Mental Health Qualitative Research Network

27 March 2014 meeting

Theme: Autoethnography in mental health research

Presentations:

Negotiating the swamp - constructing the subjectivity of a researcher mental health service user: Critical autoethnography, methodological questions and ethical dilemmas, Konstantina Poursanidou, Honorary Research Associate/Service User Researcher, University of Manchester

From lived experience to poststructural voice: Some methodological implications for the use of autoethnography in mental health research, Alec Grant, University of Brighton

“If this is an answer, then what is the question?” Using autoethnography as a basis for a doctoral research project, Simon Clarke, University Of Nottingham

The MHQRN is co-convened by the RCPsych and Rethink Mental Illness
Visit: http://rcpsych.ac.uk/mhqrn
“If this is an answer, then what was the question?”

Using autoethnography as the basis for a doctoral research thesis

Simon Clarke, PhD student  
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Supervisors: Professor Stephen Joseph and Professor Nick Manning
My background

- Clinical psychologist, working in the NHS and for a large arthritis research charity at the University of Nottingham.
- Research experience mostly in experimental psychology, clinical research trials of medical interventions and systematic reviews.
- Clinical experience in early psychosis, adult mental health and chronic pain.
Epic Fail

I find your lack of win disturbing.
May the fail be with you.
But… hidden identity...

- Former mental health service user
- Practicing Christian with an interest in spirituality and person-centred approaches
- Interest in narrative methods and qualitative approaches
- Started a PhD at UoN last year to explore these themes further
Why autoethnography?

“Ethnography is less about finding the right answers to questions, than finding the right questions to ask”

(Larsen, 2007, p. 341)

- What do I want to study?
- Who am I and what do I believe?
- Where does my past experience sit with my current professional identity?
- How important is my faith in all of this?
The purpose of my autoethnography

1. For myself, and for my own reflection on self, world and other

2. To structure this thinking time in a constructive way that gives me a first chapter for the PhD

3. To work out what I want to investigate for my thesis
Autoethnography as method

- The focus of biography is ‘epiphanies’ - “remembered moments perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of a person's life” (Ellis et al., 2005)

- Ethnography is a social science method used to illustrate the cultural, relational and social practices of a given community, or a sub-culture, through participant observation

- Autoethnography thus combines retelling of ‘epiphanies’ with the ethnographic goal of investigating the social world, often through personal stories
Four significant events in my life

1. Taking drugs as a teenager and getting sectioned
2. Finding my spirituality and becoming a Christian
3. Second breakdown and contact with a therapeutic faith community
4. Recovery and decision to become a clinical psychologist
First epiphany “what is normal?”

- The ‘normal’ family
- Bullying and average performance at school
- Taking drugs and reading philosophy
- Feelings of being conned by society - anger and rebellion
- Breakdown, sectioned, ECT, “schizophrenia”
Second epiphany “born again”

- Post-psychotic depression and difficulties adjusting
- Reuse of drugs
- Interest in spirituality, leading to ‘born again’ experience
- Radical life-style change and recovery
Third epiphany “how deep does the rabbit hole go?”

- Move to London to start teacher-training
- Physical health problems and depression
- Asking questions, “leave your past alone!”
- Disenchantment with faith and church
- Breakdown leading to contact with a therapeutic faith community
Fourth epiphany “being real”

- Engagement with the therapeutic process of the community
- Self and relationships, past and future
- Authentic spirituality based on “being real”
- What do I want to do? Research versus clinical
Professionalisation of identity

- Qualified as a clinical psychologist in 2009
- So-called ‘scientist practitioner’
- Rhetoric and reality
- The role of personal experience and spirituality
- “Joining the enemy”? 
Double identity or dual identity?

“It seems that you've been living two lives. One life, you're Thomas A. Anderson, program writer for a respectable software company. You have a social security number, pay your taxes, and you... help your landlady carry out her garbage. The other life is lived in computers, where you go by the hacker alias "Neo" and are guilty of virtually every computer crime we have a law for. One of these lives has a future, and one of them does not.”

(Agent Smith from The Matrix)
Main themes: identity overlap

- Professionalism
- Authenticity
- Spirituality
A comment on method

- Writing chronologically was too much at first
- Wondering, “where I am going with all of this?”
- Listing memories/experiences as raw data to gain some distance
- Loose coding with important subjects, themes
- Final draft and redraft
- Supplementary sources: old clinical notes, therapeutic journal, professional development diary
nothing’s ever for sure.

Thank you – any questions?

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