




# Capturing the personal through the lens of the professional: The use of external data sources in autoethnography

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## Abstract

This article shows how external data sources can be utilised in autoethnographic research. Beginning with an account of a critical incident that examines the incompatibility of private and professional identities, I show how, through the collection of data sources, I capture the impact of homophobic and heteronormative discursive practices on health, wellbeing and identity. In the critical incident, I explore how I prospered as a teacher at a British village school for almost 10 years by censoring my sexuality and carefully managing the intersection between my private and professional identities. However, when a malicious and homophobic neighbour and parent of children at the school exposed my sexuality to the Headteacher, I learned the extent to which the rural school community privileged and protected the heteronormative discourse. A poststructuralist theoretical framework underpins this article. My experience of being a subject is understood as the outcome of discursive practices. Sexual identity, teacher identity and autoethnographer identity are understood to be fluid, and constantly produced and reproduced in response to social, cultural and political influences. The article describes how email correspondence, medical records and notes from a course of cognitive behaviour therapy were deployed to augment my personal recollection and give a depth and richness to the narrative. As the critical incident became a police matter, examination takes place of how I sought to obtain and utilise data from the police national computer in the research. Attempts to collect data from the police and Crown Prosecution Service were problematic and provided an unexpected development in the research and offered additional insight into the nature of the British rural community and its police force.

## Keywords

Teacher, rural, school, autoethnography, data, lesbian, homophobia, heteronormativity

This paper is an examination of my experiences as a teacher and a lesbian. Utilising autoethnography as a method of inquiry, it deploys data sources such as text messages, emails and medical records, to expose the effects of homophobia on my health and wellbeing.

By drawing on data sources surrounding a critical incident, I examine the incompatibility of my private and professional identities, investigate the moral panic that surrounds teacher sexuality in schools and consider the impact of homophobic and heteronormative discursive practices on health, wellbeing and identity.

The vehicle for my exploration of data in autoethnography is a narrative describing a critical incident. My experiences as a teacher and a lesbian in a rural school are analysed, and the circumstances that compelled me to leave the teaching profession after a 22-year career are examined through

the data sources. In the autoethnography I explore how I prospered at a village school for almost 10 years by censoring my sexuality and carefully managing the intersection between my private and professional identities. However, when Mr. Freeman (a pseudonym), a homophobic neighbour and parent of children at the school, exposed my sexuality to the Headteacher, I learned the extent to which the rural school community privileged and protected the heteronormative discourse.

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Personal testimony typical of autoethnography was supported by external data sources, including email and text message correspondence, medical and counselling records. As the critical incident eventually became a police matter, I also sought to utilise police records and evidence from the UK Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) in the research. However, the collection of these data proved problematic, providing an unexpected development in the research and offering additional insight into the nature of the rural community and its police force.

A poststructuralist theoretical framework underpins this paper. My experience of being a subject is understood as the outcome of discursive practices (Butler, 1990). Sexual identity, teacher identity and autoethnographer identity are understood to be fluid, and constantly produced and reproduced in response to social, cultural and political influences.

### The critical incident

It is beyond the scope of this paper to share the entire critical incident on which the research is based. What follows is a synopsis of the salient events framed by short extracts from the external data sources collected. It should be noted that this incident took place in 2009, a year before I decided to reflect on it as part of my doctoral research. I was not involved in doctoral study at the time of the events nor did I have future plans to do so. I decided to use the incident as the focus of my research after it had taken place, retrospectively seeking the data produced at the time from my general physician (GP), my cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) therapist and via my own records of incidents and correspondence with others. What follows is a narrative summary of events along with short extracts from some of the data sources retrospectively collected.

