

2009

Speaking into Silences: Autoethnography, Communication, and Applied Research

Lisa M. Tillmann Ph.D.
Rollins College, ltillmann@rollins.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarship.rollins.edu/as_facpub

 Part of the [Health Communication Commons](#), [Nonfiction Commons](#), and the [Publishing Commons](#)

Published In

Tillmann, L. M. (2009). Speaking into silences: Autoethnography, communication, and applied research. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 37(1), 94-97.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Rollins Scholarship Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Rollins Scholarship Online. For more information, please contact rwalton@rollins.edu.

Speaking into Silences:
Autoethnography, Communication, and Applied Research¹

Lisa M. Tillmann
Rollins College Box 2723
Winter Park, FL 32789
Ltillmann@rollins.edu
407-646-1586

Keywords: autoethnography, communication, narrative, qualitative research, eating disorder, bulimia

Abstract

In 2004, two articles in the *Journal of Applied Communication Research* (Ashcraft & Tretheway, 2004; Goodall, 2004) celebrated the merits of auto- and narrative ethnography, methods of research grounded in lived experience and evocative modes of representation that seek to engage readers emotionally, aesthetically, ethically, and politically. Despite these and other persuasive calls for auto- and narrative ethnographic works, few have been published in communication journals. More than four years ago, *JACR* offered readers *arguments* for this kind of scholarship, yet no full-length autoethnography appeared in its pages—until now. This article, a prelude to its companion essay, “Body and Bulimia Revisited,” speaks into that silence.

¹ The author thanks Art Bochner, Laura Ellingson, Carolyn Ellis, Tom Frenzt, Bud Goodall, Christine Kiesinger, Kathryn Norsworthy, Laura Stafford, and two anonymous reviewers for their feedback and support. A version of this piece was presented at the 2008 meetings of the National Communication Association. Cite the published version as:
Tillmann, L. M. (2009). Speaking into silences: Autoethnography, communication, and applied research. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 37(1), 94-97.

In their synthesis of *JACR*'s special issue, "Developing Tension," editors Karen L. Ashcraft and Angela Tretheway discuss "how traditional forms of scholarly representation function to erase the contradictions of emotion and work" (2004, p. 179). Ashcraft and Tretheway posit autoethnographic writing as potentially better suited to prevent such effacement. Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner (2000, p. 739) define autoethnography as "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural."² Striving to show life's complexity and fragility in depth and detail, autoethnographers utilize varied forms (e.g., short stories, poems, and plays) and multiple narrative techniques, such as scene setting, dialogue, and metaphor.

The *JACR* issue following "Developing Tension" leads with H.L. Goodall's commentary, "Narrative Ethnography as Applied Communication Research." Goodall uses "narrative ethnography" as an umbrella term covering autoethnography, characterizing this work as "a cross-disciplinary communication project aimed at re-establishing the centrality of personal experience and identity in the social construction of knowledge" (2004, p. 187). Goodall deems narrative ethnography an "embodiment of applied communication research" (p. 187).

JACR's editorial policy states that "all theoretical and methodological approaches are welcome," yet, as Goodall (2004, p. 192) observes, "I don't think many narrative ethnographers see the *Journal of Applied Communication Research* as a friendly outlet for our work." While I have no access to the "friendliness" of past *JACR* editors and reviewers, I can assess the work that has appeared in its pages.

² A search of Google Scholar reveals that "Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) ranks among the most cited articles or chapters by communication scholars, though most of these hundreds of citations appear in sociology, education, and psychology publications. According to Bochner (personal communication, September 25, 2008), the chapter "has been virtually ignored in our field."

I consulted the database Communication and Mass Media Complete (CMMC), which as of this writing, catalogued 589 scholarly journals, including *JACR*. To capture as many articles as possible, I searched “all text” of *JACR*, using the terms autoethnograph*³ and narrative ethnograph*. Despite this inclusivity, CMMC returned just three results: Goodall’s commentary and two studies by lead author Lynn M. Harter: “The Structuring of Invisibility among the Hidden Homeless” (Harter, Berquist, Titsworth, Novak, & Brokaw, 2005) and “Freedom through Flight: Performing a Counter-Narrative of Disability” (Harter, Scott, Novak, Leeman, & Morris, 2006).

These three articles engage readers in how individuals cope and thrive amid hardship: professional alienation, homelessness, and physical and mental disability. In terms of representation, Goodall’s provocative piece is more an *argument* for auto- and narrative ethnography than an embodiment of these forms, as he has provided so often and so poetically elsewhere (see e.g., Goodall, 2006). Harter et al. construct equally compelling texts, presenting key excerpts from interview transcripts, vignettes based on field notes, and analysis. Yet, like Goodall’s work, these articles better reflect the style of an academic report (a research-based proposition supported by evidence and reasoning) than of an auto/ethnographic *narrative* (a research-based story that includes plot, character/s, and dramatic tension). I offer these as observations, not critiques; different methods and modes of writing fulfill different purposes.

After examining Goodall’s and Harter et al.’s work, I felt ready to investigate auto- and narrative ethnography’s presence in additional communication journals. Entering autoethnograph* and

³ An asterisk commands the database to locate all variants of the word.

narrative ethnograph* in CMMC searches by subject, title, and abstract yielded 36 scholarly articles and reviews.⁴

The role of auto- and narrative ethnography in these texts varied widely. One subset of articles summarized, analyzed, reviewed, and/or responded to such projects (see, e.g., Ehrlich, 2003). Some authors made a case for autoethnographic scholarship (see, e.g., Banks & Banks, 2000); others critiqued it (see, e.g., Shields, 2000).

