**Culture, Consent and Confidentiality in Workplace Autoethnography.**

*Introduction*

This paper examines my experiences as a school teacher and a lesbian. It considers the culture and discourses of power in the school and the ethical implications of telling my story. Utilizing autoethnography as a method of inquiry, it draws on a critical incident to explore the incompatibility of my private and professional identities, and reflect on the impact of homophobic and heteronormative discursive practices in the workplace, on health, wellbeing and identity. Conceived of initially as a therapeutic exercise to set my doctoral research in context, the critical incident itself eventually became the focus of the research.

In the critical incident, I explore how I prospered as an assistant headteacher at a UK village school for almost ten years by censoring my sexuality and carefully managing the intersection between my private and professional identities. However, when a malicious and homophobic neighbor, and parent of children at the school, exposed my sexuality to the headteacher, I learned the extent to which the rural school community privileged and protected the heteronormative discourse.

Throughout the process of writing about the critical incident, I have been concerned about the ethical implications of telling this story. Initially I wrongly assumed that as an autoethnographic researcher I need give only limited regard to ethical issues, since I was the focus of the research. However, as the narrative took shape on the page and inevitably included reference to colleagues, the pupils and the parents, I asked myself time and again, do I own this story simply because it happened to me (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000)?

This paper begins by interrogating the cultural and organizational power in the school and the incompatibility of my home and workplace identities. It then explores three broad themes relating to the ethics of writing about the workplace. First is concern for the representation of others in my research. Other people are almost always present in self-narratives as they place the self in context and facilitate the cultural, social and relational construction of identity. Even though the critical incident is primarily about me, it has at its core the behavior of others and my relationships with them. Tolich (2010) describes the word ‘auto’ when applied to autoethnography as a “misnomer”, describing the self as “porous”, inevitably “leaking” onto others, sometimes without due ethical consideration (p.1608). The second broad theme concerns the reliability of the narrative and the possible impact of telling this story on other school stakeholders at that time. The account of the critical incident was written retrospectively, five months after the incident itself. Data collected from the police, my GP and CBT therapist as well as email and text message correspondence at school, helped me recall the ‘factual’ and emotional detail of the time, but this story is largely based on my memory of it. The critical incident is not whole. I made choices about what to include and what to omit. I set privacy boundaries, some of which I later crossed and some of which I could not (Petronio, 2002). The critical incident has been redrafted many times; I have rewritten entire sections, wrestling with the presentation of myself and others in the piece, and struggling particularly to be accepting of my narrative voice. The others mentioned in the narrative have not had the right to answer the criticism of them and, though their identities have been anonymized, those that know me or worked with me are without doubt able to identify the school The third broad theme is apprehension surrounding the representation of myself, particularly at a time when I felt at my most vulnerable. Green, in Flemons and Green (2002) describes autoethnography as an ‘outing’ process not dissimilar to coming out as lesbian or gay. Green states, “You have to decide if you are ready to be outed or to put yourself out in that way” (p.93) and cautions autoethnographers to consider the potential impact on personal identity and relationships. Data collected about me from medical and mental health services portray a person that present and potential future colleagues do not know existed. Releasing this much of myself into the public domain leads me to wonder whether that initial therapeutic exercise may in fact turn out to be more harmful than healing.

*The Critical Incident*

My doctorate took as its focus, a critical incident which took place in 2009 in the rural community in which I lived and worked as an assistant headteacher. It draws on personal recollection supported by external data sources to interrogate the way in which the rural school community dealt with my sexual identity, and the impact of participating in this conservative environment on my perceptions of own identity as a teacher, colleague, partner and neighbor. In common with Canagarajah (2012), I recognize that there are tensions in diverse identities but these tensions need not be debilitating, and can as Canagarajah, acknowledges “lead to forms of negotiation that generate critical insights and in-between identities” (p.261).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to share the entire critical incident on which the research is based. What follows is a brief synopsis of the salient events supported by short extracts from the documentary evidence collected. It should be noted that this incident took place a year before I decided to embark on doctoral research. In contrast to much autoethnography, I was not involved in doctoral study at the time of the events, nor did I have future plans to do so. I decided to use the incident as the focus of my research after it had taken place, drawing retrospectively on the data produced at the time to supplement recollection and enhance understanding. Doloriet and Sambrook (2012) refer to this type of research as previous or other life autoethnography.

I lived with my partner in rural South East England. We had a house surrounded on three sides by fields belonging to the local Wildlife Trust. In June 2009, the neighboring farmhouse and only other property for half a mile was sold to the a family of seven. They moved in and enrolled three of their children at the school at which I was assistant headteacher. The family next door had a garden of six acres, but placed a trampoline immediately abutting our boundary, no more than fifteen feet from our kitchen and living room windows. My partner and I were upset at this intrusion to our privacy. Therefore, we decided to go and introduce ourselves and welcome theour neighbors to the village, hoping in the process for an opportunity to mention the trampoline issue.

The children’s fathershowed us around the grounds of his new property and my partner sensitively broached the subject of the trampoline, explaining that I was a teacher at the school his children attended and that it was important for his children and for me that professional and personal boundaries did not become blurred. Hemoved the trampoline, we thanked him for appreciating our position and rounded off the encounter in a cordial and neighborly manner.

Later that evening, banging on the front door interrupted our conversation. Our neighborwas pacing on and off the doorstep shouting that he would not be told what to do by a pair of lesbians and was going to make our lives a ‘living misery’. We stood paralyzed as hespat out more and more frustrated threats.

