2015 Research at Andrews

Andrews University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/researchbrochure

Recommended Citation

http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/researchbrochure/6

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Research and Creative Scholarship at Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Annual Research Brochure by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact trbtsn@andrews.edu.
Rachel Williams-Smith studies herself. It sounds strange, but the study of self in the context of culture is a growing field known as autoethnography. “It’s a mix between the ‘auto,’ or self, the ‘ethno,’ or culture, and the ‘graphy,’ or storytelling,” explains Williams-Smith, who is chair of the Andrews University Department of Communication.

“The idea with autoethnography is that there are some experiences that are lodged deeply within the individual.” Such experiences may not be accessible through standard quantitative or even qualitative research. “Autoethnography can be a way to get inside the mind of the knower by the knower themselves,” she continues. “It’s a method that is highly subjective, but it embraces the subjective, instead of shying away from it, in order to leverage it for scholarly purposes.”

She emphasizes, in particular, the importance of stories in learning and knowing. “Intellectual scholarly knowledge is important, but if you think about it, some of the ways that we know the deepest are through stories that engage our imagination and grasp our emotions,” she says. Williams-Smith recognizes that autoethnography is not an end in itself for research, “but it is a great place for unearthing things that may otherwise never be articulated if they had not been uncovered through autoethnography.”

Williams-Smith has embraced the “unearthing” element of autoethnography. Raised in the south in a radical religiously conservative family, her unusual childhood and early adult life served as the perfect ground for an autoethnographic study. Removed from society at the age of 6 by her parents, she and her family forged a living in the remote hills of Tennessee as they waited for the end of time. At the age of 16, she reentered the 21st century “after eight years of relative isolation” and enrolled in Fountainview Academy, later completing degrees at Oakwood University and the University of Cincinnati. Her adaptation process, which included learning how to do her hair after years of wearing a bonnet, resembles the challenges faced by fictional time-travelers.

During her doctoral program at Regent University, she was encouraged by her professors to turn her story into an autoethnographic study. She began her research by using the “introspection and emotional recall” method utilized by autoethnographer Carolyn Ellis to dig deeper into her childhood memories (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). Using this method, the researcher goes back through periods of their life and creates note cards of memories, much as an ethnographer would for subject interviews.

Williams-Smith created about 78 pages of small print “field notes” that catalogue her memories in note form. She coded the memories for themes and patterns and then went back through the catalogue, paying close attention to anything that stood out as being emotionally significant. “I could tell [what was important]—even though I didn’t know why—either by the change in my life after, or by that sense inside that it was important,” she says. “For those memories, I allowed myself to go back into the time and place to the point where I was actually able to relive the experience. And of course the art is to capture that relived experience on paper. That is no easy task.”

This method, Williams-Smith explains, does two things: “It brings the past back into the present, where you can begin to explore it for its significance in relation to the study and it allows the reader to become involved in the study in a way that goes beyond intellectual knowledge.”

In addition to coding her memories, Williams-Smith coded her journals and letters from childhood through adulthood. Then, she conducted two forms of interviews: first, interviewing people who had known her

---

throughout different stages in her life and second, asking people to interview her.

The first form of interview allowed her to see what was important to other people in her journey, though not necessarily considered important to her. The second, which she refers to as “interviewing the interviewer,” is a relatively new technique in the field. “I got three professionals—a pastor, a scholar and a counselor—who had known me a long time and explained to them in depth what I was trying to do and I asked them, without consulting me, to construct interview questions for me based on what they knew of me and what they knew of my research,” she explains. “I recorded all of those interviews and transcribed them. They were so rich, so powerful in helping me create my dissertation.”

Using the materials she had gathered, Williams-Smith wrote her dissertation on the topic of cultural adaptation—her adaptation, in particular, from an isolated religious culture to the wider cultural milieu. She asked questions like, “How do you go from isolation and separation to being integrated into society?” and more broadly, “What are the unique adaptation challenges of going through such a transition in relation to religion?”

“Most people are raised in an environment where religion is just one of many demographic features of their lives,” she says. “Even in Adventist culture, religion is a very powerful part of our lives. It shapes our lifestyle and our friends and where we go to school and how we eat. However, most of us have televisions in our homes, we associate with other people, we go to jobs that may not be in the Adventist system, we have lives that intersect in so many ways with the wider milieu. What happens when someone is raised in a culture that is so isolated that there is almost none of that kind of association? When someone who is raised in that kind of isolation goes to the wider culture and begins to adapt to it, it’s possible to see the impact of religion on that adaptation process.”

Williams-Smith is still the only graduate of Regent University who has written a dissertation on autoethnography. But the field is growing and she intends to help nurture it. The methodology of autoethnography is particularly fascinating to her. While there is a current emphasis in scholarship on the performance aspect of autoethnography, she believes it can be used as a legitimate, scientific research technique. However, autoethnography is not entirely accepted by scholars in some fields. “There are some areas of social science research that are open to it and a lot that are not. For example, autoethnography is more common in anthropology, the arts, or health-based research than in some of the other social sciences,” she says. “I want to demonstrate how this can be, in its own way, a science, but a gripping science, an interesting science, a live science.”

She hopes to do this by teaching other people how to do autoethnography, “and to do it in a way that other more traditional social scientists can see as valid. I think that’s possible if we find methods that are obviously rigorous, obviously understood as authentic, and bring objectivity in the midst of subjectivity.”

Autoethnography is a useful technique for any field, she argues, because we all bring our own “lenses” to our research. Personal motivation or experience often lurks behind an individual’s career choice or research specialty. “You can only see, even microbes, through your own lenses,” she says. “You can’t see anyone else’s experience without lenses of your own. I believe that the more you embrace your own experience and story, the more you can understand it and then differentiate between your story and someone else’s. So I think autoethnography is a valid approach for every researcher at some point in order to see for themselves the lenses by which they do their own research.”

But Williams-Smith has a cautionary word for those who might want to jump into autoethnography research. “Autoethnography is not an easy form of research,” she warns. “If anything, it may be one of the hardest forms of research because dealing with your emotional self and trying to get through it and past it to understand your own experience is one of the most difficult things a person can ever do. Most people escape from the emotional by putting their brain into something else. This [autoethnography] forces your brain to get into the middle of your emotions. That’s very hard.”

Williams-Smith plans to take the work she did for her dissertation and turn it into a scholarly book. In particular, she wants to work with Caroline Ellis, whose “introspection and emotional recall” method she used in her research. In the meantime, she has been busy with the flurry of interviews and speaking invitations sparked by the publication of a popular version of her dissertation, an autobiography titled “Born Yesterday: The True Story of a Girl Born in the 20th Century but Raised in the 19th” (2014, Xulon Press, http://www.rachelwilliamssmith.com/).