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**Researcher | Researched: Repositioning research paradigms**

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## Researcher | Researched: Repositioning research paradigms

'Researcher | Researched' calls for a complementary research methodology by proposing autoethnography as both a method and text that crosses the boundaries of conventional and alternative methodologies in higher education.

Autoethnography rearticulates the researcher | researched positions by blurring the boundary between them. This repositioning opens up the dialogue to question what constitutes acceptable research methodology and data. I outline the autoethnographic methodological framework before discussing concerns about this form of research.

Keywords: autoethnography; ethnography; qualitative methodology; research methodology

1993: Death, estrangement, grief, celebration all packed into five months. I was challenged then to write autobiographically. I winced at the thought of recounting those complicated episodes.

My autoethnographic journey began as I embarked on a research project to discover aspects of myself as a Chinese woman living in Australia. I sought a methodology that went beyond statistical analyses and controlled environments. My life had become too complex for the neat statistical procedures I had been trained in.

In a sense, my journey began in a liminal (Meerwald, 2001), or in-between, period in research methodology, indicative of a paradigm shift that had not been fully realised yet. I remember reading with much anticipation: 'Postpositivism has cleared methodology of prescribed rules and boundaries' (Lather 1991, p. 52). This promised a praxis-oriented research methodology that would effect change. Perhaps a complementary approach that is more than just rigid surveys may flesh and flush out some 'data' to illuminate what is otherwise unknown and untappable. I found the autoethnographic inquiry within the realms of sociology and cultural studies most appropriate despite its gutsy and confrontational qualities. (Agnes, autoethnographic narrative)

Research paradigms are in a state of ferment (Ellis et al., 2008). Staller, Block and Horner (2008) track the ingredients contributing to this ferment in social science from the 1960s, highlighting how the postmodern turn and the civil rights movement destabilised positivism's position. More significantly, they outline how the second wave feminists, especially feminist sociologists and critical theorists, created a 'turbulence' in

1  
2  
3 their critique of methods and methodology to spearhead the personal narrative's jostle  
4  
5 for legitimisation, culminating in the present renaissance of mixed methods. Cohen,  
6  
7 Hughes and Lampard (2011) caution that disciplinary effects and funding organisations,  
8  
9 for example, could still stir the ferment towards three possible trajectories for sociology:  
10  
11 agree to disagree to end the debate, return to the paradigm wars of the 1970s and 1980s,  
12  
13 or embrace quantification without further critique. I prefer Lincoln and Denzin's (as  
14  
15 cited in Staller, et al., 2008) notion of an on-going reinvention of old methods for new  
16  
17 contexts within higher education.  
18  
19

20  
21 In this turbulent ferment, I focus on a complementary paradigm that 'articulates  
22  
23 how claims matter on the level of the individual [as it intersects with] discursive  
24  
25 systems, legislative policies, and interpersonal interactions' (Ellis, et al., 2008, p. 276).  
26  
27 The spotlight on the individual foregrounds autoethnography not as an alternative but as  
28  
29 a maturing staple methodology that positions the researcher and researched on the same  
30  
31 platform for the critical analysis of juxtaposed experiences. This repositioning of the  
32  
33 researcher | researched emancipates conventional research by 'thinking outside [the]  
34  
35 traditional "methods/practice box"' (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006), and challenges what  
36  
37 is considered valid data.<sup>1</sup> Autoethnography is hence both a methodology and method as  
38  
39 its use as a method assumes a particular research paradigm (Staller, et al., 2008).  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44

45 'Researcher | Researched' in my title strategically problematises the binaric  
46  
47 divide in the research paradigms,<sup>2</sup> and highlights the fluidity that frames  
48  
49 autoethnography as a methodology that transgresses the traditional idea of real research,  
50  
51 real data. While Spry (2006) defines autoethnography as 'a self-narrative that critiques  
52  
53 the situatedness of self with others in social context' (p. 189), autoethnography can be  
54  
55 translated into *different* contexts to encourage researcher analytic reflexivity (Anderson,  
56  
57 2006a).  
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3 For research to truly benefit higher education and the wider community, it needs  
4  
5 to be a social act. As Lather (1991) asserts, ‘an emancipatory social research calls for  
6  
7 empowering approaches to research where both researcher and researched become ...  
8  
9 “the changer and the changed”’ (Lather, 1991, p. 56). Autoethnography repositions the  
10  
11 researcher and researched to become social actors as it moves them from the inward to  
12  
13 the outward, from the personal to the other, and vice versa, in a dialogue that negotiates  
14  
15 meanings and ultimately change (Kidd & Finlayson, 2009). Autoethnography’s  
16  
17 contribution to a complementary methodology opens up alternatives to research  
18  
19 questions formulated and potential transformation in practice (Taylor, 2008), as  
20  
21 depicted in the following responses to motherhood and children:  
22  
23  
24  
25

