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### The Healing Power of Storytelling: An Exploration into the Autoethnographic Process

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## Research Article

# The Healing Power of Storytelling: An Exploration into the Autoethnographic Process

—Amanda Cote

My mind was a hopeless mess when it came time to register for courses for my eighth—what should have been my final—semester studying communication arts as an undergrad. Since my depression diagnosis in the spring of 2014, my mind and overall wellbeing had been at the mercy of sharp ups and downs. I hastily chose a few course numbers falling under the short list of remaining requirements for graduation. Unbeknownst to me, a higher being sat beside me, drawing my attention to CA 612, Narrative with Barbara Jago.

On the first day of class, as Barbara sat in her chair I sat back in my own, prepared for the signature, first-day-of-class, syllabus-and-professor-bio lecture that was sure to come in the next few moments. Expecting a brief explanation of her degrees and qualifications, I was pleasantly surprised at what I heard in lieu of the latter. A summation of her life story, filled with ups, downs, and outrageous cross-country moves, this woman was beyond intriguing. An excitement I never anticipated for the coming semester grew with impressive speed.

Narrative, a writing intensive, senior-level course, would prove to be emotionally and spiritually challenging. Yet somehow, in a manner that brought comfort and empathy, both for myself and for everyone else, especially those writing about times of turmoil in their own lives. The University describes this course as focusing on the ways humans make sense of experiences through the stories we construct within particular relational, cultural, and historical contexts. Specific topics throughout the semester included canonical stories, the relationship between story and audience, and narrative truth. The main objective of the course was for each of its nine students to complete and original research project, through a methodology termed autoethnography. My autoethnography was an exploration into my experience with major depressive disorder.



Amanda Cote

## What Is Autoethnography?

Breaking the word “autoethnography” down, as Barbara did for the class, “graphy” represents writing, “auto” represents the self, and “ethno” represents culture. Autoethnography is a process that combines research and personal narrative, with the goal of characterizing and analyzing experience in the interest of understanding cultural experience. My autoethnography was written on my experience with depression, a time in my life that brought forth a change in perspective, and I related my personal story to the stories of others who experience the phenomenon of depression. Autoethnographers mostly write about an event or moment in their lives that led to an epiphany of sorts, but unlike autobiographers, they must also consider the ways in which others may have experienced a similar event in their lives. The autoethnographic process has become my strongest interest for further research.

Now, how does one do autoethnography? Through qualitative research and storytelling. Qualitative research is an umbrella term, encompassing innumerable “approaches to and methods for the study of natural life” (Saldaña, 2011, p. 3). As with literature, there are many genres of qualitative research. Autoethnography is only one of many genres of this kind of research, including ethnography, content analysis, and poetic inquiry, among several others. Instead of quantitative, statistical data, which is what many picture when the word “research” is mentioned, qualitative data consists of textual materials, like interview transcripts and field notes, and visual materials, like photographs and video recordings, that explore the human experience in the context of social interaction and self-reflection. For example, some of the strongest material in my work came from personal conversations and hand-written journal entries. Overall, qualitative research serves the purpose of trying to understand how people make sense of their world.

In my work, my narrative musings intertwine in what is called an autoethnographic layered account. From my understanding, a layered account is a form in which the writer methodologically separates sections of writing focused on research from those focused on narration. Autoethnographer Carol Ronai describes this as “an impressionistic sketch, handing readers layers of experience, so they may fill in the spaces and construct an interpretation of the writer’s narrative” (Ronai, 1995, p.396). In one of her many autoethnographies, Ronai discussed the controversial topic of child sex abuse in the context of her own experience and research. Autoethnography, I believe, is the medium authors and researchers use to explore topics society places a taboo on.

## Writing My Way Through

After a conversation with Barbara about our shared experience with depression, she directed me to her autoethnography on the subject. Doing so set my mind on the path to writing an autoethnography on *my* experience with the same. I was overwhelmed by the sheer sensitivity of the subject, which had kept me from even considering depression as a topic, but her words had a way of convincing me otherwise. I wrote about my experience with depression, and I did it for others battling depression, but more importantly, for myself to heal.

In late February, it was time to start the initial phase of writing. I wrote in a place some might find peculiar, the dining room table in my family home, where I had grown up over the past fifteen years.



My laptop in front of me, my golden retriever lying next to my chair, I wrote. I heard my mom in the kitchen, washing dishes, talking to the dogs, laughing on the phone. I heard my brother upstairs listening to his music at deafening volumes. I felt connected in those moments. I didn't consciously set out to make that location my personal writing center, but I am grateful I did.