I lived with my partner, Jo (a pseudonym), in rural South East England. We had a house surrounded on three sides by fields belonging to the local Wildlife Trust. In June 2009, the neighbouring farmhouse and only other property for half a mile was sold to the Freemans, a family of seven. They moved in and enrolled three of their children at the school at which I was Assistant Headteacher. The Freemans had a garden of six acres, but placed a trampoline immediately abutting our boundary, no more than 15 feet from our kitchen and living room windows. My partner and I were upset at this intrusion to our privacy. Therefore, we decided to go and introduce ourselves and welcome the Freemans to the village, hoping in the process for an opportunity to mention the trampoline issue.

Mr. Freeman showed us around the grounds of his new property and Jo sensitively broached the subject of the trampoline, explaining that I was a teacher at the school his children attended and that it was important for his children and for me that professional and personal boundaries did not become blurred. Mr. Freeman moved the trampoline; we

thanked him for appreciating our position and rounded off the encounter in a cordial and neighbourly manner.

Later that evening, banging on the front door interrupted our conversation. Mr. Freeman was pacing on and off the doorstep shouting that he would not be told what to do by a pair of lesbians and was going to make our lives a 'living misery'. He added that he owned a PR company and would expose us online, though for what he did not say. We stood paralysed as Mr. Freeman spat out more and more frustrated threats.

The following weeks were unhappy and uncomfortable. Though no further words were exchanged with the Freemans, Mr. Freeman pursued and provoked us at every opportunity. He called us 'dykes', and 'lezzers'; he urinated in our garden, appeared at our windows late at night, and tried to run us off the narrow country lanes in his enormous black SUV. We staunchly attempted to enjoy the summer sunshine, but we had become an obsession to Mr. Freeman. He could not settle if we were outside and shouted or howled or laughed loudly and inexplicably at us. He threw things over the fence to startle us; on one occasion it was a bucket and on another the Freeman family bag of clothes pegs:

Crime Report. Police National Computer

To date Catherine Lee has experienced 45 separate incidents involving Mr. Freeman. This has taken place over a nine month period and includes the following behaviour.

Climbing the tree on the boundary and howling at the two women

Shouting "do the dykes want peace and quiet".

Howling and shouting at them when he sees them.

Shouting at male decorator working for the couple "why have you got a man visiting your house".

Five separate incidents of running victim off the road in his four-wheel-drive.

Urinating openly in front of the two women on their land.

Throwing a bucket into her garden.

Being in her garden and staring through the kitchen window.

At school, I was relieved not to be teaching any of the Freeman children and made a conscious decision to try to remain unaware of them in this setting. I hoped that this would help me to avoid any awkward encounters with them

and ensure I was fair and consistent in any chance dealings I did have with them. This was not too difficult to achieve in a school of more than 700 pupils, especially as I was not too sure what they looked like, such was my determination to avoid them at home.

Because our property and Mr. Freeman's were isolated from the rest of the village, Jo and I were too afraid to contact the police. To do so would provoke Mr. Freeman further, and it would be unlikely the police could protect us in such a remote location. When the name calling and taunts showed no sign of stopping, we put the house on the market. Although we loved our cottage, our ability to enjoy it had disintegrated:

Estate Agent Property Details  
Rightmove.com.

Tucked away off a quiet country lane, at the end of a long private driveway, xxxxxxxx cottage provides flexible living accommodation in a location that is second to none. Nestled on the xxxxxxxxxxxx nature reserve, the property is surrounded by breathtaking scenery and a network of footpaths and bridleways. There is a large garden which has an enviable selection of mature fruit trees, including apple, plum, green gauge [sic], cherry, walnut and hazelnut. The property also boasts a spectacular wildflower meadow.

