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Autoethnography as Constructionist Project

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Handbook of CONSTRUCTIONIST RESEARCH

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Several years ago, we published an essay in which we claimed that qualitative research can be productively thought of as existing along a continuum. Artistic interpretivists anchor one end, whereas scientific positivists hold down the other. In between is a vast and varied middle ground wherein most qualitative researchers locate themselves (Ellis & Ellingson, 2000). We constructed a nuanced range of possibilities to describe what many others have socially constructed as dichotomies (mutually exclusive, paired opposites), such as art–science, hard–soft, and qualitative–quantitative (see Potter, 1995). Dichotomous thinking remains the default mode of the academy. "Language, and thus meaning, depends on a system of differences," explains Gergen (1994, p. 9). "These differences have been cast in terms of binaries. . . . All are distinguished by virtue of what they are not." Nowhere is this evidenced more strongly than in the quantitative–qualitative divide. Even in qualitative work itself polarities mark the differences between interpretivists and realists (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, & Lofland, 2001; Bochner & Ellis, 1999). Recently autoethnographers have begun to distinguish themselves from one another by separating evocative from analytic autoethnography. Analytic autoethnographers focus on developing theoretical explanations of broader social phenomena, whereas evocative autoethnographers focus on narrative presentations that open up conversations and evoke emotional responses (Hunt & Junco, 2006).

When Carolyn invited me (Laura) to coauthor this chapter, I accepted with enthusiasm, excited to be working with her again.
Perusing the Handbook prospectus, I chuckled at the irony of the two of us jointly constructing a story about the intersections between autoethnography and social constructionism once again. Those familiar with Carolyn’s methodological novel on autoethnography (Ellis, 2004) might recognize me as the witty, weak-bladdered woman in Carolyn’s qualitative methods seminar. Whereas Carolyn cheerfully explores my bodily weakness to add levity to her story, her discussion of my dissertation only hints at the lengthy, intense saga of my negotiation with her and my committee over the role autoethnography would play in my ethnographic construction of an interdisciplinary geriatric oncology team. Thankfully, the story had a happy ending; together we resisted the art-science dichotomy and embraced crystallization, a postmodern form of methodological triangulation that utilizes multiple methods of analysis and multiple genres of representation (Richardson, 2000). I combined narrative ethnography, grounded theory analysis, autoethnography, and feminist analyses into a single dissertation project, now revised into a book (Ellingson, 2005a). In this chapter, Carolyn and I continue that conversation, developing our conception of autoethnography as a constructionist project.

When I (Carolyn) asked Laura to coauthor this chapter with me, I hesitated at first as I thought about how insistent she had been in her dissertation on including everything but “the kitchen sink.” She wanted to engage in crystallization and approach the oncology team she studied from a variety of perspectives. Her goal was to illuminate the socially constructed world of the team while simultaneously revealing the constructed nature of her multiple accounts of the team. Yes, perhaps I would have preferred at the time that Laura do it “my” way. Don’t we all want to reproduce ourselves? But I also pride myself on helping students to find their particular and unique voices, especially if they are different from mine. I was leery of Laura’s proposed project because I’ve discovered in my many years of directing dissertations that the main roadblock for students is that they try to do too much. Then they encounter difficulty doing any one thing deeply or thoroughly enough. Laura was among the very best students I had ever mentored, and I wanted her to succeed. Laura persevered, and I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised, given that she was as astute at traditional analysis as she was talented as a narrative writer, that she pulled off an excellent dissertation that incorporated multiple perspectives and methods. In light of our experience, I thought she would be the perfect coauthor for this chapter.

In this chapter, we explore autoethnography as a social constructionist project. We want to resist the tendency to dichotomize and instead explore how autoethnography makes connections between seemingly polar opposites. Though we see it as a sign of progress that authors desire to tease out differences in autoethnographic projects, we argue that concentrating on dichotomies is counterproductive, given that autoethnography by definition operates as a bridge, connecting autobiography and ethnography in order to study the intersection of self and others, self and culture.

After further detailing in this chapter the limits of dichotomous thinking, we sketch the meanings and goals of autoethnography. We then discuss social constructionist concepts pertinent to autoethnography by deconstructing various methodological dichotomies.

The Limits of Dichotomous Thinking

I (Laura) often feel I am channeling Carolyn when I introduce the continuum of qualitative methods to my undergraduate qualitative students, so tied to our personal relationship is my knowledge of and passion for qualitative methods. I recall with fondness Carolyn’s chart of qualitative research with
the squiggly, broken line down the middle between the art and science sides. “Qualitative as art and qualitative as science,” she says adamantly, “are endpoints of a continuum. You have to decide where you want to locate yourselves in terms of your identity and in every research project you do. That location will determine your goals, the procedures you use, and the claims you make” (Ellis, 2004, pp. 25–31, 359–363).

I address the limits of dichotomous thinking early in my qualitative methods course, right after introducing social constructionism as the epistemology that underlies the methodological continuum. “The central premise of social constructionism,” I tell students, “is that meaning is not inherent. The central concerns of constructionist inquiry are to study what people ‘know’ and how they create, apply, contest, and act upon these ideas” (Harris, 2006, p. 225).

My undergraduate students sit with their desks arranged in a circle, faces not yet drooping with late-term fatigue but more than a few evidencing the mild resentment of taking required courses. I discuss the politics of the field of qualitative research and how hotly contested many issues are within the field, referencing their reading of James Potter (1995). My students look at me with naked disbelief when I add with a smile, “And some of us actually care so deeply and passionately about this stuff that we have ongoing debates and dialogues and even get mad at each other sometimes!” The students shake their heads, mystified as to how anyone could care so much about such a topic.

Then I tell them that making sense of the world through dichotomous thinking is unproductive. “Dichotomies are pervasive in Western thinking,” I add, warming to my topic, my excitement growing. The circle of students remains quite unexcited, but I continue.

“Knowledge is not ‘out there’ waiting to be found. Instead, we socially construct knowledge in relationships, through formal channels, such as academic journals, and through informal, interpersonal interaction with others [Gergen, 1994]. Unfortunately, we are so schooled in some ways of thinking that we no longer notice how limiting those mental patterns can be. There are three ways in which dichotomies limit our thinking. You’ll want to take notes on this and ask me questions if you don’t understand, since this isn’t in the reading, and it will be on the exam.”