The following weeks were unhappy and uncomfortable. Though no further words were exchanged our neighbor pursued and provoked us at every opportunity. He called us ‘dykes’, and ‘lezzers’; he urinated in our garden, appeared at our windows late at night, and tried to run us off the narrow country lanes in his enormous black four wheel drive. We staunchly attempted to enjoy the summer sunshine but we had become an obsession to our neighbor. He could not settle if we were outside and shouted or howled or laughed loudly and inexplicably at us. He threw things over the fence to startle us; on one occasion it was a bucket and on another the family bag of clothes pegs.

Crime report. UK Police national computer

To date Catherine Lee has experienced 45 separate incidents involvingxxxx. This has taken place over a nine month period and includes the following behavior.

Climbing the tree on the boundary and howling at the two women

Shouting “do the dykes want peace and quiet”.

Howling and shouting at them when he sees them.

Shouting at male decorator working for the couple “why have you got a man visiting your house”.

Five separate incidents of running victim off the road in his four-wheel-drive.

Urinating openly in front of the two women on their land.

Throwing a bucket into her garden.

Being in her garden and staring through the kitchen window.

At school, I was relieved not to be teaching any of the neighbor’s children and made a conscious decision to try to remain unaware of them in this setting. I hoped that this would help me to avoid any awkward encounters with them and ensure I was fair and consistent in any chance dealings I did have with them. This was not too difficult to achieve in a school of more than eight hundred pupils, especially as I was not too sure what they looked like, such was my determination to avoid them at home.

Because our property and our neighbor’swere isolated from the rest of the village, my partner and I were initially too afraid to involve the police. To do so would provoke our neighbor further and it would be unlikely the police could protect us in such a remote location. When the name calling and taunts showed no sign of stopping, we put the house on the market. Although we loved our cottage, our ability to enjoy it had disintegrated.

The stress of being subject to harassment by our neighbor began to take its toll on me physically and mentally. I was admitted to hospital at the beginning of the school summer holidays with abdominal pain. Surgery followed for the removal of ovarian cysts that had lain dormant for some time and as I lay at home incapacitated, I fell into a black hole of despair.

GP Notes 29th July 2009

Dr XXXXXXXXXX

S: Dispute with neighbor. Anhedonia, low mood, poor sleep, self-loathing, poor concentration, anxiety and restlessness ++. Refer for CBT.

Soon after I returned to school, my headteacher asked to see me in his office. My neighbor had come into school to tell my headteacher that I was a lesbian and express concern that I was working with children. He had qualified his concern by alleging that I had been staring lustfully at his nine year-old daughters on the trampoline. My headteacher warned that my neighbor was determined to pursue me and recommended I get on with moving house as quickly as possible. I had never mentioned to my headteacher that I was a lesbian but now with my sexuality exposed, I told him all about the harassment at home. I asked the headteacher whether, if I ever felt safe enough to report my neighbor to the police, he would support me by telling the police about this visit. Clearly compromised and irritated at being so, the head retorted that this was not a school matter and his priority was to get along with my neighbor, particularly as he had so many children passing through the school.

I reflected on the conversation as I left the head’s office to return to my own. The allegation by my neighbor that I had been staring lustfully at his daughters did not seem outrageous to the head. He had felt unable or unprepared to challenge it. I started to worry that other colleagues and other parents would deem the accusation feasible.

Inevitably, the children next door began to tell their friends that I was a lesbian. A teaching assistant told me that I had been the topic of conversation in the class she was attached to and before long the walk from my classroom to my office or the playground was tortuous. In the staffroom too, I was suddenly alone; light-hearted conversations with colleagues evaporated and invitations to social events disappeared. Perhaps this was my fault as no doubt I behaved differently, as I wondered who knew and thought what about the allegation.

Although I enjoyed teaching, I could no longer bear to be at the school and jumped at the first job opportunity I found with a local authority. We sold the house quickly and decided that the day before we were due to leave, we would report our neighbor to the police.

My partner and I selected this date with care, aware that from this point we would lose control over circumstances surrounding our relationship withour neighbor . We did not want to wait until after we had left our home to make our allegations as we were concerned that the police might decide that, as we no longer lived in close proximity to our neighbor, the case did not need to be pursued. However, at the same time, we feared that if the police approached our neighbor whilst we were still in the neighboring cottage, there was a good chance his behavior towards us would become more extreme.

Arrangements were made for a police officer to visit us at home to take a full statement on our last night in the cottage. Arriving to our relief in plain clothes and in an unmarked police car, he sat with us amongst the cardboard boxes. He asked us questions about our work, the cottages, our relationship and the nature of our neighbor behavior towards us.

Crime report. Police national computer

Offender over nine month period has verbally abused victim and her partner due to them being in a gay/lesbian relationship.

The couple have got to the point that they have sold their property and are moving out of the area completely. They have been too afraid to report the matter to police until the last minute before they move for fear of reprisals.

This has resulted in the victim being petrified of her neighbor. She has been referred to her GP for depression and is receiving counselling.

She received little or no support from the headteacher. She has also contacted the teaching union.

It is obvious that both are upset and Catherine in particular is frightened and at the end of her tether. She will require a huge amount of support.

I have discussed special measures should this end up in court and assured her we will do everything to support her. I would recommend either video link or partition to assist in her giving evidence if required..

