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# Growing Up

## A Journey Toward Theoretical Understanding

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This article describes a struggle and a journey. It shows a struggle between the need to be scholarly and the desire to be evocative; it travels carefully along a path toward less certainty. The article discusses how the author, as a doctoral student, was aware of the need to address her innate resistance to *use* theory and how she struggled to assimilate this into her research project and text. The author says the journey toward this understanding was akin to a growth spurt—sometimes painful and always surprising. Here, the author uses a narrative style to explore approaches to theory, knowledge, and representation and to show this struggle in the context of her research into lived experience. The author records the way how she constructed her own theoretical framework and show the dawning realization that decisions about approach and method are indeed theoretically informed and supported. Finally, the article discusses how the author faced her theories about theories and discovered that the journey is important and that certainty is an elusive destination.

**Keywords:** *theory; autoethnography; storytelling*

### The Study and the Struggle

This article describes a struggle as well as a study. It shows a struggle between the need to be scholarly and the desire to be evocative. As a doctoral student I was aware of the need to address my innate resistance to use theory and I struggled to assimilate this into my research project and text.

It is a sensible and important project, a study into the lived experience of teaching assistants (TA)s in primary schools (Grades K-6) in the United Kingdom. TAs are adults paid to support learning in school classrooms in the United Kingdom. They are not usually qualified teachers but work in support of teachers either in general roles, or more specifically with a child, subject area, or age group. In 2002, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) outlined its plans for reforming the school workforce in the United Kingdom to reduce teachers' workloads and thereby help to raise

educational standards (DfES, 2002). Reform of support staff roles, including TA, was a key part of the plan. Since then TAs have been under scrutiny. Their role, deployment, and effectiveness is being studied (e.g., Blatchford, Bassett, Brown, Martin, & Russell, 2004; Blatchford et al., 2006, 2007; Butt & Lance, 2005; Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education [HMI], 2002; Howes, Farrell, Kaplan, & Moss, 2003) to find out what they are doing and how they are doing it.

To augment this information, I have studied the work of the TA in a qualitative way that concentrates on how it feels to be an assistant in the classroom. I have used ethnographic methods to get alongside a small group of TAs, and I have combined this with a strand of autoethnography that enabled me to draw upon the store of data I have within myself from my own experiences as an assistant in the classroom. I wrote me into the story. I reflected on hundreds of hours of work as a TA, and on many dozens of hours of conversations, observations, and interactions that I recorded with other TAs. And then I stitched them together: the theory and the methodology; the stories and the feelings and the history; and the pain, frustration, boredom, hilarity, and fun. I made connexions between ethnography and autoethnography, their words and my words handled and mingled with care into a marvelous, messy, beautiful bricolage. I wrote our results as short stories. However, before any of that, I had to continue my struggle with theory:

We chatted, almost as friends, about my article. Someone has read my work and actually wants to discuss it. And then the crunch, I knew it would come. I have been here before and I did not fully resolve it. How foolish to imagine it would not come up again. "So, Celia, what kind of theory are you drawing on? What theoretical ideas are you using?" And my mind is totally blank. I cannot think of a single sensible thing to say, not even one word. I moved on swiftly to safer territory, but I cannot keep avoiding the issue. Later, at home, I unpick this difficulty and decide that I do not know what a "good" or "adequate" answer to the question would look like. I have an innate idea about theory, but I do not know what words to use to answer such a bald question. My thoughts go around in circles as I become less certain of my ability to do this.

What kind of theory are you drawing on?

What does theory do?

Theories show underlying meanings and understandings.

What does theory do?

Why do I need it and what am I going to do with it?

What does theory mean?

Why is it important?

I need to talk to colleagues, ask my supervisor, read more, write more, think more. I know I have got to do it but I do not know how to. Worse, I suspect that really I do not want to. The more I think about it, the more I convince myself that I do not even know what the question means. Perhaps I can write my way out of this dead end and create my own “paper chain” of theoretical ideas.

