

Confessing Takes Courage

Karen V. Lee

Key words:
autoethnography,
confessions,
disclosure,
secrecy

Abstract: The author writes an autoethnography reflecting on the inherent complications of confessions. She reveals the irony of living in both a culture of disclosure and a culture of secrecy. Her assumptions of the perils and pitfalls of rendering intimate thoughts shift as she reflects upon her own confessions. The impact and insight from her writings become revolutionary as she moves inward and outward through interrogations of personal disclosure. In the end, autoethnography helps her gain a deeper understanding about the personal and cultural influences shaping her desire to confess.

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1. Prologue

The following chronicles how confessions demystify (SPARKES, 2002, p.58). It explains how I arrive at a crisis when writing confessions and what I learn from confessing. Using a narrative form to share my experiences provides a pedagogical context that shows how knowing the self and subjects are integrated. I wish to "showcase concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, self-consciousness" (ELLIS, 2004, p.38). I define confession as writings that "draw on personal experience with the explicit intention of exploring methodological and ethical issues as encountered in the research process" (SPARKES, 2002, p.59). I concern myself with my mode of presentation and the meaning in a broader context (GOFFMAN, 1959). Dramatic realization occurs from impression management of control, or lack of control, and communication of information through the performance (GOFFMAN, 1959, p.208). Confession occurs from a state of reflection as one consciously monitors what to keep secret and what to say to another person. [1]

I am torn about confessing as I have to open up my "privates," my personal thoughts, and make them public. There are ethical and pedagogical issues: exposure, authority, audience, ownership, personal vulnerability. There are feelings: anger, anxiety, fear, guilt, shame, discomfort, embarrassment. A sense of uncertainty about the process with the realization that I need to re-examine my epistemological position. I use confession as a form of writing inquiry to "reflect upon method and explore new ways of knowing" (RICHARDSON, 2000, p.9). Writing blends social science with the aesthetic sensibility with expressive forms

of art. I seek to "tell stories that show bodily, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual experience" (ELLIS, 2004, p.30). I reflect on the narrative accounts of my experience as client, patient, and mother, experiencing social, cultural, personal, political, emotional, intellectual, spiritual epiphanies from confessing. The notion of the change and turmoil is examined. [2]

The purpose of this article is for readers to gain a deeper understanding about how negotiating confessions through writing can be transformative. By reflecting on confessions, "the chances for understanding a way of life are enhanced" (SPARKES, 2002, p.74). Confessions are specialized forms of disclosure as "the confessional becomes a self-reflective meditation on the nature of ethnographic understanding; the reader comes away with a deeper sense of the problems posed" (VAN MANNEN, 1988, p.92). Confessions "explicitly problematize and demystify fieldwork or participant observation while revealing what actually happened in the research process" (SPARKES, 2002, p.58). [3]

By writing the following narrative, I reflect upon my own practice as an ethnographer and raise discussion about the complex issues associated with confessions as research. I use "systematic sociological introspections and emotional recall to try to understand the experiences" (ELLIS, 1997, 1999). I tell a "personal tale of what went on backstage during a research project" (ELLIS, 2004, p.50). My research is situated within a personal and contextual framework and uses a social constructionist perspective. As I share emotions and vulnerabilities, I find confessions transformative. I write, "therapeutically, vulnerably, evocatively, and ethically" (ELLIS, 2004, p.2). By engaging in autoethnography, I ask "readers to relive the experience through the writer's or performer's eyes" (DENZIN, 2000, p.905). [4]

2. Binoculars

This morning, I go for a walk, a nowhere-special stroll. The street is quiet, a few birds chirp. There is a melodic theme. Strong and sweet tone. It starts the slow motor of my day. I frame a photograph of a man sitting in his bathrobe watching television. Looks like *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. I laugh and look around. There is another window. A woman reads the paper and drinks coffee. Instantly, she picks her nose. I snicker. As I check one more window, an Asian man is doing tai chi in his underwear. I shake my head and smile. Suddenly, my cell phone rings. [5]

"What are you up to, dear?" I want to disclose, be a midwife to release words, shed guilt and shine a light on deeper motivations. What I say will be risky. Cell-by-cell, molecule-by-molecule, atom-by-atom, my brain shies away. Anaesthetize myself. I balk and snap, find madness in the stroll. Enclose the wild power and assume a courageous mien. But what do I confess? [6]

