

Personal notions of time travel: Reflections on love, loss, and growth through autoethnography

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This is the accepted manuscript © 2016, British Psychological Society published in *Transpersonal Psychology Review* 18(2) Autumn 2016, available from:

<http://shop.bps.org.uk/publications/transpersonal-psychology-review-vol-18-no-2-autumn-2016.html>

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Just an overpowering desire. Just need and longing and pain and regret and the right talisman or the right surroundings. Put the right person in the right place, and perhaps with the right objects, and the potential for time travel is there.

Tony Rabig, *Doorways*

Yes, and imagine a world where there were no hypothetical situations.

Jasper Fforde, *Thursday Next in First Among Sequels: A Novel*

Abstract:

*Using the concept of time travel as a contextual and narrative tool, the author explores themes of love, loss and growth after trauma. Reflections relate primarily to the experience of conducting the qualitative research method of autoethnography. Opening with consideration of existing work (*Yoga and Loss: An Autoethnographical Exploration of Grief, Mind, and Body*), discussion moves on to academic thought on mental time travel, and personal transformation, culminating in the construction of a new memory combining past, present, and future.*

Keywords: Autoethnography, Qualitative Reflections, Post Traumatic Growth, Friendship, Love, Time Travel

Introduction

I have recently fallen in love. As new couples often do, we have begun the adventure of meeting each other's families and friends, of bringing our best charm to the table for a good first impression. And this is where the pain sneaks in; because there are some people my partner will never meet. There

are some people who no longer physically exist in this time and space.

One such person is my friend, Sarah. Sarah took her own life in 2014. Her death affected me deeply, and as I searched for something concrete in my grief, I found myself spurred into a research project. This work eventually became an exploration of the possible benefits of yoga when coping with loss (Stirling, 2016). My chosen methodology was autoethnography, and not only did I learn about myself through the process of yoga, but the process of the research itself.

In this brief retrospective I touch on friendship and loss, moving to focus on how the nature of conducting autoethnographic research allowed transformation and growth in and of itself. I then reflect on this change from the context of my current reality – which is markedly different from the one in which my original research was conducted. To facilitate this reflection, I use the concept of time travel – the conscious transportation of self through memory. This has been inspired by the recognition that love appears to be a powerful tool for psychological time travel; of forming connections between past and present through a cable of increased positivity. After a scientific reflection on this process, I share the experience of my own attempt at a time travel experience. As a whole, this reflection progressed from an analytical consideration of autoethnography, into it's own evocative piece. This journey is illustrative of the power long term grief still holds in pulling me back to a visceral, emotive place.

Grief, Growth, and Autoethnography

Growth following a traumatic event has been well explored, with systems of linear progression outlined in work such as Calhoun and Tedeschi's (2006) model of posttraumatic growth, and Grof's (1990) holotropic framework of psycho-spiritual growth. It is accepted from such research that personal crisis need not always lead to collapse, and can in fact result in positive transformations – though when I read them today, I still can't quite situate myself within their convenient transitional diagrams. Tedeschi and Calhoun, (2004, p.59) list possible outcomes from trauma as 'improved

relationships, new possibilities for one's life, a greater appreciation for life, [and] a greater sense of personal strength and spiritual development.' They also note increased capacity for intimacy and compassion. While the individual differentiations which dictate an outcome of growth or distress remain to be definitively negotiated, the consensus is the aftermath of trauma is far from black and white. It may best be envisioned then, as a positive-negative continuum (Harvey et al. 2004), where distress and growth can co-exist (Tedeschi and Colhoun, 2004). This continuum suggestion is what sits most comfortably with me, as I consider my own process of recovery.

