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PERSONAL WORLDS: Discovering the Constituent Parts of the Individual

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As an autoethnographer, your story will emerge out of the juxtaposition of your own experience and outside influences, and the interaction between the two. The desire to engage in an autoethnography derives from the disjunctions that occur between one's own experience and the official narratives set out to explain it. Can you really filter out your own experience, even if you wanted to? Individuals have played an enormous part in my journey but you may find other recurring themes in your own.

Our personal worlds are complex and unique but share certain characteristics and this enables us to participate imaginatively in another person's world.

SENSE OF SELF

To most of us, our self image is a combination of whom we see in the mirror and the interaction of our physical, social, psychological and emotional sense of wellbeing in respect of that image. We are heavily influenced by the dominant voices from 19th and 20th century psychology, such as those of Freud, Skinner and Piaget, to name just a few of the founding fathers, but any encounter with the theoretical development of what is meant by self gives rise to the difficulties that can be encountered in any story about the self. This may be because there is a transient and illusive element to the self, which gives rise to doubt about the 'truth' of any stories that evolve. Romanyshyn (1982, p. 10) said that 'stories about oneself are episodic, tiny fragments taken from the continuous flow, over laid with emotion and half buried in stages of consciousness making reality an indefinable concept'.

He suggests that psychological life, his term for subjective experience, has a metaphorical character. He says the reflection in the mirror is not 'a visual double of the empirical me standing here on this side of the mirror ... when I look in the mirror I never see merely the double of myself but rather a figure in a story' (Romanyshyn 1982, p. 10).

The figure in our story can be construed as the culmination of, and glimpse into, all of the fleeting traces of our experience, mirrored in our consciousness. As Polkinghorne (1998, p. 1) reminds us, making meaning is not static, it cannot be measured, but 'it is meaningful, and human behaviour is generated and informed by this meaningfulness'.

In order to understand individuals, it seems important to think about how they see themselves, what impression these particular reflections leave. Our particular sense of self comes from a combination of our biological flow, our social context, our bodily awareness and our specific consciousness. We are aware that an important part of the self is a private, inner world of thoughts, feelings and fantasies which we only share if we choose to. We recognise a continuity from our younger selves but there is also a sense that we are continually renewed. Because of our capacity for reflexivity, we recognise the self of our experience and the self as others see us. William James first drew attention to the idea that our sense of who we are is intimately bound up with our awareness of our body and our thoughts and feelings. In his seminal text *The Principles of Psychology* (James, 1890) James's persistent concern with relations among conscious elements led him to the puzzling psychological question of the self. He argued that in every person's stream of consciousness there is a dichotomy between the 'me' and the 'not-me'. James divided the self into the 'I', the knower; and 'me', the known. However, one of the most influential theories of self was developed by Mead (1934), drawing on both James's (1890) distinction of 'I' (self as knower) and 'me' (self as known), and Cooley's (1902) theory of the looking-glass self. Cooley maintains that

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the self is reflected in the reactions of other people, who are the 'looking glass' for oneself. In order to understand what we are like, we need to see how others see us.

Mead also believed that knowledge of self and others develops simultaneously, both being dependent on social interaction; self and society represent a common whole and neither can exist without the other. According to Mead, this sense of self transforms our relation to the world and gives us a unique character. In being an object to ourselves we can perceive ourselves, interact with ourselves, communicate with ourselves; this self interaction can exert influence on the world in general and other people in particular. The self then is a process not a structure; the reflexive process allows us to act upon and respond to ourselves, and an important feature of this interaction is language.

PERSONAL WORLDS

Another way to perceive the world of the self is by consideration of the constituent parts of a personal world. No account of an experience can be considered without recourse to some consideration of the personal world of the individual who has constructed it. There are certain characteristics of personal worlds that might be useful to consider as you read autoethnographies or create your own. These common features provide a framework within which it is possible to consider the different levels of connection with the stories.

I am using the term personal world to mean: subjective awareness of oneself as a person and the overall pattern of personal life experiences. These experiences need to be considered in relation to aspects of self, world, experience of self and world, and the ways in which we organise experience and actions.