Instead of starting with a quick brainstorm, I felt like I was drawn to my laptop, my fingers to the keys; I couldn't get away from it. I free wrote scenes in surprising detail of the painful memories from the years depression began to define my being. The stories came easily, taken from a haunting place in my mind and past, with details that I will likely never forget. These stories were supplemented by entries from a journal I kept in my darkest days, as well as memories of

conversations from years ago up until in the months and weeks approaching the project's deadline. There was an entire folder on my laptop dedicated to these narrative stories in two days' time. That part of the writing process felt effortless, and my first draft consisted of only these pieces.

### **Feeling the Weight of My Subject**

Along with the ease of writing my narrative accounts came the difficulty in writing about a subject that holds such weight in my life, in many respects. I simply had so much to say, with an excessive word count to prove it. I had to make a decision about which elements and stories to exclude or shorten in order to condense the overall size of the piece. Judging my own writing in such a way, judging my own experience, in terms of what should or should not be kept felt like a strange kind of torture. Looking at my writing as an observer, I picked out the stories that were repetitive or irrelevant, and the torture subsided. Beyond cutting some stories that remain close to my heart, I also faced a kind of judgment I had not seen before. I was not the only person to read this. Barbara was not the only person to read this. Friends, family, and mere acquaintances would come to read this illuminating inquiry into the darkest part of my life thus far.

Writing about such a personal topic, my fear for judgment from any possible audience grew. After completing several drafts and sharing them with loved ones, that fear dwindled, and eventually vanished. My own father, who witnessed my downtrodden demeanor in some of my lowest points, found himself in tears after reading one of the drafts. Reading of the pain I put onto paper, if not into spoken words, helped him to understand me in ways he never had.

I found that my depression is not something to hide from. Sure, others may not fully understand and thus make their own judgments, but I know who I am as a person and while my depression has helped me to grow, it does not define me.

## Connecting the Dots with Research

Maneuvering the related practice of qualitative research however, proved to be challenging. How would I relate my own experience to something academic writers wrote about themselves years, if not decades, ago? Would I find any connections? *How?* Barbara then directed me to a few authors she found interesting over the years in regards to my topic: Andrew Solomon, Peter Kramer, Jerome Bruner, Carolyn Ellis, Carol Ronai, Erving Goffman, and a handful of others.

Their words opened my eyes to many things, regarding both depression in all its facets and autoethnography, in the works others have written on the topic. Solomon's 2001 memoir, *The Noonday Demon, An Atlas of Depression*, writes an eerily accurate portrayal of the first few months in which depression takes hold. Reading his first chapter felt like revisiting my melancholic, broken mind in 2014, when depression first pulled me deep into its darkness. In Erving Goffman's *Stigma Notes on Management: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity*, written in 1986, he discusses the epidemic of stigma in society for those with physical and mental illness alike. After experiencing the sting of stigma in my own life by sharing my struggle with the wrong people, reading some of his passages brought some clarity for the feelings of inferiority I noticed in myself. Although indirectly, Goffman's work encouraged me to redefine the word "normal" as it fit into my own experiences, which in turn helped me to regain a feeling of security within myself. I found that there is no universal definition of normal; normality is a subjective phenomenon, something that has different meaning and weight to all.

In "Multiple Reflections of Child Sex Abuse," Ronai shares her story of assault as a young child, if only to use herself as an example of the possibility of remaking oneself after even the worst of pain. Ronai (1995) said, "Put simply, if I define myself as having taken a crash course in empathy, I can reframe my experiences as having something positive about them" (p. 411). That passage gave me the courage to reframe my experience with depression in order to find the slightest bit of positivity. If she found a thin shred of value in her childhood filled with sexual, emotional, and physical abuse, I knew I could find some in my own life.

The words of Andrew Solomon (2001), in particular, had a lasting effect in my research and life. I quoted the following from his book in my own work:

*It had had a life of its own that bit by bit asphyxiated all of my life out of me...I had moods that I knew were not my moods: they belonged to the depression...When I tried to think clearly about this, I felt that my mind was immured, that it couldn't expand in any direction. I knew that the sun was rising and setting, but little of its light reached me (p. 18).*

Solomon put into words his own struggle, which I strongly identified with. His words gave me hope that I could do the same in my autoethnography.

