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Three Seconds Flat:
Autoethnography Within Commissioned Research and Evaluation Projects

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Introduction

It seems to me that autoethnography usually exists in a space apart from funded research and commissioned evaluations. It sometimes feels like a parallel universe exists: funded, commissioned studies are conducted *over there*, while autoethnographies are conducted *over here*. But must that be the case? More to the point, perhaps, *should* that be the case? Might something be gained from blurring or diminishing this separation? I would like to see a greater degree of overlap, because autoethnography can make an important contribution to studies which utilise other methodologies. In the process of researching others' lives – whether through questionnaires, interviews, observation or any other methods – researchers inevitably influence, shape or construct findings and interpretations (Etherington, 2004). Their biography, politics, cultural positioning and experiences while doing the research therefore *matter* – they potentially impact the study's outcomes. Because autoethnography facilitates critical exploration of a researcher's experiences within a culture, a political context, I'd like to see it considered a routine and necessary component of commissioned social research and evaluation.

In this chapter, I share an autoethnography conducted under these circumstances: during a commissioned study of others' life experiences. Previously, I have used autoethnography to explore same-sex attraction in sport (e.g., Carless, 2012) and the processes of writing songs as arts-based research (e.g., Carless, in press). Here, I use a similar storytelling approach to explore my experiences of conducting research into the value of a sport and adventure activity residential course for military personnel who have experienced injury, illness and/or trauma. My colleagues and I have published a series of articles based on this project (e.g., Carless, 2014; Carless & Douglas, 2016a, 2016b; Carless, Peacock, McKenna & Cooke, 2013; Douglas & Carless, 2015, 2016). These publications draw on in-depth interviews with soldiers and coaches on the course, as well as events and interactions that occurred during fieldwork (as a participant-observer) on numerous courses. The earlier publications feature narrative analytic approaches while later articles privilege arts-based representations. Besides supporting different kinds of insights, the arts-based pieces shed light on how the findings emerged and practical/ethical challenges that arose along the way. Here, I extend this work through an autoethnography which draws on field notes, reflexive stories and an interview relating to my first week of fieldwork.

Bedroom, accommodation block, Sunday 8.20pm

I don't know what to expect and I'm nervous. I've come to a 'serious' venue – quite famous in the world of British sport. I picture national teams that have assembled here in preparation for Olympics and World Championships. Does the choice of this venue mean that this week matters, that it is valued by the military, considered important? But then should *I* be here? Am I worthy of a week at a National Sport Centre? Whatever 'worthy' is judged to be – skilled, strong, fit, fast, mentally tough, determined, authoritative, confident, ambitious ... thoughtful ... questioning ... concerned ... caring ... kind?

I'm worried about the activity sessions: the claustrophobia of caving, for one. I imagine squeezing through ever-narrowing tunnels, mental images fuelled by stories of floods and collapses. And what about climbing? Do I trust the person who'll be holding the other end of the rope that's holding me? I don't have much faith in my ability to cling to vertical stone. I want someone to rely on. I need to feel secure that the coaches – and other group members too – will care enough about me that I'll be safe. But why should they? What am I looking for from them for reassurance?

I worry too about the 'alpha-male-ness' of it all – and the homophobia of military culture. Am I going to have to cover up? Perform straight? Cover *myself* up? Well, I'm not going to be telling them about kissing my boyfriend goodbye when I left to come here this afternoon, am I? Will I be obliged to follow the old '*don't ask, don't tell*' mantra? Will I be safe – emotionally, physically – here? I need to survive this week. It's my job. It's how I earn a living.

I hope I'll be accepted despite being different to what I imagine people here will be expecting. I hope there will space for someone who might not warm to adventure activity, who might be afraid but might not show it. What signs am I looking for that this will be the case? A display of expertise? A tale of conquering? A dramatic story of disaster avoided? A simple explanation of what is to come? A humble account of imperfection? A kind word? A reassuring smile?

Seminar room, Monday 1.30pm

Lively music fills the room, ahead of the first session of the week. Eighteen chairs are arranged in a large circle. Each chair is occupied: soldiers, instructors, a health professional, another member of the evaluation team, me. Billy, the course leader this week, steps to the centre of the circle. He points a remote towards the iPod dock and the volume drops.

“In a moment I’m going to ask you to make yourself a name badge, but please don’t do what I just did,” he says with a goofy grin. Billy holds up an A4 sheet of self-adhesive labels and shows us his own name written on the wrong side – the back – of the sheet. “I’ve just spent ten minutes trying to peel that off!” he says, as the group breaks into a laugh. With a sheepish smile, he passes the sheet of labels and marker pen around the group.

