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NEGOTIATING AND NAVIGATING MY FAT BODY – FEMINIST AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ENCOUNTERS

*NEGOCIANDO Y NAVEGANDO MI CUERPO GORDO – ENCUENTROS FEMINISTAS
AUTOETNOGRÁFICOS*

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Palabras clave

Autoetnografía
Feminismo
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Interseccionalidad

Resumen

En este artículo interactúo con la autoetnografía feminista como forma de aproximación al fenómeno cultural de ser una mujer “gorda”. La autoetnografía feminista es un enfoque profundo y comprometido, que logra poner de relieve la colonización de espacios y discursos. El proceso destaca la coexistencia y la exposición de “yoes” líquidos vulnerables – cuestionando nociones de un yo, que es una “identidad” cuidadosamente contenida y controlada. El proceso crítico de la autoetnografía feminista se entrelaza con bibliografía sobre investigación feminista, feminismos, autoetnografía, estudios críticos sobre la gordura e interseccionalidad. Un punto clave de esta investigación es el proceso reflexivo de investigar las experiencias de ser una “mujer gorda” y como yo (y mi discurso) “resisto[imos] a las normas sociales e institucionales que frecuentemente prescriben la investigación” y “promocionan voces de mujeres y experiencias únicas” (Averett, Soper, 2011, p. 371-372).

Abstract

Keywords

Autoethnography
Feminism
Fat Woman
Reflexive
Overweight
Intersectionality

In this paper, I engage with feminist autoethnography as a way of gaining insight into the cultural phenomenon of being a ‘fat’ woman. Feminist autoethnography is an in-depth and engaged approach, opening up colonised spaces and discourses. The process highlights the being with and exposing vulnerable fluid ‘selves’ – challenging notions of a self, which is a neatly contained and managed ‘identity’. The critical process of feminist autoethnography interweaves with the literature in feminist research, feminism, autoethnography, critical fat studies, and intersectionality. A key to this exploration is the reflexive process of researching the experiences of being a ‘fat’ woman’ and whether I (and my discourse) “resists the social and institutional norms that often dictate research” and “promote women’s voices and unique experiences” (Averett, Soper, 2011, p. 371-372).

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Sometimes, when swimming, I liken my body to a seal’s – covered in blubber and buoyant. It helps when I put on the swimsuit and my belly’s sag is exposed and my thighs’ wobbles are wobbling. It helps as I walk from the changing room, to the shared shower, to the swimming pool. I stand at the edge of the pool and dive in – I love diving into the water and I love swimming; but it requires an effort of either conscious seal-like strength or a disconnection from the roundness, the stares and the sneers. (Field Journal Extract 1).

Exploring my embodied ‘fat body’ is and has been an ongoing project of mine for a number of years. With the increasing focus within health and neoliberal citizenship discourses around obesity, healthy eating and exercise alongside the continued objectification of women’s bodies (Gleeson & Frith, 2006), I wanted to give a voice to the everyday (Muncey, 2005) colonised spaces of the fat woman (Murray, 2008). Over the last two and a half years I have been (self) consciously engaged in an autoethnographic encounter with my body. In this paper I will reflect on the process of this feminist methodology and explore some of the issues which arose, and still do. I will ‘present’ a number of experiential living exerts (Chang, 2008) as ongoing examples of my ‘fat life’. These exerts are non-sequential in character and represent examples from a wide time frame. The intention being that these are added to the reflective and analytical aspects of the rest of my writing. Reflection and indeed criticality are core aspects of feminist research where the role of the researcher is acknowledged as interwoven within the social worlds that she researches (Burman, 2006; Goodley & Smailes, 2011; Mauther & Doucet 2003). Reflecting on our influence and positionality enables us to open up the spaces of knowledge from invisible partiality to potentially shared, reciprocal and contested arenas. With this in mind throughout this article salient points get revisited again and again, as they emerge in their many guises and manifestations.

Erica Burman (2006, p. 316) encapsulates this engagement with reflexivity as being “research that refuses the scientific positioning of the neutral observer, to instead highlight and explore the nature of the researcher involvement as a relevant resource”. It is not just the notion of subjectivity with which feminist research engages but also the explicit negotiations and implications of power; power between the researcher and the researched and the power of the constructs in which we reside and construct. Diane Burns and Melanie Walker (2005, p. 67) describe this as the “implication of the researcher in the production of knowledge and a breaking down of the “masculinist” separation of the private [world of the researcher] through the public [activity of research]”.