I have identified that the headteacher needs to be spoken with and a statement obtained covering the complaint made to him regarding Catherine Lee being a lesbian. I have checked with Catherine Lee that she is happy for this to take place.

This is a very nasty case of homophobic harassment.

The following day my partner and I moved into rented accommodation in another county and began our lives again, well away from our neighbor and the rural school community.

*The Rural School Culture and Discourses of Power*

Workplace identity is produced as a consequence of experiences and is negotiated and renegotiated through reflection that leads to new understandings about the self (Sachs et al., 2005:15). The cultural context in which one works, in my case, the school, its community or catchment area, the age range taught, the subjects delivered, and the responsibilities consistent with the post, all impact on a teacher’s sense of professional identity. As careers progress, teachers acquire knowledge and experience that serves to reshape professional identities (Lasky, 2005). As teachers move on from school to school and/or role to role, identities are revised according to the dominant discourse of the school community and the responsibilities inherent to their post. Teacher identity is then, not merely personal, but situated within a cultural and socio-political discourse (Sfard and Prusak, 2005).

Teachers are subject to significant prescription of working practices by the government, school leadership teams and school governing bodies and this serves to restrict the ways in which teachers can perform their professional identities (Gray, 2010). Drawing on this tension, MacLure (1993) describes teacher identity as a “continuing site of struggle” (p.313). Similarly, Zembylas (2003) describes teacher identity as “messy” (p.109), adding that it is a working subjectivity that is formed and articulated through talk, social interaction and self-presentation. Citing the work of Butler and Foucault, Zembylas argues that teacher identity is not pre-existing or stable but comes to be perceived that way through the discipline that is imposed upon the profession through the culture of the school discourses of power that exist within it.

According to Zembylas, who draws on Foucault’s (1977) notion of ‘docile bodies’, discourses of power in schools require teachers to be “docile and disciplined” (2003:123). If teachers are at odds with the dominant discourse, they must remain silent or face criticism or isolation from the school community.

Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) contend that in order to fully understand teacher identity one must consider the inextricable link between the personal and professional self. Similarly, Zemblayas (2003) calls for teachers to bring more of themselves into school and be less concerned about managing the intersection between private and professional selves. Though the call for teachers to take more of themselves into school is attractive, it is somewhat idealistic and is dependent of course, on a private identity that exists in a way that is acceptable to the school community and culture.

Teaching requires teachers to have integrity and be morally upstanding (Gray, 2010). Aware of the influence that a teacher has over the lives of young people, teaching is positioned by those with power (government ministers, school leaders, parents and school governors) as a moral profession. The UK Teachers Standards 2012, for example, require teachers to demonstrate that they “uphold public trust in the profession and maintain high standards of ethics and behavior, within and outside school” (2012:10). Teachers are socially and politically positioned as role models inside and outside school and as such, must display exemplary behavior at all times. There is, however, a tension between the positioning of teacher identity by social and political discourses, and the desire and right of teachers to have access to a private life. In order to have a private life, teachers must manage the intersection of their private and professional identities within and beyond the school campus. Boundaries between professional and private lives must be drawn in order that teachers can be afforded the privacy and liberty to relax, let down their guard and assume identities that the school community might regard as incompatible with the position of role model to young people. This presents a challenge for all teachers, but as heterosexual identities are privileged in school (Gray, 2010), those who are not heterosexual may find their private and professional identities particularly incompatible. Whilst this is a challenge for every teacher it is especially demanding for those who find themselves positioned outside the heteronormative discourse.

According to Gray (2010), when a teacher is marginalized by heteronormativity, a “fissure” (p.24) can exist between their private and professional selves. Gray states:

although we may all inhabit ‘homeselves’ and ‘workselves’ that do not necessarily intersect comfortably, for LGB teachers the difficulty of negotiating these two selves can become impossible and seemingly unsurpassable (2010:239).

One might imagine that managing lesbian and teacher identities is simply a case of separating home life and school life. However, according to Gray (2010), managing teacher and lesbian identities is much more complex, particularly because sexual identity does not merely exist in the private realm. Gray argues that because sexual identity is subject to “politico-legal interventions” (p.26) and heterosexuality is a constant presence within public life, it becomes necessary to speak of sexual identity in contexts that extend well beyond the discussion of sex.

Sexual identity in schools is highly regulated by heteronormative discourses and practices. My rural school subscribed to an essentialist paradigm of identity that posited heterosexuality, along with labels of boy, girl, male and female gender, as stable, natural and inherent. For example, ‘big strong boys’ were asked to move heavy equipment and girls were permitted to wear make-up as an end of term treat. Butler argues against such an essentialist notion. She states:

The illusion of an interior and organizing gender core is discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of heterosexuality. If the ‘cores’ of desire, gesture and act can be localized within the ‘self’ of the actor, then the political regulations and disciplinary practices which produce that ostensibly coherent gender are effectively displaced from view (1990:136).

Applying a poststructuralist perspective to schools, Rasmussen (2004) argues that schools marginalize those who are not heterosexual and states that the management of non-heterosexual identities in school is “mediated by the varying circulations of power in the community, the classroom, the playground, and the staffroom” (p.26). The circulations of power to which Rasmussen refers necessitated the careful management of my lesbian identity at school. I wanted to belong and be myself, but I could not find an opening to do so. Furthermore, the process of managing the intersection of my lesbian and teacher identities rendered me cautious and guarded in all my interactions.

