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Article Title: Re-immersing into Elite Swimming Culture: A Meta-Autoethnography by a Former Elite Swimmer

Authors: Jenny McMahon¹ Kerry McGannon²

Affiliations: ¹Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania, Launceston, Australia. ²School of Human Kinetics, Laurentian University, Sudbury, Ontario, Canada.

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Re-immersing into elite swimming culture: A meta-autoethnography by a former elite swimmer

Jenny McMahon¹ and Kerry R. McGannon²

University of Tasmania, Launceston, Australia ¹

Laurentian University, Ontario, Canada²

Corresponding Author: Dr Jenny McMahon, email: Jenny.McMahon@utas.edu.au,
address: c/- University of Tasmania, Faculty of Education, Newnham Campus, Australia
7250. Phone: +61 036324 3999

Abstract

This paper presents two meta-autoethnographies written by a former elite swimmer. In the first meta-autoethnography, the swimmer revealed doubts in relation to details, emotions and inner-thoughts that she had included in her historical autoethnographic work. As a means of sorting and pondering these tensions and uncertainties, the swimmer explored cultural re-immersion as a possible additional element in the meta-autoethnographic process. The second meta-autoethnography centres on the swimmer’s re-immersion into elite swimming culture. It was revealed how cultural re-immersion enabled the swimmer to better reflect on her historical autoethnographic work by providing a more conscientized, rational and reflexive voice. This research highlights how cultural re-immersion should be considered as an additional element in the meta-autoethnographic process as it benefits both the author and also audience. (124)

Key Words: Story telling; Reflexivity; Embodiment; Fat; Autoethnography; Culture; Sport.

Introduction

Maybe I do sound like a disgruntled 16 year old swimmer who never made it? Maybe the coaches did have a right to weigh me every day since I am a member of the Australian swimming team? Maybe the coaches and team manager did have a right to question my commitment because I put on 0.3 of a kilogram? Maybe I did have a unique opportunity that others would wish for? Maybe my inner voices and feelings have altered over time since this encounter occurred? Maybe my view and my story is overly one sided? Maybe I do need to show some restraint in regard to letting my unpleasant experiences of Australian swimming manifest in the story? Maybe my team-mates might have seen it differently? (McMahon & McGannon , 2016, p. 102)

When a reviewer criticised the details that I (McMahon) had included in my autoethnographic work¹ eight years ago, I felt personally attacked by someone who I felt had little idea of what I had personally endured as an adolescent swimmer. At the time, it was like the wounds that I had received over the years as a result of elite swimming culture were re-opened. Like a bandaid had been ripped off them in one quick swipe (or review) and the pain that I felt during my time in elite swimming culture and also during my time of storying the autoethnographic research was upon me again. At that time, I actually wondered whether autoethnographic research was for me. While I eventually overcame the hurt associated with reviewer criticism, putting it to the side, never have I really put the reviewer’s words out of my mind over the last eight years. It has always been there, lurking in the background and with every autoethnographic research project that I have since completed, those words of doubt and criticism have always surfaced.

¹ The reference details of the autoethnographic work that underpins this meta-autoethnographic investigation are; McMahon, J., & Dinan-Thompson, M. (2008). A malleable body – Revelations from an Australian elite swimmer. *Healthy Lifestyles Journal*, 55(1), 23-28.

Over the last eight years, I have not want to, or felt that I needed to, critically reflect on my historical autoethnographic research taking into account what that reviewer said. However, I recently found myself pondering whether that reviewer actually had a point as I now acknowledge that I was in a ‘bad place’ at the time I wrote those early autoethnographic representation in 2008. Or perhaps it was the way the reviewer interpreted and ‘took up’ my autoethnographic work due to his/her own life experiences. Whatever the case may be, I feel that distance and time have certainly allowed me to get to this present point, where it is time to critically re-examine and reflect on my written past. This is also because I hold a secret deep down, unbeknownst to anybody else, which is that I have felt like an academic/researcher fraud because my stories were criticised for containing details that the reviewer felt were incorrect. Maybe they were incorrect? This tension that I have felt for all this time is actually not dissimilar to what I felt when I did not achieve competitively. During my time on the Australian swimming team, I felt like a fraud athlete. Part of me now wonders whether the reviewer, all that time ago, actually had a point. Whatever the case may be, it is time that I critically (re)examined my historical autoethnographic work from 2008 to see if I remember more; to see whether I remember differently or to see whether additional details should have been included?

In this paper, meta-autoethnography is made use of by a former elite swimmer (McMahon) who decided to reflect on, and (re)engage with her previously published autoethnographic work which detailed her athletic experiences in a swimming culture. As a strand of autoethnography, meta-autoethnography enables researchers to revisit previously produced autoethnographic work, consider the responses of others to their former representations in the time that has lapsed since its production. An autoethnographic account is then generated about the original autoethnography to stimulate further critical reflection on key personal and cultural issues (McGannon & Smith, 2015). Described as an ‘untapped

resource’ in sport contexts by McGannon and Smith (2015), meta-autoethnography provided McMahon with an ethical space to (re)examine and (re)story her previously produced autoethnographic work. In so doing, two research questions frame this research paper: 1. *what new or additional autoethnographic details were revealed by McMahon after she (re)engaged with, reflected on and (re)storied her historical written accounts from 2008.* And 2. *Did re-immersion into elite swimming culture provide additional benefits, perspectives or layers of understanding for McMahon (the autoethnographic researcher) as part of the meta-autoethnographic process?* Indeed, it is hoped that through the “re-examining, and re-visioning” (Ellis, 2009, p. 12) of McMahon’s historical autoethnography, the opportunity is opened up to make use of alternate and/or additional reflective lenses that may benefit both McMahon as the Autoethnographer (reflexively) and audience (with possible new details revealed by the Author).