26 My heart skipped as the data produced another avowal against having children.

27 ‘I don't have children and don't plan to have any but that's unrelated to my Chinese  
28 identity. ... No children by choice. ... We don't have children and don't want to have them.  
29 ... I don't plan to have children. I don't see it as an issue. ... Don't intend to have children.  
30 Reasons have nothing to do with Chineseness or ethnicity. More to do with priorities and  
31 ideas of where society is headed; humans in the greater scale of things.’  
32

33 They seemed so self-assured. Kids ... I thought they would state ‘how many’, not ...  
34  
35 (Agnes, autoethnographic narrative)  
36  
37  
38

39 These women were either unwilling or unable to explain their preference. Set  
40  
41 against others’ customary acceptance of motherhood, their silence intrigued and  
42  
43 troubled me. I asked for contributing factors to their views and why my views were then  
44  
45 unformulated. The silence, the unknown, created a space for further investigation.  
46  
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49  
50 \* \* \* \* \*

51  
52  
53 The sweep of viewpoints on autoethnography shows that its form is a hybrid  
54  
55 scientific genre (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Its use usually focuses on either ethnography or  
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1  
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3 autobiography. While the ethnographic focus of autoethnography is a study of one's  
4  
5 own cultural group, the autobiographical angle is the study of self within a cultural  
6  
7 group. These two autoethnographic practices divide the researcher from the researched  
8  
9 as autoethnography is then either the 'ethnography of one's own group or  
10  
11 autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest' (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 2).  
12  
13 Both these ideas view the researcher and researched as two distinct groups creating a  
14  
15 them-and-us notion, which is problematic for two reasons.  
16  
17  
18  
19

20  
21 First, the researcher and researched divide situations identity as singular and fixed.  
22  
23 Postmodernity views identities as multiple and fluid. The notion of the multiple self  
24  
25 challenges the conventional ethnographic study which works within the realist and  
26  
27 objective observer paradigm, and the traditional autobiography with its monovocal  
28  
29 reflection of the self (Reed-Danahay, 1997). This has important implications when  
30  
31 adopted to the notion of experience. If experiences are not depicted as having a singular  
32  
33 fixed true version, then we can begin to validate a range of experiences as having equal  
34  
35 legitimacy. Autoethnography defies the assumption that there is a singular truth out  
36  
37 there in decontextualised participants (Spry, 2006) by giving equal weight to different  
38  
39 voices offering different experiences. The contradictory and conflicting experiences  
40  
41 become fuel for further research instead of being dismissed as having no statistical  
42  
43 significance.  
44  
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49  
50 Secondly, the researcher and researched divide situations the researcher as the  
51  
52 creator of knowledge and the researched as the source of knowledge. Autoethnography  
53  
54 decentres the researcher's role as the archaeologist of existing knowledge. Instead,  
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3 researchers create data with the researched (Tierney & Lincoln, 1997). The need for an  
4  
5 alternative autoethnographic form is apparent from these two considerations.  
6  
7

### 8 9 **The method text**

10  
11 I deploy autoethnography as both a 'method and a text' (Reed-Danahay, 1997). As a  
12  
13 text, I employ the narrative to cover both snippets of my life and my participants'. The  
14  
15 pervasive nature of the narrative should not be surprising since narratives define us, and  
16  
17 influence how we make meaning of our lives at both the individual and social levels  
18  
19 (Conle, 2000). Because our lives are so infused with narratives, it is appropriate to  
20  
21 analyse the relationship between the narrative texts produced and the influence of other  
22  
23 narratives on them. This analysis is important as it contributes to understanding through  
24  
25 contextualised narratives and further theorising. Here, I highlight that the narrative is  
26  
27 merely a 'tool' used to gain insight into the relationships amongst the different  
28  
29 narratives.<sup>3</sup>  
30  
31  
32  
33

34  
35 As a method, I marry Anderson's (2006a) analytic autoethnography to Ellis and  
36  
37 Bochner's (2006) evocative autoethnography to manipulate the features of analysis and  
38  
39 theory with emotional sensibilities for heightened researcher reflexivity. This blend  
40  
41 positions it closer as a suitable method for a complementary research paradigm. Cohen  
42  
43 et al. (2011) argue that such a blend would also need to factor in a quantitative  
44  
45 component. I add, the type of data collected should be appropriate (see Kral, Links, &  
46  
47 Bergmans, 2012).  
48  
49  
50

51  
52 In this method text, I use the autoethnographic narrative to collapse the divide  
53  
54 between researcher and researched as I research my participants and myself  
55  
56 concurrently in an interactive process that is not dichotomous. Sometimes I am the  
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3 researcher, sometimes the researched, and sometimes I am both. In dialogue together,  
4  
5 this perspective knits the researcher | researched together. Let me illustrate:  
6  
7

8 It was late [in] the interview... [Cherie] was keen to turn the questions on me.

9 'So, on a scale of one to ten, how Chinese are you?' she asked cheekily.