## Thinking About Theory

The word *theory* has various meanings depending on its context. In everyday usage it has come to mean a speculation or opinion, sometimes not fact based. In natural science it means more precisely something that can be tested and proved, and in the social sciences, it is associated with the paradigms and perspectives that organize research. It seems to me that “being theoretical” is akin to “being certain”; is there room for uncertainty I wonder? These paradigms are human constructs; they help to define the stance taken toward the main principles of ontology, ethics, epistemology, and methodology. In contrast, a perspective is less solidified or unified but can share elements of a paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In this context, both signify an approach that the researcher uses to plan, carry out, and discuss a piece of research. Therefore, as Becker (1986) suggested, the grand theory that underpins the work is already and unavoidably in place; it affects early choices and decisions and grows organically with the project. It is a relief and a delight to find that my initial inclination toward qualitative and interpretative methods and toward ethnography was theoretically driven, as is my commitment to storytelling as a method of representation.

I have been worrying about theory. I have wrestled with how to fit it in, or how to fit me in. Without doubt I am “terrorized by the literature” (Becker, 1986, p. 140). However, I find Becker’s assurances are extremely helpful: “none of us invent it all from scratch,” scholarship is a cumulative enterprise, and “we depend on our predecessors” (p. 140). He suggests that the element of choice is less free than some students and scholars would believe and that a whole host of small, practical choices made early on commit us to a paradigm. This suggests an approach that is organically developed rather than choosing a structure to fit ourselves into; we fit it into place by making a relationship between their work and our own. I realize that fitting into a structure, or box, was a major cause of my struggle with being theoretical. Maybe there is room for a little uncertainty?

## Using Theory

What do you *do* with theory? I am not sure that I know how to think of theory as a powerful, practical tool because there seems to be a gap between naming it or claiming it and actually using it. Reading about theory supports, challenges, refines, upholds, churns up, or spits out our certainties. Often it does all of these. Sometimes our ontological leanings are described, accounted for, and explained. This is philosophically pleasing; it informs, inspires, and cradles thinking. And yet Delamont says, “it is the deployment of theory that separates social science from journalism or storytelling” (Delamont, 2002, p. 20); this seems a rather more practical usage. Scholars talk about *using* a particular theory or theorist, I am learning to be a scholar, how can I use theory? Sikes says, “theory is essential and inescapable” and that we need some to live by (Sikes, 2006, p. 43). But what does using theory mean? In traditional investigation theory enables analysis. Theories are discussed and then findings are presented and analyzed in this light. However, because of the evocative aim of the work, I am resistant to theorizing in this way. It is positivist and structured and produces generalizations and abstract knowledge, whereas the kind of knowledge that I want to produce is evocative and experiential. There needs to be scholarship, but I do not want to chop up stories that celebrate the surprising nature of human experience to make them fit into conceptual categories because then they would not be stories anymore. I am not aiming for objective “distant theorizing” or “theoretical abstractions” (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 434).

I am troubled by the impossibility of producing an objective, neutral view of a lived experience. Geertz pointed out that there is a tension between constructing “ostensibly scientific” texts out of “broadly biographical” material (Geertz, 1988, p. 10), and this tension helps to explain my dis-ease. How do lives and theories merge or meet? To study human behavior, experience, and interaction, there needs to be interpretation, self awareness, cultural and linguistic mediation, and recognition of agency and contingency. I want to bring to life the particular contexts and circumstances that we lived with and to evoke characters, actions, spaces, and senses to build subjective, situated knowledge; I want to “transform collected materials into vivid, detailed accounts of lived experience that aim to show how lives are lived, understood and experienced” (Kiesinger, 1998, p. 129). I am not aiming for objectivity, or a neutral observer’s voice; Rorty reminds us that there is no view from nowhere, we cannot “step outside our skins and compare ourselves with something absolute” (Rorty, 1982, p. 6).

