

Compare and Contrast Two Different Methods of Data Collection and Analysis from A Critical Realist Ontology Perspective in Studying My Lived Experience of Conversion Therapy and Disfellowshipment.

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ABSTRACT

When managing a research project, it is imperative to decide which ontological view the researcher-participant stands. Is the world viewed in absolute terms thereby having a positivist view only believing the observable constructions of the mind. From this stance then helps to decide epistemology informing both data methods of collection and analysis. This informed the lived experience researcher to follow logical and correct processes to uncover the post traumatic grief experience after gay conversion therapy. To best understand the lived experience self-studies are growing in popularity with the experience standing up to the rigor of peer review. A dual approach is taken to use autoethnography to explore the church culture via the lens of fundamentalism, working class, gay lens, and auto-hermeneutics to address the conversion and disfellowship phenomenon. With the focus of trying to get ideas, attitudes, felt senses of grief and trauma following conversion therapy to curb suicide, depression, and minority stress.

Keywords: *Auto hermeneutics, Autoethnography, Self-Study, Gay Conversion, Participant-researcher, researcher-participant.*

Suicide following conversion therapy is twice likely amongst sexual, gender and intersex minority populations (Mallory et al, 2019). In the USA alone an estimated 698.000 people (aged 18-59) will have received and gone through conversion therapy. In the UK figures remain unknown due to monitoring difficulties but albeit remains a strong practice of torture and systematic abuse. For the purposes of this discussion, I have chosen to place myself under the microscope to become the researcher-participant studying the participant-researcher to write a first-hand account of my experience of conversion therapy to understand the phenomenon and culture (Broadway-Horner, in press).

Conversion therapy has many terms assigned to the experience each used to describe the torture and systematic abuse of changing one sexuality/gender type for another. Other terms include sexual orientation and gender identity change efforts (SOGICE), reparative therapy, sexual

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orientation change efforts (SOCE) and gender identity change efforts (GICE). For the purposes of this paper, the term conversion therapy will be used.

Since the beginning of time, stories are passed down through the generations as a method to teach, describe and elucidate upon for fun, drama, and community development. Stories are held in time and very much are a snap shot of the culture of the time. Culture is a term that has 200 plus definitions, is historically fluid, socially constructed and complex (Baldwin et al, 2006). The way we look at the world in a moment in time is based upon a set of valued beliefs based on ontological and epistemological assumptions. In addition, there needs to be an investigation of the phenomenon using qualitative methodology from a critical realist viewpoint. This is inductive, reflexive and flexible within the natural setting when considering the exploration of both the phenomenon and culture of conversion therapy experience from the individual who lived it.

Critical realism

Communication and terms used in the language change according to whom we speak within the cultural group over time. Explanations given will overlap, whilst others disagree with the position held (Guba and Lincoln, 1996). To understand the lived experience of conversion therapy, the ontological position must be one that is autobiographical touching the personal domain via the social and political intersectional lens. Both Positivists and Critical Realists agree (although previously disputed) that attributes, ideas and perceptions are part of the real world and can be accessed and open to subjective interpretation (Ritchie et al. 2014, Flick 2014; and Haig and Evers, 2016). Critical Realism sits in between positivism and social constructionism but leans towards a positivist ontology (Bhasker, 1975).

It is argued that all scientists are constructionists observing mental events like attitudes, intentions, urges, behaviours, and sensations, which all fit within the realism paradigm (Campbell, 2002; Haig and Evers 2016). As a survivor of conversion therapy and disfellowshipment under investigation I used Adams, (2016) use of critical autoethnography as inspiration to both share the lived experience within the context of church, working class, gay, to understand in a self-reflexivity interpersonal and intercultural inquiry. In this, the researcher and the participant are the same thus lending itself to a qualitative approach of autoethnography. To purposefully gain knowledge and data with the researcher holding the power as to how this is interpreted. Therefore, methodology needs a procedure to limit the power base by holding an objective stance being slightly removed from the story told (Maxwell, 2012). However, Bochner, (1997) states that the piece ought to be written in the first-person narrative thus making the objective stance difficult. Nevertheless, would time aid the sense of distance? The episode of conversion therapy occurred 31 years ago with time offering a buffer or so I thought. I latter found out that the hurt and pain is still there albeit with different intensity with the tears flowing. In addition, the main recounting of the story may be more about the phenomenon with a little on culture. Therefore, auto-hermeneutics would be prudent to use, as it will focus the story of conversion therapy and the disfellowshipment phenomenon.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a method from the ethnography school of investigation. Banfield (2019) believes it to sit well within Critical realism and ethnographers should not be shy in this regard, as it universalises the human experience and its freedoms. Like ethnography, autoethnography will relate to culture, customs and unwritten rules of the lived experience. Some would say that

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it is difficult to separate the phenomenon from culture (Rodriguez & Ryave, 2002; Smith et al., 2009). As Closet – Crane (2014) found out in the autoethnographic study which some would say is more auto-hermeneutic as it investigates the phenomenon with little mention of culture.