The stress of being subject to harassment by Mr. Freeman began to take its toll on me physically and I was admitted to hospital at the beginning of the school summer holidays with abdominal pain. Surgery followed for the removal of ovarian cysts that had lain dormant for some time and, as I lay at home incapacitated, I fell into a black hole of despair:

GP Notes 29th July 2009

Patient No:XXXXXX Ms Catherine Lee

29/7/2009

G.P.Surgery

Dr XXXXXXXXXXXX

S: Anhedonia, low mood, poor sleep, self-loathing, poor concentration, anxiety and restlessness ++

Soon after I returned to school, my headteacher asked to see me in his office. Mr. Freeman had come into school to tell my headteacher that I was a lesbian and express concern that I was working with children. He had qualified his concern by

alleging that I had been staring lustfully at his 9-year-old daughters on the trampoline:

Text message sent on 1st December 2009  
14:01:01 to Jo

Freeman has been into school spouting off about us being gay and about how I shouldn't be allowed to teach children because I live with you. All sorts of other stuff. Feel a bit shaken up xx

My headteacher warned that Mr. Freeman was determined to pursue me and recommended I get on with moving house as quickly as possible. I had never mentioned to my headteacher that I was a lesbian, but now with my sexuality exposed, I told him all about the harassment at home. I asked the headteacher whether, if I ever felt safe enough to report Mr. Freeman to the police, he would support me by telling the police about this visit. Clearly compromised and irritated at being so, the head retorted that this was not a school matter and his priority was to get along with Mr. Freeman, particularly as he had so many children passing through the school. England's Department for Education website offers guidance for headteachers when allegations are made against members of staff:

Employers have a duty of care to their employees. They should act to manage and minimise the stress inherent in the allegations and disciplinary process. Support for the individual is key to fulfilling this duty. Individuals should be informed of concerns or allegations as soon as possible and given an explanation of the likely course of action. (Department for Education, 2011)

I reflected on the conversation as I left the head's office to return to my own. The allegation by Mr. Freeman that I had been staring lustfully at his daughters did not seem outrageous to the head. He had felt unable or unprepared to challenge it. I started to worry that other colleagues and other parents would deem the accusation feasible.

Inevitably, the Freeman children began to tell their friends that I was a lesbian. A teaching assistant told me that I had been the topic of conversation in the class she was attached to and before long the walk from my classroom to my office or the playground was tortuous. In the staffroom too, I was suddenly alone; light-hearted conversations with colleagues evaporated and invitations to social events disappeared. Perhaps this was my fault as no doubt I behaved differently, as I wondered who knew and thought what about the allegation.

Although I enjoyed teaching, I could no longer bear to be at the school and jumped at the first job opportunity I found with a local authority. We sold the house quickly and decided that the day before we were due to leave, we would report Mr. Freeman to the police.

Jo and I selected this date with care, aware that from this point we would lose control over circumstances surrounding

our relationship with Mr. Freeman. We did not want to wait until after we had left our home to make our allegations as we were concerned that the police might decide that, as we no longer lived in close proximity to Mr. Freeman, the case did not need to be pursued. However, at the same time, we feared that if the police approached Mr. Freeman while we were still in the neighbouring cottage, there was a good chance his behaviour towards us would become more extreme.

Arrangements were made for a police officer to visit us at home to take a full statement on our last night in the cottage. Arriving to our relief in plain clothes and in an unmarked police car, he sat with us among the cardboard boxes. He asked us questions about our work, the cottages, our relationship and the nature of Mr. Freeman's behaviour towards us:

Crime report. Police National Computer Offender over nine month period has verbally abused victim and her partner due to them being in a gay/lesbian relationship.

The couple have got to the point that they have sold their property and are moving out of the area completely. They have been too afraid to report the matter to police until the last minute before they move for fear of reprisals.

This has resulted in the victim being petrified of her neighbour. She has been referred to her GP for depression and is receiving counselling.

She received little or no support from the headteacher. She has also contacted the teaching union.

It is obvious that both are upset and Catherine in particular is frightened and at the end of her tether. She will require a huge amount of support.

I have discussed special measures should this end up in court and assured her we will do everything to support her. I would recommend either video link or partition to assist in her giving evidence if required. Mg 2 would be required.