Why Autoethnography for ‘fat’ spaces

I am wearing some stretch cords – I can comfortably cycle in them and they cover me well in a loose fashion ... how do I look, do I look like I am ashamed or self-conscious about my body, do I look like I am hiding ... that is not the look I want or indeed feel; I want to look of comfort, style and freedom ... that I don’t care ... am confident and don’t need to contribute to the shamed invisibility and hidden of fat ... I have chosen the trousers because they are a

lovely colour and comfortable ... and they stretch, they are loose ... (Field Journal Extract 2).

Let us not fool ourselves, fat stigma, women's body dissatisfaction and the implications of having a body which does not conform to the prescriptions of slimness are hugely damaging to women (Bordo, 1990; Brooke, 1999; Chrisler, 2011; Cooper, 2010; Longhurst, 2011; Murray, 2005). I have lived in my 'fat' body for many years, and both my actual size has fluctuated, as well as my positioning within my 'fat' identity. I deliberately use the word fat as it is about claiming or even 'coming out' as fat. It moves me into a space of ownership. In some ways it is a similar process to how queer was claimed as an identity which cocked a snook at homophobia. Susan Bordo (1990) writes about how we need to gain insight and understand the process in which we are embedded and through which our experience is constructed. While Robyn Longhurst (2011) writes about how the process of construction, enacting and performing knowledge is always embodied. Feminist autoethnography has enabled me to really explore how my fat is "a fluid subject position relative to social norms, it relates to shared experiences, is ambiguous, has room in identity politics and is thus generally self-defined" (Cooper, 2010, p. 1021).

Part of my intention was to get insight into the phenomenon of being a fat woman, without doing it from the position of "fat on the way to being slim" (Longhurst, 2011, p. 5) or from the position of 'unhappy fat woman whose life is without value because she is fat'. The tropes that fat women can draw on are very limited in this way. I know that while being fat is certainly a very influential aspect to how I perform my identity, there is more going on than I am given to believe. Joan Chrisler (2011) considers that fat women's bodies are always located as something to 'make better' rather than bodies with their natural rhythms, changes and ways of being. Longhurst (2011) adds to this picture of pathologisation when she writes about the before and after story lines available in dieting narratives. Elena Levy-Navarro (2012, p. 341) encapsulates this limited repertoire as one which positions fat women as "the person who more clearly and noticeably lives by cultural imperatives to live for the profits of tomorrow". In other words being a fat woman is either a 'passing through' identity or a 'something wrong' identity.

Data sets

It's a beautiful day out and I am on my bike, enjoying the sun, being fast and silent – my thighs pump away as I set myself the task of going uphill, not stopping until I get to the top. I am red and sweaty of face, breathing heavily

and nearly at the top. The thin bloke behind me finally manages to pass me at the top, saying ‘stupid fat cow’ and cycles on (Field Journal Extract 3).

The ‘data’, for want of a better word, on which I draw, is a mix of journals, reflective writing, memories and responses to the literature. The intersectionality and fluidity of my multiple identities emerge throughout the interweaving of these resources. Thus, my autoethnography reflects my feminist, humanist, academic and reflective positioning. Like Carol Ronai (1995, p. 395) I worked with a “layered account” where “the boundaries of these identities converge, blur, and separate as I write”. It is the looking back and forth, responding and being in dialogue with the literature which has also formed a very rich seam of insight (Muncey, 2005). Wolff-Michael Roth (2009, p. 4) considers that at the centre of autoethnography is how “authors take the special insights that they gain from their particular position in the life world of people and use it as a vantage point to write, and write about, the people”. So the process requires us to work with both ‘a priori’ set of insights as well as the emergent.

Clearly this research process can be messy and disconcerting, challenging preconceived ideas of who we are and how we become. In many ways this merely reflects feminist qualitative researchers’ concern with “the whole concept of authenticity” and the erroneous representation “of identity as coherent” (Lovell, 2005, para. 17). Engaging with this confusing experience is ever developing, where I started two and a half years ago is not where I am now. What has been a constant is the importance of connecting my personal experience with theory (Wall, 2008). This is not just as a retrospective exercise of locating my particularity in wider discourses, but also one which reveals my attachment to emergent fixed abstract constructs as if I was separate from the interwoven and every changing landscape of self (Lovell, 2005).

