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Beyond Technique: An Autoethnographic Exploration of How I Learned to Show Love Towards My Father

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Abstract

I offer an autoethnographic exploration of my experience with the culture of a marriage and family therapist (MFT) in training. As a beginning therapist I assumed that success would be determined primarily by how well I mastered different theoretical models. This belief shifted during an instance in which I was planning to begin differentiating myself from my family of origin using Bowenian techniques. I experienced a profound shift in the way I interacted with my father – and with others – as a result of an interaction completely void of therapeutic technique. I discuss the ways that this experience changed my view of what it means to be therapeutic. Implicit in my exploration are recommendations for the training and practice of MFTs.

Keywords

Marital and Family Therapy, Autoethnography, Self of the Therapist, and Differentiation

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Beyond Technique: An Autoethnographic Exploration of How I Learned to Show Love Towards My Father

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I offer an autoethnographic exploration of my experience with the culture of a marriage and family therapist (MFT) in training. As a beginning therapist I assumed that success would be determined primarily by how well I mastered different theoretical models. This belief shifted during an instance in which I was planning to begin differentiating myself from my family of origin using Bowenian techniques. I experienced a profound shift in the way I interacted with my father – and with others – as a result of an interaction completely void of therapeutic technique. I discuss the ways that this experience changed my view of what it means to be therapeutic. Implicit in my exploration are recommendations for the training and practice of MFTs. Key Words: Marital and Family Therapy, Autoethnography, Self of the Therapist, and Differentiation

Introduction

Autoethnography as a Research Approach

In traditional ethnography, the researcher embeds him or herself in the field and studies “the other,” whether that is a native tribe, people in a different socio-economic status, or any group that is different from himself or herself (Patton, 2002). Another hallmark of ethnographic research is the desire to remove the researcher’s influence from the study and presentation of the data. “Accurate” data is data that reflects the lived experience of the group being studied as closely as possible. The researcher’s personal experiences with and reactions to the group are carefully removed from the study in an effort to accurately represent what the culture is really like (Vidich & Lyman, 2000).

Recent postmodern critiques challenge the ability (and desirability) of a researcher to be detached from the data he or she is studying (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). Postmodernists propose that objectivity is impossible to obtain in social science research. If it is impossible to remove the effects of the observer on the observed, they contend, it is impossible to present any scientific finding that does not reflect the values of the researcher (Greenwood & Levin). Traditional positivist social science research and reporting methods, with their emphasis on detached, “objective” gathering, analyzing, and reporting of data, is viewed by some as “eras[ing] subjectivity and personal accountability” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 735). Postmodernists contend that a more responsible, transparent approach to research would be to have researchers acknowledge their personal values and beliefs that influence their research (Allen, 2000). Consequently, the desire to study one’s own group, whether it be community, social

class, race, or even family, and one's own experiences in that group is beginning to be seen as an increasingly valuable research undertaking (Richardson, 2000). Though I do not consider myself a postmodernist, I do find value in their critique of positivist social science claims.

In addition to being transparent about their beliefs and values, postmodernists suggest that telling the stories surrounding the researcher's personal struggles and experiences that led to their research interests is a legitimate research endeavor in and of itself (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). This struggle is seen as an integral part of the research process. *Autoethnography* was developed as an approach that allowed the researcher to study a group to which he or she belonged while allowing his or her experience with that group to be a central focus of the study (Ellis & Bochner). Though autoethnographic research can take the form of poetry, short stories, or even fiction, the purpose is usually the same: to explore a social phenomenon present in the researcher's own group using his or her personal experience with that phenomenon.