I’m writing my name on a sticker when I hear a burst of chuckles. Looking up, I see Steve proudly holding up his newly written badge: “STUD” it reads, in bold red lettering. I groan inwardly. Suddenly, although I am part of this group, I feel I am not. The distance between us has increased. In three seconds flat. I am thinking of myself but also of others: the two women in the room, someone in the group who may have sexual problems because of his injury or disability, anyone who – like me – finds this kind of supposedly harmless ‘joke’ alienating. *Am I making too much of this? Overreacting? Is it just ‘boys being boys’? A harmless gaff for a burst of community building laughter? Or is it an action that alienates the women in the room along with any ‘non-stud-identifying’ men?*

Before my thoughts freewheel any further, Adam, one of the instructors, steps towards Steve and peels the sticker off his sweatshirt. Adam re-positions it over the “CARL” of the word “CARLING” embroidered on his top. The label now reads: “STUDLING.” Now I laugh. So do the rest of the group. Steve laughs too. In three seconds flat, I feel a little closer to the group, a little less different. Adam has rewritten Steve’s display of sexist, heterosexist bravado – through gentle jest ever-so-slightly at Steve’s expense. Moments later Stu, another instructor, stands and with the marker pen writes “BA” ahead of the existing lettering to read: “BASTUD”. I laugh again, as do the rest of the group. Steve smiles, mimes deflation and feigns protest, but leaves the badge in place. In another few seconds, the separation has decreased some more. I go from feeling uncomfortable, outside and different to feeling a little more at home, a little more welcome here.

Car park, climbing wall facility, Tuesday 10.05am

We clamber out of the minibus. I'm happy to feel the pale autumn sunlight and breathe fresh air after the 45-minute drive to the climbing wall facility. Billy addresses the group with a raised voice.

“Guys, straight across the car park, please – the main entrance is just there,” he says, pointing. “I'll meet you at the shoe store on the right.” Then, quieter, pointing in the other direction now, towards a gleaming people-carrier 30 meters away: “Dave, can you give Stu a hand with the rest of the kit?”

I head across to the rear of the car which now has its boot door wide open, the gaping insides neatly packed with climbing kit.

“Morning Stu, can I give you a hand?” I nod a hello to the other instructor, who I don't know.

“That would be grand, Dave, thanks. Have you met Neil?”

“Hello mate,” Neil says with a smile, shaking my hand warmly.

We each take an armful of kit from the back of the car, threading straps over our shoulders and cradling the remainder of the cargo against our chests. I tuck the fragile ever-present iPod dock under my free arm. Fully loaded, I look up at the open boot door, arced high into the air. *Well, I can't reach to shut that!* I turn towards Neil who returns my gaze with a grin and a shrug of his heavily laden shoulders. We both look towards Stu. With a wry grin, perhaps enjoying the chance to show off this swanky new vehicle, Stu looks upwards at the boot door as – miraculously, to me at least – it descends seemingly of its own accord, accompanied by a soft whirring sound, before clunking solidly shut. With raised eyebrows, Stu glances downwards, directing our gaze to the electronic key fob between the thumb and forefinger of his kitbag-carrying hand. I nod my head and chuckle at Stu's improvised magic show.

“That is *so* gay,” Neil says, laughing too.

Stu laughs.

I freeze.

I am stunned by the kind of comment I got used to hearing day in day out at school and throughout the years I played sport. *Where did that come from? What does an automatic door have to do with two men loving each other? Why am I unable to ask Neil that question?* In recent years, I've got out of the habit of hearing this kind of remark. Surely, times have changed. People don't say this kind of stupid thing anymore do they? Or is that down to the circles I move in nowadays? Circles where careless, casual homophobia is mostly absent.

I turn and walk towards the climbing facility. I am with these two men, but I am not. The distance between *me* and *them* has increased. In three seconds flat.

Showers, swimming pool, Wednesday 3.55pm

It's an ageing military base, so I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that the pool's showers are open plan. Private cubicles or curtains are not for military men it seems. When I was younger, I sometimes used to enjoy the *frisson* of post-sport communal showers. Now, though, I'm feeling uncomfortable and over-exposed sharing a shower with the instructors and male soldiers on this week's course. Maybe I'm not the only one? I notice a couple of the soldiers – self-conscious of their injuries perhaps or bothered by something unseen – lingering in the changing room. They don't seem to want to shower.

As I walk from the shower, towel wrapped round my waist, Billy shouts out: "Come on in guys! We're all heterosexuals here!"

Laughter.

I feel a momentary sting.

I am silent.

Are we Billy? All of us? Well, I ain't! Yet my silence implies otherwise. I wonder about the soldiers in the group this week: Hetero? Hetero by default? Named hetero by others? Or hetero by virtue of their own silence?

I am with these men, but I am not. The distance between us has increased again. In just three seconds flat.

