about people mis-pronouncing my name. My colleague looks at me and says:

 "Oh, I pronounce your name that way."

I am horrified. I once again dip into my story about mispronouncing my own name when I speak in English, to explain how the mistake has occurred, and that it is easily done, and that it doesn't matter. I am beginning to get sick of the sound of my own voice as I keep re-telling this story. Maybe I should just change my name and be done with it?

20.

I'm not sure who started the trend, but everyone seems to call me "Sara-bach" (little Sara.) All my friends, their parents, and even Miss Thomas – our young and very cool teacher (circa 1987, when I am 8 years old), they're all calling me "Sara bach." It suits me because I am very small – unusually so. I have a tiny little button nose, tiny little face and a very slight frame. And I am short for my age. Somehow, perhaps because of the hard "A" in the

extremely common Welsh word "bach" (little), this new nickname has everyone pronouncing my name correctly; I am vaguely aware and pleased.

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I am 36 and reflecting on this memory of some 28 years ago; it is the first time that I have really thought about this nickname in this way.

21.

I am thinking about writing an article about the problematics of my name. I wish that my name was more unambiguously Welsh – Glesni, Awen, Gwerfyl, Gwenllian, again Siân - as it is the only one I can think of which has a circumflex. Then I read one of the only articles I can find on the problematics of "naming" and its cultural significance. I read María's story of her Kindergarten teacher screaming at her for what she perceived as the incorrect transcription of the letter "I", despite María actually quite correctly transcribing her name with the culturally appropriate accent mark (Rivera Maulucci & Moore Mensah, 2015). I am appalled. Thank goodness nothing like this ever happened to me; and then somewhat less-selfishly, I ponder the devastating effect this must have had on María at the time.

I spend six months or so, from the time when the idea first occurred to me for the article, musing around these experiences, which are such important aspects of my biography – the person I have grown to be. Finally, to exorcize my frustration, I begin writing an article for an academic journal about the constant mispronunciation of my name. I wonder whether the journal will publish it, and beyond that if anyone will read it. If successful my hopes for the article are that it will contribute an internationally published, potentially REF-returnable, peer-reviewed article to my rapidly-improving CV (Wheeler, 2014). And perhaps it may

forewarn people of my "difficult" name so that they can try to side-step the issue if they meet me at conferences.

Part 3: Reflections

The original draft of this paper was conceptualised as an evocative autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2016), and a CAP ethnography, using writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson & St. Pierre, A, 2005). I had been moved by the body of work by Richardson which explores emotions, feelings and subjective experiences, without adhering to the restrictive conventions of the traditional social scientific approach, including completely eschewing the practice of referencing the work of others (Richardson & Lockridge, 1991, 2002; Richardson, 1995, 1997, 2011, 2013, 2014a, 2014b, 1998a, 1998b, 1999, 2000b, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2010). I was impressed by Richardson's revelation of the false dichotomy between the social sciences and literary genres (Richardson, 1997), including the fact that:

> The standard sociological article is in the form in which sociologists have been expected to report their research. This format, however, is simply a literary technique and not the only legitimate carrier of social scientific knowledge (Richardson, 2002).

Discovering evocative autoethnography was in itself a personal epiphany – it was like rediscovering the Sociology I had originally fallen in love with, and my thoughts closely echoed those of Art Bochner on encountering Carolyn Ellis' work for the first time:

> I felt a rush of optimism about the future of social science inquiry. Yes! I shouted to myself. This is what social science is missing! This is what social science needs to become in order to make a difference in the world – daring, honest, intimate, personal,

emotional, moral, embodied, and evocative. Here was a social scientist venturing beyond the realm of predictable events and rational actions, revealing life's particularities, bearing witness to the wreckage of human suffering, showing what it might mean to live well while afflicted by loss, inviting her readers to receive her testimony and become witnesses themselves, questioning the subject matter and methodologies of her discipline, refusing to hide behind academic jargon and citations, making us feel the truth of her story in our guts (Bochner, 2005).

