Journal Writing as Identity Formation and Counter Story

Nancy Button

Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne

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Journal Writing as Identity Formation and Counterstory

By Nancy H. Button

Dear Journal,

For decades I have carried around stacks and binders and notepads full of ME. It is time I figure out how all this writing has helped form a sense of SELF. I get the feeling that there have been some major influences in my life that have contributed to this IDENTITY CREATION.

Dear Journal,

Researching ya’ll is a little touch-and-go in an academic community. Journals of others (dead) is considered archival but studying my own journals.....well it is kinda oral history, but I’m not technically “speaking.” It’s narrative too, but not necessarily narrative research because I am looking for something specific within documents already written. I am studying myself within my journals, that’s more ethnographic. Best stick with auto (self) ethnographic (situated within the community of research). Well, that provides the FRAMEWORK, time to get to IN VIVO CODING. Nothing like methodology to pull out the best in ME.

Dear Journal,

So, here’s what I figured out. These could be considered the “results” or “findings,” but mostly I just have really enjoyed being able to use ya’ll to support research within composition studies. I feel like I am contributing a unique perspective on how identity is formed in relation to families through writing:

* Chronological coding identified how my sense of identity first reinforced family identity, then challenged, countered and eventually adapted values and traits that shape my personal identity.
* Earliest entries reinforced research within autobiographical and family history writing that presupposes naming as primary identifier, a symbol for myself which was immutable and significant.
* Throughout adolescence I devoted considerable space in my personal journals from 1993-1997 to the exploration of self in relation to my family. To understand self, particularly through adolescence, an ‘I’ is constructed through the lens of relation to others. It becomes therefore even more significant to reflectively look at the specific determination of how I conceived myself as fitting with my family during the adolescent stage, thus challenging the initial family name as symbol.
* Ironically, it is through journal writing that I began to discover my discomfort within the family.
* My adventures in pre-adult life away from home still heavily involved family expectations. Each decision, although an act of personal agency, was weighed heavily against my accepted designed role within the family despite personal discomfort.
* While still functioning within the religious frameworks that had thus informed my own sense of self, I deliberately questioned the structure of family that had felt confining. My personal performance of reflection and deliberate construction of past events act as a deliberate adaptation of family identity (Rumsey 2009). Just as the early journals were personal textual representations of the selective identity making, the intentional adaptation of family structures to fulfill personal identification released previously felt restrictions.
* My struggle for individual self-identification in relation to family has not been completed with marriage - it has only expanded. Marriage has been a micro-identity lab experiment.
* Personal journals evolved through the years, just as personal identity evolves. This study has looked at my own voice of the past as a way to look to my future sense of self as inevitably connected to the family from which I came, and the family that I am now creating.

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I am purposefully digging deeper into my own personal history to contextualize the derived import of family in specific places and particularities (Rankins-Robertson 2010). The methodological work of autoethnography involves the deep interpretation of one’s own motives and subjectivities which attempt to situate—indeed create—personal experience in a cultural frame (Rumsey 2009). My personal state in the research informs the data just as the data informs me of my positionality. I could no more remove myself from my journals or research than I could study a gene butterfly reduced to a multidimensional and bloodless representation of what was once its relation to the world (Busman, Brandt et al. 2004). I care to study my own journals subjectively in order to illustrate how intimate the relationship between family and identity function in writing.