This last comment brings them to rapt attention, and they poise their pens above their notebooks as I explain.

“First, dichotomies present as opposites what are actually interdependent. Socially constructed opposites actually depend upon each other for existence; without women there would be no men, only people; without hard, there would be no soft, only a single texture.

“Second, dichotomies limit the possibilities to two and only two, negating the near-infinite possibilities present between any two poles. Thus we can resist the limitations of femininity and masculinity as mutually exclusive opposites and imagine them instead as poles between which there are many degrees of androgyny, blended identities, and possible performances of sex, gender, and sexuality.

“Finally, when we limit possibilities to only two, one will inevitably be valued over the other. It is not possible to view the world in terms of equal opposites; one side is always already privileged.”

As I finish the statement I notice I am leaning forward, gesturing enthusiastically, my voice effortlessly projecting throughout the room. One of my students, a lovely young woman who works in my department office, looks up at my impassioned soliloquy and gives me an amused smile.

As my students dutifully scribble away, I think back to my own courses in qualitative methods with Carolyn, narrative inquiry and
social constructionism courses with Art Bochner, and feminist theory and methods courses in women’s studies, all of which challenged me to think beyond, through, and around accepted (dichotomous) norms for research and knowledge construction in academia. The fundamental axiom that culture and meaning are socially constructed undergirded my graduate coursework, opening up for me bountiful possibilities for challenging the taken-for-grantedness of everyday life. I try to offer my students the same.

I recall that Carolyn constructed qualitative methods not only as a continuum but as a passionate pursuit. “I love method, as you know,” she reaffirmed in a recent e-mail. “I like to figure out the process of how to know. I am passionate about making methods dovetail with life as lived, rather than with rigid procedures.” I couldn’t have agreed more, and her enthusiasm reinfected me immediately. Though I don’t have as much success teaching undergraduates to love qualitative methods in a 10-week quarter as Carolyn does teaching committed graduate students in her interpretive studies program, many of my students report that they find it at least palatable. I try to be content with that.

Both of us teach the entire continuum but locate ourselves between the middle and artistic ends. Carolyn more comfortably inhabits the near regions of the artistic pole than Laura does, and Laura indulges more often in systematic, middle-ground analyses than Carolyn does (e.g., Ellingson, 2002, in press-b; Ellis, 1995, 2002c). But Carolyn has done grounded analysis in the past (Ellis, 1986) and sometimes now grounds her narratives in theory and other voices (Ellis, 1998, 2000, 2002b), and Laura writes artistic narratives and often includes long portions of narrative in her grounded analysis pieces (Ellingson, 2003, 2005a).

Both of us write from a social constructionist perspective, which provides the epistemological underpinnings for autoethnography and other boundary-spanning qualitative methods we embrace (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). Social constructionism, we believe, is an approach particularly adept at challenging fundamental dichotomies, not only those in society in general but also those that structure traditional approaches to research, such as:

- Self-other
- Subject–object
- Humanities–social science
- Process–product
- Personal–political
- Emotional–rational
- Passionately involved–neutral
- Evocative–analytic

We view autoethnography as a social constructionist approach that enables critical reflection on taken-for-granted aspects of society, groups, relationships, and the self. Autoethnography becomes a space in which an individual’s passion can bridge individual and collective experience to enable richness of representation, complexity of understanding, and inspiration for activism.

**Defining Autoethnography**

Autoethnography is research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). It is the study of a culture of which one is a part, integrated with one’s relational and inward experiences. The author incorporates the “I” into research and writing, yet analyzes self as if studying an “other” (Ellis, 2004; Goodall, 2000). Autoethnography displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Autoethnographic texts appear in a variety of forms—short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose. In these texts, the workings of the self are expressed emotionally, physically, and cognitively. These texts feature concrete action, emotion, embodiment, spirituality,
and introspection, which appear as relational and institutional stories influenced by history, social structure, and culture, which themselves are revealed dialectically through action, feeling, thought, and language. Autoethnography portrays meaning through dialogue, scenes, characterization, and plot, claiming the conventions of literary writing (Ellis, 2004, p. xix; Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Similar to many terms used by social scientists, the meanings and applications of autoethnography have evolved in a manner that makes precise definition difficult. We include under the broad rubric of autoethnography those studies that have been referred to by other similarly situated terms, such as: personal narratives (Personal Narratives Group, 1989), narratives of the self (Richardson, 1994), personal experience narratives (Denzin, 1989), personal essays (Krieger, 1991), ethnographic short stories (Ellis, 1995), writing stories (Richardson, 1997), self-ethnography (Van Maanen, 1995), emotionalism (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997), radical empiricism (Jackson, 1989), and many others (see Ellis & Bochner, 2000, pp. 739-740). Autoethnography is a blurred genre. Whether we call a work an autoethnography or an ethnography depends as much on the claims made by authors as anything else (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). We desire to be inclusive rather than exclusive, to focus on commonalities among terms and projects rather than differences. Autoethnography as a genre frees us to move beyond traditional methods of writing (Gergen & Gergen, 2002), promoting narrative and poetic forms, displays of artifacts, photographs, drawings, and live performances (Ellis, 2004). The predominant form consists of short stories written by researchers who systematically introspect and record their experience with the intent of evoking emotional response from readers. Thus autoethnographers connect the imaginative style of literature with the rigor of social science ethnography.

Autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the writing and research process (graphy), culture (ethnos), and self (auto) (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 2). Different exemplars of autoethnography fall at different places along the continuum of each of these three axes. For example, Laurel Richardson sees herself as a writer and focuses on graphy, often writing about writing (Richardson, 2000; Richardson & Lockridge, 2004). Carolyn often focuses on the self, and Laura often focuses on culture. In all these cases, however, the authors include all three dimensions in their works, and how much of each is included differs in the various projects they do.