The path I navigated along the continuum was constructed from many strands. Not only was I helped in my recovery by the practice of yoga - which I was researching - I was supported, to my surprise, by the research process of autoethnography itself. The ability of qualitative research, particularly that of an intensely self-reflective nature, to act as an 'occasion for self-transformation' (Braud, 1998, p.3) is recognised by many who have conducted it. As a methodology based in experience, it is a way 'to inquire about the nature of existence (i.e., what it means to be)' (Valle and Mohs, 2006, p.99). Braud (1998, p.3) explains that as the strategies required for such research are 'many eyes, many brains, and many mouths', alternative ways of knowing are promoted, thus enhancing the inner experience. This access to my inner world during a distressing time allowed me a level of self-consideration that may not have previously been accessible, and was certainly beneficial (also see Chatham-Carpenter, 2010)..

I found a second faculty for personal change in the methodological practicalities. The repeated act of writing about ones pain and suffering acts as 'an escape from living the topic you are writing about' (Ellis, 2004, p.128). This could be considered a mental overload escape valve, which is, of course, a valuable asset to access when pain needs somewhere to go. Sharing our personal stories also allows construction of narrative, permitting discovery and transformation (Raad, 2013, p.17) - essential elements of recovery and survival. The overall power of the practice is supported in *The Handbook of Autoethnography* (Jones et al. 2013, p.10), when Ellis boldly states that for

those living an autoethnographic life, '[i]t might not be hyperbole to say that sometimes it has saved our lives'.

By completing autoethnographic research at a time of great emotional distress, I was able to consider existential issues of living, as well as channel my grief through a logical process. As a result, I have now reached a place where I can reflect on the positive changes in who I am as a result of experiencing the trauma of Sarah's death - which is a difficult admission to make. It does not feel right that any such gains should be made from tragedy. However, as Daniels (2005) notes, transformation is not always 'pleasant or welcome' and may in fact 'often be frightening and painful' (p.13). Now change has occurred, all I can do is recognise and explore it. My current state of being in love shines a spotlight on this.

Love after Sarah, I am finding, is love across a new landscape. It is love in a world altered by her absence, like navigating a place where the familiar rocks and trees have been ripped away by a tsunami. I am changed, I hold changed habits evolved of my recovery and growth, and I am acutely aware of the linear line in which such change is situated. This linear nature became most obvious when I began writing this reflection, and I was struck by how big an influence time held in how I saw the world around me; how looking back had a different flavour depending on the current situation.

This realisation prompted me to consider my past research from a new perspective. Braud (1998, p.2) explains that the very roots of the word research suggest, 'searching again, anew, back'. In looking back at existing work to create something new, I saw an opportunity to explore the act itself of returning to the past. Autoethnography, as such a fluid and intimate research process, offers prime opportunity to move within time in such a way, for time to become 'a dance without boundaries' (Custer, 2014, p.2). This is where I found the inspiration to treat autoethnography as a vehicle for time travel; a challenge to myself to consider time as malleable within my own consciousness.

I chose to use the term time travel because 'narrative reconstruction' - or some similar description of rewriting - does not capture the existential nature of the experience I had in creating this paper. By defining in my own mind that narrative *is* time, I found the necessary empowerment to return to difficult thoughts and feelings.

The idea of time as a subjective exploration through memory is not a new concept, particularly in fiction. Whilst often wielded as a plot device, it has also become a philosophical basis to explore existentialism, temporality, and dimensions of space. As Wittenberg (2013, p.2) asserts, time travel is 'a fundamental condition of storytelling itself, even its very essence'. While autoethnography is a child of research and enquiry, it is also born of storytelling, which leaves it ripe for traversing across narrative to manipulate time. The reconstruction of past, present, and future shared later in this paper is my attempt at this, and while wholly unrealistic, exactitude is not the purpose of its being. As Wall (2008, p.42) explains, 'representation is not intended to be an accurate reflection of life, measurable against reality'. Rather, the culminating piece in this article is an attempt to capture a transcendence of boundaries, and acknowledge the control we wield over our own processing of the world. Before this however, I will briefly discuss the conceptual capability of the human mind to travel within time; to dance between future and past.