Within the context of cultural research in which the present paper is situated, no research in sport has yet produced a meta-autoethnography (McGannon & Smith, 2015). However, a small number of qualitative researchers have made use of meta-autoethnography in the social sciences such as Ellis (2009), Duarte and Hodge (2009) and Chatham-Carpenter (2010). Chatham-Carpenter (2010) used meta-autoethnography to reflect on her ongoing battles with anorexia. By revising and re-engaging with her original autoethnographic accounts, Chatham-Carpenter realised that her compulsion to publish became intertwined with the compulsion of her anorexia. In so doing, Chatham-Carpenter (2010) realised that she ultimately protected herself as a researcher by withholding certain details in the process of publishing and thus presented somewhat controlled autoethnographic accounts about the eating disorder as she felt she needed to present a certain "face" as a researcher. Thus, the process of writing and re-writing helped her to come to terms with her compulsions to control her anorexia and how she came to express it in and through her original autoethnographic accounts. For the audience,

Chatham-Carpenter’s meta-autoethnography re-opened a window on her life and her eating disorder by providing new information that was not originally disclosed. In turn, not only were the associated tensions with publishing and writing revealed but in addition, more ‘untainted’ insights into her battles with the eating disorder were further made known. As autoethnographies are often created without showing the struggles that take place during the actual writing of the text (Tamas, 2008), meta-autoethnography provides the opportunity for these tensions and struggles associated with the writing process to be made known and further understood.

(Meta)Autoethnography: Revising; Reflexion and Restorying

In order to contextualize what follows, further details outlining *why* meta-autoethnography was made use of, as well as *how*, will be outlined, followed by the meta-autoethnographies. At times throughout this section, McMahon will include her Autoethnographic voice (*italicised*) which will be interspersed between the academic voices of both McMahon and McGannon (Author 2).

Why: The Case for Revising, Revisioning and (Re) storying

As outlined in the introduction of the paper, reviewer feedback and resulting tensions were the primary reason why McMahon felt compelled to generate a meta-autoethnography. In this regard, meta-autoethnography afforded McMahon the opportunity *to see if she remembered more; to see whether she remembers differently; to see if anything got lost in the telling or to see whether additional details should have been included?* These critical questions were not the only reasons why McMahon felt the need to generate a meta-autoethnography. Another reason why meta-autoethnography was chosen was because of its potential to enable further clarity and understandings into McMahon’s lived swimming experiences. This particular consideration stems from the acknowledgement that autoethnographic accounts are

always incomplete (Ellis, 2009; Smith, in-press). Such accounts are regarded as incomplete because they have been constructed from the researcher’s position and critical consciousness at the time of transcription. Further, they have been constructed for a particular audience (Ellis, 2009) as Chatham-Carpenter (2010) explained in the process of publishing her autoethnographic work. Further as Medford (2006) explains, from any lived experience, multiple perspectives result, however the autoethnographer often writes from his or her singular subjective position. Pollock (2007) further points out how first person pieces (e.g. autoethnographic representations) are all too often left “as incontestably determined or merely arbitrary, absolute or relative, esoterically remote or toxically close, and, either way: untouchable. This then radically delimits possibilities for practicing new subjectivities” (p. 242). Meta-autoethnography is one such way to reflect on these incomplete representations while exploring new subjectivities (Pollock, 2007) and considering multiple perspectives (Medford, 2006), because as a method, it enables authors to be reflexive and re-tell their previously written autoethnographic work (Ellis, 2009). In this respect, meta-autoethnography as both a framework and process, prevents autoethnographers from remaining fixed to the interpretations they have stated or settled on in the past by adding ‘voice’ to what might have been originally silenced (Ellis, 2009). The process of being reflexive and giving additional voice to what may have been silenced in the past “is crucial for autoethnographers because there is no fixed truth of the past” (Bochner, 2007, p. 206) and also because “the past is much affected by the present moment” (Ellis, 2009, p. 354). Further, meta-autoethnography “opens a space between what is and what might be” (Pollock, 2007, p. 247). Indeed, it is an ethical space with the potential to mobilize the difference between imagined and entrenched realities (Pollock, 2007).

An additional reason for choosing this approach is that the process of storying and (re)storying can be an evocative and therapeutic instrument (Ellis, 2009; McGannon & Smith,

2015; Smith, in press) with the potential to initiate catharsis for the researcher (McMahon & Penney, 2011). This is because the opportunity for further understanding is provided when the autoethnographer makes themselves vulnerable by (re)considering the details of their original storied accounts from multiple perspectives (Ellis, 2009). The consideration of multiple perspectives can be achieved through the sharing of their historical and (re)storied representations with others. In the case of this research, this sharing included McGannon (Author 2); three other swimmers from the same era as McMahon and another autoethnographic sport researcher. In this respect, these other points of view (Ellis, 2009) were considered a necessary part of the reflection and (re)storying process which potentially opened Author 1 up to new, additional or alternative ways of knowing and experiencing of her self-stories.

Indeed, it is hoped that by reflecting and re-storying past historical autoethnographic accounts of a swimming culture, we can reveal how McMahon *viewed* her lived experiences eight years ago as well as how she *views* them in the present day as ‘sense making tools’ of cultural embodiment. In addition, like Stanley (1993) contends, it is hoped that ‘post hoc understandings’ can be achieved when McMahon takes snippets of her life and sorts and ponders as a way of coming to some understanding about them as she selects and (re)orders these historical accounts in a coherent way in the present day.