Although some types of autoethnographic writing focus on the voice and point of view of the primary author (Jago, 2006; Kiesinger, 2002; Secklin, 2001; Spry, 1997), the genre also includes multivoiced narratives in which authors weave their stories with those of other participants (Boylorn, 2006; Drew, 2001; Ellingson, 2005a; Holman Jones, 1998) and coauthors (Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997). Coconstructed narratives, interactive interviews, and interactive focus groups are variations of this interactive approach (Davis & Ellis, in press; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis et al., 1997). These techniques allow autoethnographers to more fully understand the lived experiences and relationship practices that occur in interaction with others and in groups and systems, as well as the multiple interpretations, experiences, and voices that emerge in lives and stories.

Autoethnography as a Social Constructionist Project

The practice of autoethnography presumes that reality is socially constructed and that meaning is constructed through symbolic (language) interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Presuming that reality is socially constructed enables autoethnographers to counter accepted claims about “the way things are” or “the way things always have been.” As described earlier, autoethnography is a broad and wonderfully ambig-
uous category that encompasses a wide array of practices. As authors, we remain ever cognizant of how we participate in the social construction of the field of autoethnography by participating in this discourse that is both autoethnographic and about autoethnography.

On the one hand, we have much in common: Laura seeks multigenre crystallization in her work (Ellingson, 2005a), and Carolyn advocates that “analysis and story also can work together” (Ellis, 1993; Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 444). Laura learned about autoethnography from Carolyn, who mentored her throughout her PhD program and beyond, thus significantly influencing Laura’s understanding of herself as an ethnographer and autoethnographer. On the other hand, our goals as researchers and authors often diverge. Carolyn publishes primarily personal autoethnographic narratives (e.g., Ellis, 1995), coconstructed narratives (e.g., Ellis & Bochner, 1992), and methodological commentaries for those who appreciate and work at the intersection of social sciences and humanities (e.g., Ellis et al., 1997), thus troubling the distinction between humanities and social sciences. Laura offers systematic qualitative analyses to more conventional social science audiences in health communication and family communication (Ellingson, 2002, 2003, in press-a; Ellingson & Sotirin, 2006), alongside her narrative and autoethnographic writing (Ellingson, 1998; 2005b), gleefully troubling the distinctions within genres of social science (Ellingson, 2005a).

Socially constructed categories such as autoethnography do not exist in a vacuum. Social institutions, laws and regulations, media, advocates representing various positions, and more make up the matrix in which ideas are created, maintained, and changed over time (Hacking, 1999). In no context is this more apparent than in universities and research institutions. Social constructionists posit that the conventional standards of scientific inquiry developed during the Enlightenment—to remain dispassionate, control the conditions, convert observations to numerals, search for the answer, and separate truth from practice—are rhetorically constructed to privilege the powerful elite and marginalize other voices (Gergen, 1999, pp. 91–93). Although not suggesting that such research is without value, Gergen counters its claims to a privileged status in the process of knowledge production.

Autoethnography developed in large part as a response to the alienating effects on both researchers and audiences of impersonal, passionless, abstract claims of truth generated by such research practices and clothed in exclusionary scientific discourse (Ellis, 2004). It attempts to disrupt and breach taken-for-granted norms of scientific discourse by emphasizing lived experience, intimate details, subjectivity, and personal perspectives. Thus autoethnography as a method participates in the ongoing social construction of research norms and practices at the same time that it seeks to influence the social construction of specific phenomena (e.g., child abuse; Hacking, 1999).

**Troubling Dichotomies and Socially Constructing Alternative Research Modes**

We now turn to a discussion of dichotomies that pervade research and explore how autoethnography troubles these divisions, often providing alternative modes of experiencing the process of research. We invite readers to think through and beyond polarities such as researcher-researched, objectivity-subjectivity, process-product, self-others, art-science, and personal-political.

**Researcher–Researched**

The researcher–researched dichotomy is undone, or at least unraveled, by autoethnographies in which the author becomes a participant and the author’s experiences, emotions, and meanings become data for
exploration. To a greater or lesser extent, researchers incorporate their personal experiences and standpoints in their research by starting with a story about themselves, explaining their personal connection to the project, or by using personal knowledge to help them in the research process (e.g., Holman Jones, 1998; Linden, 1992). Feminism contributed significantly to legitimizing the autobiographical voice associated with reflexive ethnography (e.g., Behar, 1996; Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Richardson, 1997).

Qualitative methodologists refer to the process of researching the self as introspection (Ellis, 1991b). Introspection involves the researcher in generating diaries, journals, freewriting, field notes, and narratives of his or her lived experiences, thoughts, and feelings, and then using these as data. “Resurrecting introspection (conscious awareness of awareness or self-examination) as a systematical sociological technique will allow social constructionists to examine emotion as a product of the individual processing of meaning as well as socially shared cognitions” (Ellis, 1991b, p. 23). I (Carolyn) used this technique to construct the experience of grief for my family, my neighbors, and myself in my story of my brother’s sudden death:

Even with the planning, we did not anticipate the effect seeing the flag-draped casket would have on my mother on Sunday night when our family went to the funeral home to receive friends. Silently, we walk through the bitter cold weather and into the funeral home. When my mother sees the casket, she screams, “My baby. Oh my baby is dead.” She collapses to the floor, while the rest of us stand rooted to our spots. It is like a play rehearsal, and my mother has messed up her lines. In slow motion, we finally help her up and support her still sobbing to a chair. My once-powerful and imposing father looks helplessly on, confused, as someone approaches to remove his coat.

Several hundred people have come to pay respects. [My brother] Art and I shake hands or hug each one, thank them for their expressions of sorrow, exchange light talk, smile, sometimes even laugh. “It is God’s will.” “God will look after him,” they say to make us and themselves feel better. I nod. The same sentences are uttered over and over. It doesn’t matter. There are no points for originality. (Ellis, 1993, pp. 720–721)

Using my own experiences, reflections and memories, I reconstructed myself and people emotionally close to me and to the tragic event I describe as a story told within the context of my ongoing relationships with family and friends. By looking inward for data, I, the researcher, became both the subject and object of research.