SPECIFIC CONSCIOUSNESS AND MULTIPLE WORLDS

The most common way to think about and write about the self has been the ego theory presenting it as a persistent entity (Blackmore, 2001). The ego theory of self emphasises the idea of unity and continuity of experience. However, Blackmore (2001, p. 525) points out that 'this apparent unity is just a collection of ever changing experiences tied together by such relationships as a physical body and a memory' and is more in keeping with bundle theory as described by Gallagher and Shear (1999). The sense of self cannot be separated from questions about consciousness, making any simple unified explanation difficult.

Jaynes (1979) suggests that consciousness is a metaphorical representation, not a direct copy of the world as experienced, and therefore any personal world is experienced from a specific viewpoint. Romanyshyn (1982) extends this idea to include the idea that consciousness is not experienced inside our heads, rather it is constituted by reflections of thoughts and feelings through the things and people outside who make up our world.

The variety of situations and people we encounter can lead us to feel that we inhabit multiple worlds. The self may appear to be a unifying feature but, depending on the context, we can exhibit and/or experience a different form of our personal world.

TIME AND SPACE

Within our conscious awareness there is a sense of the movement of time. Any narrative will represent a flow of experiences, actions and events. Pervading any present experience is an implicit awareness of events which have happened before and which may happen in the future. Our current world view may be seen to be a distillation of life so far, coloured by an anticipation of what life may hold in the future. Coupled with a sense of time is a sense of space. Our experiences are located in specific settings with differing qualities. Settings such as home may have a special emotional significance compared to work.

EMBODIMENT

Our personal worlds are inextricably coupled with a physical body, which makes our experiences seem vulnerable and transient as we gradually become conscious that our existence is limited. Biological functioning can be a constraint but the body can also be a means of expression. 'The human being is an embodied social agent' (Nettleton and Watson, 1998, p. 9), and this sense of embodiment is central to the ideas of Merleau-Ponty (1962), who proposes that all human perception is embodied, and that our senses cannot function independently of our bodies.

Shilling (1993, p. 5) talks of the human body as a project, an entity in the process of 'becoming' and Foucault (1988) has written of the 'practices' or 'technologies' of the self, the ways in which individuals internalise modes and rules of behaviour, emotion and thought and apply them in everyday life. This goes some way to explain why individuals voluntarily adopt practices and representations and why they become emotionally committed to taking certain positions in discourses. Grosz (1990, p. 65) suggests that these practices 'inscribe' or 'write' upon the body, marking it in culturally specific ways which are then 'read' or interpreted by others. Nowhere is this more evident than around the area of body image, food and eating. Lupton (1996, p. 17) describes the importance of physical appearance in western society and the extent to which control over one's body is 'a potent symbol of the extent to which their "owners" possess self control'.

The discourse around physical violence and resulting trauma draws attention to the embodiment of memories, where the experience is suppressed and subsequently 'finds it repressed by some part of himself which functions as a stranger, hiding self from the self's experience according to unfathomable criteria and requirements' (Culbertson, 1995, p. 169). These unfathomable criteria are one explanation for 'victims' gaining

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weight to cover up the trauma and finding themselves reliving the trauma as they attempt to reduce weight to the level pertaining when they were traumatised.

A good illustration of the outward display of embodiment is represented in the distinction between the 'civilised' and the 'grotesque' body (Lupton, 1996, p. 19). A civilised body is one that is contained and socially managed and conforms to dominant norms of behaviour, whereas the grotesque body is unruly and less controlled by respectability. Managing and regulating one's emotions has become synonymous with the perceived benefits of rationality and self control, and the extreme example of this is perhaps exhibited in the eating practice of self starvation.