I have identified that the headteacher needs to be spoken with and a statement obtained covering the complaint made to him regarding Catherine Lee being a lesbian. I have checked with Catherine

Lee that she is happy for this to take place.

This is a very nasty case of homophobic harassment.

The following day Jo and I moved into rented accommodation in another county and began our lives again, well away from Mr. Freeman and the rural school community.

## The pursuit of data

I do not keep a journal or diary as autoethnographers commonly do. Instead, the starting point for my narrative was to assemble the abundance of external data that was created during the time of the critical incident. My iPhone provided the initial data sources. Hoping that one day I would be in a position to report Mr. Freeman to the police, I kept a log in the notes section of my phone containing dated one line descriptions of each occasion Mr. Freeman had antagonised us at home. The log ran to some 45 separate incidents. When we did eventually go to the police, I emailed the phone log to myself and printed it out for the police. I later repeated this process to retrieve the data for the autoethnography, cutting and pasting the relevant sections of the iPhone log once the coding process began.

My iPhone also provided me with the next data source. My partner, Jo, and I had sent numerous text messages to one another during this challenging period. The text messages captured our personal anxieties living next door to Mr. Freeman. The text messages demonstrate the support I received from Jo during this period and some of the tensions events placed upon our relationship. I asked for Jo's permission to use the messages in the autoethnography and then began to try to retrieve them all from the phone. I downloaded software onto my computer which enabled me to extract the text messages from the phone and transpose them into Microsoft Word. Each message carried information that revealed the date and time of the message and the identity (either Jo or me) of the sender. I immediately edited out the more mundane messages (pertaining, for example, to meal-time arrangements or travel delays) until I was left with a chronological list of messages relating to our time next door to Mr. Freeman.

I sought to record Mr. Freeman's visit to the school on a school incident form and copies of this were utilised, along with email correspondence to and from the headteacher. As the critical incident led us to sell our home and to move well away from Mr. Freeman, my computer hard drive uncovered a letter to our estate agent complaining about the description of our property in the marketing materials. In this letter, I offered my own rather more romantic description of our home and suggested that this should be used instead. My description of the house provided me with insight into the emotional attachment I felt towards it. I was



reminded of the loss I felt on being forced to leave and, in particular, how impossible I believed it would be to replicate our home elsewhere.

During the critical incident I sought medical help from my GP who referred me to a CBT therapist for stress and anxiety. On my computer hard drive, I found the 'Thought Diary' the therapist had asked me to keep throughout the period during in which we met regularly. The thought diary was used to record times in which I felt anxious and was used as a tool to encourage me to endure or 'sit with' anxious feelings and phobias until they subsided. The thought diary provided evidence of my apprehension during this time. In particular, it portrayed the manifestations of certain anxieties and revealed the onset of intrusive thoughts and compulsive behaviour.

The thought diary led me to consider the CBT therapist's case notes. Because CBT focusses on anxieties and behaviour in the 'here and now', I imagined the notes would provide insight into the triggers of distress during that time. I contacted the therapist, told her the focus of my studies and asked whether she would give permission for me to use her notes in my thesis. The therapist agreed and emailed a copy of the notes to me. The CBT notes offer a reflection of me through the lens of psychological analysis. They began with a report of my initial introductory psychological assessment which included background information about me and a synopsis of the concerns. The remaining notes presented a narrative evaluation of each of the 17 weekly sessions.

A number of consultations with my GP preceded my referral for CBT therapy. I was curious to know what my medical file would reveal about these appointments, in particular why a referral for CBT was deemed to be the most appropriate intervention for homophobic harassment by a neighbour. I telephoned the surgery and the practice manager asked me to make a formal request in writing to include the reason for this request. I was presented with my entire medical history and so I was able to set most of the medical notes aside. Focusing only on those entries that related to the seven months that my partner and I lived next door to Mr. Freeman, I carefully transcribed and formatted them ready for coding.