I (Laura) also turned an analytic lens on myself, but as part of a larger ethnographic project. I engaged in sensemaking about myself and my participants in my fieldwork in an interdisciplinary geriatric oncology program at a regional cancer center (Ellingson, 1998). I wrote a layered piece that was essentially an account of how I constructed an understanding of my relationship to the patients, their loved ones, and the staff, to whom I was a researcher and cancer survivor. Unlike Carolyn, I constructed accounts of patients I met only briefly and staff I knew but who were not part of my intimate circle. In order to explore connections among my own previous experiences as a cancer patient and my understanding of the people in the clinic in which I was conducting an ethnography, I both wrote narratives based on memories and reconstructed events based on accounts in my personal journals written at the time of my diagnosis and treatment for bone cancer: that is, “the process of opening inward [allowed] me to reach outward toward understanding” others (Berger, 2001, p. 515).

The following excerpt tells of spending Christmas in the hospital in Vermont while suffering from septicemia, a serious illness brought on by infection and the compromising of my immune system due to chemotherapy. After going out for lunch with my brother and father, I cry in my hospital bed:
Dad and Mark leave early to beat the storm home, and, with a lump in my throat, I watch them go. They take my presents with them, since I have no use for them in the hospital. How can they leave? Why didn’t Mom come? When will this end?

I think bitterly to myself that they all care, but then they get to go home. It is not their bodies pierced with needles. Too weak to make it to the toilet on crutches, having to use a bedpan. Schedule determined by blood counts and temperature. Leg aching, stomach queasy, buttocks numb from sitting in the bed day after day. Alone I lay flat on my back and stare at the ceiling all evening. My constant, silent tears creep slowly from the outer corners of my eyes and drip into my ears. (Ellingson, 1998, p. 506)

The inspiration for this story was a line in my journal, written at the lowest point of my spirits during treatment, in which I had written, “I discovered that when I cry while laying flat on my back, my tears drip into my ears.” I analyzed my own experiences and joined them with my analysis of field notes of my participants. Through autoethnography, I demonstrated that the taken-for-granted demarcation between staff and patient is slippery, for all bodies bespeak vulnerability.

**Objectivity–Subjectivity**

Being labeled subjective or biased, as it is often called, commits the worst of the deadly sins within the positivists’ worldview. Scientists socially constructed the rules of science centuries ago, and these rules remain entrenched in academic discourse and in Western societies in general. Supporters construct and present objectivity and subjectivity as a dichotomy with clear points of demarcation, and they prize objectivity and dismiss or even ridicule subjectivity. From a social constructionist perspective, objectivity is not fundamental or inherent in science but “is primarily a linguistic achievement that draws on the machine metaphor of human functioning” (Gergen, 1994, p. 165). Claiming objectivity does not make it so but rather signifies the power and authority of a person or group to assert their particular perspective over that of other persons or groups. Because power and knowledge intricately intertwine, the authority to judge and label some knowledge as objective—and thus valuable—ensures that the powerful remain so, as knowledge disputing the status quo power relations is always already delegitimized (see Foucault, 1975).

Autoethnography interferes with this dichotomy by drawing blurry lines between detached, external knowledge and personal, internal knowledge. Much of the rhetorical force of this dichotomy lies in the invocation of objective accounts as rational and of subjective ones as emotional. In actual practice, however, reading emotions of self and other often forms a necessary precursor for rational action (Ellis, 1991a). Autoethnographers weave their own emotions into their research accounts and “plunge directly into the subjective fray, at times becoming passionately engrossed” (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 59).

For example, I (Laura) not only admit but celebrate my subjectivity. I wrote in an account of the geriatric oncology clinic:

While many confessional tales have as their goal the reassurance of the reader that their findings are “uncontaminated” and hence “scientific” and “valid” (Van Maanen, 1988), I have as my goal the opposite: to reassure the reader that my findings are thoroughly contaminated. This contamination with my own lived experience results in a rich, complex understanding of the staff and patients of the clinic in which I am observing (and of my own cancer experience). . . . For the first time, I now enter the oncology context with no immediate implications for my own health or that of a loved one. Yet, I do not study the patients and staff of the clinic with detachment; my own experiences as a patient filter what I see, hear, and feel. (Ellingson, 1998, p. 494)

In reclaiming contamination, I move beyond confessing my subjectivity to reveling in the possibilities of subjectivity for understanding a complex topic.

I (Carolyn) also eschew the objectivity–subjectivity dichotomy. In addition to adva-
eating for the impossibility of detachment in research (Ellis, 2004), I demonstrate the importance of subjective understanding by allowing some narratives to stand on their own without any analysis, explanation, or contextualization within a field of research. For example, in a narrative about my mother’s hospitalization, I tell of lovingly caring for her:

Taking care of her feels natural, as though she is my child. The love and concern flowing between us feels like my mom and I are falling in love. The emotionality continues during the four days and nights I stay with her in the hospital. My life is devoted temporarily to her well-being. She knows it and is grateful. I am grateful for the experience. I do not mind that she is dependent on me. I am engrossed by our feeling, by the seemingly mundane but, for the moment, only questions that matter. Are you dizzy? In pain? Comfortable? Do you want to be pulled up in bed? (Ellis, 1996, p. 242)

This embodied tale provides concrete details of caring for an elderly parent. I do not attempt to establish distance from the experience. My sensemaking is visceral and in the moment. I tell the tale as I understand it so that others can experience the particularity of my experience through my story. My choice to publish an openly personal (read: subjective) story without the scaffolding of detachment that frames most qualitative work, including much autoethnography—theories, reviews of literature, methodological details—radically refuses to reify the opposition of objectivity and subjectivity. In so doing, I celebrate the individual’s view as sufficient for making meaning, and I participate in troubling the taken-for-grantedness of the objectivity-subjectivity dichotomy in research.

**Process–Product**

Autoethnography encompasses both process—what one does—and product—what one gets after it is done. Autoethnography reflexively celebrates and often explicitly integrates processes into the product (Ellis, 2004). Revealing and interrogating the processes of research is critical to autoethnography and counters the historical imperative to obscure the details of the construction of research findings using sanitizing strategies such as passive voice (e.g., *the data were collected; it was found that*) (Gergen, 1994; Richardson, 2000). In the field, during solitary introspection, and/or while participating in interactive reflection with others, autoethnographers engage in embodied action, not just report on distant processes (Ellingson, 2006). Often this takes the form of revealing the researcher’s complex role in a study of a specific context and of acknowledging the messiness and mistakes that inevitably imbue the process of conducting such research.