10 I turned the question back on her and said, 'Well, where would you place me?'

11 She described me as being less Chinese than she was. ... At the superficial [traditional  
12 notions of Chineseness], I had thought that she was more Chinese. Her accent was still  
13 Malaysian. ... She preferred a Chinese partner. She still lived submissively under her  
14 parents' roof despite her age and had a passion for Chinese food. But as we journeyed on, I  
15 began to see that like my own life, hers had drifted in and out of versions of Chineseness,  
16 according to time and place.  
17

18 She said that I was less Chinese than she was. I found myself wanting to disagree yet I  
19 didn't. (Meerwald, 2001, p. 392)  
20  
21  
22  
23  
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25 In deploying autoethnography through narratives, I create more ambivalence in  
26  
27 the researcher | researched domains. I blur the distinction between the researcher |  
28 researched by weaving myself into the participants' text autobiographically (see  
29 Crapanzano, as cited in Denzin, 1989a). In the above, I am clearly visible in my  
30 participant's story (Anderson, 2006a). I speak as one voice with Cherie. It contains my  
31 autobiography and personal history in a descriptive and interpretive paradigm (Denzin,  
32 1989b), as I use my life as a prism to interrogate how we constructed our different  
33 scales of Chineseness. This ambivalence gives autoethnography transgressive power to  
34 question our assumptions about what kind of data 'count' in research. In challenging  
35 these assumptions, a sense of insecurity is created which forces the research framework  
36 to critique itself towards renewal. I have various reasons for this deployment of  
37 autoethnography.  
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52 One, I embrace the autoethnographic perspective to appropriate its  
53  
54 multivocality. In invoking Ellis' (1995, 1997, 1999) multiple selved autoethnography, I  
55 embrace a range of voices to speak on the different issues that I face in the various roles  
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3 in my life – as daughter or employee, for example. Instead of aiming to create reality, I  
4  
5 engage the multiple voices to insert parts of my life into the participants' stories, and  
6  
7 vice versa, in a non-linear fashion. I jump from episode to episode in my life. The  
8  
9 participants' stories, too, are not related in a chronological manner but according to  
10  
11 themes and issues that arise. The ensuing multivocal text in turn exposes the power  
12  
13 structures that underpin the stories unfolded. This is effected as the range of voices  
14  
15 shows both the similarities and differences experienced in the issues isolated which may  
16  
17 challenge or enhance current theories (Anderson, 2006b).<sup>4</sup>  
18  
19

20  
21 Another reason for embracing autoethnography is to empower alternative voices  
22  
23 to speak from the liminal position of marginality and authority (Meerwald, 2001). It is a  
24  
25 liminal position firstly because of the position of subjugation, as a participant, and  
26  
27 simultaneous privileged position of authority, as the participant accesses the dominant  
28  
29 discourses. The doctrine of liminality displaces the participant's position of marginality  
30  
31 and inscribes it with authority, to legitimise the participant's voice.  
32  
33

34  
35 Additionally, the liminal position is further deployed by positioning my stories  
36  
37 alongside the participants' stories. It would be naïve for me to state that this attempt to  
38  
39 decentre my position as researcher achieves equality between my voice and my  
40  
41 participants' voices. It does not. I do not stand on neutral ground nor is the hierarchical  
42  
43 order totally displaced. Instead it is a strategic move to give an impression of equality,  
44  
45 of having one voice. My aim is to legitimise my participants' voices, as in the narrative  
46  
47 with Cherie.  
48  
49

50  
51 Legitimation is an empowering transaction because the narratives created  
52  
53 validate experiences. As Rich states: 'When someone with the authority of a teacher,  
54  
55 say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic  
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3 disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing' (as cited in Knaller,  
4  
5 1999, p. 99). Narrativisation empowers the marginalised and questions why some  
6  
7 voices and their experiences have been silenced, marginalised or empowered.  
8  
9

10  
11 My voice also serves constantly to expose the texts' constructedness. The  
12  
13 multivocal narratives and intrusion of various voices within the texts invite the reader to  
14  
15 inspect the texts as constructs. My voice, my narratives, have political appeals and serve  
16  
17 to foreground features in the participants' narratives. I do not pretend to adopt an  
18  
19 objective position in how I manoeuvre my narratives alongside my participants'. In fact,  
20  
21 my positioning explicitly demonstrates there is nothing neutral about methodology but  
22  
23 'it is constitutive of the very thing [I am] writing about' (Ellis, et al., 2008, p. 268). In  
24  
25 Cherie's narrative, my voice unpacks the tacit ideas of Chineseness and ushers the  
26  
27 reader to critique Chineseness.  
28  
29