Sedgwick (1990) states that lesbian identity is invisible and silent until it is spoken into existence. I am aware that some people reading the critical incident may consider that I was simply not courageous enough to come out at school. However, the culture of the rural school community provided almost no space for me to speak my sexual identity into existence. Silence around lesbian sexuality is complex. According to Ferfolja (2007), it is silenced and spoken at the same time. Through the silence it is spoken because it reinforces what cannot be said. The silence renders heterosexuality legitimate and positions all other sexual identities as inauthentic or illegitimate.

Coming out is an act of resistance that threatens heteronormativity. For that reason lesbian teachers must learn to read spaces to gauge safety or danger when deciding whether or not to come out at school. I was out to a few trusted colleagues but my fear that someone from the conservative and traditional community in which I lived and worked would deem my sexual identity incompatible with my teacher status left me hiding my sexual identity and assimilating to the heteronormative discourse.

Gray (2010) suggests that being a lesbian teacher “often involves complex processes of negotiation in order to exist professionally and privately along demarcated lines” (p.233). I drew up lines of demarcation in which I did not see colleagues socially, and shopped, dined and socialized well outside the catchment area and nearest town. However, when the family moved in and placed their children’s trampoline intrusively close to the windows of our cottage, my lines of demarcation were breached, demonstrating that I could never achieve full control of the management of my identities.

Of course, on raising this concern withour neighbor , the professional and personal boundaries were already blurred. Crucially, during that initial encounter, I could not be sure whether I was in or out of the closet to my neighbor . In visiting the family next door with my partner, I had strongly implied my lesbian identity. We did not make a declarative statement about the nature of our relationship (Khayatt, 1997) so we could not be sure that our neighbor knew that we were lesbians and whether he would actually “give up the privilege of restricted knowledge” (Ward and Winstanley, 2005:450) by telling others. Sedgwick (1990) describes the closet as “the defining structure of gay oppression in this century” (p.48). That my neighbor held the power to out me from the closet at school or permit me to remain there, demonstrates the oppression to which Sedgwick refers.

I recognized that within the heteronormative hegemony of the school community, power was bestowed on masculine, heterosexual men (Gray 2010) like my neighbor and the headteacher. My lesbian and teacher identities had been forcibly linked bymy neighbor ; therefore I could not quietly return to the closet and continue to assimilate heterosexuality. Equally, when I tried to challenge the headteacher, I realized that it was unlikely that I would be able to create a space to exist safely within this heteronormative rural school community.

In almost ten years at the school, I did not declare my sexual identity to my headteacher. I have wondered on many occasions whether the critical incident would have unfolded differently had I done so. Drawing on the US law preventing military personnel from disclosing their sexuality (1994-2011), I referred to my arrangement with the headteacher as ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’.

I realize now that though my headteacher appeared not to care that I was a lesbian, our ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ arrangement was an act of power that served to silence my identity in the school community. The act of silencing another through ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ is aptly described by Anderson (2002) who states that “the U.S. military’s ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy highlighted that what could not be discussed was just as powerful a weapon of heterosexual hegemony as what could be discussed.

Applying the ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy to schools, DePalma and Atkinson (2009) show how, through its silencing, it is a powerful heteronormative discursive practice. They argue that the pseudo-tolerance of ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ “perpetuates stereotypes and propagates the heterosexist assumption that all teachers and parents are heterosexual and all girls and boys will grow up and eventually (want to) marry a person of the opposite sex” (p.839).

Yoshino (1998) describes ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ as “mandatory invisibility” (p.485). He claims that the homosexual/heterosexual binary means that a ban on self-identification of a lesbian or gay identity implies the affirmation of a heterosexual identity by default. He explains, “this is because the strength of the heterosexual presumption makes a homosexual's silence as pointed and as performative as speech affirming that she is straight” (ibid.).

Britton and Williams (1995) argue that the ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy in the US armed forces ensured that the accomplishments of lesbian and gay service members were never able to contradict the arguments of the military establishment. Similarly, in my rural school community the silencing of my sexuality through ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ prevented me from ever positioning my sexual identity as positive. Cautious and anxious, I was too distracted by the management of my identities to ever give much of my real self to the school. Consequently, my teaching, pastoral care and relationships with colleagues always felt to me partial and compromised.

Having explored the way in which the rural school culture prevented me from speaking my sexual identity into existence, I now consider the ethical implications of writing about my experiences in the workplace.

*Ethical Considerations*

Writing about your life brings you to strange places; you might be uncomfortable about what you learn about yourself and others. You might find yourself confronting serious ethical issues ... Who might you be hurting? ... How do you write a ''true” ethnography of your experiences? (Richardson, 2001:38)

This section interrogates the ethical implications of writing about the critical incident for doctoral research. By analyzing three broad themes in turn (the representation of the school stakeholders, the reliability of the narrative and, my vulnerable self), I explore the potential impact of this autoethnography on the people portrayed in it, my personal and professional identities and on the integrity of the research itself.

*The representation of others*

It is almost impossible to tell one’s story without referring to others. As Roth (2009) aptly states:

Without the Other, there is no consciousness … without consciousness there cannot be self-consciousness. Consciousness-for-oneself always and already is consciousness-for-the-Other (para.11 Italics in original).