I wanted to experiment with format and let the raw subjective experiences speak for themselves. Also, like Doloriert and Sambrook (2011), I felt that the traditional, criteriological approach risked presenting these insights in a contrived, linear fashion, during which important emotional aspects of this contemporary ethnography would be lost (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2011). Furthermore, as an admirer of the epistemological anarchism set forth by Paul Feyrabend (Feyerabend, 2010), I am always wary of allowing my work to slip into the unfortunate realms of the limited epistemology of methodologism, since a dogmatic adherence to following procedures and criteria are in fact a poor indicator of the quality of research (Salmon, 2003). In fact, as Salmon (2003) points out, Feyerabend's work highlights the fact that:

> All methodologies have limits, so the value of a methodology can be tested only by research that violates it. Scientific progress has resulted, therefore, not from allegiance to methodological rules but from breaking them. Therefore, the anarchist scientist might choose (or create) any of an infinite array of methods. This leaves the question of how the choice is made in any instance. Feyerabend's view is that the anarchist scientist is playful rather than precious with methodology. Methods are chosen simply

because they interest the researcher or because the researcher values their products (Salmon, 2003).

Thus, whilst it may seem to be somewhat contradictory to say that I have chosen to *follow* the unconventional, contemporary CAP ethnographic format (Richardson & St. Pierre, A, 2005), I have done so whilst remaining critical and playful (Salmon, 2003) and whilst also being mindful of, and inspired by, other nuanced fields of life writing, including the evocative autoethnography genre (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). This methododology is gaining popularity in the contemporary, transdisciplinary research landscape, despite deep criticism from those who favour a more traditional social science approach to autoethnography (Anderson, 2006). It is, I feel, a good fit for me as an individual, and also for this particular, micro study of names and naming – in that it is a study of one individual's experiences, providing concrete examples, presented as a case study (Flyvbjerg, 2006; 2011). The value of this sociological methodology for exploring personal minutiae in this way has previously been demonstrated on the similar topic of not liking one's voice (Ellis, 1998).

However epiphanies are a key feature of autoethnography (Ellis, 1999) and during the writing process for this paper I experienced some new epiphanies, which brought new and important insights to this work. Thus, in the true spirit of an autoethnography, I feel it makes sense to at least explore these epiphanies and accompanying insights, and include a little of the detail here.

The first, and perhaps most obvious epiphany, came when I became aware of Onomastics as a field of study. As a sociologist I had not been at all aware of this field, nor even of this word. As a scholar in the field of life writing, I am not afraid to publically admit this fact, because it is the truth and, if one is to engage in life writing, particularly evocative autoethnography, one must get used to the idea of laying one's feelings, emotions and flaws

bare for all to see. This is in fact a positive trait of autoethnography, in that not only do authors observe, examine and challenge others, but we observe ourselves, and observe ourselves observing, and we challenge our own assumptions (Custer, 2014). Autoethnography then, is a field of inquiry which contradicts the common behavioural aspects of impressions management such as "front" (Goffman, 1990), quite a risky thing to do when one is early-career (Wheeler, 2014), when one may therefore be advised to draw particular attention to certain activities, whilst downplaying others when constructing and presenting a scholarly career (Miller & Morgan, 1993).

Meanwhile, the field of Onomastics, it seems, is a well-established one, with its own journals such as "Names: A Journal of Onomastics", which publishes articles on a wide range of name-related topics, from nicknames in prison (Black, Wilcox, & Platt, 2014) to fictional names masquerading as Literary-Historical Monikers (Dodge Robbins, 2014). And yes, it even publishes articles about the graduation ceremony phenomenon, and the important role of names at these events, with a particular reference to cultural difference (Pennesi, 2014). Whilst this latter article in particular is an interesting context within which to situate my work, I do still feel that my evocative autoethnography has a powerful message all of its own, which could later be given a more analytical treatment in a follow up paper, relating it to the wider literature. Interestingly, my naïve use of "names" and "naming" at the scoping stage, rather than "Onomastics", did eventually bring up another paper, aside from the one mentioned in vignette 21, which adopted a sociological approach to names, with a focus on kinship (Finch, 2008). This research field is rich territory for exploring all manner of Welsh-related topics in the future, now that I have the appropriate key word.

Other epiphany-like moments were experienced when reading the reviewers' comments, which on reflection led me to consider an attempt to validate the "quality" of my contribution, framed according to Richardson's (2000a) criteria for evaluating ethnography.