Emergent positionalities

I am meeting a friend for supper in a restaurant and arrive early. We haven’t been here before – the seats and tables are closely packed together, and there is little space between. I can feel my anxiety about this, will I squeeze past people sitting down without joggling them while they eat or will I need to ask them to move in? The waiter asks me to follow him to the table we have ... it is too small a space. It would just about fit me if I was on my own but won’t when my friend arrives, who is big as well. I take a deep breath and look the waiter in the eye and ask for a table with more room, saying that we are both big and need more space. My voice, even to my ears, sounds very plummy! I do not apologise, not do I present this as shaming – it is simply

what it is. The waiter blinks and shows me to a better table (Field Journal Extract 4).

According to Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams & Arthur Bochner (2010, paragraph 2) autoethnography “seeks to describe and systematically analyse (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experiences (ethno)”. On reflection this fits very well within my feminist methodological manifesto and allowed me the space to explore the lived experience of being a ‘fat’ woman in an anti-fat world (Bordo, 1990; Cooper, 2010; Guthman, 2009). Central to my exploration within this framework was working with “an ongoing informing of a contextual framework from which ... [I] ... come and its influences on the choices and approaches ... [I] ... make when embarking on research” (Goodley & Smailes, 2011, p. 38). Anne Kerr, Sarah Cunningham-Burley & Amanada Amos (1998) further clarify this coming out process by emphasising the need for feminist researchers to acknowledge the social world from which experiences are expressed and the cultural/social locations that we reside within. At some level this is not a comfortable business — it places researchers in a position which absolutely requires us to question the implications of our identities within what is a deeply hierarchical world. While identities are fluid and contested (Bordo, 1990), there is no doubt that particular positionings allow us greater and/or less power. So in my case being white, middle class, highly educated and able bodied affords me various privileges while intersecting with more marginalised positions of being female, fat and fifty. Again, feminist autoethnographies provides space to explore the experience and implications of this dialogue.

Working with the emergent dilemmas

There is something about the word ‘fat’ which holds a multitude of values, meanings and assumptions. As I engage with the research, it was this that became more and more apparent. More importantly was how I experienced it and how I located myself within the process. Mark Graham (2005, p. 178-179) writes about this when he says “in fat-obsessed cultures we are all ‘lipoliterates’ who ‘read’ fat for what we believe it tells us about a person. This includes not only their moral character but also their health”. The ‘reading’ is clearly informed by the belief that fat represents moral turpitude, laziness, irresponsibility, greed, and undisciplined appetites and behaviours (Chrisler, 2011; Longhurst, 2011; Murray, 2005). It goes beyond simply that people, and in this case women, eat too much and extends to our characters and value sets. Being a ‘fat’ woman touches all aspects of my life, whether I want it to or not. What became clear, and this is for me why rigorously reflective feminist autoethnography really can grapple with the contested, was how deeply embedded I was in the very oppressive and

objectifying discourses I wanted to dismantle. Autoethnography reveals the internalisation of the messages of abstraction and pathologisation, as well as what it feels like to find out we are complicit as well as resisting (Rubin, Nemeroff & Russo, 2004; Stuart & Donaghue, 2012).

So I need to go back to Cooper's 2010 paper on Fat Studies: Mapping the field – and acknowledge myself as a fraud ... am I really a feminist, am I an activist around fat studies, am I politicised and challenging (yes of course I am, I have always seethed about fat fascisms and body fascism and the intense gaze of others, and my own – the intense focus on my body and other women's bodies and their own collusion, my own collusion) ... can I legitimately engage with fat studies when I diet – where is my agency, how do I resist – my feminist credentials are shreds – I am part of the collusive conforming amorphous mass that feminises body dissatisfaction, body hatred, shame, and obeys the dieting dictates of the pursuit of 'health' (Field Journal Extract 5).

Linda Alcoff (1999, p. 15) writes about how “visible difference is still the route to classification and therefore knowledge”. In my autoethnographic encounters I became painfully aware of how my relationship with my problematized, indeed pathologised body (Cooper, 2010; Murray, 2005), has influenced so much of how I have lived my life. It is this revelatory process which feminist autoethnography seeks to enable, trying to go beyond the colonised repertoires available and move to giving space to women's own voices. Burns and Walker (2005, p. 66) take on this commitment within feminist methodologies as the “drawing attention to the deep and irreducible connections between knowledge and power (privilege), and to making problematic gender in society and social institutions in order to develop theories that advance practices of gender justice”. What feminist autoethnography enables us to do is see how we reside in these connections, rather than ‘othering’ them as outside ourselves. Ronai (1995) explored this process in her autoethnographic exploration of child sexual abuse, noting that not only are we contained within these discourse but that we can also be unwilling co-constructors of them. Ronai (1995, pp. 421-422) believes that by openly engaging with our positionality instead of resisting or denying it, we can “be reflexive in my report so that I am not forced to artificially create a sterile objective ‘researcher’ self that is separate from the other selves I enact”. I found this very helpful to come back to repeatedly in the process of my research, as it became increasingly apparent how deeply entangled I was in the construction of meaning.