When people feature in research they are typically referred to as participants (see, for example, ethical guidance from The British Sociological Association, 2002; The British Psychological Society, 2009; The British Educational Research Association, 2011). Though the wording of ethical guidelines differs from discipline to discipline, the messages relating to ethical research in education, psychology and other social sciences are broadly consistent. When including participants in research, researchers are normally expected to gain the informed consent of participants, consider their right to information concerning the purposes, processes and outcomes of the study, offer participants the right to withdraw at any stage and protect participant confidentiality.

Wall (2006) observes that personal experience methods, such as autoethnography, justify themselves by observing that individuals do not exist apart from their social context. Wall advocates that personal experience can be the foundation for further sociological understanding. Autoethnography often has as its focus a critical reflection on a life event. Such an event typically occurs before the autoethnographer seeks to reflect on it in for the purpose of research but the resulting narrative inevitably includes references to other people in addition to the autoethnographer as narrator. In such circumstances, conventional ethical guidance is not that helpful.

Though there is a dearth of guidance tackling ethical issues in autoethnography, some researchers have addressed the ethics of autoethnography in terms of how they represent the others who may be implicated in their stories (see, for example, Ellis, 2007; Etherington, 2007; Medford, 2006; Poulos, 2008). Some have sought the retrospective consent of their characters and afforded them the right to exercise a degree of control over how they are portrayed**.** However, even when retrospective consent is gained the relationship between the autoethnographer and others appearing in the research is a complex one, potentially full of tensions that cannot be reconciled through conventional ethical protocol or even retrospective consent. Recognizing that autoethnography does not naturally fit the procedures or structures that typically surround the ethical considerations of research, Ellis (2007) describes the ethical issues endemic in autoethnographers’ relations with the others in their story as a “quagmire” (p.4). She states:

… as qualitative researchers, we encounter ethical situations that do not fit strictly under the procedures specified by IRBs. The bad news is that there are no definitive rules or universal principles that can tell you precisely what to do in every situation or relationship you may encounter, other than the vague and generic do no harm (p.5).

Whilst the absence of clear ethical regulation presents an infinite number of possibilities for autoethnographers, the silence that surrounds the prescription of the ethics of autoethnography leaves those of us at the beginnings of our research careers without clear guidance. Tolich (2010) recognizes this and, criticizing Ellis and other leading autoethnographers, observes that those “held up as experts in their craft, [do] not appear to anticipate ethical issues or recognize boundaries within their collection of ideas” (p.1602). Tolich accuses Ellis, in particular, of causing “a contradiction, even confusion, for novice researchers” (p.1603). Tolich observes that Ellis advocates that autoethnography should be conducted ethically, but she herself indulges her readers with intimate and often unflattering details about significant others without their consent (see, for example, Ellis 1995; Ellis 1996). Tolich accuses Ellis and her contemporaries of failing to address the question “Do others mentioned in the text also have rights?” (p. 1602). This is echoed by Sikes (2015) who warns that once out there in the public domain, described and enshrined in print, people in narratives become fixed and which can have serious and far reaching consequences for the author and their characters.

The lack of ethical prescription for autoethnography, along with Tolich’s call to my conscience that others mentioned in the text should have rights, presents me with somewhat of a dilemma regarding the portrayal of others in the critical incident. Whilst I have a strong conviction that my story is one that ought to be heard, I recognize that my neighbor and the headteacher have not consented to their appearance in this research nor would they be likely to do so, given the way they have been represented. Obtaining retrospective consent would not be feasible or advisable given the terms in which we interacted in the critical incident. I am therefore left wondering whether my right to reflect on and learn from an event that happened to me in my workplace extends to, or includes the right to, refer to key school stakeholders without their permission. My dilemma is one that Ellis recognizes. Citing a question her own autoethnography students frequently ask her, she writes: ‘“Is the well-being of the researcher always less important than the well-being of the other, even others who have behaved badly?” I answer, “No, not always.”’ (2007:24). Sikes (2015) agrees, acknowledging that being identified takes on a whole new set of ethical issues if someone who committed offences or harmed people is involved.

Even though I am prepared to argue that both my neighbor and the headteacher behaved badly and the telling of my story through my doctoral research has had a positive effect on my well-being, I fully recognize that some will argue that the inclusion of a parent and a colleague in the critical incident is ethically problematic. However, as a researcher at the beginning of my academic career without clear guidance on ethics and autoethnography, I look to the example of other autoethnographers who have written about those that have caused them harm without their consent. For example, Brison (2002) writes about being raped on a country lane in France and Adams (2011) describes being the victim of homophobic violence. Ellis (2007) recognizes that there may be instances when seeking the consent of those who appear in autoethnographic research may not be appropriate. She states:

Sometimes you may decide not to take your work back to those you write about. In those cases, you should be able to defend your reasons for not seeking their responses (p.25).

In defense of the inclusion in this research of my neighbor and the headteacher I wish to emphasize that in common with many autoethnographies, this research is a retrospective reflection on a life event. I did not set out to engender the circumstances of the critical incident. It existed before I thought to utilize it in the research and its influence on my life extends beyond this academic consideration. For example, well before I decided to research this event, I had discussed it with friends and some colleagues. In these discussions, I revealed the identities of all concerned. I reported the actions of the headteacher and my neighbor to my teaching union and in doing so did not offer either man anonymity.