A central concern related to all qualitative research, autoethnography included, is trustworthiness and credibility. When is a nice story just a nice story, and when is it research? Not surprisingly, there is no easy answer to this question. Postmodernists claim that establishing objective criteria for measuring trustworthiness and credibility is problematic because the chosen criteria will still subtly reflect the values of those who established the criteria. Nevertheless, Ellis and Bochner (2000) offer their explanation for the purpose and subsequent goals of autoethnography that can aid in determining if the purposes of an autoethnography have been met. In response to a colleague who said, "...some of us still want to know how we can tell when we're right, when our representations are accurate and we can generalize," Ellis and Bochner said

For me, [autoethnography] necessitates a radical transformation in the goals of our work – from description to communication...as I see it, the practices of human communication – the negotiation and performance of acts of meaning – should become our model for how we tell about the empirical world...the goal is to encourage compassion and promote dialogue...The usefulness of these stories is their capacity to inspire conversation from the point of view of the readers, who enter from the perspective of their own lives. The narrative rises or falls on its capacity to provoke readers to broaden their horizons, reflect critically on their own experience, enter empathically into worlds of experience different from their own, and actively engage in dialogue regarding the social and moral implications of the different perspectives and standpoints encountered. Invited to take the story in and use it for themselves, readers become coplayers, examining themselves through the evocative power of the narrative text. (p. 748)

I have written an autoethnographic account on aspects of my training as a beginning marriage and family therapist. I hope you will be provoked to broaden your horizons in some way as a result of reading this paper. The experience I discuss in this paper has had a tremendous impact in all aspects of my life: I am a different person as a result. The focus of this paper will be on changes in my professional life; that is, how I

am a different MFT researcher, therapist, supervisor, and teacher as a result of the experience I discuss below. If I have written a trustworthy and credible autoethnography, you will be able to gain a sense of my personal limitations, confusion, ambivalence, and mixed feelings. You might reflect on your own experience as an MFT (or some other group which finds application in the principles I discuss) and perhaps find, as I did, aspects of your way of being challenged. You might find similarities and differences in your own experience. Perhaps you will enter into dialogue with others about your newfound insights. And hopefully, you will be a different person in some small unforeseen way.

The Culture of MFT Training Through the Eyes of a Student

I began my graduate training as an MFT believing that “success” would be defined the same way that it was as an undergraduate. Namely, as long as I was able to memorize the material presented to me in class, integrate it in some fashion with material I had previously learned, and regurgitate it in the form of a term-paper, multiple-choice exam or some other graded project, I would be fine. Similarly, I assumed that the value of my skills as a developing therapist would be determined largely by how well I was able to master the different theories and techniques I was learning in class. The personal attributes of hard work, diligence, and sacrifice that carried me through my undergraduate program would be the same that ensured success as a therapist. If any change was required, I would simply need to step these attributes up a notch. So, just like in my undergraduate years, I spent my days poring over textbooks and class notes until I could recognize and define MFT terms such as triangles, problem-saturated stories, enmeshed relationships, splitting, power, process, and countless others on demand.

This process had several effects on the way I viewed my role as a therapist. As my studies intensified, so did the assumption that whether or not I blew my first session with a real client would be determined primarily by whether or not I said the “right” things (as determined by the theories I was learning). Since success as a therapist would be determined by how well I had mastered the material, what other variables could there be? Discussions with my classmates reassured me that I was not alone in this fear. Furthermore, I believed that the outcome of therapy (like school) was primarily determined by how hard *I* worked. I walked into my first therapy session worried that I had not learned enough, that I may say the wrong thing, and the clients would either get worse or discover that I really did not know as much as I was sure they expected I should. However, as my personal life began to intersect with my professional training, I soon found my definition of success changing. The story below deals with how my perception of a “successful” therapist evolved as I navigated the inevitable clash between the personal and professional that often emerges for therapists in training.

Lessons Learned at the Intersection of the Personal and the Professional in MFT Training

“Visit family” was nestled among the myriad of other tasks on my checklist of things to complete in the few months remaining before my family and I moved from Utah to Virginia. My parents kept pressing me for a firm date for when we could make it down

to visit, but every time I gave them one, some school emergency would come up and we would have to postpone. Finally, two months before we were to leave for Virginia, I was completely done with school. A week-long gap between the end of school and hopping into plans to move was long enough to realize that I was very uncomfortable without any “emergencies” to offer as an excuse for not visiting my family. It had been long enough to own up to the fact that I was delaying the trip as long as I could – that I was simply anxious about visiting my family.