30  
31 The autoethnographic narratives also reflect my personal odyssey, and those of  
32  
33 others, as shared yet heterogenous pilgrimages. I do not argue for the production of a  
34  
35 universal history, or worse, an alternative narrative to represent a homogenous group,  
36  
37 nor do I seek to record the fate of a group. Rather, I construct a text that is 'a  
38  
39 remembrance that does not form a [generalised] we-identity' (as cited in Knaller, 1999,  
40  
41 p. 110). It is significant for the one time, one place. Narrativising sets in fluid tablets  
42  
43 experiences that are at once unique to the individual context, yet similar across the  
44  
45 different spaces in our society. It legitimises and problematises the different stories  
46  
47 shared by examining the regimes at work in these narratives, and to ask, 'What norms  
48  
49 steer Cherie towards a preference for Chinese men or to live with her parents?'<sup>5</sup>  
50  
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54  
55 Just as it is important to recognise the singularity of the voices, other stories too  
56  
57 in their proliferation need to be told to cull the idea of a universal or monolithic  
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3 experience, as the women's voices on motherhood and children depict.

4  
5 Autoethnography thus provides a collection of individual stories that are specific and  
6  
7 yet have widespread implications without being universally representative (Hones,  
8  
9 1998).

10  
11  
12 Autoethnography threads theory into narrative and manipulates the narratives to  
13  
14 illuminate theory openly to non-academic readers. It enables me to write a K-Mart text  
15  
16 (Lather, 1997) that uses lay language to commit a wider audience to theoretical analysis  
17  
18 (Anderson, 2006a), and to disseminate higher educational research findings more  
19  
20 effectively. Ellis (1997) states its accessibility outside the academe signifies  
21  
22 autoethnography's potential for further theorising and experimentation.  
23  
24

25  
26  
27 Two main theories of the narrative text and two reading theories are pertinent to  
28  
29 how I negotiate limitations raised against the narrative as a scientific tool.  
30  
31

### 32 33 *Theorising narrative texts*

#### 34 35 36 *Coherent construction*

37  
38 The conventional narrative text is coherent in the Aristotelean (1954) sense of having a  
39  
40 beginning, middle, and end. Richardson (1997) states that the narrative is crafted and  
41  
42 then structured into a created story that is located within the larger context of genre.  
43  
44 Thus, the constructed text is coherent.  
45  
46  
47

48  
49 This traditional view asserts the text is rational as a meaning-making machine.  
50  
51 The scattered elements in a life are gathered and reassembled to form a comprehensive  
52  
53 sketch (Gusdorf, as cited in Deck, 1990). It reorders the past retrospectively to make  
54  
55 meaning of the present. It thus involves valuation to give meaning. The emphasis given  
56  
57 to certain events belies the meanings and values attached to the choices made in the  
58  
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1  
2  
3 selection process. Experiences are privileged by the author according to the existing  
4  
5 systems of meanings underpinning the selection process. We therefore make meaning of  
6  
7 our lives from a coherent and rational arsenal of narratives which we deploy  
8  
9 intertextually. However, life lived is not coherent and events are not always explainable  
10  
11 in a cause and effect manner.  
12

13  
14 This view may reproduce narratives unquestioningly. To achieve coherence,  
15  
16 variance is usually explained away or made invisible to present life as free from  
17  
18 contradictions. The normalising practices within this view thus remain unquestioned.  
19  
20 More sinisterly, this view veils the reproduction of practices that require revision.  
21  
22 Evident gaps in the narrative and inconsistencies are forced to fit into existing moulds  
23  
24 which are referenced for validation. Confusion arises with the need to fix experiences to  
25  
26 these moulds, when practices should be left in flux as a narrative that requires on-going  
27  
28 revision.  
29  
30  
31

32  
33  
34 There is another dire consequence as some narratives portray images that trap  
35  
36 people stereotypically.  
37

38  
39 'Where are you from?' I asked the Korean-looking girl.

40 'Ipoh.'

41 'My hometown!' I squealed and chatted on excitably.

42  
43 'Ya, lah! From Ipoh, what. Why you speak so Aussie to her?' Wong, sitting nearby,  
44  
45 berated me.