Dining room, Wednesday 8.35pm

Billy has his hands full leading the course this week. It's a demanding job that I can see he takes seriously. I imagine he would rather be spending the evening preparing for tomorrow's sessions, so appreciate him making time to talk to me. I've brought along drafts of the *Bedroom* and *Seminar Room* stories I'd written on Sunday and Monday (see above). I want to talk with him about these kinds of topics as they seem important, but I don't feel comfortable just bringing them up in conversation. I suppose I need the time, context, depth, empathy and emotional awareness that stories can bring. I want him to have a chance to feel what I've felt being here this week. So I begin our interview by asking if he would read the stories as a way to kick-start our dialogue. He agrees. I switch my recorder on, check it's working and wait while he reads. Later, I will return to this recording to remember the conversation that ensues...

Billy looks up from my laptop screen and sits back in his chair. He pauses. "Good piece of writing," he says. We both laugh, a little nervously I think when I listen back to the recording. He rubs his hands together, pausing again.

I speak to fill the silence which I'm finding uncomfortable. "Well, its trying to get ..." But I force myself to stop, remind myself to let the silence be, to leave breathing space. "No, I should let you speak." Fifteen long seconds pass. Billy leans forward, places his elbows on the table. I watch the seconds tick over one by one on the recorder's digital display. Billy leans back in his chair. I'm drawn once more to fill the space, but hold off.

Eventually, Billy continues. Cautiously. “That,” he pauses again, searching for words, “is a good piece of writing because it’s a fly on the wall perspective.” He halts. “Fly on the wall is the device used by sensible people, if they can ...” I feel that he is filling time, buying himself space, searching for a way to respond, “... if they can afford to pay someone to do it ... And it takes the right person to do it. And it probably takes a person like you who is outside of the main catchment.”

Billy hesitates again, leaning forward once more, elbows on knees. *Where is he going with this? Is he working towards positioning me as an outsider, someone who’s experiences and emotions do not matter here, someone who is irrelevant to the job at hand?* He begins to speak again: “Um, errrr, I ...” he halts, stumbles, “... I’m somewhat relieved that its a positive thing. But I’d be happy if it wasn’t because I’d say right, I can take learning from that.” He stops. I nod but remain silent. He continues, more loudly, more forthright now: “It does make me think, actually, because I still use inappropriate things sometimes. But I’m aware of it. And I’m hoping to get a laugh. But I’m not including everybody. At the moment...” he stops again. More pause. He sits back in the chair, rubs the back of his head. “Women in the Services are an interesting thing...” *Now where is he going with THIS?* He stops. Thinks some more. “They can either sacrifice all of their femininity to fit in, or they do it just right ... But it’s not just women – could be all sorts of things. What is a good point in the story is a lot of nothing ... the stud thing ... because we haven’t considered a guy who gets his wedding tackle blown away ...” I sense Billy filling time again, trying to decide what its OK to say. “It does make me think we need to be more careful ... One of us might be cracking a joke about picking up soap in the shower or whatever, which is referring to homosexuality, and of course we may have a ... We’re not going to get feedback on that are we?”

“Well,” I begin, wavering for a moment, “my partner is male. I think that’s one of the reasons I’ve often felt like an outsider in social groups, particularly in sport.” Billy is listening – intently. “I’m sensitive to exclusion because of sexuality. But I don’t want to just state in a report or article that the culture of the course is homophobic or heterosexist. The reason I am recounting these events as stories is to engage with the complexities behind that, explore how it unfolds, how it came to be that way, ask questions, invite dialogue about how it could be different.”

“I think that’s really valuable – it’s a good perspective. I would never want to be in a situation where I was hurting or excluding anybody. Perhaps I should have said, ‘Are you a gay guy?’ I almost don’t even know how to approach that. I do know quite a few people who are gay but I’m still ...” Billy pauses, rubbing the back of his neck before continuing: “I’ve had this conversation about coming to work with guys with disabilities. It’s wrong, but I’m as nervous about sexuality. I need to be careful because if what we do offends people then the course is not doing what it’s supposed to do. It’s as applicable if the guy is disabled, gay, black, you know, we may be giving him a hard time without even knowing it. We need to be more careful.”

Bedroom, accommodation block, Wednesday, 11.15pm

I’m lying in bed thinking about the interview. It was a strange one. I can see now that Billy was trying to find his way as he spoke. At times, he seemed genuinely stumped. As if he hadn’t come up against – or considered – diversity before. He didn’t seem to know what to say. Or what was *OK* to say. Or what he *should* say. But I could sense him coming to new realizations, new understandings, new commitments, during our conversation. This is a man who has climbed Everest, led troops, navigated some of the world’s most hostile terrains ... yet he is struggling when faced with me and my stories. His training prepared him for hardship and adversity, violence and killing, leadership and inspiration, trauma and terror ... but it doesn’t seem to have prepared him for this.