Tolich (2010) cautions autoethnographers not to betray colleagues, friends and family through the portrayal of them in personal narratives. Whilst Tolich warns against “violating the internal confidentiality of relational others” (p.1599) stating that the “unsubstantiated therapeutic promise of autoethnography” (p.1607) does not give the autoethnographer the right to disregard the “ethical rights of those perpetrators who caused the harm” (ibid.). According to Muncey (2008), one of the defining features of autoethnography is its ability to give a voice to those silenced or marginalized by those who are more powerful. When ethics determine that the perpetrator must be protected, the power remains with the perpetrator and the victim continues to be silenced. It is my contention then that to deny an individual the opportunity to explore their own story is in itself an act of oppression. Victims of domestic abuse (Olson, 2004), rape (Brison, 2002; Curry, 2010) and homophobia (McLaurin, 2003; Adams, 2012) have all been given a voice through autoethnography. None of these authors to my knowledge gained the consent of their oppressors but, in proceeding without it, each has made a new and valuable contribution to academic understanding about these issues from which others can learn (Humpreys, 2005). I hope that in following the lead of these more established autoethnographers, I too might contribute a new voice

Medford (2006) recommends that autoethnographers should not publish anything they would not show to the other persons mentioned in the text and this is fully supported by Tolich (2010) and Sikes (2015). Even though I have not had the opportunity to share the contents of this thesis with the main protagonists in the critical incident, I too believe that Medford’s advice is sound. Though Medford doubts that the protagonist in her story, her Mother, would ever “seek out a subscription to *Qualitative Inquiry”* (p.860), I recognise that it is possible that my neighbor and the headteacher may come across my work one day. I would welcome this should it happen and so in that respect I am prepared to expose my version of events without censor to my neighbor and the headteacher.

It is important to stress, however, that whilst I have not sought the consent of my neighbor and the headteacher, I fully recognize that I have a responsibility to them as the author of this research. I also have a responsibility to the school community in which this research is based. I have committed to tell my story with moral integrity and to that end have endeavored throughout to avoid overt criticism of either man. Throughout the research I reminded the reader that my account of events is interpretative, coloured by my past experience. I present only my version of the critical incident and my neighbor and the headteacher along with all others featuring in it are only partial and fragmented representations of people I have known. They exist in the writing only to help me explore a workplace issue and learn more about myself.

 I have striven to do everything possible to protect the identities of my neighbor, the headteacher and indeed all the people in my story. I disguised the identity of my neighbor through the omission of all information not crucial to the narrative. I also have not named him.. I concede that those who knew me extremely well during the period of the critical incident will be able to identify him, especially as he was my only neighbor. However, as I am a private person, those knowing me well enough to know where I lived, are also likely to already know of the problems we faced living next door toour neighbor. I have referred to the headteacher by his title only and have disguised the school’s location and omitted the name of the school. Like me, the headteacher has now left the school and the teaching profession. However, I concede that those who knew me as a teacher at the school are likely to be able to identify him. In order to further protect my neighbor and the headteacher in particular, I disguised the location of events through the use of fictitious names. I also referred to others only by their job titles or relationship to me.

To answer my earlier question,*do I own this story simply because it happened to me?* *?* I would argue ‘not necessarily’. However, drawing on Medford (2006) who, without the consent of the protagonists in her autoethnography, states that she writes “under the assumption that my former partner, my mother, and the others I have named or implied in this article are in my audience” (p.863), I contend that even if circumstances dictate that one is unable to share one’s story with those featuring in it, if one is prepared to share the story with all involved then, in some situations, it is appropriate for the story to be told. That said, as a researcher, I fully acknowledge my responsibility to others, in particular my neighbor and the headteacher, and the way I represent them has been considered extremely carefully.

I conclude this section by echoing the call of Tolich for further guidance on the ethics of autoethnography Tolich states:

If autoethnography is to advance its ethical considerations, its leading exponents must provide insight into the ethical boundaries between the self and the other that anticipates ethical dilemmas (2010:1605).

Whilst it is possible for those of us to at the start of our research careers to follow in the footsteps of more established autoethnographers, the inconsistencies and contradictions that abound bear out Ellis’s (2000) analogy that doing autoethnography can be akin to being sent into the woods without a compass.

*The reliability of the narrative*

According to Medford (2006), “autoethnographic scholars know that writing the Truth or the objective account of reality, is not possible” (p.853). Instead, they strive to present the essence of their experience. In common with all researchers, autoethnographers decide what to include and what to leave out. Details that are not relevant to the focus of the narrative may be omitted. Over time certain information, such as the exact words used in dialogue, may be forgotten. Chang (2008) describes memory as both the friend and foe of autoethnographers. Memory allows researchers to tap into the wealth of data to which no one else has access, and it selects, shapes, limits and distorts recollection. According to Chang, memory may also trigger aversion when it attempts to dig deeper into unpleasant past experiences.

It could be argued that the use of third party data has enhanced the reliability of the narrative in this autoethnography. Information from the police national computer, my medical file and notes taken by the CBT therapist have also served as a reminder of forgotten details. These data have helped me to correct inaccuracies regarding the timeline of events and, particularly in the case of the CBT notes, forced me to confront some very unpleasant and uncomfortable memories. Of course it can be argued that these data are not third party data at all. The notes taken by these outside agencies merely reflect the information I relayed to them during this time; they are simply my diary entries written by someone else. However, as each organization examined my circumstances through their particular lens – the law, medicine or mental health – they have placed a different emphasis and interpretation onto events and each helped to give a further dimension to the incident.