Chang (2008) states that in autoethnography, 'the act of data collection is often intertwined' with data analysis and interpretation (p. 8). She adds that these activities often take place concurrently and 'inform each other in a web-like fashion' (Chang, 2008). The process Chang describes reflects the approach used in my autoethnographic research. Though my data collection was incomplete, I paused at this point to assemble the data received so far, and to begin some writing based on my initial reflections.

First, I organised the data chronologically. I used the iPhone incident log as a timeline and mapped the dated text messages, thought diary, CBT notes and estate agent letter onto the timeline so that I could plot the relationship between the behaviour of Mr. Freeman and my feelings and emotions

during that time. Then, taking each data source and its temporal relationship to other sources, I began to draft a short, tentative narrative around each data source which reflected my thoughts and feelings at the time. I also began to draft additional notes which attempted to articulate my reaction to reading the external data sources. I included this process because some of what I read was in stark contrast to my perceptions of myself at that time. For instance, I recalled talking incessantly about Mr. Freeman during the weekly CBT sessions, yet he was almost entirely absent from the notes. In addition, when I read the text message exchanges with my partner, the Mr. Freeman themed messages presented me as a person who was negative, accusatory and irritated by Jo's constant reassurances. I could find no evidence of the partner I thought I had been at that time, and was surprised to find that I had not reciprocated the reassurances and support that the text messages showed I received in abundance.

After making initial notes and drafting small chunks of narrative, I adopted an inductive approach to code the data, notes and narrative into the identified topics. Notable topics included anxiety, manifested through concerns about our personal safety and sadness and fear about selling our home. Descriptive codes were utilised so that the dominant topic could be easily identified and named. After I had coded the data descriptively, I entered a further coding cycle in which I identified emerging themes. Emerging themes included a shift in my understanding about identity, mental health and wellbeing, as well as privacy and surveillance. Once I had coded the data, I began writing as fully as I could about events and their impact on me.

As I progressed through this period of writing around my data sources, I became ever more detached from the sociological, relational and political dimensions of my story. I became consumed by a broken and unwell version of myself that was isolated and separated from the contextual discourse of events. I internalised Mr. Freeman's homophobic loathing of me and the process of writing served to return me to the intensity of anxiety I felt at the time of the incident. This appears to be quite common in autoethnography. Chatham-Carpenter (2010), describes how the process of writing autoethnographically about her bulimia, created urges for her to return to this behaviour and 'Valerie' in Ellis's *The Ethnographic I*, told of being afraid that her cancer would return through the process of writing about it. As I wrote, and wove the data in and out of my narrative, I realised that it told only part of the story. It reflected events through the lens of medicine and psychological therapy but I lacked the equivalent data to examine events from a sociological and legal perspective. Chang (2008) suggests that 'toing and froing' between the personal and social is quite usual in autoethnography as 'data analysis and interpretation involves moving back and forth between self and others, zooming in and out of the personal and social realm, and submerging in and emerging out of data' (p. 9).

Turning my attention to the social and relational aspects of the narrative, I discovered on my computer a number of further pieces of email correspondence. There was email correspondence from the local authority Hate Crime Service and a number of messages to and from investigating police officers. In addition, I found an email to and from my regional teaching union representative seeking clarification of the legal duty of the Headteacher to protect me as a member of staff from harassment at school by third parties.

In each of the emails, I had presented a slightly different version of myself, fine-tuning the tone and formality of the correspondence depending on the recipient. Adams and Holmes (2011) write about autoethnography as an agent of change. Through the exploration of telling and un-telling stories, they describe 'the uncertain, fluid, and becoming subjectivities, informed by multiple layers and forms of knowledge and representations' (p. 108).

I considered the email messages to and from the investigating police officers. The messages were few in number and pertained mostly to arrangements to discuss matters over the phone.