I had successfully evaded many meaningful visits with my family ever since I had started my master’s program two years earlier. There was the occasional weekend visit, but the visits were largely filled with me maintaining an emotional distance by talking about my successes in school. As I reflected on the past two years, I realized they had been very empty. I also realized that I had been aware of that emptiness all along, and that my avoidance of my parents and sisters had a great deal to do with that emptiness. Now that I had nothing left with which to fill the time, I was forced to decide what to do. Would I continue to create busyness in my life? There were certainly opportunities to be busy with preparing to move across the country. Or would I own up to the fact that, for some reason, I was avoiding my family and go home and visit them?

I grew up in Boulder, Utah, a small (population 150) farming community nestled between the foot of beautiful Boulder Mountain and the head of the world-famous Escalante Grand Staircase National Monument. A child could not ask for better surroundings in which to grow. I had spent countless days hunting, fishing, camping, and roaming the woods of Boulder Mountain or scaling the red rock formations of the Escalante desert.

In general, my childhood experience with my family was just as good. However, my family was not exempt from certain dynamics common to many families. These dynamics had left me a little drained by the time I turned 18 and moved away. For example, from time to time my father had a bad temper¹. While growing up, I had tried hard to avoid doing or saying things that would upset him. I did not spend much time alone with my father. Many interactions with him were fairly awkward. In response to my father’s anger, mom would often triangulate the children by talking to us about how she felt when he was upset. A combination of these factors led me to grow up thinking that when dad was angry he was a pretty bad man, and that my mom, my three sisters, and I were all a little bit better than he was because we did not visibly express anger. All of these thoughts persisted during my youth, despite a nagging voice inside me saying that there were other explanations for the anger and that despite dad’s anger I should strive to nurture a relationship with him. A combination of these and other factors led me to enter my freshman year of college a relatively shy, nervous boy lacking in self-confidence.

¹ My father was never physically violent. Parenthetically, my father’s anger has practically disappeared as he has gotten older (and as his children have gotten older – a phenomenon which having children of my own has helped me understand)! There is much, much more to my father than the occasional displays of anger that I saw when I was younger. Of necessity, the focus of this paper includes mention of that particular shortcoming and its effects, while the numerous positive aspects of our relationship go unmentioned. I regret this necessity, and want to emphasize that I have always had a deep respect and love for my father.

After my freshman year of college, I had the opportunity to go on a proselytizing mission for my church. I went to Scotland for two years. I was excited about the adventure, and I looked forward to being on my own. Over two years in Scotland, a combination of innumerable sacred experiences, great missionary companions (we worked in pairs), and leaders who trusted my abilities and gave me a lot of responsibility left me brimming with confidence and strengths that I did not know I had. As I laid in bed the night before I would see my family, for the first time in two years, I wondered how – or if – my family had changed.

Reuniting with my family was as anxiety-filled as I feared it might be, as I was soon being invited back into old alliances. Mom was pulling me aside to tell me of things dad had done, and dad was getting angry at the same things that had always upset him. Forgotten constraints began to creep back into my life. After a few weeks, I could feel the confidence that I had gained while in Scotland beginning to slip away as I started to fall back into a familiar role in my family. I realized that if I were to maintain those attributes I had discovered while in Scotland, I would have to leave home. So, after a month at home, I enrolled in a college four hours away and said goodbye.

The next five years gave me a wonderful marriage, two beautiful children, and three college degrees. It also gave me time to do what I needed to do – to learn how to be *in* my family as a loving member without getting pulled into old alliances and being shamed into living implicit family rules that I did not want to live. I knew that after my mission I had the confidence to move away even though moving away was against our implicit family rules. At that time, however, I did not know how to move away physically without moving away emotionally.