The presentation of the self lies at the heart of any autoethnography. According to Swartz, “personal identity cannot be clean, consistent, or concise, nor can it ever be fixed and permanent, nor yet can it be individually bounded” (2009:794). I concur with Swartz and, furthering his analogy that identity cannot be clean, acknowledge that the versions of myself that appear throughout this autoethnography are contaminated by events, relationships and circumstances in my past. As events and relationships are explored and analyzed through the process of autoethnography, the presentation of the self on the page is revisited and revised in light of new learning. The autoethnographer strives to achieve a version of the self and an account of events that is consistent and acceptable to their own conscience. Reed-Danahay (1997) describes autoethnography as a means of questioning the binaries of self (auto) and society (ethno) and subjective and objective. As the autoethnographer goes back and forth between layers of consciousness it can seem impossible at times for the auto and ethno to co-exist in a way that enables the self, events and relationships to be authentic and intelligible. One way of working to achieve this is through the process of multiple voices or “multivocality” (Mizzi, 2010:1).

Mizzi defines multivocality as providing representational space in autoethnography for the plural and sometimes contradictory narrative voices located within the researcher. Mizzi suggests that through the process of autoethnography, the researcher is able to expose the fluid nature of identity as it moves through particular cultures and contexts, and in doing so deconstruct competing tensions that connect the personal self to the social context. In ‘Queer Outings?: Uncomfortable stories about the subjects of poststructural school ethnography’*,* Youdell (2010) utilizes Pillow’s (2003) notion of uncomfortable reflexivity to explore the discomfort provoked by telling uncertain stories. Through the presentation of three versions of Youdell’s own seemingly innocuous conversation with a pupil, she attempts to confront what ‘falls away’ in the telling of this uncomfortable story. Mizzi’s multivocality and Pillow’s uncomfortable reflexivity serve as a reminder that through the process of telling my story, ‘reality’, ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’ are revealed as emerging and ever changing. They are never fixed.

Etherington (2007) describes stories as produced and created within social relationships and between storytellers and their audiences. Although autoethnography is a personal endeavor, I found value in canvassing the views of others. My partner, has had a unique role throughout this process and may be described as a co-constructor (Ellis, 2007) of at least some of the narrative. I have talked with her about my recollections of events. She has verified certain details and been quick to point out inaccuracies. We have disagreed at times when our retrospective perceptions of events have differed. My partner has occasionally accused me of overemphasizing the emotion we felt relating to certain events and I have accused her of burying uncomfortable truths and underestimating the level of our unhappiness during that time. After every exchange I have returned to my narrative and tried to re-present it in a way that is an acceptable ‘truth’ to both of us. My partner has, then, acted in part as my memory and conscience.

My doctoral supervisor too may be described as a co-constructor of the critical incident. As this was first and foremost an academic endeavor, my supervisor had a significant influence on the resulting piece of work. As I wrote and rewrote the story, it was my supervisor that I wrote for. After the submission of each fragment of the story, my supervisor has provided me with written feedback that praised some elements and inevitably criticized others. Each annotation in the margin, questioning, correcting, challenging and praising the work led me to edit and redraft my original narrative until it resembled something that I believed would be acceptable and pleasing to him.

Pupchek (2010) argues that autoethnography is a methodology producing never finished, always living texts. As I continue to edit and redraft this work, now for publication in a journal, I concur with Pupchek and suggest that my latest draft of the critical incident is no more than a pause in an unending introspection.

*My vulnerable self*

Then there’s the vulnerability of revealing yourself, not being to be able to take back what you have written or having any control how readers interpret it. It is hard not to feel your life is being critiqued as well as your work. (Ellis, 1999:672).

The third and final ethical consideration I wish to explore concerns placing intimate information about myself in the public domain. As Ellis implies in the quotation above, when one writes intimately and personally about lived experience, others are invited to make a judgment about the author that extends beyond the appraisal of their academic contribution. Humpreys (2005) concurs, aptly describing doing autoethnography as being akin to removing an academic suit of armor.

Lasky (2005) describes vulnerability as a multidimensional, multifaceted emotional experience and proposes that the emotions of the teacher position him or her in “a fluctuating state of being, with critical incidents acting as triggers to intensify or in other ways change a person’s existing state of vulnerability” (p.901). Lasky argues that perceptions of vulnerability impact on teacher identity through their interaction with belief systems, norms and values, as well as personal perceptions of competence. Even though vulnerability can be a strength, manifesting itself through the traits of openness, honesty and integrity, it can equally, according to Lasky, lead to “feelings of powerlessness, betrayal, or defenselessness in situations of high anxiety or fear” (ibid.). Lasky warns that when a teacher feels vulnerable within a school culture, they may withdraw from the community in order to defend or protect themselves. She adds that “such a closed stance inhibits [pupil] learning, trust building, and collaboration” (ibid.).

In ‘’Do thyself no harm’: Protecting Ourselves as Autoethnographers’, Chatham-Carpenter (2010) explores the ethical dilemma involved in writing about her own experiences of living with an eating disorder. Less concerned with the judgment of her readers, Chatham-Carpenter is concerned with the research process as a trigger for “previously disengaged unhealthy thinking” (p.1). In her research Chatham-Carpenter warns that autoethnography can lead to increased emotional vulnerability and counsels other autoethnographers to consider protecting themselves as well as others.