I wondered whether it would be possible to gain access to the crime file. I initially made telephone contact with the investigating police officer who gave his consent for me to use information (pertaining to me) in the crime file for the autoethnography. He agreed to send me copies of the relevant documents, including a letter from the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) outlining why they had decided not to prosecute Mr. Freeman. Several weeks passed, the documents never arrived and I tried, but failed numerous times to reach him again by telephone. I therefore telephoned the county's police headquarters and the data protection team there advised me that I could access the file by making a Subject Access Request to them. Under section 7 of the United Kingdom Data Protection Act (1998) 'Right of Subject Access', an individual is entitled to make a Subject Access Request to an organisation for information which may be held about them. I downloaded the appropriate form from the police website, paid the £10 fee and included photographic proof of my identity as requested. A month later I received a single document from the police national computer. This document from the police related to my initial statement and my victim statement but nothing further. With my partner's full permission, I made a further subject access request in Jo's name and was able to access a little more information including her victim statement.

I assembled the police documents alongside the email correspondence with my teaching union, the hate crime service and the investigating police officers. Meanwhile, I took further steps to try and gain access to the crime file, in particular a report from the CPS in which the decision not to prosecute Mr. Freeman was outlined. My pursuit and failure to gain access to this external data source suggested that the police had not followed due process in the investigation of Mr. Freeman. My attempts to uncover the facts became a part of the narrative and provided me with deeper insight into the

nature of heteronormativity in the rural community in which we lived.

I initially visited the CPS website and learned of a Victim Code of Conduct which outlines the steps the CPS should take when they decide not to proceed with a prosecution. The website states,

The CPS will provide explanations of its decisions not to proceed or to substantially alter charges in all cases with an identifiable victim ... letters to victims should be sent within 5 working days of the decision ... It is good practice for letters to be sent by first class post (CPS, 2012).

On reading this and realising that I should have received written confirmation of the decision, I telephoned the county's Police headquarters. Several weeks later, a senior officer informed me that there were two copies of my Police file containing the letter from the CPS. One file was sent to a police station in the local to my home. Unfortunately, both copies of the file had been lost.

I waited several months and decided to make a further subject access request in the hope that at least one of my police files had been located. I received the following response as part of a letter from the police:

I can confirm that attempts have been made to locate the relevant crime files which to date have been unsuccessful. Therefore whilst I note you have requested to see the written report or letter from the CPS at this time we have been unable to consider this document for disclosure because it is unclear whether the Constabulary are still in possession of it. Should the file be located further consideration will be given to this matter.

(Email accompanying subject access request, 2012)

A voicemail from the investigating police officer later the same month informed me that neither copy of the police file had been located. While he said that the police would continue to search for the files, he warned that he could 'almost guarantee' that the files would never be found.

I was aware as I made my complaint to the police to initiate the search for the file that I was now directly and knowingly influencing the narrative of my autoethnography. This felt uncomfortable threatened to compromise the integrity of the research. It was partly for this reason that I did not pursue the missing police file through to its conclusion. The absence of much of the police data was regrettable, however. I am left with many unanswered questions about the police handling of the case. As the rural school community chose not to protect me from a homophobic and hostile parent, I believe that

the crime files were 'lost' so that the rural constabulary could protect Mr. Freeman from prosecution. Subscribing to Anderson and Glass-Coffin's (2013) assertion that autoethnography is 'characterized by an open-ended rejection of finality and closure' (p. 79), I recognised that this dead end in my data collection was inconsequential as the nature of autoethnography is such, that while the narrative pauses, the story itself rarely ends.

