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In Review The Self as Subject: Autoethnographic Research into Identity, Culture and Academic Librarianship

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In Review

The Self as Subject: Autoethnographic Research into Identity, Culture and Academic Librarianship

Deitering, A., Stoddart, R., & Schroeder, R. (Eds.). (2017). *The Self as Subject: Autoethnographic Research into Identity, Culture and Academic Librarianship*. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries. 375 pp. ISBN 978-0-8389-8892-3. \$70.

In 2015, Anne-Marie Deitering, Bob Schroeder, and Rick Stoddart started an online learning community for academic librarians to explore the research method of autoethnography. This is how *The Self as Subject* began. This community provided support and encouragement. Few if any of the members of the community had prior experience with the form.

In her introduction to *The Self as Subject*, Anne-Marie Deitering explains what “autoethnography” is: “On one level, autoethnography is exactly what it sounds like. It is a qualitative, reflexive, ethnographic method where the researcher is also the subject of inquiry” (2). It combines autobiography with ethnography. As Robert Schroeder notes in his chapter, “Evaluative Criteria for Autoethnographic Research: Who’s to Judge?”, “Autoethnographers believe research can be rigorous, theoretical, and analytical **and** emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal and social phenomena” (318), quoting Ellis, Adams, & Bochner (2011), emphasis in the original).

The book intersperses chapters in which an academic librarian (or librarians) tells a story of a transformational experience with methodological reflections on the genre. Deitering rightly cautions us that this will not be a passive reading experience; readers must reflect on and interpret these texts (12). It is not easy to evaluate qualitative research. The reader should be able to trust the autoethnographer to faithfully represent her story. Honesty and openness on the part of the researcher are vital. At their best, these exercises in autoethnography show what can be learned from studying one’s professional life in the wider context of culture and society, and the result of these librarians’ self-scrutiny is often moving and fascinating. *The Self as Subject* presents the lived experiences of academic librarians of many different backgrounds. As Deitering notes in her introduction, autoethnography makes room for diversity which is sorely lacking in library literature as well as in the profession as a whole (8).

Academic librarians will be able to relate to some of these stories more easily than to others. For the most part, though, the struggles and transformations

of these autoethnographers are bound to strike chords with readers, because of similar experiences they or their colleagues have had.

While aiming to be rigorous and analytical, autoethnographers often make themselves vulnerable, and they must decide how vulnerable they are willing or able to be (62). Their accounts must also make connections to the wider culture. At the same time, narrative is front and center (13). This research method, then, throws a curveball into perceptions of how research should be done. It is a nontraditional method and uncommon in the discipline of librarianship.

Though the same research method is used in every chapter, each presents very differently. In “Avoiding Autoethnography: Writing Toward Burnout,” Benjamin R. Harris writes about joining the learning community and finding that he was too close to the topic he needed to explore in his autoethnography. He did not have the distance he needed to take an analytical approach. He also admits to faltering a bit with the process of autoethnography when he set out, but his work—a chapter that unsparingly grapples with burnout at work—has repaid his effort.

In “Looking Through a Colored Lens: A Black Librarian’s Narrative,” La Loria Konata describes what she has encountered, socially and professionally, as an African-American academic librarian. She also tells us of her concerns regarding the recruitment and retention of minorities in our profession and urges mentoring such librarians in order to promote them to leadership positions.

In “Academic Rejection and Libraries,” Emily Rogers explores another mode of vulnerability, as she unstintingly describes setbacks she suffered at work, her missteps, and her recovery.

Some of the other chapters are: “Many Hats, One Head,” by Maura A. Smale; “You, She, I: An Autoethnographic Exploration Through Noise,” by Michele R. Santamaría; “The Intersections of Art and Librarianship,” by Jolanda-Pieta van Arnhem; and Rick Stoddart’s intriguingly titled “Shuffle the Cards, Save the Cat, and Eat the Cake.”

Robert Schroeder’s appendix of “Possible Criteria for Review and Evaluation of AEs” (341-346) provides excellent guidelines as well as criteria for the research method. There are also useful notes and bibliographies at the end of many of the chapters. Separate lists of autoethnographies and sources about them would have been helpful, given that few librarians will be familiar with this research method. The volume would also have benefited from headers with chapter names. But these are minor criticisms. *The Self as Subject* is a

fascinating and enlightening collection, inviting further engagement with a genuinely revelatory mode of inquiry.

References

Ellis, C. E., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *FQS: Forum: Qualitative Social Research/Sozialforschung* 12(1): article 10. doi:10.17169/fqs-12.1.1589

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