Ethnographers—Laura included—tend to want to publish the most credible and persuasive version of our stories when we seek to influence policy, practice, and/or theory (Ellingson, in press-a). Hence we often sanitize our accounts, omitting missteps as irrelevant, tangential, or overly personal; historically, such confessional tales were kept separate from authoritative accounts of research (Tedlock, 1991; Van Maanen, 1988). Granted, we take a risk when we combine confessions of embarrassing moments with passionate calls for social, political, and professional change based on our findings; many will dismiss out of hand work that admits to a messy process (see Ellingson, 2005a, in press-a). However, when we pretend that research progresses smoothly, we provide inaccurate and deceptively simplistic maps for those who read our work. In addition to field work, the writing of accounts of our work also reflects an embodied, messy process that is inextricably bound to the final products of our research.

For example, here I (Laura) give a glimpse of the story of writing my ethnography of the geriatric oncology clinic:

I have had it with my body. I am sick to death of laying around my little house recovering from my knee replacement surgery and trying to write with my laptop balanced precariously on
my uneven lap... to write so personally about my understanding of the clinic seems impossible from the primarily prone, pain-filled position I grudgingly inhabit these days. Somehow, I can engage in systematic and detached writing, but the combination of my physical pain and the psychic wounds that accompany it are so fresh, so immediate, that attempting to dig into my body memories for insights is like rubbing salt into open wounds. Unwelcome memories of the repeated violations of my body... surface every time a wave of nausea hits or the pain spikes. I have no energy for embodiment right now. (Ellingson, 2005a, pp. 77-78)

Of course, my example also illustrates a profound resistance to the socially constructed mind–body dichotomy that deeply influences Western cultures. Social constructionists do not deny that material bodies exist apart from discourse but argue that their meanings are inseparable: "bodies are not only constrained or damaged but also constituted by discursive relations, social practices, and historical processes" (Ziarek, 2005, p. 88). My body always forms part of the process of research, and openly discussing how that happens troubles the process-product divide.

In more personal-focused autoethnography, the process of constructing the tale may be alluded to or included explicitly. I (Carolyn) tell the story of sharing with my mother a narrative I had written about our relationship (Ellis, 2001). The story chronicles my mother’s verbal and nonverbal reactions to hearing the former story I had written about taking care of her. Then, in an italicized parallel narrative interwoven into the story, I reflect upon my own reactions to sharing the story with my mother:

As I read this to her, I notice tears in her eyes. I think again of how difficult it is to know what to say in these situations. I also think that bluntly acknowledging that she may never get better might be difficult for both of us. Our relationship, to some extent, is based on joy. I come home to make her feel better, and it usually works. Yes, perhaps feeling better might mean accepting the pain and living the best life she can in spite of it. Certainly, I don’t want her to feel like she has to play down the pain or pretend to think she will get better just to make me feel good. Or do I? Do I want a relationship based upon reality and truth? Could I stand it?... I know there will come a time when she and I will have this conversation. But not yet. (Ellis, 2001, p. 604)

The account of modifying my story as I read it to my mother displays the usually hidden processes of adapting to one’s audience and considering the effects of one’s words upon those who are characters in my stories. Moving beyond merely using active voice and owning one’s own involvement in research processes, I resist the process–product dichotomy by highlighting the processes that led to the product, thus destabilizing the product as a fixed interpretation of an event and opening up possibilities for multiple understandings. I try to show how research findings, as well as hope and truth, are socially constructed in relationships, and how negotiation might change as the research and illness progress. I also show what I learned about the product from focusing on the process of research.

Self–Others

In social constructionist theory, the self exists only in relation to others. The self is not a discrete, individual, fixed entity as promoted in Enlightenment philosophy but connected to others for understanding. We understand the self “not as an individual’s personal and private cognitive structure but as discourse about the self—the performance of languages available in the public sphere... the self as narrative rendered intelligible within ongoing relationships” (Gergen, 1994, p. 185; see also Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Autoethnography points to the self as embedded in cultural meanings. Doing autoethnography affects the social construction of the author’s self. People make sense of their experiences through the stories they develop about them (Bruner, 1990). These
stories are continually altered, never static; we can retell them in ways that make them fit better the "I" who tells them (see Jago, 2006). Doing autoethnography affects individuals who do the work of "re-storying" their lives; the autoethnographic story becomes part of the life, an element of the ongoing construction of self. At times the story stands in for the experience itself and becomes what one remembers as the experience (Ellis, 2004).

Often autoethnographies feature stories of resistance to stigmatizing labels. As Kenneth Gergen (2006) suggests, "When one commits to the dominant logics, values, and sanctioned patterns of action within a group, it is often at the expense of hushed but valued impulses to the contrary" (p. 122). Giving voice to those hushed impulses becomes a political act because language is indeterminate and imbued with power relations. Autoethnography troubles the socially constructed categories by showing how they play out in the world and how we incorporate them into our identities—or do not. "Ways of classifying human beings interact with the human beings who are classified" (Hacking, 1999, p. 31). Hacking calls this an "interactive" kind of classification, as those who are classified modify their behaviors and beliefs because they are affected by the classification label (as opposed to labeling an element as iron, which causes no change in the element's particles).

The process can work both ways, as Carolyn demonstrates in her story about the role of personal details and analysis in her study of minor bodily stigma:

I doubt that I would have been able to move outside the category of minor bodily stigmas without first immersing myself in it. Categories too often limit us without our being aware of their influence; once we are aware, too often we assume there is no use in trying to break through them. Telling and analyzing my personal story not only helped generate and make visible the category of minor bodily stigma, it also provided a way through. The categorical story offered a name to my experiences where before there was only dread; the personal story connected real people with feelings to the labels, where before there were only tactics of concealment and denial. This research helped me understand the inextricable connections between categorical and personal knowledge. (Ellis, 1998, p. 535)

Often labels become essentialized, taken as inherent to a group instead of recognized as socially constructed (Ziarek, 2005). Focusing on individual narratives of self-categorization troubles the naturalness of such categories.