I find that I am not uncertain about this and that theories are giving me words to think with. I am drenched in theories and it is with great relief that I find that I am not alone. Others have gone before; “we depend on our predecessors”:

When I left the kitchen table and went to classes, I encountered a different conversation. The graduate curriculum revolved around building theory, thinking abstractly, and synthesizing the results of empirical studies. I soon learned that sociology was not about personal stories and feelings, but rather it focussed on theorizing, generalizing, and manipulating variables. (Ellis, 2009, p. 83)

With Carolyn Ellis, I did not want to focus on abstract theorizing. But for a while I got sidetracked by believing that had to. I think my earlier dilemma arose because I conflated two different ideas about theory. I jumbled the philosophical, which helps me to think clearly about my research approach, with something more structural that I wanted to resist. It is the difference between *theory* that we need to live a scholarly life, and *theorizing* that turns data into abstract knowledge. It has been a struggle to get here; this has been a confusing and painful journey, but a necessary one. At times I felt disconcerted, downhearted, and useless. I was out of my depth and wanted to give up. I grew tired and sick of the circles in my head and under my eyes. I was struggling with theory, and it was an unequal struggle.

Growing up is a journey that is confusing and painful; my teenage sons regularly look bewildered and so hurt by the process. They are driven on to independence by forces beyond their control because the urge to stretch and grow and change and understand is too powerful to resist. Learning to live a scholarly life and growing into a scholar are similarly irresistible, and sometimes painful. Tamas tells several tales to explore why and how she lost the truth that her early knowing self was so sure about. She wonders whether being educated was part of the painful process and says, “losing your Self feels terrible” (Tamas, 2009, p. 45). With Sophie I am unraveling some of my own epistemic certainties:

What does theory do?  
 Why do I need it and what am I going to do with it?  
 What does theory mean?  
 Why is it important?

I was certain that theory was a painful but unwanted necessity. I wanted nothing of theory. But now I find I am drawing upon it, clutching at it, and

braiding it into my paper chain. I want to stop fighting now, to embrace it and allow it to cradle my thinking rather than resist it as a structural straightjacket. Looking back on this growth spurt I see that theoretical understanding is important, not because it may help to make me appear scholarly, but because I need it to live by and to think with. It is not just a box that I can tick off, an irrelevant but necessary evil, a chapter ticked off in the thesis plan. What do I do with theory? I lean on it.

## **Along the Way**

How I feel and what I believe about society and the world has a direct effect on the way that I have chosen to investigate and represent it. I could not have got this far without some theoretical underpinning.

### **Ethnography**

My ontological approach is interactionist and interpretive. Prus says, “at the heart of the sociological enterprise is the idea that human behaviour is the product of community life” (Prus, 1996, p. 2) and that “social science has to respect the lived experiences of people” (p. 74). This is an approach that values people and the stories of their lives; it seeks to examine how they perceive, experience, and understand their world and the society that they move in. It values the meanings that they make, and it understands that the meaning making is situated, contextualized, and organic. In other words, it focuses on subjective rather than objective aspects of social life and interpretation of meaning rather than analysis of structures. Ellis says, “the main emphasis in symbolic interaction has been on face-to-face social interaction” (Ellis, 2004, p. 15). It follows that an interactionist, informed study will seek to ascertain meanings by immersion in a setting, often by participant observation; you answer questions by going to see for yourself. It is only by spending time with people, walking in their shoes, interacting face to face that we can begin to capture their experience. I have been depending on my predecessors more than I realized. I draw inspiration from traditional anthropologies and classical ethnographic research where time in the field was valued as a medium for getting alongside a community or group to catch the way they are and begin to understand the meanings that they live by and with. I can see that what I have done fits into this category of research practice. By spending time shadowing and observing the TAs, I captured their experience for myself as well as listening to the stories that they told

me. Furthermore, having spent time in the classroom as a TA I have been exposed to experiences that they may have encountered and, perhaps, have even felt what they felt.