While the pursuit and failure to get access to data from the police became part of the narrative of my autoethnography, the data sources I did collect added authenticity to the research. It could also be argued that the use of third party data enhanced the reliability of the narrative, although I would argue that to dwell on the reliability of the narrative is to misinterpret the place and purpose of autoethnography. Information from my medical files, my mobile phone, my computer and notes taken by the CBT therapist served as a reminder of forgotten details. These data helped me to assemble the timeline of events and, particularly in the case of the CBT notes, forced me to confront uncomfortable issues relating to my place in the critical incident. Of course it can be argued that these data are not third party data at all. The notes taken by these outside agencies merely reflect the information I relayed to them during this time; they are simply my diary entries written by someone else. However, as each agency has examined my circumstances through their particular lens – the law, medicine or mental health – they have placed a different emphasis and interpretation onto events and each helped to give a further dimension to circumstances surrounding the critical incident and my role within it.

While, the presentation of the self lies at the heart of any autoethnography, according to Swartz (2009), 'personal identity cannot be clean, consistent, or concise, nor can it ever be fixed and permanent, nor yet can it be individually bounded' (p. 794). I concur with Swartz. I have created multiple selves and multiple voices that jostled for authority and hegemony throughout the narrative. By presenting my story through the data I created an untidy and contradictory narrative. At times, this external data presented a version of myself to me that forced me to entirely revise and reverse perceptions of circumstances and ideas about myself that were well-established. These competing and contradictory data in autoethnography are something Mizzi (2010) defines as multivocality and serve to represent the complexities of human interpretation.

Multivocality provides representational space in autoethnography for the plural and sometimes contradictory narrative voices located within the research. Mizzi suggests that through the process of autoethnography, the researcher is able to expose the fluid nature of identity as it moves through particular contexts. In doing so, Mizzi suggests this deconstructs competing tensions that connect the personal self to the social context and use documentary evidence to show the way in which my voice is able to bring another dimension to the perception of external events. By utilising

third party data, I was able to see myself as the police, the GP, the CBT therapist and others saw me at the time but equally, I was able to provide a commentary to that evidence, that showed the impact that the behaviour of others had on my sense of self.

While the data evidence I collated for this research does not offer generalisations about the way in which lesbian teachers facing homophobia are received by the rural school community, it does add to knowledge by demonstrating how others in a professional capacity reacted to me and my circumstances. I add to the paucity of autoethnographic research focusing on the lived experiences of lesbians facing homophobic and gender violence. The critical incident is relatively benign but there is a wealth of empirical research that shows that I am not the first lesbian teacher in a school community to face homophobia and heteronormativity (see, for example, Ferfolja, 2007; Gray, 2010; Rudo, 2010), and while this is one person's story and describes a somewhat unique set of circumstances, the use of data means that it is possible to build a picture of how professionals could and do respond in such circumstances. In this regard, the use of data and the resulting analysis in common with Anderson's description of analytic autoethnography, has, it could be argued, recursively woven together personal experiences and the testimony of others to inform broader social understanding of the nature of heteronormativity in rural and school environments.

## Ethical considerations

Throughout the process of writing about the critical incident as an academic endeavour, I have been concerned about the ethical implications of telling this story. As the narrative took shape on the page and inevitably included reference to others, I have asked myself time and again, do I own this story simply because it happened to me (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000)? Even though the critical incident is primarily about me, it has at its core the behaviour of others and my relationships with them. Tolich (2010) describes the word 'auto' when applied to autoethnography as a 'misnomer', describing the self as 'porous', inevitably 'leaking' onto others, sometimes without due ethical consideration (p. 1608).

In defence of the inclusion in this research of Mr. Freeman and the headteacher, I wish to emphasise that in common with many autoethnographies, this research is a retrospective reflection on a life event. I did not set out to engender the circumstances of the critical incident. It existed before I thought to utilise it in the research and its influence on my life extends beyond this academic consideration. For example, well before I decided to research this event, I had discussed it with friends and some colleagues. In these discussions, I revealed the identities of all concerned. I reported the actions of the headteacher and Mr. Freeman to my teaching union and in doing so did not offer either man anonymity.