Collaborative self-making, such as that which occurs in interactive interviews and focus groups, provides another opportunity in autoethnography to produce meaning that is "neither subjective nor objective but intersubjective" (Onyx & Small, 2001, p. 775, original emphasis). In interactive research, participants act in an equal relationship as coresearchers with other authors/researchers, share authority, and author their own lives in their own voices. The group helps each member to construct the self. These approaches give us a way to include the voice and feedback of all participants (Hawes, 1994; Reed-Danahay, 2001) and to understand how participants "assign meaning to their realities," rather than how we as researchers evaluate their realities (Daly, 1992, p. 8; see also Davis & Ellis, in press).

Bringing the idea of interactive interviews to traditional focus groups, Carolyn, Cris Davis, and associates (Davis, Ellis, Myerson, Poole, & Smith-Sullivan, 2006) have developed a methodological approach called interactive focus groups. More than simply a large interactive interview, this method borrows characteristics from traditional focus groups and other methods, such as interactive interviewing (Ellis et al., 1997; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995), interactive group interviews (Patton, 2002), leaderless discussion groups (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990), and the therapy practice of reflecting teams (e.g., Andersen, 1987, 1995). In an ongoing project on re/claming middle age, Carolyn and
four other women—all middle-aged (45–60 years old) white professionals—discuss aging for women in 2006. These conversations take place in interactive focus groups.

“I think that women like us are socially constructing a different story [from our mothers],” Mary says. “We’re not buying the canonical story about what it’s like to be an older woman.”

Carolyn interjects, “What was one of the first conversations everyone had when we first walked in the door?”

Kendall laughs. “Oh my age, oh my this, oh my allergies. My innards are so, blah, blah, blah.”

“Right,” Carolyn says. She turns to Marilyn. “Look what we talk about when we go walking every week.”

Marilyn and Carolyn respond together. “How are your aches and pains today?”

“Yeah,” Carolyn says, “and it feels a lot like the conversations I used to hear my mother have.” (Davis et al., 2006, p. 10)

As researchers and participants, we probe the prevailing social constructions of middle-aged women and debate how such constructions reflect and do not reflect our lived realities as women.

The highlighting of process in autoethnography complements the work that the product, or representation, does in the world—in academia and beyond. “Human science inquiry is itself a form of social action. Knowledge and application are not fundamentally separable” (Gergen, 1994, p. 140). Readers take a more active role as they are invited into the author’s world, as feelings are evoked about the events being described, and as they are stimulated to use what they learn there to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives. Autoethnographers write meaningfully and evocatively about topics that matter and that may make a difference, include sensory and emotional experience (Shelton, 1995), and write from an ethic of care and concern (Denzin, 1997; Richardson, 1997). Carolyn invites readers to connect and identify with her and even to be inspired by her to write their own stories:

I provide my story as an incentive for you to put your own into words, compare your experience to mine, and find companionship in your sorrow (Mairs, 1998). I speak my story so that you feel liberated to speak yours without feeling guilty that others suffered more and therefore your story is not worth telling, your feelings unjustified. I believe we each need to find personal and collective meaning in the events that have transpired and in the disrupted and chaotic lives left behind. (Ellis, 2002b, p. 378)

Autoethnography intentionally blurs the lines between self and others, between the author’s particular experiences and the universality of those same experiences. Whereas autoethnographies of tragic and painful or at least difficult circumstances, such as most of Carolyn’s and Laura’s work, emphasize making meaning and forging connections, others call to joy and playfulness, to making connections with autoethnographers who want to share positive experiences as opportunities for others to celebrate their own strengths, successes, and pleasures (e.g., Drew, 2001; Ellis, 2006; Lockford, 2004; Tillmann-Healy, 2001). It may be that we feel the connection between ourselves and others most readily in the wake of pain, fear, and loss, but we also construct our positive meanings in relationship to others.

Art-Science

In the writing of evocative accounts, autoethnographers blend analysis and narrative, troubling the socially constructed chasm between science and the arts (Ellis, 2004). The choice of a genre influences perception of the audience regardless of the intended meaning of the piece:

for the constructionist, there is good reason to be concerned with the form of writing . . . our accounts of the world are not maps of the
world, but operate performatively, to do things with others. [We ask] what kind of world do we build together through our forms of inscription? (Gergen, 1999, p. 185)

Autoethnographers seek to build a world, largely within the academy but also beyond, in which art and science do not exist as a rigid and fixed dichotomy but instead form a continuum of practices. Rather than opposing traditional social science, most autoethnographers (Carolyn and Laura among them) instead choose to engage in productive play with social science writing and research conventions, shedding light on the constructed nature of the art–science dichotomy and casting doubt on its inevitability or exclusive claims to truth.

One way to accomplish that goal involves framing a narrative in a discussion of research and theory before and/or after the narrative as I (Carolyn) did in writing about my brother's death. I followed the story with an analysis of surviving the accidental death of a loved one and a discussion of my desire to reposition social scientists and their readers closer to literature. I wrote:

This article brings [“after death”] into the open, allowing us to converse about and try to understand it. As such it accomplishes what Rorty (1982) says we should expect from social scientists—to act as interpreters for those with whom we are not sure how to talk." ... This is, after all, what we "hope for from our poets and dramatists and novelists" (Rorty, 1982, p. 202). ... I seek to reposition readers vis-à-vis the authors of texts of social science research, evoking feeling and identification as well as cognitive processing. As you read this story, some of you may have felt empathy with me, as you would in watching a "true-to-life" movie; some of you may have been reminded of parallels in your own lives, as in reading a good novel. Perhaps reading my work evoked in you emotional experience that you could then examine, or led to recall of other emotional situations in which you have participated. Acknowledging a potential for optional readings gives readers license to take part in an experience that can reveal to them not only how it was for me (the author), but how it could be or once was for them. (Ellis, 1993, pp. 725–726)

Laura's social science autoethnographies usually contain citations to other academics and use an academic, disciplinary vocabulary. Layered accounts (Ronai, 1995) move back and forth between academic prose and narrative, revealing their constructed nature through the juxtaposition of social science and narrative ways of knowing. In her ongoing ethnography of an outpatient dialysis unit, Laura experiments with layering poetic representation of interview transcript excerpts with academic discussion of the social construction of professionalism in health care to explore the knowledge construction of the dialysis technicians. Medical professionals whose formal education far exceeds that of the technicians largely ignore or even scorn these paraprofessionals' expertise. Technicians resemble artisans, with a great deal of hands-on, tactile knowledge that is vital to caregiving but difficult to transmit.