Time Travel Logistics

Considering the science of mindful time travel seemed important in preparing myself to consciously engage in the process; just as one might read an instruction manual – lightly – before attempting to build an Ikea flat pack chest of drawers you don't want to fall down. My main discovery was that in scientific circles, the capability to transport a mind into the future and past is not a ridiculous fantasy. In fact, it is referred to, among other things, as mental time travel (MTT). Its function has been contested, but the prevalent theory is it allows learning from reflection on the past, and survival in predicting and conceptualising the future (Rasmussen and Berntsen, 2013). As Hunts states, 'I'll just tell you what I remember because memory is as close as I've gotten to

building my own time machine' (2009, p82).

Past and future travel seem distinct in how they are formulated. While the future requires novel construction, the past consists of stitching together specific memories. This has the result that MTT to the future is overly positive and optimistic, while past MTT is 'constrained by the reality of things that have actually happened' (Rasmussen and Berntsen, 2013, p.189). However, with the brain structure available to travel and build through both past and future, the third possibility I had in mind of traveling to the past to construct alternative narratives as required for present and future wellbeing, seems entirely possible.

This hybrid MTT is made possible by the mind's ability for open-ended generativity, 'our ability to combine and recombine a limited set of items into virtually unlimited ways' (Suddendorf et al., 2009, p.1322). Essentially, the ways in which we can remember and imagine are infinite. What should be explored then, are the conditions which facilitate it.

The first condition to consider is the individual drive to retrieve or travel to specific memories. D'Argembeau and Van der Linden (2004, p.853) suggest that both past and future MTT 'may be influenced by an individual's current goals, motives, and purposes'. By making the choice to remember Sarah, I am creating the space for that process to occur. However, goals themselves are often a product of emotion, and as Allan et al. (2008) highlight, emotions and cognition rarely occur completely independently.

Emotional states have been shown to impact not only what we remember, but how we remember. Zlomuzica (2016, p.182) note the 'permanent storage of personal life events is dependent upon the amount of emotional arousal induced by the experience'. This means a particularly strong experience of being cared for or feeling happy will translate to a particularly strong memory, which makes them easier to access. Congruence between recall states – remembering happy moments when in a happy mood for example – is also a notable affect (Allen et al. 2008). Overall, through my

current positive frame of mind, I am able to connect more saliently with positive memories of Sarah which are important to me.

The experience of being in love – or at least thinking of love – has itself been shown to impact important cognitive functions for narrative such as analytic and creative thinking (Förster et al., 2009). By comparing ways of thinking when primed by love or sex, Förster et al. (2009) showed changes prompted by love in temporal perspectives – increased thinking about abstract future events which permits improved abstract cognition globally. In their concluding comments, Förster et al. (2009, p. 1489) further note that friendship can have the same priming ability due to its inherent ‘wish for foreverness’. Again then, my current emotional situation is ideal for concentrated reflection. My intense status of feeling in love, combined with thoughts of friendship, create a perfect temporal funnel to renegotiate my own narrative.

A final note in what can prompt memory recall is social and cultural cues. My current reconnection with memories then, could be a result of the cultural life scripts associated with relationships being activated. Rasmussen and Berntsen (2013:195) found such scripts provided increased structured recall of emotionally positive autobiographical memories. I am in a culturally recognised time for new social connections to be made, for people from various parts of my life to combine. I am being stimulated by my environment to fall into autobiographical memories. Sarah met - and vetted - all of my potential suitors. She weighed them in a way that only a true friend can, with genuine consideration for compatibility based on the knowledge she knew of me from years of (hard earned) experience. My mind is currently primed to connect with such recollections.

In terms of the energy required for time travel then, I am supercharged. My mind is primed and prepped for a thorough journey, which I will now launch. What follows is an expression of the results of my own exploration in altering connections with the past.

A Hybrid Construction of Past, Present, and Future

I'm Frankenstein-ing a new past reality. Memories are collapsing and compounding, a conversation on a couch being transposed with impossible modern confessions.

"I'm in love," I say.