Like many people, I chose MFT as a profession partly to figure out my own family, though I was not aware of this motive at the time I chose my career. I knew that I enjoyed helping people and was anxious to learn the tools necessary to make a career out of it. Eager to learn the keys to helping people change, most of my MFT classmates and I devoured all the theoretical models and techniques we could in our classes. Countless hours were spent both in and out of class learning theory and technique. I loved (and still love) learning clinical theories and techniques. The emphasis that my training and the MFT research I was reading placed on mastering technique led me to assume – almost unconsciously – that the key to helping people change lies in what a therapist *did*. I had not yet considered that who a therapist *was* may also be important in helping people change.

One of the many models I learned in training was Bowen Family Systems theory (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Bowen theory intuitively “fit” the way I viewed the dynamics in my family better than other models I was learning. As I reflected on my current situation with my family of origin, I became particularly interested in the Bowenian concept of differentiation (Kerr & Bowen) as a means of healing those relationships. According to Bowenian theory, a clinician’s ability to help others is directly related to his or her level of differentiation from his or her family of origin. Differentiation refers to an individual’s ability to separate his or her intellect from emotions and act based on intellect. A therapist with poor differentiation is at the mercy of being buffeted by his or her emotions and those of his or her clients. As a result, his or her clinical repertoire will be limited to whatever interventions do not make anyone in the therapy room anxious. Consequently, the real problems – those driving the client’s anxiety – will never get addressed, and any

change achieved will be superficial. Bowen proposes that the solution to this is to become differentiated; that is, to become comfortable doing whatever you think is best in the session regardless of the client's (or the therapist's) level of anxiety. The therapist's clinical choices will be guided by reason, not emotion.

The Bowenian notion of differentiation (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) resonated with me. I had just begun doing therapy, and was finding myself being tugged all over the place by my emotionally reactive clients, especially those clients who resembled my family of origin in some way. I found myself practically paralyzed by one couple in which the husband got angry and the wife shut down in the presence of that anger. Their pattern was too similar to my own family's pattern for me to be able to function freely. Bowen theory suggests that in order for me to overcome this emotional paralysis, I needed to start becoming more differentiated from my own family of origin, as that is where I first learned the anxiety. I needed to be able to be in their presence as a loving family member, while at the same time refusing invitations to enter into old alliances and triangles. According to my perception of Bowenian theory, I should visit my family, calmly "stand above" the emotional reactivity going on around me, and coolly reject invitations to fulfill my old roles in the family. Such was my plan.

As all these thoughts went through my mind the week after school finished, I knew why I had put off visiting my family for two years. Taking the risk necessary to get emotionally close to my family was simply too scary and school was taking up too much of my energy as well as providing my anxious mind with good reasons not to complete the task at hand. I also knew what I had to do before I moved across the country and perhaps lost an opportunity forever. I picked up the phone and told mom we would be coming down to visit at the end of the month.

Over the next little while I learned all the techniques of Bowen theory that I could (all the while missing the point that, other than a differentiated therapist, Bowen theory does not really have any techniques per se). I read Bowen's account of his process of differentiation from his own family of origin (Bowen, 1978) and was impressed at how he was able to be so bold in breaking his implicit family rules. I even rehearsed in my mind things I would say to various family members as I was invited back into old alliances. Convinced that the key to change lay in the technical aspects of the theory, I remember even asking my supervisor if it was better to explicitly speak out against any invitations into old alliances or to just ignore the invitation and go do something else. I thought that perhaps one would lead to better differentiation than the other. In retrospect, I realize that she probably understood something I did not as she smiled and suggested that I do whatever felt right in the moment.

My father, an archaeologist, has always loved the outdoors. Soon after we arrived, he began telling me about a panel of rock art which he had found recently and appeared to be at least 2,000 years old. The drawings (*pictographs*) were painted onto the rock with plant dye rather than being chiseled into the rock, which made them even more unique. He was really excited because pictographs that old are very rare in our region of the southwest. I was really excited because my father did not share his enthusiasm about things like that with me very often. I eagerly accepted his invitation to go with him down into the desert to look at the pictographs.