While meta-autoethnography has inherent benefits for the autoethnographer (McMahon) to be reflexive and (re)story historical self-representations, it also may have benefits for the audience. For the audience, meta-autoethnography re-opens a window on the researcher’s lived experience and embodied self-identities, and further, the specific culture they were researching (McGannon & Smith, 2015). In this respect, meta-autoethnography as a tool ‘captures’ the complexity of embodied cultural experience for the researcher/story teller, and in so doing, it potentially provides the audience with additional information that may have not originally been

made known (Ellis, 2009; Smith, in press). As such, reader impact is potentially possible through the very act of reading, feeling and experiencing (possible) additional elements about the body and lived experience of the McMahon as articulated in stories (Ropers-Huilman, 1999; Denzin, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) further explain how writing personal stories enables the participants and readers (i.e., audience) to potentially observe and, consequently, better testify on behalf of an event, problem, or experience (e.g. Allen-Collinson’s 2005 work on the injured running body; Owton and Sparkes’ 2015 work on sexual abuse in sport). As Owton and Sparkes (2015) highlighted, it is hoped that through the use of storied representations, that a range of reader/audience responses may occur beyond that of a more ‘formal’ and cross-case thematic analysis (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005). In this regard, Author 1’s stories may affect the reader greatly, both in a positive and negative way and the audience may react/respond in accordance to the different social positions that they occupy (Owton & Sparkes, 2015).

How: Key Steps in the Meta-Autoethnographic Process

In this next section, the key steps undertaken throughout the meta-autoethnographic process will be explained in order to illuminate how one might go about constructing a meta-autoethnography. These steps are presented not only to contextualize what follows, but to expand previous meta-autoethnographic research, which has not yet outlined the potential steps (i.e. method) of the process.

In the first step of the process, a historical autoethnography written some eight years ago by McMahon² was (re)examined. This historical autoethnography is what Markula and Dension (2005) also refer to as a personal experience narrative as McMahon had to draw on

² Full text of historic autoethnography can be viewed in; McMahon, J., & Dinan-Thompson, M. (2008). A malleable body – Revelations from an Australian elite swimmer. *Healthy Lifestyles Journal*, 55(1), 23-28.

her past lived swimming experiences as the primary means of generating the story. During the formation of this particular autoethnography and as a means of demonstrating her political responsible reflexivity (Conquergood, 1991), McMahon indeed tested the details of her stories by conferring with swimmers, physiologists and coaches from the same era of Australian elite swimming. This ‘checking’ process was consequently made known in the subsequent generated publication. The historical autoethnography was analytical in nature and as such a theoretical analysis occurred (Anderson, 2006). This particular storied representation from 2008 was chosen because it was the autoethnography which received criticism from one reviewer in the publication process (previously outlined above) and was central to McMahon wanting to generate a meta-autoethnography. As an analytical autoethnographic approach was adopted in this historical representation, a large focus was thus placed on the “culture end of the auto-ethno spectrum” (Allen-Collinson, 2013, p. 291) within the publication. In so doing, an in-depth analysis of McMahon’s lived experiences “qua member of a cultural or subcultural group” (Allen-Collinson, 2013, p. 291) (i.e. Australian swimming culture) was included.

This historical representation which is entitled ‘Autoethnography 1’ presented below thus formed the sole basis of reflection as part of the meta-autoethnographic process. Also as part of the reflection process, McMahon (re)visualised her presence back in the scene (culture) that was researched eight years earlier. To do this reflection, Ellis and Bochner’s (2000, p. 752) “emotional recall strategy” was utilized by looking back at historical video footage of the sport culture in the hope that a better position might be gained by her to resonate with what was originally written or further add to, and expand the original transcription. During this stage of the reflection process, McMahon found herself stepping backwards into the lived encounter, and then forwards to the time the (historical) autoethnographic representation was written, and then forwards again into the present day to see whether additional elements could be offered.

In the second step of the meta-autoethnography, a reflective and (re)storied autoethnography was generated (see Autoethnography 2) as a result of McMahon’s critical reflection and (re)engagement with her historical representation. Entitled ‘Autoethnography 2’, this storied representation is intended to reveal the reflexive and critical voice of McMahon. In particular, the process of stepping back and forth between the historical representation to the present day is detailed, highlighting what became known for her, in and through the self-storying and writing process. However, as is outlined in Autoethnography 2, many tensions resulted. In particular, McMahon felt that she had misrepresented her emotions and inner thoughts that she had included in her historical autoethnographic representation. Instead of leaving these tensions unresolved, McMahon felt that her re-immersion into elite swimming culture, central to her historical autoethnographic research may assist her to sort, ponder and further clarify these tensions. Therefore, an additional step (i.e. step 3 below) to Ellis’s (2009) meta-autoethnographic framework was undertaken. This third step was a conscious addition made by McMahon, who continued to negotiate ongoing tensions that autoethnographic research cannot be considered as truth, or be considered an objective account of reality. As Medford (2006) explains, what ethical standard can Autoethnographers ascribe to when telling the truth is not applicable? For McMahon, cultural re-immersion was a conscious choice to assist her in the writing, (re)writing and reflecting process, and as a means of understanding the tensions that arose from the meta-autoethnographic process.

As such, in the third step of this research, McMahon re-immersed herself into the elite swimming culture that she had researched eight years earlier. This elite swimming environment had extremely tough training regimes and Olympic representation was the primary objective. The performing swimming body that is lean and fast is central to coaching practice within this context.