Having immersed myself in reading all these accounts of depression, I moved on to adding this research to my own work. I started by categorizing the specific topic that each scene addressed. I attempted to connect my experience to others' experiences, interwoven into sections of what eventually became my layered account. My first task was to define autoethnography for readers who

were unfamiliar, and I found that general definition in my course reading, a book on the topic by Adams, Jones, and Ellis (2014). I cited Solomon (2001) in scenes describing my own pain. When writing about my own largely negative experience with prescription anti-depressants, the words of Peter Kramer (1993) perfectly explained the trial process of psychiatric medicine.

In questioning the cause for stigma in those with any kind of illness or ailment, I turned to Erving Goffman (1986), who offered insight to that end. I see the impact of stigma in my own life, after trusting others too easily and sharing my story with people who were unworthy. I continued with this process by keeping a mental list of the topics I needed more information on, including relational ethics for those mentioned as characters in my stories, defining depression in an official context, and explaining the concept of framing experience, among many others.

Only upon feeling that I had explored every facet of my experience and found related research did I find an organization pattern. Inevitably, I found myself sitting on the red carpet in my living room with a stack of printed sheets, a pair of scissors, and some Scotch tape. My self-proclaimed perfectionism drew me to cut each story away from the restricted form of the printed document and then arrange and rearrange the order of the stories in a cycle that seemed endless until I found an order that pleased me. Still, before I would finish, many words were cut, changed, added, or forgotten completely.

## Revision and Reflection

After the first few revision meetings with Barbara, she told me I could stop and simply pass the assignment in as-is to receive an exceptional grade. We then shared a chuckle, knowing there was no way I would stop working at that point. I discovered a passion for narrative writing and I was not about to stop; the stories just kept coming to me. She sent me on my own way after that meeting, confident I would finish the piece leaving no stone unturned, and with permission for my word count to continue to surpass the project requirement of 5,000 words. At the time, I believed her confidence in me to be misjudged, but I proved myself wrong and finally came out with a complete, finished work for the deadline. I'm not sure I will ever consider it fully finished, but I made myself figuratively put the pen down and let my words speak for themselves.

Although the writing process proved to be difficult, as others had warned, given the personal and painful nature of the subject, the results were inherently positive. I experienced an epiphany of sorts: a simple change in perception helps identify the good in even the worst of times. Through my research and self-reflection, I reframed my experience with a hint of positivity, reconstructing the meaning of struggle. While struggle is a word associated with differing amounts of negativity, it also is an experience resulting in eventual relief. If we do not know times of trouble, how can we know peace? There cannot be one without the other; we all can find some shred of positivity, even in moments of struggle. I have found, most importantly, that we all have the power to bring happiness into our lives, despite any trouble that comes our way.

*Autoethnography combines research and writing, with the goal of characterizing and analyzing personal experience in the interest of understanding cultural experience. Before that one class in the spring of 2016, I had never heard of the process, but I am grateful for the lessons it taught me about*

*both my own life and my growth in writing. I admire and thank Professor Barbara Jago, PhD, who came into my life at the perfect time, for sharing her wisdom in life and education with me and consistently pushing me to improve myself as a writer. With all of my love, I thank my parents, brother, and all of the beautiful souls in my life for their unparalleled compassion and support during the emotional writing process, and always. You all inspire me to be the best version of myself as a person, daughter, sister, and friend.*

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## Author and Mentor Bios

**Amanda Jean Cote** of Salem, New Hampshire graduated from UNH Manchester in December 2016 with a bachelor of arts, magna cum laude, in communication arts. Although Amanda's project started as a requirement for a course, she was inspired by her professor, Barbara Jago, and soon found that she "wanted to write, more than anything" to help make sense of her depression. Amanda found that writing about her experience with depression was healing and gave her "an entirely new perspective on many things." To fulfill her coursework requirement, Amanda wrote an 8000-word autoethnography. Here, in her Inquiry article, she describes the research process she took to complete that larger body of writing. Amanda believes that writing her story has left her at peace, and shares her stories "in the hopes that they will help someone the way that they helped me."

**Barbara Jago** Ph.D., associate professor of communication arts and chair of the Department of Communication Arts and Science, has been a UNH faculty member for nineteen years. Dr. Jago studies family interaction and health communication using autoethnographic research methods, and teaches a variety of relational communication courses. Amanda Cote enrolled in CA 612: Narrative in the spring of 2016, and is the first of Dr. Jago's students to be published in *Inquiry*. "Amanda wrote one of the best undergraduate autoethnographies I have ever read," Dr. Jago explains. "Her story of depression is compelling, insightful, and brave. I am very proud of Amanda!"