## Narrative and Storytelling

If we wish to understand the deepest and most universal of human experiences, if we wish our work to be faithful to the lived experiences of people, if we wish for a union between poetics and science, or if we wish to use our privileges and skills to empower the people we study, then we should value the narrative. (Richardson, 1995, p. 219)

An interactionist and interpretive framework has led me to the consideration of narrative as a method of enquiry and representation. Clandinin and Connelly have described narrative as “a way of understanding experience” and that “experience is the stories people live” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxvi). This vantage point offers a way of approaching research because “stories lived and told educate the self and others, including the young and those such as researchers who are new to their communities” (p. xxvi). Narratives form a structure within which to think about our daily lives and about the magic and mess of human possibilities. Dauite and Lightfoot say, “narrative discourse organises life—social relations, interpretations of the past and plans for the future. The way people tell stories influences how they perceive, remember and prepare for future events” (Dauite & Lightfoot, 2004, p. xi). The way people tell stories is a way of making actions intelligible to others and also to themselves; Lodge has called narrative enquiry as “one of the fundamental sense-making operations of the mind” (Lodge, 1990, p. 141). This sense making uses language to recreate cultures so that “the reader may be enticed into vicariously experiencing [educational] events and confronting [educational] issues from vantage points previously unavailable to him or her” (Barone, 2001, p. 1). It is this kind of knowledge about the experience of the TA that I am aiming for.

Narrative is used in the sense-making phase of research in that listening to and sharing stories helps us to understand experiences and create shared meanings. It is also used in another way: in the writing-up phase. All types of research need a form of narrative report, the conventions of which have changed over time. But in the end, once all the problems of accessing and recording data have been overcome, Van Maanen says, “the fieldworker must still put into words what was learned of a culture so that a representation of

sorts may result” (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 7). At this “putting into words” stage some researchers have chosen to draw upon the expertise and practice of storytellers, to present their data. This is a creative and holistic approach to data presentation; it reflects human experience and human meaning making very closely. To tell stories is an innate part of being human; we narrate our lives to make sense of them. To use them in research writing can help to evoke drama, urgency, and intense emotion in a way that traditional research reports do not. Peter Clough has done this with his fictionalized accounts. He uses shards and splinters of data, real events, and conversations to create stories that could be true (Clough, 2002). Others are also using story forms to pursue evocative goals (see Bochner & Ellis, 1996; Banks & Banks, 1998; Cole, 2004; Denzin & Lincoln, 2002; Ellis, 2004; Richardson, 1997) and, as Caulley says, “the report of qualitative research with the short story form is one antidote to the syndrome of being bored” (2008, p. 427). He advocates the use of creative nonfiction to write “a research report that creates emotion in the reader and has a sense of realism, truth, authenticity, and authority” (p. 432). The definition of *narratives*, as given by Adams in his review article, is “human constructs that adhere to conventions” such as storylines, sequences, and genre (2008, p. 175). Along with short stories (both fictionalized and nonfiction), he adds the following categories to the definition: autoethnography, autoperformance, autobiography, personal narrative, and memoir. Autoethnography reeled me in a long time ago.

## Autoethnography

I have chosen to use autoethnography as one of my approaches because I want to make use of the rich stream of data I possess through my experiences as a TA. I am part of the story and I want to use that vantage point to both see into and reflect back on the experience. Ellis says, “autoethnography refers to writing about the personal and its relationship to culture. It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness” (2004, p. 37). But it is more than autobiography. It is a powerful and important tool in the study of lives because it shows how the personal is connected to the cultural. Autoethnography is autobiography that is aware of its position in the world. It shows this awareness by reflexivity. Autoethnographers gaze backwards and forwards through wide-angled, outward-looking lenses, and then inward, deeply inside. Relationships and institutions are examined and revealed through dialogue and action. It recognizes that language is important and that culture, history, and