Thus, it was hoped that cultural re-immersion might assist McMahon to add to, opening up, additional self-reflexive voice(s) (Ellis, 2009; Smith, in press). Rather than simply observing on the sidelines, McMahon became a full-fledged member of an elite group of swimmers again for a six month period so that intricate details of everyday happenings in the pool could be heard, re-examined, re-reflected upon and understood. As a means of gaining additional perspectives in regard to the goings on of the elite swimming culture, McGannon acted as a ‘critical friend’ (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) during the six month period that McMahon participated in the elite swimming culture. Furthermore, McGannon also acted as both an ethical and conceptual sounding board (Owton & Sparkes, 2015) in regard to various aspects of how this paper was presented as well as providing a set of neutral analytic eyes (Allen-Collinson, 2013) to the project.

To re-gain access to elite swimming culture which McMahon was part of some 15 years earlier, an extreme level of fitness and training had to be gained and demonstrated in order to be considered (by the coach) for such an elite squad. Once access was gained, the swimming culture was ‘re-lived’, ‘re-felt’ and in some ways ‘re-revealed’ by McMahon. Throughout this cultural re-immersion and re-experiencing of the elite swimming culture, the historical autoethnographic representations were continually engaged with and reflected upon, and as a result, Autoethnography 3 (along with a series of other storied representations) were generated during this time period.

Thinking and acting ethically

Ethically speaking, autoethnographic research can be problematic but as Allen-Collinson (2012), Ellis (2004, 2007), Muncey (2010), and Tolich (2010) argue, none of this means that writing and publishing ethical autoethnographies is impossible. Thus, during the six month period that McMahon was (re)immersed in elite swimming culture, she ensured a

number of ethical considerations were acknowledged and thus employed as part of the reflection; data collection and writing process. Anonymity, and confidentiality (Mellick & Fleming, 2010) were of primary consideration. Thus, physical characteristics, specifically identifying information such as attitudes, actions, and relationships with others within the elite swimming culture were purposely omitted in the generated storied accounts limiting the possibility for people included in the story to be deductively identified. Another consideration is what Lahman, Geist, Rodriguez, Graglia, and DeRoche (2011) describe as aspirational ethics. This stance encouraged McMahon as the researcher/swimmer to strive for ethics greater than the minimum standard. In this regard, we wanted McMahon’s decisions to be mindful and considerate ethically, viewed as non-exploitative as she was consciously aware of her role as researcher/swimmer (Ellis, 2007) during her (re)immersion in elite swimming culture. Relational ethics was also an important consideration during this time where McMahon would ask herself the question, “What should I do now?” rather than the statement “This is what you should do now” (Smith, in press). Smith (in press) explains how relational ethics requires researchers to act from their hearts and minds, to acknowledge their interpersonal bonds to others, and initiate and maintain conversations. These ethical considerations were also undertaken during the historical autoethnographic research.

Formatting the autoethnographies

In what follows, three autoethnographies will be presented in chronological format, a format purposely chosen to show how McMahon’s thinking and reflecting unfolded and evolved throughout the meta-autoethnographic process. They have been entitled numerically (i.e. Autoethnography 1) for the purpose of this paper to allow for ease of readership (e.g. moving back and forth from the historical to the present day) as well as identification. This chosen chronological format may not be suitable for other meta-autoethnographic studies

because as Ellis (2009) explains, some meta-autoethnographies can be well developed and continuous stories while others are short, less well-connected fragments. Whatever the case may be, a specific or rigid format or process does not need to be followed when generating a meta-autoethnography because autoethnography as a genre “should not follow a rigid list of rule-based procedures” (Ellis, 2009, p. 16). But rather, the autoethnographer needs to be “flexible, reflexive and reflective of life as lived” (Ellis, 2009, p. 16).

In order to differentiate McMahon’s story telling voice from her academic voice, an adaption of Sparkes’ (2004) personal and academic voice framework has been utilised in the three autoethnographies presented below, whereby autoethnographic representations have been italicised. In addition, direct speech will be delineated through the use of quotation marks as well as indentation. Inner feelings will also be highlighted for the reader through the use of indentation but quotation marks will not be used. Sometimes certain words are capitalised to emphasise a point and/or give emphasis to McMahon’s feelings and emotional experiences during the writing.

Autoethnography 1: Historical

The pool deck is buzzing with competitors from other countries. I stretch with my teammates and then line up to get weighed, something I dread each day. As I stand there in the middle of the concourse in my swimwear, along with my team-mates, two of the swimming team managers stand in front of us with scales systematically weighing us. I feel exposed. I notice a lot of our international competitors looking at us. As the line dissipates and my turn approaches, panic overcomes me.

What if I put on weight again today?

For the last two days, my weight has increased by 0.15 of a kilogram. I find panic overwhelms me and instead of getting my weight recorded, I inconspicuously jump into the

pool and start swimming. As my body becomes submerged in the water, my thoughts drift to the team managers and coaches.

What will the managers and coaches do if I have another weight increase?

Maybe, they will forget to weigh me. As I pull myself out of the pool at the end of the session, one of the team managers approaches me carrying his clipboard. He then points to my name on the clipboard where I can see two weights recorded next to my name, 72.5 kilograms and 72.65 kilograms. I notice how everybody else has three weights next to their names.

Manager: "Jenny, after you get changed you need to weigh-in."

I cannot find the words to reply. In the showers, I have continual thoughts about my impending weigh in.