"I know," she says back, because she already sees in the way my eyes are shining that I'm talking about someone special.

She is baking bread for me to feed to this person she will never meet. Physics are distorting, because she is in the kitchen and on the couch with me at the same time.

"Tell me about them," Sarah's voice calls from the other room, while the version of her still next to me punches lightly at my arm.

I'm talking, saying words I've already said to other friends in the future she will never see. I am explaining how I met this new person in my life, and how much they mean to me, and how excited I am for them to meet. The Sarah next to me smiles. The Sarah in the kitchen squeals and drops something.

It is light outside. No, it is dark outside.

Sarah starts to ask questions, for which I've copied and pasted her tone from that night in the bar, the one where she drank too much and lost her glasses and I had to carry her home. No, wait. It was me that drank too much and lost my glasses and she had to carry me home. But her tone is the same. Mellow. Lyrical.

Everything smells of warm bread.

A cat jumps on my leg. A third Sarah rushes into the room to shoo him away. Third Sarah's hair is down, and for a moment I think maybe I can smell how she smelled as she brushes past but it's too far away, it's at the limits of this world, on the wrong side, where I can't reach.

I know this isn't real, that it's a manipulation of episodic and semantic memory, but my body doesn't know that because it's starting to cry. Or maybe it's crying because it does know?

"We should all go to the beach together," one of Sarah shouts, "It's been so lovely this summer".

It's becoming chaotic in here. In this imagined room.

I hear a key in the front door, a fourth Sarah stomps in, wet from the snow. She is so grumpy, but she smiles at me too. A scarf longer than her entire body hangs around her neck.

(Her neck. Hanging. We can't talk about that. Nobody talks about that.)

The tears have intruded on my hybrid narrative now, the me in that moment is crying too.

But Sarah doesn't ask me what's wrong because I don't want her to. I just want her to keep listening, and keep baking bread, and keep shooing the cat, and keep walking in the door. I just want her to keep being.

And that's when everything starts to fray a little bit. I'm running out of material to stitch. I'm reaching the spool at which the thread of Sarah ends.

It seems hard to touch anything. It seems too painful to stay here much longer. I fight it. I stand and I hug Sarah four, feel the cold of her body from the snow. Ignore how that reminds me of death.

I've told her. I've shared my news. I feel lighter and heavier all at the same time. I have to go now.

This journey is over.

Reflection

This paper was due to be finished two days ago. But I had to walk away for a while after completing the final section, because it hurt so much to write it. This hurt however, was how I knew I had created something genuine. It was how I knew I had truly travelled and experienced something new. The most of my emotion went into this part, and I anticipate it will also resonate with most readers, as they find within it the losses and hardships which are stamped across their own timelines.

Perhaps time travel is possible. Certainly, in using the capacity of the brain to construct narratives from existing materials and predict alternative outcomes, there is the ability to travel to the past and create new, impossible moments. The mental environment to support this can be found in focused motivations, congruent states, thoughts of love, and cultural cues. But there is

more to living than that. More than contemporary science can ever quantify. For that, we must turn inwards, to the world we hold inside, and often navigate with such inattention that we fail to understand its capabilities at all. In constructing a new memory narrative, I have explored the limits of utilising one's current emotional state to permit connections with one's past. I have pushed the boundaries of love's capabilities in a way indescribable to statistics.

In my reflections, I have searched again my previous experience and research to support an argument for growth after trauma. I have gone back, and explored how qualitative research methods such as autoethnography, make difficult topics not only accessible, but survivable. I have delved anew into the notion of time and space - in a way only this methodology allows - to find new reflections, and new connections.

Incidents of trauma are unique to every individual, which is why I hope that promoting and sharing reflective qualitative research methods such as autoethnography will lead to further work in the area. This will undoubtedly produce unique insight into moments of suffering, and more enlightened and invigorated researchers as well. In a way, this paper could be considered a love letter to such methods – as well as to the past, the present, and the future. I won't go so far as to finish with a kiss.

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