positionality affect meanings. It shows how our “personal accounts count” (Holman Jones, 2005, p. 764); it shows how lives are lived and experienced. It takes the interactionist notion of participant observation and adds to it the explicit presence of the author, which is usually missing from traditional ethnographies, apart perhaps from background stories from fieldwork or “confessional tales” (Van Maanen, 1988). Furthermore, it concentrates on the author self as a site for study; it makes use of the autobiography of the researcher through self-examination and reflexivity to understand and construct meanings. It creates knowledge by recognizing the links between individuals and cultures and by examining and highlighting those links. It works powerfully on readers because it engenders intimate involvement with people and lives

Autoethnography creates powerful images, emotions, and understanding. One of the first pieces I read was *A Secret Life in a Culture of Thinness: Reflections of Body, Food and Bulimia*, by Lisa M Tillmann-Healy. This is a startling story of the author’s experiences with bulimia, the eating disorder. It is divided into 18 sections of varying length. By way of introduction, there is a short, shocking narrative of one bulimic episode, followed by a brief overview of the medical and psychological discourse, and the author’s reaction to these voices. The rest of the piece has a strong narrative thread. There is a clear linear progression; we learn the author’s age in each piece. Six poems are included in the piece; in each case, the poem is used to add more detail to the emotional portrait that is being drawn up. The stories give the narrative line, and the poems reflect the feelings of the author at the time; they allow us a picture inside her head. This is a deeply personal account; the editors of the volume in which it appears say that Tillman-Healy “invites readers into her secret life as a bulimic woman” (Bochner & Ellis, 1996, p. 31). She is frank and open about the condition in a way that feels bold and risky. I read it, I lived it, I breathed it, and I wrote in response to it:

I reacted positively to the structure and form of the piece. The narrative is compelling, with each small story we understand a little more about the nature of the condition and the power that it exerts. The inclusion of the medical and psychological information gives the reader just enough context against which to set the personal narrative. Some of the stories comprise pure dialogue, some narrate and some mix the two forms. The piece therefore feels richly textured; some of the writing is very dramatic. Passages that describe food and meals have a lyrical quality which caused me to reflect upon my own relationship with food and eating. Tillman-Healy writes beautiful descriptive passages about food, as she picks out the ingredients for a dinner she is to cook she sounds like a gourmet and she invites us to the feast. But we already know

how obsessive and destructive this passion is for her. From this writing I felt the awfulness of the vomiting; the power of control; the despair of not being in control; the peer pressure; the desperate need to conform; the sadness; the pain; the yearning. It made me think of my issues with food. It made me think of my sister and my mother. It made me wonder whether all women play this dangerous game with sustenance and image. I thought about control and powerlessness. I felt addiction and its destructive power. I thought about the incredible urge to eat even when we are not hungry, and I thought about hating our bodies. I wondered about the strange craving to have food in the mouth but not in the belly. I thought about self-worth and self-loathing and self-esteem. I realised that this illness affects people like me, near to me, not strangers. I realised that it is not about vanity. Afterwards I knew more about bulimia than I had done before I read it.

Tillman-Healy says that she was aiming for this reaction:

I purposefully told my story this way. I wrote a sensual text to pull you away from the abstractions and categories that fill traditional research on eating disorders and into the experience to help you engage how bulimia feels. I used multiple forms to mimic the complex and multilayered nature of food addiction. (Tillman-Healy, 1996, p. 104)