Maybe I have just sweated some of that water out during the session?

Go to the toilet. That could help.

As I walk outside of the change rooms, the managers are waiting for me with their clipboards and those dreaded scales. My feet step carefully onto the scales. My body is motionless, careful not to move or bump the scales and cause a slight increase in the number. My weight is 72.85 kilograms, another increase of 0.15 kilogram. The two managers are not smiling and look at each other. Then, the larger of the two men starts to speak.

Manager: "Jenny, we are concerned with your weight increases. You need to think about whether you still want a place on the National team because your weight is indicating that you are not remaining focused and committed. Your skin fold reading was also up four days ago. We will be interested to see how you go in your skin fold measurements tomorrow when they are repeated?"

I find myself immediately questioning my level of commitment.

Maybe I am not worthy of being a member of the national team?

At dinner that night I hardly eat. Have to fix my body. My consciousness is also alerted to the coaches and team managers' gaze during dinner. I can see that they are all looking at what is on my plate. I put some corn onto my fork and bring it to my mouth.

As I eat, they then whisper to each other.

They continue to gaze at me with every spoonful that I eat. Their constant gaze suppresses my appetite and I no longer feel hungry. Somehow my stomach has been tricked into feeling satisfied, however I have eaten so little. I am so desperate to do something about my weight.

Maybe the sauna could help with my weigh-in tomorrow?

I head there straight after dinner. Walking into the sauna takes my breath away. It is so hot and oppressive. I become thirsty very quickly.

Can't drink as that will affect my weigh-in tomorrow.

I find myself wanting to get out of the sauna but I stay as I have no other choice. After three hours in there, I walk back to my room. As I climb the stairs, I am feeling so dizzy. At the top of the stairs, I run into another female swimmer. Her eyes lock with mine. She can see that something is wrong and asks me if she can help?

Me: "My weight has increased two days in a row and I am really worried about it!"

She gives me the biggest smile.

Teammate: "I can help you!"

We walk back to my room together. As we arrive, she grabs my hand taking me into the bathroom. She tells me to try sticking my fingers down my throat. She demonstrates how to do it. I wince as I watch her shove her two longest fingers deep into the back of her throat.

Teammate: "Jenny, if you bring up your dinner, it will help with your weight in the morning."

I then try it. I stick my two longest fingers down my throat. It hurts and I gag. One tiny piece of corn comes up.

Teammate: “Don’t worry Jenny, I didn’t get it first go either. I do it well now though. I never have to worry about eating too much and putting on weight. Just remember that you need to do it straight after you eat.”

Haven’t brought up enough food to make a difference with my weight and still have to get weighed in the morning.

Teammate: “I have another way that can help you.”

She shows me a small bottle with purple writing on it.

Teammate: “This will make you go to the toilet and help you lose weight. The instructions say to only take one or two laxatives. I take seven because it makes you go to the toilet more and get everything out. You will go to the toilet in a matter of hours. Jenny, you are desperate. You should take seven.”

I feel relieved as I climb into bed that night knowing my weight will be sorted in the morning. Next morning as my eyes open, my stomach muscles feel like they are in the spin cycle of a washing machine. I was supposed to start going to the toilet before now. Have to race today in less than four hours. It is the World Swimming Championships and I can barely move. During the next hour, I crawl on my hands and knees to the toilet and pass seven bowel movements (McMahon & Dinan Thompson, 2008).

Autoethnography 2: Revising and reflecting on my historical story

If I draw on my historical understanding and interpretations of my autoethnographic representation, I see how my body did not ‘classify’ or ‘conform’ to the constructed body ideals of those inside the Australian swimming culture. As a consequence, I perceived myself as being uncommitted and felt that others viewed me in the same way. I saw myself as a failure and an

athletic fraud. It was through some of the coaches’ and managers’ ‘regulating’ and ‘surveilling’ of my swimmer body that I learned about the ideology of ‘slim to win’.

Upon reflection of the circumstances surrounding my life when I wrote that original autoethnography, I realise that I was a person who was damaged. Most days I would cry when I recalled my time as an Australian swimming representative. At the time of the actual writing of my historical autoethnography, I was a person who refused to look at my own reflection in a car window or a mirror. If I did accidentally, I would stiffen and look straight ahead, without so much as a glance below my shoulders. I was always fearful of looking below to my hip and bum area, fearful of what I would see, as if it was something that was so dreadful to me, something that I was told prevented me from achieving my athletic (Olympic) dreams. Also, I was suffering from post-natal depression when the historical autoethnography was written (which I did not realise at the time). I can see now in Autoethnography I that I felt like I was a victim and that the unhealthy relationship that I continued to have with my body, a decade on, I perceived could be blamed on those involved in the swimming culture.

As I re-read that historical autoethnography now nearly ten years later, I do doubt my original representation, understanding and analysis of my lived encounter. I am wondering now, how much post-natal depression affected my ability to recall all the events and happenings that I was actually exposed to. Or perhaps these doubts stem more from a reviewer’s comment on that particular autoethnography.

Even though I experienced what I wrote in that historical account first hand as a member of the Australian swimming team and I got other swimmers from the team to ‘check’ the details that I included, this particular reviewer’s criticisms over my recollection of events really caused me to doubt my story and my ability to write about my encounters. Feeling like an academic fraud, a feeling that I also felt as an athlete was confronting. Particularly as the reviewer had compared the details that I had included in my (historical) autoethnographic

account with a biographical novel that s/he had read about a successful Australian swimmer. As the details that I had included in that story did not align with what the reviewer had read in the biography, they felt that my versions were not an accurate representation of the culture. Further still, they made a personalised attack on me and my ability to recall and write about my elite swimming experiences which was confronting as there is not one right or correct way to tell a story in autoethnographic research.