46 I found myself really annoyed. Wong had assumed my accent was put on, like a snob,  
47  
48 just because I switch codes with him as he looks typically Malaysian to me. (Agnes,  
49  
50 autoethnographic narrative)

51  
52 The above assumed aspects about the girl, Wong and myself in a triangulation  
53  
54 that could be amusing. However, some assumptions made about people and their  
55  
56 practices can lead to serious misunderstandings. Alternative or resistant discourses are  
57  
58  
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1  
2  
3 needed to free those who are marginalised and stereotyped by pre-existing narratives.  
4  
5 Such new discourses also lead to fresh practices.  
6  
7

### 8 9 *Contradictory construction*

10  
11 As an alternative to the coherent narrative, I adopt Ricoeur's (1991) idea of the narrative  
12 as a creative and dynamic process. The recreation of experiences, or the act of  
13 narrativising, produces new narratives. I add to this the notion of the text as  
14 'fragmentary, inconclusive, digressive, and interpenetrated with other texts' (Wallis, as  
15 cited in Knaller, 1999). This view mirrors social realities where conflicts remain  
16 unresolved, where lives are lived as on-going processes (Poirier & Ayres, 1997).  
17 Moreover, this view interprets and presents the stories shared in a non-sequential frame  
18 with discontinuities. Narratives are thus not constructed as coherent texts in the  
19 chronological and rational sense. This is because our lives are on-going projects that are  
20 still being made sense of. Further, in piecing together the fragments from my life and  
21 those from participants', without necessarily seeking coherence, new meanings are  
22 more likely to emerge. This alternative narrative theory presents a peeping-hole position  
23 from which to examine new meanings. I borrow from Pensky (as cited in Lather, 1997)  
24 to describe the project as thus: 'The task is to bring fragments (all we have) into a  
25 critical constellation so precise that truth will allow itself to appear, however fleetingly,  
26 in the mosaic representation itself' (p. 239).  
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48 Contradictions, instead of rationalised accounts, are rife in the alternative  
49 narrative theory. Events may not be interpreted to fit the existing network of narratives.  
50 They may challenge them instead. The past is understood as incomplete, tentative, and  
51 revisable, according to present circumstances and how the future is projected (Bochner,  
52 Ellis and Tillman-Healy, as cited in Ellis, 1997). Alternative versions of the past and  
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reinvented selves may emerge (Ellis, 1997). The inconsistencies that may be recognised here 'signal points of confusion, uncertainty, or conflicting emotions in the narrator' (Poirier & Ayres, 1997, p. 552). Gaps are allowed to exist to question the relevance or sufficiency of the existing meaning-making framework. This suggests altered perspectives and positions are possible (Knaller 1999), as captured in the versions of 'You're Australian' below:

1999 Version

My friend said to me just the other day, 'You're Australian.'

Having been quite comfortable with being an in-between person in the past, I was suddenly confronted with a new pigeonhole. I felt unusually unsettled by his statement and found myself asking, 'Why am I Australian?'

'You are, aren't you? I mean you're not typically Chinese, are you?'

'You mean I'm unconventional in my cooking?'

He couldn't quite explain how I was Australian but the point of the exchange made me uncomfortable.

2001 Version

'You're Australian,' my friend said to me one day. I smiled and then thought, 'I'm not!' and surprised myself. In the past I would have welcomed such a comment but I didn't this time and wondered why.

'You don't cook Chinese, do you?' he added. 'No, I don't but yes, I do,' I said and noted the annoyance in my voice.

As I pondered on it, I realised why the exchange irked me. (Meerwald, 2002)

His assertion labelled me. The simplistic ethnic 'banana-ism' (yellow on the outside, white inside) I had adhered to in 1999 became complicated as I became more aware of the complexities in my ethnicity. I realised my various practices are rehearsed according to different contexts. Reflecting on that conversation today tempts me to respond with: 'Yes! And I'm Chinese, woman, wife, mother, daughter, researcher, etcetera, too!'

### *Reading responses*

I deploy two opposing reading theories to frame how we consider data.<sup>6</sup> The traditional approach expects one correct reading from a text to find a singular stream of meaning. For instance, reviews that claim a film to be true to the novel captures this purist stance. Instead, I am interested in the liminal gap between the reader and text as a virtual space that can 'never be precisely pinpointed' (Iser, 1972, p. 279). This liminal virtuality creates a dynamic and imaginative arena where reader and text interact to make meanings. This opposing reading theory, or rather, cluster of theories, suggests that membership in the reading community and personal context produce multiple readings (Bleich, 1986). The reader's own story adds to the meaning and its interpretation. Bleich (1986) adds readers may gather different meanings from a text at different times, or different readers may read a text and gather different meanings. This has research implications as it opens up the issue of validity with data that are presented as narratives. Traditional reading theory requires data to be presented as accurately as possible so that the data will not be misread. The opposing reading theory suggests that multiple readings are produced so that accuracy per se is not a test of validity.