Sarah Wall (2008) too writes about this dilemma of representation in her autoethnography of international adoption. Her concern was that, as she explored her own ethnographic relatedness to this phenomenon, she was replicating the dominant dis-

course of privilege of which she very much didn't want to be a part. My autoethnographic encounters with my fat body also got knotted up with the oppressive positioning of women and their bodies. In other words while I could mostly see what this positioning was and felt very much resistant to it, the more rigorously I engaged with the research the more it became apparent that I was interwoven within this positioning. Feminist qualitative research is about "disrupting the power imbalances, challenging them and then seeing where the research goes and what emerges" (Goodley & Smailes, 2011, p. 44); and in my feminist autoethnographic encounters it has been where I go and what emerges that has become more critical.

On the one hand, I come to research as a feminist researcher and academic and on the other hand, I am imbued with hegemonic knowledge and the invidious power of sexism and objectification. Reflexivity is interwoven within this exploration so that this contestedness of knowledge is 'revealed', as well as how I endeavour to resist, subvert and challenge powerful objectification discourses of their bodies (Rubin et al, 2004). Thus, at some level I very much want to rip asunder the oppressive dictates of body fascism so that women can not only 'see' what is going on, but also then equip women with ways of functioning within these frameworks which are not so damaging. Yet at the same time what emerges is my only partial freedom from the very dictates I want to dismember; and surely in some ways this is indeed the experience of women in negotiating objectification (Bordo, 1990; Rubin et al, 2004; Stuart & Donaghue 2012,). Susan Bordo (1990) cautions us about the potential of blaming women for their complicity in anti-fat objectification processes, positing that women are presented as either dupes or out and out conformists when in fact women move along a continuum of these supposed opposites. What emerges is how the "researcher, researched and research make each other; research and selves (are) interactive texts" (Rose, 1997, p. 316). The implications of this is accepting that when embarking on a feminist autoethnographic journey be prepared to be witness to the unwelcome and unexpected ways of our own entrenchment within a myriad of subject/object positions.

I am out with a group of female friends; we are off to the pub for a drink. The venue is a very heterosexual one where there is much looking. For once I am not the fattest, I am not even one of the fattest, in fact I am somewhere in the middle – I relax. I am invisible and I breathe a sigh of relief (Field Journal Extract 6).

Robyn Longhurst (2011, p. 5) writes that our responses/choices are "determined within particular sets of discursive relations which cannot simply be deconstructed". Daniel Goodley and Sophie Smailes (2011) also discuss how feminisms are interested in reflecting on our own part in constructing, producing, being influenced by and re-

sisting social constructs. Bearing in mind that autoethnography is interested in both the phenomenon being researched as well as the researcher's location within that phenomenon; it makes sense that what increasingly emerged was this very dilemma. In some ways I think this is what makes feminist autoethnography a really rich and critical process. There is no doubt at all that you have to be revelatory on many levels in order to allow these vital spaces to be opened. As Cressida Hayes (2006, p. 127) writes, we are all "ideologically duped by an oppressive set of beauty ideals". It is the endeavour to engage with anti-oppressive research that has highlighted the real complexities of the body dictates for women.

Challenges of feminist autoethnography

I am getting ready to go out to a 'smart' French restaurant tonight and so reluctantly look to my wardrobe for clothes —I get out shirts that no longer fit, stretch across my breasts and torso, trousers which strain at the thigh and which I struggle to do up — and (I turn off the switch in my head so I can get on with this, and reduce the despair) somehow it becomes mechanical, it is merely a fitting exercise where something fits on a body or it doesn't — I finally find things that fit and I like and in which I look good ... Sue says 'don't talk about your body, or how fat you are feeling while we are out tonight' (Field Journal Extract 7).

Choosing to engage with autoethnography has required a level of commitment to what Leon Anderson (2006, p. 384) describes as "revealing [oneself] ... as grappling with issues relevant to membership and participation in fluid rather than static social worlds". It is not smooth or straightforward; knowledges keep on emerging and being reconfigured, blurring the lines between myself and the other. Thus, feminist autoethnographic research is about attempting to recognise when we give voice to how it ought to be, limitis meanings through limited constructs (Muncey, 2005). This is certainly what happened when I engaged with my autoethnography — revealing the iterative nature of research and life. By trying to somehow corral my experience into 'this is what it means to be fat' as a singularly containable and definable construct, I was doing exactly what feminist research endeavours to resist — privileging one viewpoint over another.