The reviewer is not the only person causing me to doubt the details I included, or more importantly, the details that I did not include. So too, are some of the National swimmers. Some recent high profile swimmers have become ‘healthy eating’ and ‘diet’ advocates and continuously post pictures of their successful and fatless bodies advocating how swimming has helped them to be healthy and lean both in the short term and long term – a total contrast to what my autoethnographic accounts reveal.

I now feel that perhaps my emotions at the time of writing were reported rather than what I felt during the actual incident. Perhaps the situation was not as bad as I portrayed. Coaches are professionals and they are employed to get the best from us as athletes and I should be grateful to them for trying to help me at that time. I now feel like I ‘criticised’ the very people who were trying to help me achieve what I very desperately wanted.

Autoethnography 3: Re-Immersion into elite Australian swimming culture at 40

I lift myself out of the pool at the end of the seven kilometre swim session. Fiona is already out and I see her talking to the coach on the pool deck. She is nodding and silent. I can see that HE is doing all of the conversing. Fiona’s expression is serious and so is his. As I walk past, I hear him tell her that she is carrying too much weight on her thighs and bum.

Coach: “You are never going to swim well carrying that weight.”

16 year old Fiona stands there in her swimwear with water dripping off her from the session. I notice, that at the moment HE comments on her hips and bum, her arms drop down by her sides and she tries to cover her hip area. I can see that she is self-conscious of her body as she is standing there listening to him. I look to the grandstands to see if her parents are around. I notice that there are no parents at all around and wonder if the coach has made a conscious choice to have this conversation with Fiona at this time?

I walk up to HIM once his conversation with Fiona is over and she has headed to the change rooms. It is just HIM and I on the pool deck now. No longer am I scared of addressing the coach or talking through issues that I think are just not right. I have to be careful not to overstep though because I might no longer be accepted as an ‘insider.’

Me: “I overheard some of your conversation with Fiona just then.”

Coach: “Yeh, I was just telling her that if she doesn’t get the weight off then she isn’t going to go very far in the sport. I did not want to do it when Mummy was around because Mummy just spoils her and she needs to hear what I am saying.”

Me: “You know there is no scientific evidence to support what you are saying. I mean there has never been a study done (ever) saying that being lean or having limited body fat means you swim faster. I researched it and I spoke to the Australian Institute of Sport. They actually have research that states the opposite – how having some body fat assists with body floatation.”

Coach: “It is logic though Jenny. The more weight you have on, the greater the surface area of your skin which you have to pull through the water. You swim high in the water so it (fat) might not affect you as much whereas somebody like Rita and Fiona swim quite low in the water so it is going to affect them.”

His logic and his statement are said with such conviction. What he says makes sense to me, even now, knowing all I know. I know there is no scientific research to support such an idea yet I find myself buying into what he just said.

While this was just one of many encounters that I saw during my (re)immersion in elite swimming culture, I do see consistencies between what I originally wrote and what I just heard and experienced. I see how the interactions between this particular coach and young Fiona were centred on her body and as a consequence she became conscious of her body size and how it did not meet what the coach felt was the ideal shape. This encounter is just like what I experienced with a swimming coach at the same age. I can see that this particular coach practiced ‘slim to win,’ ‘body classification,’ and ‘body surveillance’ which I also experienced during my adolescence as part of the Australian swimming team. Even though I was then an adolescent and now a 40 year old woman, I acknowledge how easy it is (and was) to buy into what the coach is saying, viewing him as the bearer of all knowledge. I also just got to see firsthand how Fiona’s feelings about her body and her self changed in just one conversation, just as mine did in an interaction with a coach. In a way, I feel like seeing Fiona’s angst firsthand, I am re(living) and (re)experiencing the feelings I had as a swimmer in the present day – it is like the feelings I had as a 16 year old are running through my veins again, now, as a 40 year old woman.

I also remember incident that happened yesterday.

We had been in the water for nearly 90 minutes. I remember feeling weary as I was waiting to hear what was next on the agenda. The coach had not written anything on the whiteboard and I was hoping it would not be anything hard because the warm up had been unusually long - nearly 2.5 kilometres. So had the main set of three kilometres.

I just want to get out of the pool and go home.

While I predicted a short warm down swim and out, I was wrong. I recall the Coach’s words.

Coach: “ok, I want Natalie, Amelia, Zahlia and Ayla in lane 8 and then I want Jacki and Fiona in lane 7.

The coach did not put me in either lane. The coached then turned his attention to the girls in lane 8.

Coach: “Ok girls, you can put your fins on and do 16 x 25 metres of butterfly on 30 seconds. I really want you exploding through these. After that set, you will be warming down and you can get out.”

The girls in lane 8 put their fins on and got ready to commence the set. The coach then turned his attention to Jacki and Fiona in lane 7.

Coach: “Ok girls, I have you both over in this lane because I want you to do a bit more distance rather than sprint work. I am purposely going to give you more mileage over the next few weeks to try and strip that weight off you both. We have to get your mileage up there if you have any chance of losing any weight. I want you to do 4 x 800 metres. You can alternate them with paddles and swim. I want you repeating about 1.15 per 100 metres.”

I remember the girls nodding obligingly as he spoke. The coach then turned his attention to me.

Coach: “Jenny, What would you like to do? Do you want to hop in lane 8 and do the fly set or do you want to do a little more distance in lane 7? I think you could also benefit from getting the mileage up as it may help you to strip a bit of that weight off.”