### **Scientific stories**

Although my use of the autoethnographic narrative is a result of my search for a tool that adequately embraces the stories that I seek to tell and hear, to some, the act of writing and telling stories is just not scientific research. I address these concerns by adopting Lather's (1997) notion of double science, that is, a science situated in the interstices of science and not science, to describe the scientific narrative as an authorised science. Its position as a liminal scientific tool, however, raises questions as to whether it is a legitimate scientific recording device.

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3 Since the seventeenth century, all writing was divided into the literary or the  
4 scientific categories (Richardson, 1997). Revolutionary work with any real importance  
5 or truth content was recognised only in scientific writing (Milne, 1997). In a survey of  
6 life stories in various fields from the 1960s to the mid-1980s, Kohli and Bertaux (as  
7 cited in Reed-Danahay, 1997) found that the trend was towards *scientism*, rather than  
8 native autobiography in anthropology.  
9

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12 Despite the objections raised against the narrative as a scientific device, its  
13 increasingly widespread use indicates its growing popularity as a research tool. In  
14 education, for example, it has been used to capture the temporal nature and the  
15 contextual details of the data (Fenstermacher, 1994) over many years at school sites  
16 (Jackson, 1968; Smith & Geoffrey, 1968). What many fail to realise is that narratives  
17 have always been a part of science. For example, the research paper's format:  
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22 Reveals its own narratively driven subtext. ... theory (literature review) is the past or the  
23 (researcher's) cause for the present study (hypothesis being tested), which will lead to the  
24 future - findings and implications (for the researcher, researched, and science).  
25 (Richardson, 1997, p. 77)  
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Clearly, even academic papers are constructs. The construction of texts does not deem  
them less or more valid. It simply highlights the different ways in which research can be  
presented (see Polkinghorne, 1997).

Although the narrative has also been critiqued as a 'unique act of imagination'  
(Cox and Frye, as cited in Renza, 1977, p. 2) which has little scientific validity due to  
the literary techniques employed, other scientific texts too engage in the use of literary  
techniques. In the recording of scientific data, the lifespan of an organism may be  
structured narratively as having a beginning, middle, and end. Renza (1977) argues that  
the presence of fictional techniques is not enough to accuse the genre of scientific



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3 invalidity. Even mythical stories can convey truths. Instead, he reasons, the  
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5 autobiographer, unlike some other scientists, 'self-consciously borrows from the  
6  
7 methodological procedures of imaginative fiction' (p. 2). He adds that the verbal  
8  
9 strategies are used to transcend the limitations that exist in the attempt to record the past  
10  
11 from the present.  
12

13  
14 As a tool, Middleton (1995) argues, narratives are useful to convey often  
15  
16 complex ideas in non-specialist language. Often, academic discourse is unable to  
17  
18 capture the complexity of the lives lived. Ellis (1997) felt that the social science prose  
19  
20 and use of the omniscient voice were too authoritative and detached to deal with  
21  
22 sensitive issues such as death and loss. Further, the discourse could not capture the  
23  
24 complexity of life adequately. As Ellis (1997) states, the 'conventional' discipline:  
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28  
29 Celebrates the usual and the typical while ignoring the possible and exceptional; ignores the  
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31 emotional and sensuous for the cognitive and visual; privileges theory, concepts, and  
32  
33 taxonomies over stories, examples, and cases (Bochner 1994); generalisations and  
34  
35 explanations over details and understanding; the simple and predictable over the complex  
36  
37 and ambiguous; telling with authority over coping with our vulnerabilities; and arguments  
38  
39 that produce general truth over stories that show lifelikeness (Bruner 1986, p. 116).  
40

41 The deliberate juxtapositioning of the narrative against academic discourse has a  
42  
43 twofold effect. The narrative signposts the text's constructedness to the reader by  
44  
45 amplifying the researcher | researched voices. The academic discourse then reminds the  
46  
47 reader of positivism's presence in repositioning the research paradigms.  
48

### 49 *Autobiographical authenticity*

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52 Validity should not just be concerned with legitimising truth but more with  
53  
54 interrogating the validation itself, and how research as praxis enriches the participants'  
55  
56 lives and the wider community. Lather (1991) speaks of research as having catalytic  
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3 validity in the researcher I researched collaboration which produces self-enlightenment  
4  
5 and action. She explains that probing into the basic details of life's daily practices  
6  
7 exposes how the larger issues are inextricably interwoven with life's particularities.  
8  
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10 Gaps between the textual and non-textual *I* destabilise a text's validity. There is  
11  
12 discontinuity between the *I* on paper and the non-textual *I*. The identity represented in  
13  
14 an autobiographical text is not the whole person signified but only the relevant portions.  
15  
16 Bruner (as cited in Deck, 1990) argues 'only a naïve positivist would believe that  
17  
18 expressions are equivalent to reality and we recognise in everyday life the gap between  
19  
20 expressions are equivalent to reality and we recognise in everyday life the gap between  
21  
22 experience and its symbolic manifestation in expression' (p. 244). Clearly, it is not the  
23  
24 non-textual identity that is *properly* and *truly* captured on paper, but the textual identity.  
25  
26