Philaretou and Allen (2006) argue that in trying to articulate the psychological, emotional variants of their personal life, an autoethnographer comes face to face with certain negative aspects of his or her identity that may be hard to acknowledge, understand and accept. As a doctoral student, I was not able to afford myself the anonymity I gave my neighbor, the headteacher or any of the other characters in my story. I shared aspects of my medical records during the time I lived next door to my neighbor, and revealed diagnoses of mental health disorders. In my CBT sessions and the associated thought diary homeworks, I was asked to share intimate information relating to my anxieties. Retrospectively, I am embarrassed that I let this incident cause me such unhappiness. I worry that sharing such a weak and broken version of myself will have consequences for present and future key relationships. Colleagues in my current workplace know nothing of my experiences during this time. I worry that in presenting myself so vulnerably, I risk losing the respect of those I work alongside. And might the critical incident affect future employment prospects? I have relinquished all control of who knows that I fell apart, how I became almost too anxious to leave the house. Tolich cautions researchers to think very carefully about what they include of themselves in autoethnographic writing:

My advice for a novice researcher planning to write about their bulimia or attempted suicide, or any other stigmatized experience, is that they should imagine dressing up in sandwich boards and walking around the university proclaiming their stigma. Imagine living the moment now, not in the future. Like an inked tattoo, posting an autoethnography to a Web site or making it part of curriculum vitae, the marking is permanent. There are no future skin grafts for autoethnographic PhDs. (2010:1605)

Despite the stark warning from Tolich, I was driven on to complete my doctorate. Grant (2010) asserts that the opportunity to expand consciousness and learn from painful experiences renders writing from an autoethnographical perspective worthwhile. Similarly, Philaretou and Allen (2006) argue that self-reflective accounts have considerable therapeutic utility and empower autoethnographers towards positive change. Whilst I acknowledge the therapeutic benefit of writing about the critical incident, the main driver for publication is a desire to make others aware of my workplace experiences. Ellis (2004) states that the power of autoethnography is that it “gives a voice to those who have been ‘silenced and othered’ … in telling their stories the ‘otherness’ can dissipate” (p.200).

It is easy to think that at a time when equal marriage is legal that homophobia is no longer an issue in the workplaces of the UK. I am prepared to share my vulnerable self in order to tell others what happened to me at my place of work. Jennings (2005), writing about gay and lesbian teachers, makes a call to others that captures perfectly my motivation for revealing my vulnerable self. “Only through telling our stories can we shatter the myths and expose the lies that allow bigots to portray us as the threatening other” (p.13).

*Conclusion*

I have explored the cultural discourses of organizational power and workplace identities, and considered the ethical issues that surround writing autoethnographically about the workplace. I have consideredthe culture and discourses of power in the rural school and argued that the don’t ask, don’t tell arrangement I had with my headteacher was a powerful act that served to silence my sexual identity in the workplace. I have contested the appropriateness of conventional ethical guidance and argued that my autoethnographic research is a reflection on a life event and had a profound effect on me that extends beyond the academic context in which it is presented here. That said, as a researcher, I fully recognize my responsibilities to the other people in my story and have described the measures put in place to protect the identities of those featuring in the narrative.

Third party data has helped me to recall factual details and emotions evocative of that time. I described the struggle to present the self (auto) and society (ethno) with consistency and authenticity. I explored plural narrative voices and uncomfortable reflexivity and through this have argued that ‘reality’, ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’ are unfixed and ever changing. Finally, the ethical implications for my vulnerable self were considered. Drawing on Tolich, I acknowledge the personal dilemma I faced in deciding whether to release such intimate personal details into the public domain. In particular, I have worried that in sharing details of a time that I fell apart personally and professionally, could cause an adverse impact on my future career opportunities. Ultimately however, I am prepared to share a vulnerable version of myself in order to expose the effects of heteronormative discursive practices in the workplace, on both health and wellbeing.

The critical incident revealed the considerable power of heteronormativity in my rural workplace. I lacked the opportunity to speak my lesbian identity into existence at the school and the need to manage the intersection of my lesbian and teacher selves led to personal dissonance and low self-worth. During the critical incident, I internalized the negativity surrounding my sexual identity, which lead to anxiety and depression. Despite advances in equalities provision, the absence of a ‘socio-legal gaze’ led those in positions of authority to disregard workplace policy and uphold instead more conservative rural norms and values.

This research presents the perspective of only one lesbian teacher in a rural context. Consequently, generalizations are inappropriate and recommendations are difficult. I call, therefore, for future research to capture more widely the views and experiences of other lesbian teachers in rural schools. The experiences of lesbian teachers in the urban context are now fairly well documented, but to date the equivalent understanding of lesbian teachers in rural schools is lacking. As this research has shown, the rural school community can present particular challenges one might not ordinarily expect in schools based urban or suburban contexts. It is important therefore that through further research these workplace challenges are captured in order that they can be overcome.

Headteachers of rural schools must ensure that their schools are inclusive and welcoming environments for teachers, and their equalities policies are living documents that are not simply cast aside in the face of rural parent power. Young people in the countryside deserve access to the full pool of teaching talent and should have access to the diverse role models that their urban and suburban counterparts are beginning to enjoy. More must be done, therefore, to ensure that lesbian identities can be acknowledged, understood and performed without fear, so that in rural school communities the dominant discourse is one that is inclusive and reflects the lives of all those who live, learn and teach in the countryside.

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