"Oh, I'm just out for a walk," I respond. The paradox of telling. If I lay out words, I excavate a fresh and fleeting moment, I find structure and symmetry. I discover a rough but magic catharsis. The conscious and unconscious leak into my hermetic world. I try to be reverent. To purge my sins and peccadilloes through an act of

contrition. *Mea culpa, mea culpa*, pass the pen. To open my world to a place of learning. About others, about myself. At times, when I confess, I'm startled by beauty, by sudden insight, by a glimpse of my soul. Everything comes together and apart in one brilliant, elusive flash. I sense the wonderment of feeling human. [7]

"See anything interesting?" he asks. Fidgeting, I continue to walk. Small binoculars in my right pocket. I toss back my hair to wreak havoc from within. It stimulates my senses. Walking a familiar route blasts me through obstacles. Seizes glistening moments. Stirs up emotions. Complex or convoluted, I turn a corner. But telling requires exposing my private thoughts. My inner secrets. At times, I am not eager. A graveyard shift of movements, revelations, earthquakes. And what I say today might be different than tomorrow. Language can be slippery as words are not innocent or transparent. Telling can change depending on the mood and emotion. The act of sharing can happen in a great rush. I teeter on a high wire. [8]

"Maybe, I'm just nosy," I laugh. There is release. A hint of honesty relieves my heavy breath. As he talks, he tells stories about his students. Reactions from class. Listening to tapes. Shedding page-by-page the details of his teaching day. A chapter in his book. The belongings of his moment. A labyrinth of confession that feeds my mutual hunger. Images flash through the lenses. A very large woman in leotards is doing exercises in front of a video. My silent gaze clings to the street, to other houses. In the shimmering rays of sunlight, I pause. Peer into the lives of others. Furtively, I scrutinize. [9]

"You there?" But disclosure takes courage. To release, to tell secrets. To feign indifference, to shock reaction. Expel excess material. Scrape away. Melt baffles so my inner voice can blurt with freedom of expression. I let 'er rip. No holding back, complete diarrhea. Spewing from deep inside where hopes and dreams coalesce. If I confess the sad, happy, angry, anxious, compassionate, tearful, joyful, resentful, humiliating, passionate, shivers run down my spine. While I compose tiny, round, intertwined words, something happens beyond deliberate understanding. A dangerous way to live. [10]

While in the throes of disclosing, no thought of after-effects. The audience appears and disappears, intermittently. By confessing, there is an opening to another person. Eye to the keyhole, I observe an uncensored moment, curiosity unsated. But if I disclose my behavior, I am vulnerable to judgment. Hypnotized by the dark cadence of his words. Hard to know his reaction. But could cease the behavior. An irrepressible urge to hide. If I do not disclose, I could continue my eye-popping journey. [11]

When I confessed grief, I looked backwards (LEE, 2006a, 2006b). The messiness and negotiations. The issues of authority, confidentiality, audience reactions, being a character, experiencing the moment, confessing my anger. There is tightness in my chest. Tears. Relieving the trauma. Stewing, stirring. She had hung herself. My massage therapist. A slow, violent end. The memories leavened my anger. Though it was cathartic, I was ashamed I was angry. A deep

nausea. Many unanswered questions: Socrates was right. I reflected, ruminated. Penetrated to find myself. I accessed my intuition; I could be small and grown-up. Devoutly transformed into a new person. Absorbing the sounds of laughter, shrieks that drift from my mind. I am whole. The truth brings an inner thoughtful voice. In the end, releasing the anger brought me to a place of heightened awareness, resolve and peace of mind. It led me to a healing place, away from the trauma. [12]

When I confessed pain in another article, I struggled whether to share my medical history. That I had a CAT scan. A possible illness. In a medical lab lying in the mouth of a machine. Strip naked, donning a blue hospital gown. Slowly, one by one. The drone of the machine sent chills up my spine. Shaking. My chest, feet, hands, jaw, legs, muscles. Could I share this secret with my students, colleagues, relatives? [13]

When I wrote about the roadblock around completing my dissertation (LEE, 2006c), writing enabled me to overcome the barrier. By disclosing the social and personal struggles, the roller coaster ride of doldrums and breakthroughs, I found writing pushed me to find a catalyst to closure. [14]

When I shared love for my daughter (LEE, 2006d), I had to accept she would grow up. Disclose my selfishness. Wanting her to remain a child, avoid having her growing away. To keep her safe. With me. To keep her dependent. On me. Writing provided a pedagogical context for helping me resolve that the social and cultural influences influencing my selfishness was embedded in the mother-daughter relationship. To cherish each memory of us eating, laughing, at the beach, at the zoo. [15]

"Yes, I'm here." For disclosure to become transformational, to become confession, I must reflect on what I say. Confessing requires that the safe, impersonal, third-person voice replace the personal voice (SPARKES, 2002). That I, as author, announce my words. This is how I feel, react, cope. I discover my need to resolve frees my insides.