EMOTIONS

Feelings and emotions may be part of the backdrop to our lives or a central and overwhelming dynamic in the pattern of our lives. In Aristotle's inquiry, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, into virtue, character, and the good life, his challenge is to manage our emotional life with intelligence. 'Passions when well exercised can have wisdom, guide thinking, values and survival but they can also go awry' (cited in Goleman, 1997, p. xiv). Candace Pert (1997), who has spent her professional life trying to integrate eastern ideas with science, suggests that the emotions exist in the body as both informational chemicals such as neuropeptides but also in another realm where we experience feeling and inspiration beyond the physical. This unity of mind and body is aptly illustrated by the body blushing red following an embarrassing experience.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

As we exist bodily, so we are part of a physical world. Sensory qualities attributed to the environment such as temperature, comfort and colour all form an intrinsic part of personal experience. Our senses interact with our physical environment: sights, sounds, smells and tastes, along with significant artefacts, may carry special significance because of associations they have for us. These connections are epitomised in Proust's celebrated evocation of the madeleines and what he calls his inner story:

as I came home, my mother, seeing that I was cold, offered me some tea, a thing I did not ordinarily take. I declined at first, and then, for no particular reason, changed my mind. She sent out for one of those short, plump little cakes called 'petites madeleines', which look as though they had been moulded in the fluted scallop of a pilgrim's shell. And soon, mechanically, weary after a dull day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate, a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, but individual, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent

to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory – this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it was myself. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, accidental, mortal. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? I was conscious that it was connected with the taste of tea and cake, but that it infinitely transcended those savours, could not, indeed, be of the same nature as theirs. Whence did it come? What did it signify? How could I seize upon and define it? (Proust, 2003, p. 101)

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Personal worlds form part of a larger social world. Other people play influential roles in our narrative and in our emotional experience. These others help to create our social worlds and we are enmeshed together in a complex process of mutual definition and construction. Indeed, some people exert greater power of definition over social reality than others, ensuring that we come to assimilate the dominant value system. The medical model of healthcare might be deemed to be one such value system, with allopathic medicine being the dominant system and ayurvedic traditions treated as other.

SENSE OF SELF AND AGENCY

Ethnographers have typically described two contrasting patterns of selfhood referring to the degree of affiliation of a self with its social milieu. Jung (1964) believed that a human being is inwardly whole, but despite losing contact with important parts of our selves, we can reintegrate our different parts if we listen to the messages of our dreams and waking imagination. Individuation is the goal of life, where we harmonise the various components of our psyche. The individuated self is located in the context of the cultural valuation of independence, autonomy and differentiation, whereas the unindividuated self includes a wide variety of significant others (Becker, 1995).

The western view of self is not homogenous and varies among other things with gender and ethnicity, but the idealised self is consistently portrayed as autonomous and unrelated to self fulfilment and key values of authenticity. There is a need to be cautious in considering the self of autobiography as anything more than partial. Neisser (1994, p. 8) draws attention to the oblivious self and talks of the self as a reconstruction, warning that different versions may be conceived everyday.

VALUES AND SEARCH FOR MEANING

The search for meaning and coherence in life gives order and direction to the choices we make about how to live our lives. The point and purpose of our existence has been



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traditionally found in religion but is also found in the philosophy of reflective people regardless of whether they have a specific religious belief. We weave the stories of our lives to give them meaning but Smith and Sparkes (2002, p. 143) remind us that ‘storytellers do coherence through artful practices’ that belie the contradictions and distortions in our fragmented lives.

REFLEXIVENESS

Reflexive self awareness is integral to what it is to be human. Not only can the individual exist in multiple identities by being immersed in them, but they can also adopt different perspectives towards themselves by standing back and reflecting. Not only can we think of our own personal world as if it were that of someone else, we can also think of someone else’s world as if it were our own. This gives us the capacity for empathy and openness to the idea that other people’s worlds may be different from our own.

This theoretical outline of the composition of a personal world attempts to provide a framework within which it is possible to reflect on and examine the stories of others. The illustration that follows should allow you to test out the usefulness of such a framework for yourselves.



A FRAGMENT OF MY PERSONAL WORLD



We begin to understand others when we can imagine ourselves in their world and we make sense of ourselves by weaving stories. I offer below the warp and weft of my own story as I provide some tiny fragments of the continuous flow that has made up my own journey so far. This was written originally for a presentation that included illustrations and allowed intonation in my voice to change the meaning of words but is represented here as an excerpt from the textual form, to give a glimpse of my position in this world we call research.

MIXING ART AND SCIENCE: A BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATERS OR A BRIDGE TOO FAR¹

My journey to belong in the world of research spans five decades. Are these isolated experiences, gaps to be treated with caution, or bridges with spans across memories of feelings, study, books and popular culture that interweave to form a journey of belonging?