### **Whose Autoethnography?**

Autoethnography creates strong feelings. Recent discussion over form has identified a difference between evocative autoethnography and analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2006). A difference in intent may separate these two strands; purveyors of evocative autoethnography aim for an “epistemology of emotion” (Denzin, 1997, p. 228) that uses the feelings evoked by the account to speak to the reader in place of traditional analysis. Therefore, attempts at abstraction are resisted because they are regarded as a return to a detached, authorial voice, and because, by definition, autoethnography is evocative; “we use stories to do the work of analysis and theorizing” (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 436). In a special edition of the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* devoted to autoethnography, Anderson calls for the recognition of other visions of the genre, particularly a style that might fit into an analytic ethnographic frame. He regards the inclusion of theorizing in the work as added value but does not concur that his vision of autoethnography is, therefore, turning back to the production of positivist, undebatable conclusions. He says, “the qualities that have drawn me to analytic ethnography, the Chicago School tradition, and symbolic interaction

include its humble awareness of the limits of certainty, its compassion, commitment to social justice, and resistance to fundamentalisms” (Anderson, 2006, p. 462).

The debate goes back and forth. What am I going to do about it? I do not want to sit on the fence, but I can see strengths in both arguments. Anderson’s position, although contested by the theorists that I know and love best, is interesting because he talks of “added value.” This seems to echo Delamont’s suggestion, as discussed earlier, that the addition of theorizing is what marks social science from journalism. And I do need to do that; this is my doctoral thesis. I am troubled, too, by the either/or debate, the need to opt for evocation or analysis. With Vryan I do not believe that just because a work is strongly evocative or based on personal experience it is necessarily incompatible with analysis (Vryan, 2006). Nor do I believe that valuing analysis undermines an evocative purpose. I recognize the power of autoethnography to speak for itself and I honor the epistemology of emotion as an approach that works—I have showed that it worked for me and bulimia (discussed earlier, with Tilman’s work). But I also like the kind of writing that incorporates layers or juxtaposes different ways of looking at something to create meaning. The notion of a bricolage or montage is useful here (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). It involves the stitching or placing together of representations or images: “the quilter stitches, edits and puts slices of reality together. This process creates and brings psychological and emotional unity to an interpretive experience” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 7); I like the idea that I can embrace a complex of methodologies and analytic tools that I can link together in a unique way. That’s it! I am off the fence. This flexible, bricolage approach is the final part of my theoretical underpinning. I think I may have to break everybody’s rules by producing autoethnography, alongside ethnographic tales forged from my time spent with other TAs as a researcher. Both will aim at evocation and feeling. The bricolage can be pieced together with other sorts of narratives, self-commentary, other voices, field notes, snippets, even metaautoethnography (Ellis, 2009) and by alternating my gaze inward and outward I will fulfill the need to become analytical while remaining evocative. The stories will work together in the same way that short stories in a collection can work together to provide a lens and a perspective on each other; for example, each successive tale in Joyce’s *Dubliners* draws from understandings already woven by the previous stories. After all, “There is nothing more theoretical than a good story” (Ellis, 2004, p. 23).

## Assimilation

This article has described a struggle as well as a study. Indeed, it became part of the struggle; just as writing it helped me to think, so thinking it helped me to write. Like all good learning, the process was important and so I have charted my queries and doubts. I questioned what theory could do, and I feared that it might become a straightjacket. I resisted the idea of putting myself or my approach or my research into a neatly labeled box. Instead, I found that theory was already there in the background, that I had been depending on my predecessors, and that exploring it proved to be flexible, creative, supportive, and surprising.

This has been a journey away from certainties although I now find myself on surer, firmer ground. Along the way, I have started to understand theory and theorizing and the way that it relates to methodology. In linking up the theory I have also clarified and justified my approach and seen that I can keep both autoethnography and ethnography together, holding an evocative and analytic purpose in tension. Quinney says we should “imagine wildly” what we can do with ethnography, which expresses perfectly my innate understandings about the flexible and imaginative nature of ethnography and the way that I want to use it:

There are many ways to do ethnography, more ways that can be imagined in any philosophy. And among the ways is the telling of tales beyond any notion of science, objectivity, or rational discourse. Time and death do not wait on the tools of any trade. Imagine wildly the possibilities of ethnography. Perhaps you will make the trip of a lifetime. (Quinney, 1996, p. 382)

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