Auto-hermeneutics

Modern hermeneutic school of thought looks both at the verbal and non-verbal communication. Self-study provides an opportunity that interviews do not. To know the possibilities of exploring all the urges, memories, and imagery of the phenomenon in way that adds richness to the data. Also, I need to acknowledge that I did observe all-knowing points from my memory recall using the observer perspective with no wish to explore fully at times but still recorded them. In an IPA interview these often time are unrecognised or taken for granted or seldom recorded as the interviewer will not be made aware. This lacking maybe be due to the funneling questions or the contested bracketing experience. It is suggested that a systematic approach be under taken in bringing the implied phenomenon to the fore by using interval recording and free-format narrative recording might bring (Rodriguez and Ryave, 2002). The key they claim is to remove faulty memory or transformations of the recalled memory. However, it is doubtful this is possible; as autobiographical memory will change aspects of the recalled data unconsciously each time, it is recalled. The due to the brain inbuilt facility to provide short cuts leading to summaries and paraphrasing of the experience. Nevertheless, the first recall of the experience was recorded and then listened to, to register both what is said and the interpretation upon hearing what is said.

Intersectionality

In preparing the self-study it was needful to address the intersections that inform my lived experience. I am a married gay man and father of a brilliant child. I was born into a born-again Christian working-class family with education providing the route to a middle-class profession. I am a trained mental health nurse of 20 years plus, consultant psychotherapist of 16 years plus and a senior fellow of the higher education academy. I have married into a higher upper class Sri Lankan family and learning to navigate the mind field of being gay in that culture.

Plus added to this is a fundamentalism of Christianity that both influences and shadows some of the narrative. Both the influence and shadows are important for helping to mould the person I am today. But nevertheless it can be viewed both as an extraneous or viable variable depending on which ontology viewpoint one takes. For me I view it as a viable variable via the reflexive process.

The constructionist

This epistemological stance; the position of the researcher has to be interactional, transactional, subjective and co-created with the participant. And the methodology to satisfy this would be both auto-hermeneutics and auto-ethnography in order to share fully my experience and that experience in the context of church culture to share fully their views. I as the enabler enables the researcher and participant in one to fully understand and translate them as one entity.

In IPA it is Smith's (2008) belief that the researcher needs the transactional and subjective experience of the participant, which forms a collaboration where both participant and researcher share equal status in the data gathering and it is to this end auto-hermeneutics cuts out the middleman. The researcher-participant understanding the phenomenon as seen/understood/the space/ reflect upon by the participant-researcher thus intrinsically reflexive in nature. Auto-

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hermeneutics is useful generally within identity groups like e.g., sexual minorities to new mothers with a first child (Conrad, 1987; Smith & Osborn, 2008).

This would be different to the first methodology in that the participant-researcher is encouraged to be self-reflective and self-interpretive within the phenomenon; thus, following a dynamic process in which the researcher-participant is involved (Flick, 2014). This involves the researcher-participant trying to know which internal events are activated like negative automatic thoughts, attitudes etc that take us back in time. And as the participant-researcher I am fully aware of 'hot spots' in trauma therapies. Hot spots are cognitive events locked in the past. For self-preservation the brain locks away information at painful times to help us evolve and self-actualise. This can and does bring alongside difficult emotions, cognitive consequences and action tendencies. This being the case it is important to have some grounding skills just in case I find it difficult to navigate the participant-researcher journey. This to aid in bringing me back from the phenomenon to the present time. Grounding skills involve the five senses and so I had my son's favourite toy for touch, a current family photo for sight and Siddhalepa balm for the tip of the nose to bring me out of a difficult emotional roller coaster.

The first methodology focuses on the cultural context of church, working class, and child of parents with mental illness; thus, following a dynamic process in which the researcher participant is involved as an observer of the participant-researcher (Flick, 2014). This being different to the second methodology as the focus is of an observation standpoint. Observing/studying the cultural context/environment of the time. The cognitive eye observing the people, the living space, the home where the conversion therapy took place, the spoken word, the attitudes of the time etc. Thus, being complimentary to the first methodology. Both methods have one aspect in common of agreeing to investigate the experience.

Which stance to take?

Not much is known about the experience of survivors of conversion therapy. There are a few case stories and some anecdotal evidence of helpful supports. But little exists which primarily is due to many countries still upholding the practice, which I would argue, is an offshoot from colonisation period in history. Many countries colonised by a European power still hold a penal code to incarcerate sexual minorities people and simultaneously holding the narrative "No gays here" and in some cases blame the existence of sexual minorities on the western world. Unfortunately, this is combined with efforts to purchase international educational degrees to authenticate and legitimise the practice of conversion therapy. Many citizens for example will travel to the UK and be educated on a psychology course endorsed by the British Psychological Society with the view of returning to the homeland. They return to the homeland to set up a conversion therapy Centre. They will advertise conversion therapy clinics using BPS credentials giving credence, an authority figure to torment and abuse the sexual minority person for a fee.

Parents with a religious belief are driven to pushing the child to such clinics with the view of making the child perfect for a romantic or forced marital arrangement. It is with this in mind that I consider myself as the person of study. I grew up and came from a fundamentalist Christian belief system understanding the family pressures to marry within the religion. However, can I do it purely from a church culture perspective excluding the phenomenon or is it better to include both? On this basis, it is needful to be dual data collection platforms using both autoethnography and auto hermeneutic approaches would be equally suited to explore the experience.

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CONCLUSION

To help answer the question from a critical realist point of view it was necessary to take a qualitative approach. The constructionist epistemology using both auto hermeneutics and autoethnography data collect strategies to make sense of a complicated experience of conversion therapy. This a logical process of making sense of culture and the phenomenon. It is hoped that this will lead to further inquiry in gaining further knowledge and understanding in a problematic area.

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Conflict of Interest

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