Obviously he thinks I need to lose weight. Whatever, he can get fucked. He gave me the option so I will make my own decision. I am an adult afterall. I hop into lane 8, the butterfly sprint lane. Fuck swimming another 3.2 kilometres when I have done five already.

This incident helped me to realise that this coach classified and punished his female swimmers’ bodies that did not meet the ideal size and shape, just like my body was punished

by a coach during my adolescence. It also highlighted for me how body surveillance and ‘slim to win’ live on, enacted by him in the present day – in the ‘now’.

I also got to see how ten or so young girls brought into the ‘slim to win’ ideology just like I did and as a consequence, I saw how these ten girls’ relationships with their own bodies became damaged as they started to feel self-conscious on pool deck in their swimwear. These young girls started covering their bodies up in front of their team mates and coaches, just like I did in my teens as a swimmer. I also saw one young girl hiding her food that she was eating. Fiona was sitting in the grandstand at the pool with a towel over her head eating something. I asked her why she put the towel over her head and she said that she did not want to get in trouble by the coach for eating ‘carbs’. As I look back at my historical autoethnographic account in the present day, I can feel the emotional pain I felt at the time of writing the stories. But, the emotional details that I included were not as farfetched as that reviewer suggested some eight years ago. The feelings and emotions that I felt as an adolescent Australian representative swimmer, I got to (re)feel and (re)experience as an adult woman in the present day.

It is important to acknowledge at this point, that my (re)immersion and my subsequent stories of the Australian swimming elite culture in the present day centre on my perceptions and experiences with one swimming coach and any conclusions that I, or indeed the audience draw should not be seen as applicable to all Australian swimming coaches or the culture specifically.

Reflections on reflexions

In this closing section of the paper and in keeping with the meta-autoethnographic genre, McMahon will continue to reflect further upon the storied reflections above, thus leaving the self-storied, reflexive and re-immersion process ongoing. To accomplish further ‘reflections

on reflexion,’ both of McMahon’s storytelling voice and academic voice will be used to reveal the journey and process of meta-autoethnography as well as the journey of others (e.g. Autoethnographers; ethnographers; social scientists; sport socio-cultural researchers) as outlined in their previous work. In particular, in this closing section, what became ‘known’ for McMahon in and through this research will be highlighted and made known. At times in this closing section, McMahon’s storying may be perceived as ‘messy’ as she reveals her reflections and ongoing negotiations that occur as a result of stepping back and forth between the past and present. It is worth noting that in this closing section, McMahon reveals her personal revelations and reflections which to some extent she was trepidatious in revealing. In particular, McMahon was concerned that her interpretations may lead the audience down one path over another or be perceived as ‘telling’ rather than ‘showing’. To *tell* rather than *show* in itself violates the assumptions of creative forms of writing (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; McGannon, 2012; Smith, 2013; Sparkes, 2002). In keeping with the assumptions that underlie meta-autoethnography, we acknowledge that others may not resonate or share McMahon’s reflections. However, the point in presenting these reflections, is to bring to the fore McMahon’s experience with meta-authoethnography, a process which others may relate to and react in accordance with their own social positions (Owton & Sparkes, 2015). In keeping with the meta-autoethnographic genre of writing, in what follows, we now shift to the first person voice of McMahon.

The meta-autoethnographic process raised a number of tensions and issues in relation to how my historical autoethnography had been written. Throughout the reflection and revising process that is associated with meta-autoethnography, I found myself doubting the details, my emotions and my inner voice/s that I had included in my earlier autoethnographic work. In particular, during the reflection and (re)storying process (Autoethnography 2), I felt my having post-natal depression at the time of writing my historical autoethnographic account deeply

impacted the details and emotions that I had included in it. In hindsight, I felt that I had included emotions and feelings that I was experiencing at the time of writing rather than when I had actually experienced during the encounter itself. My voice below, provides an insight into the extent of my depression during the transcription of my historical representation and one of the primary reasons why I felt tensions in regard to what I had included.

Darkest days of my life

I have nothing to look forward to. The weekends, something I used to love are no longer joyful. Everyday seems to be so long. It is like a 24 hour day has become a 50 hour day. Every day I go through the process that is life, knowing that is what I have to do but not necessarily what I want to do. I have this baby that I am supposed to love but I feel nothing towards. I know that I have to look after him, and I do that, but I don't feel that connection that other mothers say they feel. I actually resent him for taking away the life that I had, the life that I enjoyed. Since having him, it is like I have these grey tinted sunglasses on and life is no longer colourful but rather, grey and dark.

While it could be easy to blame my emotional state at the time of writing, another possible cause for these tensions may have been a result of reflecting upon, and wrestling with, a heightened critical consciousness (Newman, 2013). While it difficult to identify how and why these tensions arose for me, I believe that as a story teller and as part of the meta-autoethnographic process, it is important to bring them to the fore and make them known, rather than hiding away, scared that I will be perceived in a lesser way academically, or as a person. When reflecting on both Autoethnography 1 and Autoethnography 2, I do recognise a similar theme of self-blame. For instance, I notice that I took blame for my swimmer body not meeting the coaches,' team managers' and cultural expectations (Autoethnography 1) and I took blame for the details that I had included in my historical autoethnography (Autoethnography 2). Or perhaps, the common theme of blame is more related to my great desire to gain acceptance,