We left early in the morning as the light from the sun was just starting to fill the sky. The sky was still very cloudy and a light, misty rain was falling. Rain in the desert

always cleans everything; the rocks look redder and the cactus looks greener. When it is raining in the desert the rocks, cloud cover, and muted sun combine to turn the air a pale red color that has a very calming feel. Squawking ravens and blowing sand typically combine to make the desert a very noisy place. But when it rains, the whole desert stops as if it were soaking in a bath; there is very little movement and almost no sound except for the soft falling of the rain. That morning, the reddish hue, gentle rain, and permeating silence combined to create a humbling, awe-inspiring atmosphere as we walked towards the box canyon where the pictographs were.

The pictographs were amazing. They had remained sheltered from the rain by a small overhang and were surrounded by towering red rock walls. My father and I admired the designs and figures that had been etched into place by Indians over 2,000 years ago. I realized that by simply touching many of the pictographs they would crumble into dust. I felt very humbled to be seeing something that had withstood the test of time so well and yet stood before me with so much vulnerability: Their future was entirely in my hands. As I looked out across the narrow canyon we were in, I thought of a comment one of my colleagues had once made. He said that he liked going to the far away corners of the outdoors by himself because nature has a way of inviting self-reflection. Since there was nobody else around onto whom you could project your own inadequacies and shortcomings, you eventually had to acknowledge them in yourself, and nature had a way of patiently waiting for you to do so. Heeding the invitation to look at myself, I realized that I did not like what I saw. I thought of my infantile preoccupation with myself over the last two years. I began to realize that the more I had focused on myself, the more I had become emotionally disconnected from my family of origin. Standing in the rain that day, I realized that for the last two years fear had led me to avoid taking the risks necessary to be vulnerable enough to truly connect with my family. Whether my family needed to change or not was irrelevant – *I* needed to change.

Reflecting on this was a tremendous spiritual experience that I cannot adequately explain in writing. I looked at the rocks, knowing that they had patiently looked down onto the Indians over 2,000 years ago as they painted on the rock's surface. I realized that the landscape looked almost exactly the same then as it did now; 2,000 years was nothing to these awesome rock walls. I suddenly got a sense of how small I really was. I found my sense of self-importance almost laughable. My life here on earth would be a very small event in comparison to all the things that those rocks had and would see. My family concerns began to take perspective. I realized that my concerns of protecting myself from my family by avoiding them were rather petty. I realized that, in the big picture, distancing from my family simply because of fear was a terrible mistake.

As my father and I shared that morning, all of my well thought-out plans for differentiating from my family seemed a little silly. Once I realized that *I* needed to change, my earlier notion of differentiation seemed to have a certain arrogance to it – almost as if I was the golden child seeking to rise above the muck and mire that was my family. That morning, I realized that the mechanical, technique-focused process I had understood as differentiation was much more about humbly acknowledging my own fears and being with my family differently than it was about trying to forcefully change the emotional structure of my family. I began to see that differentiation as Bowen meant it was a far more deep and profound journey than could be experienced by simply mastering a bag of tricks. On a broader scale, I began to see that true change is far more

complex than mastering a certain skill or technique. Fortunately, not a single skill or technique was implemented by me that day. Instead, dad, the desert, and I just “were” together and events transpired as they did. Nothing was forced.

My experience that morning changed my relationship with my father. As my thoughts faded away, I looked at my father, glad that the rain was disguising the tears on my face. He was reverently gazing at the pictographs on the overhang wall, occasionally beckoning me to come see a new pattern he had found. We quietly discussed how amazing it was that people had stood where we stood over 2,000 years ago. As we walked out of the canyon that morning I paused to look back at the small overhang and the awesome rock walls that had seemed almost to speak to me moments earlier. I whispered a silent “thank you” to the Indians who had left their mark so many years ago, thus inviting me to gain a clearer perspective on who I – and my family – really are. I whispered the same “thank you” to the rock walls, who, by simply standing there unchanging and watching me had provided me an opportunity to look into myself. Later, I wondered what implications the rocks had for me as a therapist. I turned around and whispered the same “thank you” to my father, who had loved this place enough perhaps to overcome his fears of having me say no to his invitation and invite me there anyway.