One poem, entitled "Joking Around," describes how the technicians adapt to the preferences of the patients they work with over long periods of time:

Yeah, you joke around with him, 'cause I remember when he first came to this clinic, he was well to me he still is, a grumpy old man ... It took me a week or so until I figured him out. Give him a bad time. Argue with him and it makes him happy. That's him. You've got to be I hate to say it to him it's not disrespectful, but you got to be kind of like disrespectful towards him and speak to him basically in his own language in order for him to be happy. And he has to complain to be happy ha ha Oh I love that old man.
He’s one of those patients that when it’s time for him to go it’s gonna hurt. And other patients it’s “Yes ma’am, No ma’am” ’cause that’s the way they want it and with no joking around. (Ellingson, 2007)

These excerpts from the poem reflect my editing of the technician’s words and, as such, reveal my views of his role in the dialysis unit. I constructed the poem to show what I appreciated about this man—his earthy charm, innate kindness and gentleness, what I perceived to be his sincere attempts to serve his patients “as a professional.” This blurring of the boundaries of art and science in my writing enriches readers’ understanding of the culture of this dialysis unit.

**Personal-Political**

The impetus for arguing that something is socially constructed generally arises when a phenomenon appears to be natural and inevitable (Hacking, 1999). Feminists have long argued that the personal is political. Resisting the dichotomy of what should be private and what should be public, what is an individual issue and what is a matter for the collective to address, often figures prominently in autoethnography. Autoethnographers address issues such as child sexual abuse (Ronai, 1995), bulimia (Tillman-Healy, 1996), the ravages of irritable bowel syndrome (Defenbaugh, in press), and the death of a parent (Berger, 1997), bringing painful, intimate topics to share with others. Many times autoethnography sheds light on uncomfortable issues that others wish would remain hidden.

The article I (Carolyn) coauthored with my partner Art on our abortion experience exemplifies the politics of a personal choice and the personal implications of a hotly contested political issue. We wrote:

> No doubt, other persons who have faced abortion have felt the sense of not knowing how to feel about or interpret what was happening to them. Others surely have been as bruised as we were by the contradictions and ambivalence associated with the constraints of choice. The absence of personal narratives to detail the emotional complexities and ambivalence often attributed generally to abortion . . . may be only the result of people feeling forced to accept these blows of fate passively or being subjected to taboos against expressing these disturbing feelings openly. Because abortion may still be deemed immoral . . . it can become nearly impossible to find the words to talk about what happened. Making public and vivid some of the intricate details of abortion may break the barriers that shield public awareness and prevent marginalized voices of both women and men from being heard. (Ellis & Bochner, 1992, p. 99)

As narrators and performers of this story, we gained a perspective on our experience and a sense of what it meant that we did not have before. The responses of others to our performance and text strongly suggest that they have been moved to feel and think about themselves and others in new and important ways and to grasp and feel the ambivalence, confusion, and pain associated with experiences of abortion such as ours. The response to the content of this story has been both positive and negative, which of course met our intent of opening up conversations, though it remains difficult to hear some of the condemning remarks.

Bodily details are certainly another one of those personal details that many people would rather not know. I (Laura) include many of those in my book on an interdisciplinary team, showing my experiences as a cancer patient receiving chemotherapy, using my own suffering to connect me to the patients and hospital where I did my research. For example:

> A sharp pain in my lower abdomen startled me into wakefulness and I groaned in recognition. I searched the bed for my nurse-call button and pushed it. Glancing over at the rapidly dripping IV line, I cursed the need for continuous hydration to save my kidneys from the on-
slaught of toxic chemicals that was injected in that morning. The bone cancer had left my right leg a mess of grafts, stitches, and staples; there was no way I could get out of the bed, find my crutches, and hobble to the bathroom without losing control of my bladder. I was beyond exhaustion, and by the time I woke up, my bladder was so full it hurt. I'd have to wait for my nurse, Chris, to bring a bed pan. . . . The hot yellow liquid streamed from my urethra without my consent and the searing flames of shame swept over my face. Defeated, I let the tears flow with the urine. My pelvic muscles relaxed gratefully even as my buttocks cringed in retreat from the growing wetness that surrounded them. (Ellingson, 2005a, p. 87)

We engage in political work when we openly discuss bodily details that society tells us are shameful, for we resist the social imperative to remain ashamed and hence complicit in our powerlessness (Mairs, 1997). We embrace troubling the taken-for-grantedness of the world in order to give voice to oppression and move people to action or new beliefs and understandings. Yet social constructionist projects such as autoethnography are not inherently liberating; material realities do not change simply because we reveal their origins and sociopolitical complexities; poverty, for example, may be shown to be socially constructed as being the fault of the poor, but noting unjust portrayals does nothing to alleviate the crushing oppression of poverty. People must be in a position to benefit from the critical analysis offered by autoethnography and other critical methods: “Social construction theses are liberating chiefly for those who are on the way to being liberated . . . [those] whose consciousness has already been raised” (Hacking, 1999, p. 2). Some methods claim liberation as an explicit intent of their project: Practitioners of the memory-work method suggest it “is thus explicitly liberationist in its intent” (Onyx & Small, 2001, p. 774). The connection between intention and action may blur, however.