1 First published as Muncey (2006).



THE JOURNEY

1950s

I stand in the school playground watching my peers playing Fairies and Witches. I know it is a game that involves running around divided into two groups; I do not understand the rules, I am not asked to join in and I don't know how to. I feel excluded and this is my first experience of being an outsider.

1960s

My alienation continues at school. I survive but don't really understand how the mixture of subjects that pitch up in my school calendar relate to each other or make up what I now know is a curriculum. I'm forced to read things that will 'do me good', that bore me and prevented from reading things like comics that interest me.

My home life is a mess but completely hidden from public view and in my head I concoct complicated survival strategies that keep the public and the private both hidden and separate. I leave school at 15, pregnant and alone. By 16, I am married with a child, and very hard up, with one of my most pressing tasks being to invent different ways of disguising mince for meals. I can remember wondering how politics worked, why some people are poor and some rich, and I had my first experience of research.

I went to my GP for a prescription for the contraceptive pill. He tells me I am to be in a research project looking at the effect of the pill. I remember being told he would have to find a person to act as a control and I thought at the time that to find a 17-year-old with an 18-month-old child might be quite tricky. My consent was assumed rather than informed, and I didn't find out the results until exploring years later. The outcome of the research was that the pill was dangerous for some women, but I guess my GP thought it was more important that I didn't get pregnant again rather than having any concerns about me dying.

I go to see Bob Dylan at the Isle of Wight festival and know that I have entered a new era without being told.

1970s

My lot improves in the 1970s. I realise that marriage to a depressed, mixed-up man is rather self destructive and I use my meagre 'O' levels to enter nursing. My first role model remains to this day. Sister M made us serve up gravy to patients in a jug and pour it separately in case they didn't want their dinner swamped with gravy. She would order 15 ml of sherry to help promote the appetites of poorly patients. Her example has stayed with me as the epitome of thoughtful individual care.

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I escape the confines of the institution to work in the community. I experience my first taste of sociology. I remember hearing that all children of young single parents wet the bed and go on to become juvenile delinquents. I wait for it to happen; the theory sounds powerful.

As a young keen district nurse I meet Norah, who teaches me the importance of listening and asking the right questions. Norah is in her 80s and has had a leg ulcer for many years. I am hell bent on healing it. Her anxiety increases in direct proportion to the stage of healing. I think she is concerned about my not visiting if the ulcer heals. I anticipate the future paper on the Social Ulcer in about 10 or 15 years time, but in 1976 I only have my naive experience (Wise, 1986). Frustrated by Norah's growing anxiety, I confront her. What is her problem? For years she has had an exudate from the wound which she calls 'the bad' and if it heals, where will all the bad go? She doesn't understand physiology; she has her own system of meaning, and it is a salutary lesson that has stayed with me (Muncey and Parker, 2002).

I first hear 'American Pie', by Don McLean, and I become word perfect without comprehending the lyrics.

1980s

I'm bringing up children in an education system that doesn't seem to fit any better than the one I left. One is dyslexic and will struggle with the effort of reading if it is about his favourite topic of hunting, shooting and fishing and yet he is admonished for not being receptive to extra French lessons at lunchtime. The other is bored and she is rebuked for missing out some maths books, not because she couldn't do the maths, but because the teacher is furious that she missed out a stage without asking. I am left wondering what education is for and about, and encourage my children to follow their hobbies rather than what is deemed 'good for them'.

Professionally, I have entered the world of Health Visiting, where I quickly realise the futility of trying to sell health to people who have no shared concept of what it is. I liken it to the selling of double-glazing, where most people at best ignore you or at worst tell you to go away.

I start to re-engage with the academic world; I balance a degree with perfecting the art of the cheesecake. The boundaries of the subject for me are epitomised by the Stroop phenomenon (Stroop, 1935) and the discovery of George Kelly and Personal Construct Theory (Kelly, 1955). I despaired of ever finding a psychological perspective that felt comfortable with my world view, but Kelly came as close as it gets. The Stroop phenomenon on the other hand is a way of measuring how automatic or intentional some well-practised tasks are and how we respond in conflict situations. The two aspects of cognitive development that are demonstrated by the Stroop task are naming response and counting response. When two responses compete or are in conflict, the time required to make the correct decision is dependent on speed and accuracy. It epitomises the reductionist view of the person.