Of the 36, I consider 20 (across 12 journals) to be full-length autoethnographies (see, e.g., Shuler, 2007) or to contain substantial autoethnographic sections (see, e.g., Hinckley, 2005). In this subset, the locus of study ranged from the author's own embodied experience (Fox, 2007), to close relationships (Diggs & Clark, 2002), to academic life (see, e.g., Pelias, 2000), to spirituality (see, e.g., Russell, 2004), to community engagement (see, e.g., Olson, 2004). A single communication journal, *Text and Performance Quarterly*, published seven of the 20. As indicated, none appeared in *JACR*.

When I wrote the first draft of "Body and Bulimia Revisited," the essay that follows this one, I did not initially consider *JACR* a likely publication outlet. I admit suspecting, as Goodall (2004) has, that other journals would be more receptive to work whose cultural analysis is rooted so deeply in personal experience. However, as I revised, I felt a desire to connect my work on eating disorders--a struggle that afflicts many of us and many more of our students--with *JACR*'s

⁴ I acknowledge the limits of using a search engine to locate relevant works. In a broader review of the 136 articles netted by searching for autoethnograph* and narrative ethnograph* in "all text" of all peer-reviewed CMMC journals, I found a small subset that did not mention auto- or narrative ethnography at all—not even in the works cited. In addition, my search likely missed sources that would meet Ellis and Bochner's (2000) criteria for autoethnography, but their authors either did not label their work, or they used other terms to describe it. Further, CMMC does not catalogue sociology journals like *Symbolic Interaction* or interdisciplinary outlets like *Qualitative Inquiry*; both regularly publish autoethnographic scholarship.

community of applied communication scholars, members of our field I perceive as among those most committed to work that sparks conversation on important social issues and that induces personal, relational, and cultural change. I also noted that, despite its authors' and editors' dedication to making a difference in so many other significant areas, I could not find a single *JACR* article using "eating disorder," "anorexia," or "bulimia" as a search term for subject, title, or abstract. "Body and Bulimia Revisited," *JACR*'s first full-length autoethnography, speaks into that silence as well.

"Body and Bulimia Revisited" seeks not to argue for auto- and narrative ethnography, as Ashcraft and Tretheway (2004) and Goodall (2004) already have done persuasively in *JACR*. Instead, this piece aims to *show* personal narrative as applied interpersonal, organizational, and political communication. Portraying the inability to express emotion as a pathway into bulimia and spoken, written, and relational communication as potential pathways out, I attempt to help readers understand and *feel* the value of autoethnographic methodology and representation in general and the personal and cultural significance of eating disorders in particular.

References

- Ashcraft, K.L., & Trethewey, A. (2004). Special issue synthesis: Developing tension: An agenda for applied research on the organization of irrationality. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 32(2), 171-181.
- Banks, S.P., & Banks, A. (2000). Reading 'The Critical Life': Autoethnography as pedagogy. *Communication Education*, 49(3), 233-238.
- Diggs, R.C., & Clark, K.D. (2002). *It's a struggle but worth it*: Identifying and managing identities in an interracial friendship. *Communication Quarterly*, 50(3&4), 368-390.
- Ehrlich, M.C. (2003). Poetry on the margins: *Ghetto Life 101, Remorse* and the new radio documentary. *Journalism*, 4(4), 423-439.
- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A.P. (2000). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher as subject. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.) (pp. 733-768). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Fox, R. (2007). Skinny bones #126-774-835-29: Thin gay bodies signifying a modern plague. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 27(1), 3-19.
- Goodall, H.L. (2004). Narrative ethnography as applied communication research. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 32(3), 185-194.
- Goodall, H.L. (2006). *A need to know: The clandestine history of a CIA family*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Harter, L.M., Berquist, C., Titsworth, B.S., Novak, D., & Brokaw, T. (2005). The structuring of invisibility among the hidden homeless: The politics of space, stigma, and identity construction. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 33(4), 305-327.
- Harter, L.M., Scott, J.A., Novak, D.R., Leeman, M., & Morris, J.F. (2006). Freedom through

- flight: Performing a counter-narrative of disability. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 34(1), 3-29.
- Hinckley, J.J. (2005). The piano lesson: An autoethnography about changing clinical paradigms in aphasia practice. *Aphasiology*, 19(8), 765-779.
- Olson, L.N. (2004). The role of voice in the (re)construction of a battered woman's identity: An autoethnography of one woman's experiences of abuse. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 27(1), 1-33.
- Pelias, R.J. (2000). The critical life. *Communication Education*, 49(3), 220-228.
- Russell, L. (2004). A long way toward compassion. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 24(3/4), 233-254.
- Shields, D.C. (2000). Symbolic convergence and special communication theories: Sensing and examining dis/enchantment with the theoretical robustness of critical autoethnography. *Communication Monographs*, 67(4), 392-421.
- Shuler, S. (2007). Autoethnographic emotion: Studying and living emotional labor in the scholarly life. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 30(3), 255-283.