Feminist autoethnography challenges practices of 'truth' and 'fact' and 'objectivity' — our own and other people's. It can be evocative, deeply personal and personalised and at the same time analytical, located within theoretical discourses (Anderson, 2006). Writing it involves risks as well. Ronai (1995) in her research was advised by her academic colleagues not to publish her work on her experience of child sexual

abuse because of its potential to harm her academic career. April Chatham-Carpenter (2010) in her research on her eating disorder found that her autoethnographic encounters retriggered anorexic behaviours and she had to take time away in order to put into place 'self-care' and limits to her drive for authenticity. Sarah Wall (2008) writes about the risks of disclosing too much that is not hers to disclose. Wolff-Michael Roth (2009) writes about the risks of writing/research the self without acknowledging the other in how we understand ourselves. For Roth (2009) our ethical concerns need to be around how knowledge is co-constructed and not ours alone, as in our autoethnographic narratives we will implicitly and explicitly bring in other people. Barbara Jago's (2011) ethical negotiations with self and an enmeshed other still resulted in her publishing her narrative of her troubled relationship with her partner's daughter. At present my own relationship with autoethnographic risk is with both the painful process, as well as the concern of revelation.

I am feeling a bit naked and anxious about whether I have revealed too much about myself, others as well as whether I have replicated the 'poor little fat girl' storyline so popular in wider representation. I have given one of my writings to a colleague and another copy to a friend. It is full of revelatory reflections on fat encounters with self and friends. My colleague emails me her comments, among which are 'you are very brave and honest', 'I don't know if I could do this; have you checked they are okay with what you have written' and finally 'wow'. My dear friend says to me 'gosh it's really you in this isn't it — how lovely' and 'I didn't know you struggled so much with your weight'. I feel a bit sick, and stick the writing back in the drawer ... this fat research project is tricky (Field Journal Extract 8).

So what does all this tussling mean in relation to engaging with feminist autoethnography? From my perspective it means that like the UK Girl Guide motto, we should be prepared. That "the goal is to produce analytical accessible texts that change us and the world we live in for the better" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 8). That assuming just because we think we 'know' about oppressive frameworks at work it does not mean that we are free from them ourselves. What has also struck me in terms of epistemologies is that "women's ethnographic and autobiographic intentions are often powered by the motive to convince readers of the author's self-worth, to clarity and authenticate their self-images" (Tedlock, 2000, p. 468). However, by trying to represent ourselves in these ways we immediately play into hierarchical practices of separating the knowing and knower, from the unknowing and 'unknower'. As feminist research is concerned with at least working hard to even out the playing field as much as possible, it is ironic that I can respond to my own experience in such oppressive ways.

Final reflections on feminist autoethnography

Ultimately “by autoethnographically layering these moments across time and stand-points, I endeavour to move beyond my autobiographical experiences in an effort to comment on the larger social, cultural, and political forces” (Jago, 2011, p. 205). This commentary also involves the research process itself – thus everything becomes data. The researched, the researcher and the research are the entire field; the reflexive feminist voice provides the frame and the lens through which to view this landscape. To embark on a feminist autoethnographic piece of research while exciting and open to solipsism and self-indulgence, can also be an authentic critically located exploration of a phenomenon from within the phenomenon. Based on my own experience I see the engagement with a myriad of resources as a way of enriching, informing and widening my own partiality. Thus, while the ‘showing’ (Ellis, 1995) still remains a central source of data, the ‘telling’ is of equal importance. This has meant I have interacted with the research theory and practice literature, as well as literature on fat studies, objectification, gender and agency, neoliberalism, health and well-being, obesity and women and power. Some of this literature I came with and was prepared to engage with further, other arenas emerged with the research process – and this process was exciting and rewarding. Throughout, my responses to and understandings of the literature was another thread/layer to my feminist autoethnography.

It seems to me that there are two key points to consider when participating in feminist autoethnographic research. One is about intentionality in terms of our political commitment, which is “to resist the social and institutional norms that often dictate research ... [thereby] promoting women’s voices and unique experiences” (Averett & Soper, 2011, pp. 371-372). The second interconnected precept is that what is required of the researcher is a willingness to move through and among these multiple interconnected layers of performativity and intersectionality, providing insight into a shared experience in ways that may be complex in their emancipatory nature.

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