27 Discontinuities also exist for the writer, who returns to the text to find that the  
28  
29 text has been written by *another*, though this *other* is self. The autobiography, for  
30  
31 example, is an elucidation of the present, not the past (Renza, 1977). We understand our  
32  
33 past from our present position and gain insight as we disentangle the now from the then  
34  
35 (Ellis, 1999). When I write about the past, there is a lapse between what I remember and  
36  
37 the actual words I use to recall the memory. The context in my life at the point of recall  
38  
39 shapes the meaning attached to the event as compared to the same event recalled at  
40  
41 another time, in another context, as depicted in the versions of 'You're Australian'. The  
42  
43 limitation on what can be known and admitted to self (Ellis, 1997) produces a boundless  
44  
45 *I* that is constantly reinvented according to new knowledges and admissions.  
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50 Here, I adopt Gunn's (1982) concept of the *displayed self* to build a bridge  
51  
52 between the dual self in autobiographies. This displayed self is positioned in the gaps  
53  
54 between the textual and non-textual identities, or between what is narrativised and  
55  
56 practised. I do not argue for consistency in the displayed self, between the textual self  
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3 and its non-textual other. Instead, I focus on the ambivalences and contradictions (Ellis,  
4  
5 1997) perceived in the displayed self in the liminal gaps produced to uncover the 'larger  
6  
7 ideologies that structure them' (Denzin, 1989a, p. 62). I caution that the textual self  
8  
9 must not be so far removed from the non-textual self that the text becomes pure fiction.  
10  
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12  
13 We need to realise that our experiences are re-written according to the narratives  
14  
15 of the time. The realisation of the sociopolitical, geographical, and historical factors  
16  
17 informing our identities leads us back to Lather's (1991) notion of catalytic validity  
18  
19 where the research process 're-orient, focuses and energizes participants toward  
20  
21 knowing reality in order to transform it' (p. 68). Our self-reflective processes catalyse a  
22  
23 deeper understanding of our particular contexts, and the emancipatory outcome is more  
24  
25 valuable than the establishment of the story's accuracy. As Lather (1991) argues: 'The  
26  
27 fact/value dichotomy simply drives values underground. Facts are never theory-  
28  
29 independent (Hesse, 1980: 172); they are as much social constructions as are theories  
30  
31 and values' (p. 51).  
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### 36 ***Reconciled readings***

37  
38 The old parameters for reliability concentrated on coherence along a time continuum.  
39  
40 Reliability should focus on gaining a reconciled reading of the data for 'power is shared  
41  
42 not only in the application ... but also in the generation of knowledge' (Heron, as cited  
43  
44 in Lather, 1991, pp. 55-56). Without aiming for consensus, a negotiated interpretation  
45  
46 between researcher | researched produces a reconciled reading (Ellis, 1999) to reduce  
47  
48 the likelihood of theory conditioning experience, which in turn reinforces theory  
49  
50 (Lather, 1991). Theory should not act as a 'container into which the data must be  
51  
52 poured' (p. 62). Data that only illuminates theory is guilty of 'a priori' reading. To  
53  
54 avoid this, I need to be open to imperfections in my theory and to counter-  
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3 interpretations through my participants' voices. Gaps should be expected to exist  
4  
5 between the readings to encourage multiple readings. The risky act of leaving the  
6  
7 readings potentially contradictory exposes existing frameworks for meaning-making as  
8  
9 inadequate, and this then leads to new realisations and further theorising.  
10

11  
12 For me to understand the participants' world views and the narratives impacting  
13  
14 their understanding of life, I need to engage with them in this meaning production. Both  
15  
16 parties learn from each other in dialogue. To seek conclusive reconciliation between our  
17  
18 readings here is to commit the crime of data doctoring, even if the doctoring is by the  
19  
20 researched. The few women who chose not to have children is a signal to critique the  
21  
22 ideologies informing those choices. I need to be comfortable with non-closure in the  
23  
24 analysis of the data and to not seek a final reading:  
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29 For praxis to be possible, not only must theory illuminate the lived experience of  
30  
31 progressive social groups; it must also be illuminated by their struggles. Theory adequate to  
32  
33 the task of changing the world must be open-ended, nondogmatic, speaking to and  
34  
35 grounded in the circumstances of everyday life. (Lather 1991. p. 55)  
36