Not a word of my relationship with my father was spoken that day. Yet when we left the canyon, I knew that my past hurts were gone. I knew that we walked side by side now as a son who admires his father and a father who loves his son. This mutual, unspoken feeling endured as my father and I drove 40 hours across the country together a few months later. We talked and laughed the whole way; not a single awkward moment arose. Had this trip been three months earlier, I would have been subtly trying to convince dad to be a “better” person, and he would have been sitting in silence, with an occasional angry outburst (i.e., a plea for his son to love him). Instead, I no longer viewed myself as superior to my father. In fact, we both got really mad when we got lost for an hour in St. Louis; afterwards, we laughed. Before our experience in the desert, this event would have consisted of dad getting mad and me sitting in silent self-righteousness until dad felt shamed enough to be quiet. As I watched my father board the airplane back to Utah at the close of the trip, I knew that my relationship with him was forever different. I realized that I could comfortably express my love to him and he could do likewise. I drove home from the airport in silence, this time with no rain to hide my tears of joy.

How My Experience with My Father Changed Me as a Therapist

As Bowen theory (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) predicts, my personal changes were not limited to interactions with my father. I became a better therapist as well. When I began my doctoral program later that year, I found that I was more relaxed in therapy. I usually did not become anxious when my clients did. If I did, I was aware of it and could use the anxiety as a source of data about my clients rather than have it govern my actions. I did not feel any pressure to have each session carefully planned, as I knew that I was not the sole architect of change with my clients. I realized more clearly that change was co-created: both my clients and I have a role in the change process. The realization that I was not solely responsible for the outcome of therapy allowed me to be more relaxed with my clients. I was sad when clients did not change, but it was a more mature sadness borne out of a sincere concern for their welfare rather than a belief that I had somehow failed

(which is really the only option when a client fails to improve and a therapist believes the model – and their mastery of it – is the most important element of therapy). I was sad for them, not me.

Since I no longer viewed my mastery of technique as being supremely important, I was able to be more comfortable going with the flow of therapy (Piercy & Nelson, 2000/2001). This was how I had experienced change and it began to be how I saw my clients experience change as well. I still used models to conceptualize my client's problems and treatment, but I also paid attention to my intuition. I did not feel the pressure to perform or to craft the perfect intervention that I did when I was a beginning therapist. I still studied theory, but I did not believe that my mastery of the theory would be the lone determinant of my success. I was able to sit peacefully with my clients and calmly be with them in their suffering and ambiguity. I trusted my client's ability to change. I was comfortable with confronting my clients – even angry fathers. Prior to my experience, I would become frozen any time I was meeting with a family like mine. Now, even though I still felt some anxiety with these clients, I was aware of that anxiety and could still use the full range of my clinical skills with them. In short, I became a more therapeutic person.

I remember sitting in supervision with a classmate, T. J. Rowden, during the second semester in our master's program. T. J. repeated what his client, who was grieving over the death of a family member, had said. When T. J. asked what our supervisor would say next to the client, without hesitation our supervisor very warmly said, "Oh my, how are you able to deal with that loss?" Assuming there was some interventive, theoretical reason behind my supervisor's statement, I asked her what her intent was in saying that. "Oh, there is no intent," she said. "I say it because I care. Could you imagine what it must be like to go through what this lady is going through? I just want to be there for her." Then, my supervisor's response seemed odd. Now, after the morning in the canyon with my dad, it makes perfect sense. She modeled what I learned in the canyon that day: "Therapeutic" is something you *are*, not something you *do*. Healing relationships – including your own – is more about learning to "be" with someone in a loving way than it is about crafting an intervention or mastering a theory. The latter is undoubtedly important, but perhaps not more so than the interpersonal reverence and connection I experienced with my father that day.

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