Kelly on the other hand, from the philosophical standpoint of constructive alternativism, suggests there are no facts in life – there are as many ways of construing an

event as people can conceive. The theory's basic assumption is that each person is a scientist whose *raison d'être* is to develop an increasingly useful model to enable her/him to cope with the world. Kelly suggested that 'nuggets of truth do not lie out there waiting to be discovered' (Kelly, 1970, p. 1). Reality is constructed reality, it is negotiated and contested, it is provisional and subject to revision. Kelly's criterion of good research is not its validity or its reliability; it is its viability, its fertility in the business of living. Kelly's scientist is an ordinary human being, engaged in the most natural of all human activities – enquiry. Kelly's refreshing view entered the world in 1955 and yet was mostly ignored until the 1970s.

Kelly was very aware himself of the subversive nature of his ideas. First, in contrast to traditional research, Kelly does not separate the author from its subjects. His principle of reflexivity puts researcher and researched in the same universe of discourse. Kelly himself was one of the pioneers of unconventional methods of asking questions; he focused on what is inarticulate and on those whose voices go unheard. For me, there is no competition, the fascinating world of Kelly far outweighs the contribution of the Stroop phenomenon, but a paradoxical part of me loved doing the experiments.

I might have stayed with Kelly. Indeed I considered offering him up as the ultimate mixed method. Repertory grids give unique individual perceptions of the world while generating quantitative data to keep the most extreme rationalist happy.

I've discovered *Jonathon Livingstone Seagull* (Bach, 1973), and Kahlil Gibran's (1980) *The Prophet*. I'm entering an existential world before I know the meaning of the word, but it frees me from the memories of literature at school and I start to feel liberated.

1990s

A feminist itch needs scratching at the beginning of the 1990s. With that wonderful synchronicity in life that I have come to respect and rely on, a masters degree in women's studies is waiting locally for my attention. For the first time, I question the conventional approaches to what knowledge is, a knowledge system that appeared to exclude the meaning of the lived experience of many people whose stories lie outside the contrived world of empirical research. For the first time, I found people allowing me to express a view without telling me I was wrong or misguided. It was not wrong to be passionately interested in something simply because I had personal experience of it. For the first time, I realised that we don't just learn from formal historical events, but from subjective feelings and thoughts with which we experience the events of our everyday lives; and so it was that I started to examine why I had never felt a 'proper' nurse or a 'proper' mother.

It was at this time I started to attend conferences and to listen to the many and varied explanations put forward to explain the cause, side effects and solutions to teenage pregnancy. I was fascinated by the studies that attempted to explain the reasons for, and lived experience of, the pregnant adolescent and realised they were not telling my story.

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'American Pie' is re-released and a hit all over again. This time I have a Brunerian 'aha' experience. 'Drove my Chevy to the levee but the levee was dry' were words I could sing word perfectly but never really understood. Juxtaposed with hearing the song again is a news item about the levees' being flooded down the Mississippi. This becomes an anecdote in my teaching on developing curricula about the length of time some things take to learn and therefore the futility of doing educational evaluations too soon.

The early 1990s are characterised by death: the suicide of my oldest friend and the death of my father. I embark on a course called 'Life and Death'; note the ambiguities in my own views about abortion, suicide, capital punishment and euthanasia. I conclude that death itself is a red herring. It is suffering that is the crux of the matter.

By the end of the 1990s I have read the *Celestine Prophecy* (Redfield, 1994). It sparks an interest in a world beyond conventional explanations and I add 'New Age' to the growing list of concepts that appear to alienate me from the academic world.

I read books that give me more insight into real life issues than do academic texts, and I start to recommend them to my students. I recommend *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* by Roddy Doyle (1993) to anyone who wants to understand how a child might feel when his father leaves. It takes you into the mind of a child in a way that, for me, phenomenological studies don't.