Front door, accommodation block, Thursday 6.10am

It’s pitch black and freezing cold. I’ve put on running tights, gloves, hat and a fleece. It’s the only time of day I have any hope of squeezing in a short run. There’s a lane I can follow – although its not lit there won’t be much traffic this early. I head downstairs and out of the accommodation block before anybody else is up.

But I’m wrong. Talking quietly but intensely under the covered porch are Billy and Carl, one of the other coaches. At six o’clock in the morning! Outside the front door! In the dark! These coaches put the hours in.

They both stop talking. They seem to stop moving too. They look towards me as I push the door open. Time seems to have slowed. I suddenly have the sense that they were talking about me. And they haven't decided how to continue now I am unexpectedly here before them.

"Morning Billy, Carl," I say as I let the door swing closed behind me.

"Morning Dave. Early run eh? Very impressive mate!" Billy replies.

"Aye!" Carl nods in greeting.

I smile, nod and break into a slow jog.

Sports hall, Thursday 3.20pm

Billy, Paul and I are laying out the mats for a seated volleyball session that will begin shortly. We haven't got long to cover the floor with the simple geometric arrangement of mats that will provide the court for the two teams. The phrase 'military precision' might be a cliché, but right now it's appropriate: three men swiftly maneuvering forty-odd gym mats from the store room into a tight arrangement on the sports hall floor. We're chatting, joking and calling to each other as we work.

"I got this one Billy," Paul shouts.

"Speed m-a-c-h-i-n-e!" Billy echoes.

"This one's stuck, can you give me a hand Paul?" I ask.

"Sure thing," Paul replies, giving the other end of the mat a kick.

"I've got the left side covered," Billy says to us both.

“OK, I’m coming in behind you Billy,” I reply.

“Uh oh! Better watch out Billy!” Paul shouts, laughing.

Did he just say that? Was that an anal sex ‘joke’? My heart jumps, I feel an impulse to freeze, but keep on working. Maybe I’m being hypersensitive?

Before there’s time to decide, Billy drops his mat, turns to Paul and says: “Hey, mate. Come on. We don’t need any of that kind of chat around here.”

Then I know right away. Billy is on it. He gets it. Advocacy. Solidarity.

I was with these men. Then I was not. Now I am with them again (well, Billy anyway). The distance between us increased for a moment ... and then shrunk away. All in three seconds flat.

Bar, Thursday 9.05pm

Carl caught my attention when I arrived on Sunday evening. This was probably inevitable given his visible disability. Beyond this, though, I was drawn to his t-shirt emblazoned with the words: *You pity me because I am different. I pity you because you are all the same.* It struck me as provocative. Challenging. Confrontational perhaps. But it was a welcome sight that first evening – I gave a silent cheer. It made me feel a little less alone.

Although Carl was warm and welcoming towards the soldiers, I found him prickly. On Tuesday, I’d asked him for an interview about his coaching practice. He’d agreed, but our conversation was stilted. We didn’t seem to be able to open to each other. The interview was short. So I’m surprised when he comes up to join me at the bar as I wait to buy a beer.

“Dave, good to see you,” he says in his distinctive dialect, with a broad grin. “How’s your day been? What’ll you have?” Carl seems changed towards me since yesterday. He is more friendly. Available. Generous – *he* wants to buy *me* a beer. And, once our beers have arrived, he seems to want to talk.

University campus, the following week

I stand and make to leave his office. My meeting with the project lead about the contribution of last week's fieldwork to the evaluation seems to have reached its conclusion. I move towards the door and my hand is on the doorknob when, on the spur of the moment, I decide to write myself into the story I have shared with him this past half hour. I turn the doorknob but don't open the door.

"You know, the culture on the course can be pretty sexist. Misogynistic even. Racist occasionally too. And homophobic at times." I pause. He nods but does not respond. I continue, carefully: "I don't find it a particularly safe environment. So I haven't felt comfortable sharing much about myself with the soldiers. But I did come out to Billy midway through the week."

"Hmm, I was wondering whether to ask you about that," he replies, leaning back in his chair. My hand stays on the doorknob. "I heard that Billy," he pauses and shifts in his seat, "I'm not sure how to say this ... 'outed' you to the coaching team. How do you feel about that?" *So my declaration to Billy was deemed newsworthy ... That in itself says a lot ... And I was the focus of that news ... And news clearly travels fast ... Though I'm shocked its made its way back to Leeds and the project lead already.* These and other thoughts race through my mind. But I venture a different reply:

"Oh, its OK. I did feel uncomfortable, sensing I was being talked about. But I think Billy did it in a supportive way – he recognised the culture could be alienating and tried to address it within the team. He tried to make me feel included. I pointed out that a LGBT soldier would probably also find these kinds of moments alienating. He got that. He understood a gay or bisexual soldier would probably not feel safe or relaxed in that environment. So he did what he could to modify the environment. Good coaching I'd say."

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