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A Book of Possibilities – Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetics

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A Book of Possibilities – Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetics

Abstract

I would say this book is successful in reference to the authors' intention to showcase ethnographic projects that "blur the boundaries between social science and literature," but I would also caution those researchers looking for a how-to book for their dissertation or other qualitative research project. This is a book of possibilities of what (auto)ethnographies can be—inspiring authors and fostering creativity, and I am sure a lot of readers will connect with it.

Keywords

Ethnography, Autoethnography, Performance Ethnographies, Ethnodramas, Identity, Qualitative Research

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A Book of Possibilities – Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetics

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I would say this book is successful in reference to the authors' intention to showcase ethnographic projects that "blur the boundaries between social science and literature," but I would also caution those researchers looking for a how-to book for their dissertation or other qualitative research project. This is a book of possibilities of what (auto)ethnographies can be—inspiring authors and fostering creativity, and I am sure a lot of readers will connect with it. Keywords: Ethnography, Autoethnography, Performance Ethnographies, Ethnodramas, Identity, Qualitative Research

This book is helpful for nascent researchers or other curious minds who are wondering how (auto)ethnography can be defined, what it looks like, and how it is applied in qualitative research; however, it is not a how-to book. I would describe this book as exploratory. As a whole, it is 412 pages, but it is broken up into eight sections that enable a reader to scan for the most applicable topics; therefore, it is not necessary for readers to read methodically each page in order to walk away with something.

Arthur Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, the editors of *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetics*, begin the book by talking about an upcoming conference to "showcase ethnographic projects that blur the boundaries between social science and literature" (Bochner & Ellis, p. 1). They lay out how the book came together and express their excitement over "building a community of interpretive ethnographers who communicate with each other across disciplinary lines" (p. 3).

The opening of the book is written by Mary Gergen and Kenneth Gergen who emphasized the humanistic, relational, and liberating aspects of autoethnographies:

Autoethnography represents a significant expansion in both ethnographic form and relational potential. In using oneself as an ethnographic exemplar, the researcher is freed from the traditional conventions of writing. One's unique voicing—complete with colloquialisms, reverberations from multiple relationships, and emotional expressiveness—is honored. In this way, the reader gains a sense of the writer as a full human being. (Gergen & Gergen, p. 14)

They discuss performance ethnographies and the immersive effect it can have on others. This flowed nicely into the next section where authors talked about ethnodramas: "a live, charged exchange with an audience" (Holman Jones, p. 51) where we come "to know ourselves, our cultures, our world" (Lockford, p. 77).

The next section addressed identity in ethnographies. For instance, Douglas Flemons and Shelley Green talked about "the dilemma of writing down any one story" (p. 92).

When you write a story of yourself, you accept an assumption about yourself that then determines in part how you understand yourself, and if you publish this account, then you are defining yourself not only personally but also professionally. To what degree will the reputation that gets stirred up with that

make it more difficult for your story to transform your understanding of yourself in the future? (p. 90)

Flemons and Green discussed the implications of having a different narrative. They brought up important questions and considerations for a researcher undertaking autoethnography.

The subsequent section focused on the aesthetic aspect of ethnographic work. Examples were given on what may constitute as autoethnography (e.g., visual art or dance). The sixth section focuses on the literary aspect of autoethnography (e.g., traditional, fictional, alternative, or interpretive ethnography) and the “many expressive paths that lead to ethnographic illumination” (Stoller, p. 299). Following this is a discussion of narrative in Arthur Frank’s terms of *The Ride* and *The Story*: “the ride is a place (event, experience, site) where the individual has no influence” (Richardson, p. 373) while the story “can be remoralized” (Richardson, p. 374). This section may benefit those interested in the *graphy* (i.e., writing) of autoethnographies.

The book closes the same way it opens, that is, with Ellis and Bochner discussing the conference—only this time it has already taken place. Here a reader can glimpse into their intention in writing this book:

The book would have to give the readers a sense of the experience and feeling of the conference. . . . We’ll emphasize the process of writing, critiquing, and rewriting. It’s a way to extend the conference, perhaps even take it to a wider audience. (Ellis & Bochner, p. 392)

I would say this book is successful in reference to the authors’ intention, but I would also caution those researchers looking for a how-to book for their dissertation or other qualitative research project. This is not a step-by-step explanation of how to conduct an (auto)ethnographic study; it is a book of possibilities of what (auto)ethnographies can be—inspiring authors and fostering creativity, and I am sure a lot of readers will connect with it.

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