A fierce storm
From wild waters
From muted clouds
I find my way
To sing a song [16]

Stream-of-consciousness thoughts take me in unexpected directions. At times, I fall in love with what I release. Explode with inescapable fascination that the conception, composition, performance of confession blossoms into a single moment. I become whole and satisfied. I uncover clues to live a well-adjusted life. A great excitement. A spiritual connectedness. Let the moment flow, paint the canvas with chaotic lines. Let the self be vulnerable. Reflect and tell. Tell and reflect, that is what confession is about. [17]

"Anyways, that's what's happening at work," he says. As I nod, I inhale. Do my "privates," my personal thoughts and actions, become public? Self-flagellate and then salt the wounds. Inside, pathways repel. The edges of self-pity exist inside and outside. Closing my eyes, I know my own pity. I gnaw it, bury it, unearth it to determine its own triviality. [18]

"Okay," I say while opening my eyes. "I see interesting things," I laugh. Plot chronologically. Draw him into my thoughts and feelings. Share my social experience. Dramatic and engaging. Sociological analysis. Communicate vulnerability. An open conversation. Self-revelation. Resonance. I string words together. Relive and revamp memories. Around me, words cheer and yell. Intimate details expose. I climb a ladder until my head pokes above clouds. Ascend each rung, one at a time. Slowly and deliberately. Balance my words. Climb until there is nothing weighing down my heart. I hold my breath and fly. Utter exposure to elements. Spin around a sunbeam. An exquisite pleasure that makes my body ache for more. In a place and mode I inhabit with increasing fever. [19]

"Okay," he snickers, "you can tell me about it later." Diverse images implode like firecrackers. I want to confess, be a midwife to release words, shed guilt and shine a light on deeper motivations. But some refuse to leave the womb. Others spring forth, frantic to express, impress, depress. There is a mental birth. Massage and relax to confess the labor. [20]

3. Epilogue

The conventions of confessions reveal texts that seek authority, audience, anxiety, exposure, fragility, and vulnerability which can render the complications of writing confessions. If scholars reflect on confessional journeys, then they would experience a deeper understanding about being a writer portraying a world that is, "socially constructed, complex, and ever changing" (GLESNE & PESHKIN, 1992, p.6). Though the writing becomes an epiphany (DENZIN, 2001) that can transform a pedagogical context, there are downfalls from confessional journeys. "Confessional tales often include episodes of fieldworker shock and surprise. The blunders and mistakes made, the social gaffes committed, and the secrets unwittingly unearthed" (SPARKES, 2002, p.60). Second, the confessor might regret sharing information that could produce serious ethical consequences to themselves or others. Third, shared information might be misinterpreted which could result in social conflict or confrontation. Indeed, there can be transformation from confessions but one does not always have to share their thoughts as there are issues that need to remain hidden due to possible consequences from disclosure. [21]

Though my conflicts of writing confessions remain unresolved, I learn there is a metamorphosis. By balancing disclosure and secrecy, there is transformation that evocatively and passionately shares my detailed experiences of death, fear, grief, love, anger, disappointment, which provides proclamations of change. Though confessions chronicle excitement, uncertainty and fatigue, it is the conceptual and

analytical shifts of my understanding of research that enable my growth as a scholar. Overall, it is of vital importance there be careful consideration toward the process and product of confessions as there are ethical and methodological questions to consider. Reflecting on the issues of confessions involves a process of inquiry that represents the transformative nature of intimate renderings. [22]

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Author

Karen V. LEE is a Faculty Advisor and co-founder of the Teaching Initiative for Music Educators cohort (TIME), at the Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B. C. Her research interests include issues of musician identity, teacher identity, music education, teacher education, and arts-based approaches to qualitative research. Her doctoral dissertation, a book of short stories titled *Riffs of Change: Musicians Becoming Music Educators*, was about musicians becoming music educators in a classroom context. She is a musician, writer, music educator, and researcher. Currently, she teaches undergraduate and graduate students at the university.

Contact:

Karen V. Lee, Ph.D.

Faculty Advisor/Instructor
The University of British Columbia
Dept. of Curriculum Studies, Faculty of
Education
2125 Main Mall
Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z4, Canada

E-mail: kvlee@interchange.ubc.ca

Citation

Lee, Karen V. (2006). Confessing Takes Courage [22 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 8(1), Art. 6, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs070163>.