I never got the chance to run away. I was too late. He left first, The way the door shut; he didn't slam it. Something; I just knew: he wasn't coming back. He just closed it, like he was going down to the shops, except it was the front door and we only used the front door when people came. He didn't slam it. He closed it behind him – I saw him in the glass. He waited for a few seconds, then went. He didn't have a suitcase or even a jacket, but I knew. (Doyle, 1993, p. 280)

2000s

A craving to be included in the academic community culminated in a doctoral study that paradoxically marked the end of my need to conform. All of my discomfort with received wisdom is finding solace in answers from outside mainstream evidence. The paradigm shift that I feel is occurring in the world is reflected in the shift in my own views to find solutions outside conventional approaches.

The climb up the academic ladder allowed me to understand how knowledge is generated and the power structures that are in place to perpetuate certain claims. I recognise that expert knowledge is socially sanctioned in a way that common sense knowledge is usually not, and the various practices that are accorded higher or lower status dependent on how it has been produced and who is saying it. So at the same time as learning the rules of the research game, my own story became entwined with what I was reading and hearing and I started to notice that the expert voices were not telling my story.

The puzzle over deviancy or otherwise of my individual case gives me further cause to reflect on how many other truths are denied. This presents a recurring philosophical idea in my patchwork life, namely, what is truth? Whose truth is valuable? Can truth vary? Is an experience true if it corresponds with the facts, or is there an absolute truth that depends on the consistency of the whole? Research has never been very successful in accepting new ideas that don't conform to received wisdom, hence the proliferation of theory to support false memory syndrome (FMS) (Lynn and Payne, 1997; Laurence et al., 1998). Rather than accept the harsh reality, that some women damaged by sexual abuse may be telling the truth, FMS conveys a powerful expert voice to silence the weakened victim.

In vain attempts to detail the inner cognitive processes, memory researchers epitomised by Kihlstrom (1998) introduce ideas such as 'exhumed memory': the exhumation of repressed memories, particularly associated with forms of abuse but clearly more concerned with issues of truth and reality. This appears to support the idea that a memory, thought to be long forgotten, must be considered a lie unless historical evidence can be found to support it.

By now I have been inspired by Chopra's (1990) *Quantum Healing*, where I find a fascinating proposal that the intelligence of the body is much better able to heal itself, and I find a confidence to write my own papers to see if anyone else agrees with my way of thinking. In one particular paper I write of my growing frustration with my students' battle with phenomenology. I ask 'is the philosophical angst of phenomenology really worth the effort?' and reach the conclusion that really it isn't (Muncey, 2004). Phenomenologists suggest that life is separated between everyday life (structured by habits) and 'provinces of meaning', where we reflect on everyday life.

Take, for example the difference between the meaning **of** life and finding meaning **in** life. We either take on the simple truth that God is the provider of life and all its sacred rituals; or at the other extreme, in 'His or her' absence, like the existentialist Camus, we liken it to rolling a stone up hill, only to find it rolling down again with monotonous regularity (Camus, 2000). Asking people to talk about the meaning of any 'lived experience' is a similar philosophical quest. I would suggest that what novice phenomenological researchers may be doing is asking what makes particular experiences meaningful. One is asking them to philosophise and the other to tell their story by describing meaningful events.

As my children leave home I am drawn to fill a gap in my life. You perhaps won't be surprised, in the light of my friend's suicide in the last decade, that I become a Samaritan. Here, I learn about the dreariness and staggering loneliness in people's mixed up lives. I am faced with many contradictions. I remember Durkheim's (1982a) *Rules of Sociological Method*: explanation requires comparison; comparison requires classification; classification requires the definition of those facts to be classified, compared, and ultimately explained. Consistent with these rules, Durkheim (1982b, p. 42) began his 1897 work with an insistence that

our first task ... must be to determine the order of facts to be studied under the name of suicide ... we must inquire whether, among the different varieties of death, some have common qualities objective enough to be recognized by all honest observers.