approval and success. In Autoethnography 1, I was a neophyte Australian representative swimmer who just wanted to please the coaches and team managers, whether it was through the attainment of a lean and fatless swimmer body shape or through my performance. I was fearful of being perceived by coaches and team managers as ‘not having what it takes’ or being labelled as a ‘fraud of an athlete’. The desire to gain acceptance, approval and success was something I also sought as a neophyte academic particularly after I received critical feedback from the reviewer on my historical autoethnography. After receiving the reviewer’s feedback, I so desperately wanted to gain that reviewer’s approval and acceptance and was terrified that I had been thought of as ‘not having what it takes’ or as a ‘fraud of an academic’. Therefore, in relation to the first research question and whether there were additional elements revealed in the meta-autoethnographic process. For me, Autoethnography 2 did uncover additional elements in the reflection and (re)storying process. However, these additional elements centred more on feelings of doubt and concern in relation to the inner-thoughts and emotions that had been originally included in my historical representation. For me, had the meta-autoethnographic process ceased at that point, the tensions that had arisen as a result of engaging with meta-autoethnography would not have been further explored and in addition, these tensions and doubts may have been transmitted to the audience (e.g. Autoethnography 2). In short, the learning through the reflexive process would have ceased at that point for me.

It was at that point in the meta-autoethnographic process where *cultural (re)immersion* was considered as a possible additional element to enhance the reflection process. For nearly a year, the doubts that were raised as part of the meta-autoethnographic process (i.e. Autoethnography 2) weighed heavily on me, in particular, a feeling that I was and still am a fraud (as explained above). Because of the tensions and doubts that were raised in Autoethnography 2, I felt that I had potentially misled the audience. It was after much angst that I felt that the only way of moving forward and contextualising or better understanding my

past lived and storied encounters would be by re-immersing myself back into an elite swimming context. My re-immersion was not about me proving truth or trusting my previous storied accounts, but rather, it was about me sorting and understanding the tensions that had arisen over time for me as both an athlete and also an autoethnographic researcher. I also was also acutely aware at this point that I may have indeed been reflecting on an experience that contained my limited or partial insights, particularly as lived experience is always partial and one can only write about what they are consciously aware of at the time (Freire, 2000).

While the notion of immersing oneself in a specific cultural setting for the purpose of (auto) ethnographic research is not a new notion by any means particularly given the emphasis of culture (ethno) in autoethnography, I was hopeful that an ‘insider’ perspective (i.e. Sparkes, 2015; Atkinson, 2012) would provide me with access to further clarify and reflect on my doubts. I felt that physically being in the actual culture again would allow me to step backwards and forwards through the past and present. This weaving back and forth between the past and the present was not regarded, nor experienced as distinct, but rather, was woven and interlayered, in the re-visiting and (re)storying, and reclaiming of my reflexive self.

Cultural re-immersion did indeed provide a platform for me to analyse and rationalise my tensions (see Autoethnography 3). Cultural re-immersion helped me to somewhat understand these tensions and continue to reflect on them, but it also raised new ones. Being a swimmer again in an elite squad and living their day to day life helped me to clarify and confirm what I perceived my lived experiences to be. It also helped me to realise that reflection is ongoing and there is no finite or end point to autoethnographic research. I am not saying at this point that cultural re-immersion is for everyone who engages with meta-autoethnography. As a person who was damaged and scarred from the culture that I was researching, I was all too aware of the potential risks associated with not only the meta-autoethnographic process of reflecting and re-writing as Sparkes (2013) outlines, but also the risks associated with re-

immersing myself into elite swimming culture once again. As Richardson (2000); Ellis (2009) and McMahon and Penney (2011) state, there is an inherent need for care to be taken for the researcher (me). In which case, meta-autoethnography and cultural re-immersion may not be physically, emotionally, spiritually, mentally or logistically possible for all researchers.

While I subjected my body to the physical abuse associated with the training in elite swimming culture, cultural re-immersion as an additional tool to the meta-autoethnographic process helped me to (re)engage in the kinaesthetic nature of cultural research (see Crang, 2003, Spinney, 2006) by being what Spry (2001) refers to as an ‘*active agent*’ in the reflexive process by (re)participating in a series of active doings. Indeed, cultural re-immersion (re)situated me in the actual cultural context as part of the reflexive process rather than removing me from it, thus embracing the embodied nature that is associated with autoethnographic research (McGannon & Smith, 2015; Smith, in press; Sparkes, 2000).

In relation to the second research question, it was through my re-immersion in elite swimming culture that further insights and layers of understanding of Australian swimming culture were realised for me (the researcher/swimmer) which I subsequently communicated to the audience through my stories. Some of these additional insights I realise, I had not been consciously aware of at the time, but on reflection and after my re-immersion, I believe they were always present (i.e. I believe coaches are consciously aware of when they are transmitting dominant ideologies and in so doing manipulate swimmers to conform to look and act a certain way).

As a result of cultural (re)immersion as well as greater life experience, the reflexivity that comes with meta-autoethnography was enhanced for me because I was indeed an ‘*active agent*’ in the reflexive process by (re)participating in elite swimming culture. In so doing, a more coherent and detailed autoethnographic account was offered. That being said, I am still acutely aware as Ellis (2009) says that my autoethnographic accounts always remain

incomplete, however cultural re-immersion provided me with a platform to ‘actively’ reflect, resonate and (re)story my historical lived experience. Cultural re-immersion, for me, was a self-reflexive tool that assisted me and continues to assist me in my ongoing reflection that is born from autoethnographic research, because as was realised throughout this meta-autoethnographic process, lived cultural experience can never be viewed as finite, fixed or complete.

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