Underneath each criterion, I will consider its meaning from my perspective, evaluating the contribution of my article accordingly. I invite readers to do the same:

1. **Substantive contribution:** Does this piece contribute to our understanding of social-life? Does the writer demonstrate a deeply grounded (if embedded) human-world understanding and perspective? How has this perspective informed the construction of the text?

I believe that I am on safe ground with this first criterion, since my vignettes are based on personal experience and reactions to interactions regarding my name. I have also included the emotional and subjective reactions of others, as in vignette 1, where a virtual stranger expresses the view that I am "being precious" by stating my name as Sara, not Sarah. This perspective is the sole source of data for the article.

2. **Aesthetic merit:** Does this piece succeed aesthetically? Does the use of creative analytical practices open up the text, invite interpretive responses? Is the text artistically shaped, satisfying, complex, and not boring?

This is the criterion which I feel I have excelled at addressing. Reading the work back to myself, I am personally satisfied that, at the very least, this article is not "boring;" however, I invite readers to make up their own minds regarding this criterion. I might tentatively suggest that, if you are still reading by this point in the article, I have successfully sustained your interest and kept you sufficiently entertained, thus negating the idea that the reading experience has been "boring."

3. **Reflexivity:** How did the author come to write this text? How was the information gathered? Ethical issues? How has the author's subjectivity been both the producer and a product of this text? Is there adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make judgements about the point of view? Do authors hold themselves accountable to the standards of knowing and telling of the people they have studied?

This is a slightly more complex criterion to assess, however I feel that I have included sufficient information, about the writing process I undertook in producing this article, and I frequently reflect on my own judgements, flaws and blunders.

4. **Impact:** Does this affect me? Emotionally? Intellectually? Generate new questions? Move me to write? Move me to try new research practices? Move me to action?

Responding to this criterion, I would say that I have, at the very least, succeeded in generating new questions, not only about my name and its pronunciation, but perhaps also about evocative autoethnography as a legitimate scholarly pursuit, to be published in academic journals such as Sage Open. Social science is a broad field of inquiry, and as Richardson (2000) says:

Creative arts is one lens through which to view the world; analytical/science is another. We see better with two lenses. We see best with both lenses focused and magnified (Richardson 2000).

5. **Express a reality:** Does this text embody a fleshed out, embodied sense of lived-experience? Does it seem "true" – a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the "real"?

Reading back through the vignettes, I am satisfied that I have created sketches with sufficient detail to give a credible account of how events took place. Having said this of course, I have the benefit of recalling the events having experienced them first-hand. I therefore once again suggest that the readers are in the best position to judge me on this criterion.

Part 4: Epilogue

The field of evocative autoethnography is now well-established, in large part thanks to the pioneering efforts of scholars such as Norman K Denzin, Carolyn Ellis, Arthur Bochner and, my own personal favourite, Laurel Richardson. However, this methodological approach inhabits a space within the wider sphere of scholarly work which can be quite difficult to navigate – chiefly because its very essence violates several traditional, much-cherished views on how scholarly work should proceed. Nevertheless, as mentioned in this article, what we can learn from history is that scientific progress has resulted, not from allegiance to methodological rules, but mostly from approaches which violate them (Salmon, 2003). Furthermore, when conventional wisdom is questioned, new insights may be gained and sometimes the parameters of a field of inquiry may be altered (Isaacson, 2008).

To conclude I would say that, whilst an evocative autoethnography might be easily accepted by a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal which has a focus on these kinds of creative outputs – and indeed I have had some success in this regard in the past (Wheeler &

Hopwood, 2015), they are perhaps more difficult to place in journals such as Sage Open where the dominant mode of inquiry is the traditional, criteriology (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2011), "scientific" approach. However, rather than balk at the prospect of the kind of reactions and friction this may initially cause, I welcome the challenge and debate that this will hopefully generate. I am therefore hopeful that this article will open up a new space for respectful and intellectual exchange between the field of onomastics and the field of autoethnography, perhaps negotiating the possibility of a future where the strengths and benefits of autoethnography can be enjoyed by scholars in the field of onomastics, enhancing and bringing new insights into the wide range of topics studied in relation to names.

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