37  
38 To build reciprocal reliability into autoethnography, a reflective section can be  
39  
40 factored into the data gathering process by providing participants with a common text to  
41  
42 reflect on. Additionally, the participants can interpret their own narratives. Reciprocal  
43  
44 reliability moves participants to theorise from what they have shared about their own  
45  
46 lives (Kushner and Noms, as cited in Lather, 1991) towards a politicised self. However,  
47  
48 Pay (as cited in Lather, 1991) states that the process that leads to emancipatory and  
49  
50 empowering enlightenment is not that simple:  
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53 It requires an environment of trust, openness, and support in which one's own perceptions  
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55 and feelings can be made properly conscious to oneself ... in terms of a radically new  
56  
57 vocabulary which expresses a fundamentally different conceptualization of the world [to  
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3 see how] one unwittingly collaborates in producing one's own misery, and in which one can  
4 gain emotional strength to accept and act on one's new insights. (p. 60)  
5  
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7 To address these concerns, online forums can extend the researcher | researched  
8  
9 dialogue where questions are raised, theories constructed, validated, tested for  
10 practicality, and on-going critique encouraged. It is an iterative process like the Delphi  
11 method (Hasson, Keeney, & McKenna, 2000) but here gaps are exposed instead of  
12 achieving consensus.  
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19 The forum for collaborative theorising does not seek to produce a neat  
20 theoretical framework. Instead it seeks to lay side by side the different stories, voices  
21 and readings, leaving gaps open. Lather (1991) argues, the imperfect answers in these  
22 gaps serve as entry points for ideological critique. My ideas of motherhood and  
23 children, for example, were challenged when the women voiced opinions that rejected  
24 my accepted norms. The silence in the data served to question both the Australian and  
25 Chinese communities' ideas of motherhood and children.  
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### 36 *Shared stories*

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38 Traditional views on generalisability demand a universal set of criteria that can be  
39 applied to all contexts. Generalisability could focus more on the particularities in every  
40 set of data produced. The specific situations in every story shared draw us to conclude  
41 that some data cannot be transferred. However, it is still invaluable as the specific story  
42 can give readers a vicarious experience which we may not otherwise have, to enlighten  
43 us to our own particular practices.  
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53 There is also another sense in which the specific sharing educates us. In many  
54 ways, our stories are situated in a liminal space of singularity and generality. No  
55 experience can ever be fully separated from other experiences or absolutely generalised.  
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3 These moments are interconnected. Borrowing from Probyn (1996) I argue that the  
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5 element of interstitiality in our experiences comes from the specific and singular being  
6  
7 situated ambiguously within and alongside a generalised narrative. It is this  
8  
9 interstitiality that gives us that transposed wisdom as we taste experiences vicariously.  
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### 12 13 **Novel narratives**

14  
15 As we continue to ferment towards a complementary paradigm, the research process is  
16  
17 significantly empowered by inserting the researcher into the narratives  
18  
19 autoethnographically. This may not be feasible in all higher education research but,  
20  
21 where possible, autoethnography creates in a researcher a reflexivity that is 'crucial for  
22  
23 creating authenticity in the research process' (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006) to validate  
24  
25 the singular experience and to learn from the multiple experiences. I thus echo  
26  
27 Polkinghorne (1984) in the following:  
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31  
32 The counsellor sat with an army of books behind him, books he professed he needed to read  
33  
34 to catch up on current renderings of human behaviour. He sighs and then explains that he is  
35  
36 caught in a discipline that uses very set principles and tools for the examination of a very  
37  
38 complex and unpredictable subject – human beings. To comprehend the unpredictable  
39  
40 forces of human nature according to clinical statistical data, he shrugs and then peers at me  
41  
42 deeply from behind his reading glasses, is somewhat oxymoronic. (Agnes,  
43  
44 autoethnographic narrative)

### 45 46 **Acknowledgments**

47  
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49  
50 Jan Currie, Wayne Martino and Simone Volet who supported my ideas when this was 'not research'; and  
51  
52 to Him who enabled with time.

### 53 54 **Notes**

- 55  
56 1. In programming language the vertical bar | is used to feed information in on-going processes between  
57  
58 programs. I use it to emphasise that sometimes the researcher is the researched, and vice versa.  
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2. In critiquing binarism, I deploy a dualistic discourse to showcase the liminal spaces in the issues raised, noting grey can never erase black or white.
3. 'Tool' here and elsewhere is used figuratively as a bridge towards complementarity.
4. For an example of how different voices illuminate issues of gender and sexuality, please see Meerwald (2002, p. 124-168).
5. Meerwald (2004) discusses the impact of 'cultural semantics' or normalised narratives that impact on how one negotiates and practises Chineseness.
6. Dillon (1982) gives an overview of the plethora of variables in reading responses.

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