

DCoP Conference: July 15th – 16th July 2022

“Edge of Awareness?”

Symposium Title: Autoethnography – Let there be chaos

Symposium summary:

This symposium aims to reach to the edges of our discipline’s awareness in order to shine a light on a neglected research paradigm that has captured our imagination. Autoethnography is an approach to research that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand it more deeply and situate it within something broader, like a cultural or sociopolitical context (*ethno*). Autoethnography is both profoundly personal and explicitly political when it attempts to straddle the psycho-social realms. The researcher is often the sole ‘participant’, whose task is to document and analyse their subjective experiences with an ultimate aim of illuminating something and awakening in readers generative processes that can range from fleeting, visceral reactions all the way to social change.

We will start by sketching out the theoretical territory of this approach and address some of the common questions that arise when doing autoethnography, such as topics, analytic strategies, and ethical issues (Hadjiosif). Then we examine the method’s application to two doctorate research studies. The first (Ince) concerns the experience of *Weltschmerz* (a German word which roughly translates as ‘world weariness’ or ‘world pain’). The second (Martin) attempts to tease out the therapeutic qualities involved in the art of drag. We hope to conclude the symposium with a lively discussion regarding the purpose of Counselling Psychology research as we attempt to shake the proverbial edge and bring autoethnography closer to the centre of our profession.

Paper 1: “Autoethnography: Why so neglected?” / Miltos Hadjosif

Autoethnography is gaining momentum in many disciplines, from sociology to law. I will share some background to this method, which has profoundly challenged canonical ways of doing research and representing others (Spry, 2001) as it destabilizes two central pillars of psychological research: the methodology of a predetermined procedure and the idea of ‘data’. One of the key resources of autoethnography is the subjectivity of the author, which psychological research has traditionally sought to either erase or pay lip service to. Indeed, a serious engagement with autoethnographic scholarship raises questions regarding what is both available and desirable in Counselling Psychology research. While the academic literature is replete with autoethnographies, their status in psychology remains both obscured and suspect. I will share my journey into this method and some insights from the supervision of trainee counselling psychologists and undergraduate psychology students. The opportunity to engage in scholarship that champions the internal (private, subjective) as much as it venerates the external (social, political) is a particularly appealing aspect. I conclude with thoughts on how to harness the chaos of autoethnography for the personal and professional development of counselling psychologists.

Paper 2: “Weltschmerz: An autoethnography” / Amelia Ince

‘*Weltschmerz*’ is a German word for which there is no English substitute. Capturing a sense of grief, suffering and pain on a global scale, it points to a psychosocial experience that has not been researched; not least because one cannot research what cannot be named. Given multiple global crises and the speed of information travelling, perhaps there has never been a more appropriate time to explore the concept of *Weltschmerz*. My thesis draws upon theoretical frameworks in Counselling Psychology to elucidate a deeply personal interrogation of what it might mean to feel the world’s pain. After experimenting with multiple methods of qualitative research, I settled on autoethnography as the most appropriate way of telling and hearing stories about something that doesn’t have a name. Moulding these experiences into creative writing and pieces of art I look to evoke reflections in the viewer so that they too may be inspired to tussle with the concept of *Weltschmerz* to help us make sense of it. I conclude with some preliminary thoughts on applications of this research as well as a consideration of the utility of taking an autoethnographic approach to the study of *Weltschmerz*.

Paper 3: “Let’s drag this party up!: What is therapeutic about drag?” / Jennifer Martin

Drag is everywhere these days! Studies on drag offer us many insights into its gendered significance and its ability to entertain and provoke in equal measure. Many describe it as ‘therapeutic’, which has led me to wanting to unpack this further: *What, exactly, is therapeutic? For whom? Under what conditions?*

Covid-related upheavals led me to exploring alternative research methods of approaching the therapeutic qualities of drag in order to do them justice. When I encountered autoethnography I felt that it held the potential to capture everything that draws me to counselling psychology as it speaks directly to the ‘professional artistry’ called for in the DCoP practice guidelines. I count myself as a cultural member of the drag community and hope to produce an autoethnography that will guide my readers/audience to see drag through my own lenses: that of a fan, a queer person, and a therapist.

In choosing autoethnography, I know I have chosen to walk down a research path that does not proceed linearly. I will share my experiences of mining my personal history, grappling with performativity and transgressions, the significance of play, and talking to drag entertainers as I seek to answer a deceptively complicated question: *‘what is therapeutic about drag?’* in an age when the art form has both gained unprecedented visibility and been accused of falling prey to commercialisation and neo-liberalism. I will conclude by arguing that Counselling Psychologists are well placed to undertake projects such as this, which can evoke and illuminate therapeutic aspects of other cultural activities.