Tolich (2010) cautions autoethnographers not to betray colleagues, friends and family through the portrayal of them in personal narratives. While Tolich warns against ‘violating the internal confidentiality of relational others’ (p. 1599) stating that the ‘unsubstantiated therapeutic promise of autoethnography’ (p. 1607) does not give the autoethnographer the right to disregard the ‘ethical rights of those perpetrators who caused the harm’ (ibid). According to Muncey (2005), one of the defining features of autoethnography is its ability to give a voice to those silenced or marginalised by those who are more powerful. When ethics determine that the perpetrator must be protected, the power remains with the perpetrator and the victim continues to be silenced. It is my contention then that to deny an individual the opportunity to explore their own story is in itself an act of oppression. Victims of domestic abuse (Olson, 2004), rape (Brison, 2002; Curry, 2010) and homophobia (Adams, 2012; McLaurin, 2003) have all been given a voice through autoethnography. None of these authors to my knowledge gained the consent of their oppressors but, in proceeding without it, each has made a new and valuable contribution to academic understanding about these issues from which others can learn (Humphreys, 2005). Similarly, Adams et al. (2017) describe the ‘right to story’ as a basic human right (p. 676). I hope therefore that in following the lead of these more established autoethnographers, I too might contribute a new voice.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored the process of collecting and utilising data in autoethnography to capture what can fall away (Youdell, 2010) through personal recollection alone ... It is argued that sources of supporting evidence such as text messages and email correspondence, can, in addition to helping recall events can provide multiple lenses with which to reflect on the self.

In essence, my experience as outlined through the critical incident is typical of those described by participants in empirical research about the experiences of lesbian teachers (see, for example, Ferfolja, 2007; Rudoe, 2010). Although the details of events differ, my narrative captures the sort of experiences that many lesbian teachers encounter in schools. There is evidence (see for example, Clarke, 1996; Gray, 2010; Piper and Sikes, 2010) that even those lesbian teachers fortunate enough not to have faced homophobia or heteronormativity, live in fear that an incident such as the one described here might one day happen to them.

By utilising data sources in my autoethnographic narrative, and drawing in detail on the records of the professional bodies with whom I had contact, I have been able to give a sense of place, character and context to myself as researcher in the narrative. I have also demonstrated how those from whom I sought support and protection, responded to me in their professional capacities and in doing so have provided a

commentary that shows how the decisions and behaviour of others, impact on perceptions of personal identity. Canagarajah (2012), celebrates the way in which autoethnography can ‘articulate one’s own experiences, rather than letting others represent them’ (p. 262), adding that all too often the testimonies of the marginalised are presented by those outside the community. I would argue that in providing analysis that juxtaposes the testimony of others with my feelings and perceptions of the time, I have reclaimed the testimony of others and shown how professionals can misinterpret or mislead in their reporting of events and interactions.

I have briefly explored the ethical dilemma associated with autoethnography that inevitably includes reference to other people. Although I have protected the identities of the perpetrator(s) in the critical incident, I did not seek their consent when writing about them. However, in common with Bolen (2012) I ‘write to right’ and hope to make a contribution to the broader social understanding of the potential challenges and risks facing lesbian teachers in rural school communities. Though generalisations are not sought, it is suggested that by looking closely at the documentary evidence of professionals, it possible to create new learning in autoethnography that does more than merely teach the reader about the autoethnographer themselves. The proliferation of new media in the Internet age has, in recent times, expanded the range of data available to autoethnographers (Anderson and Glass-Coffin, 2013). The rise of social media in particular as a mode of communication, sharing and display, presents a wealth of new data opportunities for autoethnographers and will without doubt lead autoethnographic inquiry in a new direction as we embrace technology for ever new forms of social interaction and reflection. If autoethnographers are prepared to supplement rich introspection and self-analysis with data providing the testimony of others, then it is possible that autoethnography could make a more confident contribution to social understanding, and secure the place it deserves as a worthy contemporary to more established and traditional empirical research.

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### Author biography

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