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Durkheim's rules specifically suppress the presence of actual people so that objectivity and honesty can prevail. Compare this with an excerpt from one of the characters in Hornby's (2005) book *A Long Way Down*

I'd spent the previous couple of months looking up suicide inquests on the internet, just out of curiosity. And nearly every single time, the coroner says the same thing: 'He took his life while the balance of his mind was disturbed.' And then you read the story about the poor bastard: his wife was sleeping with his best friend, he's lost his job, his daughter had been killed in a road accident some months before ... Hello, Mr Coroner? Anyone at home? I'm sorry, but there's no disturbed mental balance here, my friend. I'd say he got it just right. Bad thing upon bad thing until you can't take any more, and then it's off to the nearest multi-story car park in the family hatchback with a length of rubber tubing. Surely that's fair enough? Surely the coroner's inquest should read, 'He took his own life after sober and careful contemplation of the fucking shambles it had become?' (Hornby, 2005, p. 7)

Hornby's description in the words of his character resonates with the experiences I have heard from the suicidal.

Finally, after three decades I discover that 'American Pie' is autobiographical (Dearborn, 1972). The reason it resonates is that it depicts an era that I am familiar with and people that are part of my history. This resonance links me to a time and place and validates my identity.

A BRIDGE TOO FAR?

Finally, I come full circle to the present day; the latest bridge in my thinking comes from a workshop I attend at a conference where I am introduced to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin provides my bridge between art and science. He is known as a social thinker as well as a literary critic. He trained as a scholar in the philological tradition in which the study of language and literature is inextricably linked, and his work parallels the current reawakening of interest in the everyday world. His is one of several modern epistemologies that seek to grasp human behaviour through the use humans make of language. Holquist (2002, p. 30) suggests that Bakhtin uses 'the literary genre of the novel as an allegory for representing existence as the condition of authoring'. An authoring of the unique place I occupy in existence looks very much like an autoethnographic text.

Full Circle

This text ended at a point in 2005. Since then a myriad of further books, films, dreams and conversations have added to my world view. I retired from work only to find that work didn't stop. I have started to ponder on the extent to which anyone has more

than one identity, more than one story, and I remain fascinated by the myriad of individuals who make up my world.

Summary

- Specific consciousness and multiple worlds: the self is a collection of ever-changing experiences tied together by such relationships as a physical body and a memory.
- Time and space: all narrative will represent a flow of experiences, actions and events, a distillation of life so far coupled with an anticipation of the future.
- Embodiment: our senses cannot function independently of our bodies.
- Emotions: emotions exist in the body both as informational chemicals and also in another realm where we experience feeling and inspiration beyond the physical.
- Physical environment: sensory qualities form an intrinsic part of the personal experience.
- Social context: other people play influential roles in our narrative and some come to be associated with a dominant value system.
- Sense of self and agency: the western view of self is not homogenous and varies among other things with gender and ethnicity; but the idealised self is consistently portrayed as autonomous and unrelated, with self fulfilment and authenticity as key values.
- Values and search for meaning: coherence and meaning are found in reflection.
- Reflexiveness: multiple identities and reflexivity give us the capacity for empathy and entry to another's world of meaning.

And from the example given:

- Self is a process not a structure. The process of becoming is always in motion. Any evocation of an experience is always incomplete and in transition, and at best can only be described as a snapshot.
- The self, the individual, is a highly reflexive, historically positioned entity, who attempts to engage in meaningful relationships with their culture, their society and other individuals. Like an iceberg, only a fraction of them is visible and autoethnography attempts to increase this visibility to provide a wider range of stories for individuals to connect with.
- Autoethnographies need to be organised around certain features: portrayal of the self, one's positioning in the world, the interaction of the experience of self in a particular world and the ways in which we come to organise experience and our actions.
- If consciousness is not a direct copy of the world then metaphor is an excellent vehicle for unfolding experience.

FURTHER READING

Coffey, Amanda (1999) *The Ethnographic Self: Fieldwork and the representation of identity*. Sage, London.

For further consideration of the iterative relationship between the researcher and the field, Coffey's text draws attention to the creation of the ethnographic self and the embodiment of the field and the self.

Freshwater, Dawn (2002) *Therapeutic Nursing: Improving patient care through self awareness and reflection*. Sage, London.

Chapter 1 gives an excellent overview of the theories of self, and links to recent debates about the challenges to seeing the self as a unified set of experiences.

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