Ian Hacking (1999) describes six “grades” of commitment of invocation by different constructionist projects. His continuum spans from historical constructionism, which analyzes a phenomenon and posits that it is the result of historical events and social processes and hence not inevitable, through revolutionary constructionism that overtly moves beyond writing and “the world of ideas” (1999, p. 20) to strive to bring about concrete change in the world. Autoethnography may reflect any grade of commitment to change. Many people's lives have been transformed through the process of composing their own stories and of hearing those of others; others have been moved to action through telling and reading personal narratives (Ellis, 2002a). Thus autoethnography certainly can be one tool in the social change tool box, particularly in its potential to spark creative and productive discourse. Dialogue moves us toward constructing a better world (Gergen, 2006). Many, if not most, researchers publish autoethnography in academic outlets. Those who seek broader audiences and revolutionary social change may need to move beyond traditional academic outlets, such as journals, handbooks, and edited collections, to mainstream outlets, such as trade and popular books.

**Could Dichotomies Be Useful?: A Concluding Dialogue**

Carolyn: Laura, after cowriting this chapter with you, I was thinking about how dichotomies come to seem so natural and inevitable; “the reality of everyday life is taken for granted as reality” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 23). We seldom notice how often we invoke these socially constructed norms within social science simply because they are so foundational to our sense of methodological reality. While autoethnography troubles taken-for-granted dichotomies, this method can also reinscribe them.
You operate primarily in the large middle ground of the methodological continuum, so nondichotomous thinking may be to your advantage. For me, working on the humanities end, which traditional ethnographers view as more marginal, that might be less true. Politically, it might be smart for me to encourage people to think in terms of dichotomies, at least for a while, because it brings focus to what I do. For example, Leon Anderson’s (2006) article, which views analytic and evocative autoethnographies as dichotomous, actually had the unintended consequence of calling the attention of an audience of realist ethnographers to the kind of autoethnography I do. It provided a venue for autoethnographers to speak back and “claim” territory, which is important in this phase of the interpretive “social movement” going on in ethnographic circles. The resistance of Art [Bochner] and me to the realists’ attempt to claim and rename autoethnography put us in the center of the debate. We have something other, more mainstream ethnographers want. I recognize this as dichotomous thinking, but I still think it can be useful as long as we see it for what it is—a political strategy rather than necessarily useful for knowledge production.

**Laura:** You’re arguing for strategic essentialism a la Gayatri Spivak (1988), who suggests that we can’t fight for women’s (or other groups’) rights if we unrelentingly deconstruct the category of women. Thus you can’t uphold the value of what you do as an autoethnographer if you can’t define it and stake some territory.

**Carolyn:** I believe that. But we need not have a rigid definition of autoethnography, in terms of what’s included and what’s excluded from the category (Ellis, 2004). Autoethnography is an evolving and fluid approach. But to call a work autoethnography means it should share at least some, if not all, of the most important elements of the category—a focus on personal story, evocation, and narrative writing. Anderson’s conception of autoethnography didn’t emphasize any of these. I am concerned that those in power positions or who fear losing relative power may try to appropriate autoethnography primarily by watering it down so much that it is unrecognizable and thus no longer potentially challenging to their definitions of what is included in ethnography and what is not.

**Laura:** I recognize the political necessity of challenging existing power structures and their policing of disciplinary and methodological boundaries (Blair, Brown, & Baxter, 1994). But relying on existing dichotomies to take our stand concedes most of the ground to those in power before we even begin. As Audre Lorde (1984) explained, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (p. 110). Reifying positivist dichotomies in order to challenge the socially constructed boundaries of methodological legitimacy seems no more effective as a dismantling strategy. The question for me becomes, then, how do we help everyone to stake their ground—including my boundary spanning, crystallizing ground—in ways that go beyond defining our stories dichotomously—as not analysis, our analysis as not loose or weak, our personal details as not distant, our grounded theory as not merely one case?

This recalls Gergen’s ideas about how we define things in opposition. Scholars understand the positivist rules of social science primarily through what they exclude—subjectivity, intimacy, stories, and so on—and autoethnographers have challenged these socially constructed standards by flagrantly violating them (Gergen, 1999). I can see why that is helpful. When Leon uses the analytic versus evocative dichotomy, he enables you to speak up for your position. However, this also recollects what I said about how dichotomies present as opposites what are actually interdependent for meaning. Thus we cannot have autoethnography if there isn’t realist ethnography for contrast.

**Carolyn:** Though the realists would like to think they can have realist ethnography with-
out autoethnography because they think realist ethnography is ethnography and autoethnography, if it should exist at all, would be subsumed under their label. That's what can happen if we don't honor dichotomies, I'm afraid. We all become one category, like women all used to be lumped under mankind, and masculine pronouns stood for all of us.

I think nuanced disagreement is important. Don't new ways of thinking come out of this kind of dialogue? And aren't things sometimes improved with new paradigms that address gaps and holes that older paradigms ignore or miss? Conflict can be useful; it can point the way for change. Sometimes it's productive to get our dander up, feel a little angry, and be determined to show the value of our position. You might argue that adrenaline could limit our perspective, but I also think feeling revved up about something can help us do deeper work. I feel that's been the case for me.

Besides, too much lukewarm agreement, which I predict would happen if we gave up entirely on dichotomies, would interfere with the word games that academics like to play. Sometimes when I argue with realists over meanings, I wonder if that's all we're doing—acting as wordsmiths. I don't know how important these games are in the whole scheme of things. Sometimes I think this kind of debate isn't really important at all, except to protect the few measly resources represented in the struggle. I doubt word mining and position defending contribute to making the world a better place. Maybe these disagreements simply entertain us until rigor mortis sets in.

Laura: I'm not sure how entertaining they are. In the beginning of autoethnography, it made sense to harness that adrenaline to reinforce the differences—and hence value— inherent in our position. Someone else had all the methodological power, and so we began by getting angry and critiquing them to stake our ground. Feminists started with similar opposition—race scholars, queer theorists, and now autoethnographers have, too. But haven't we already made the case that autoethnography is useful, meaningful, and legitimate? What comes after anger and defensiveness? Shouldn't we explore interdependency instead of opposition?

Carolyn: That sounds good in theory, but in practice it's difficult because the goals of autoethnographers and realists are different. To be interdependent we have to agree on goals for our research, or at least agree that it is legitimate and worthwhile to have different goals. Autoethnographers honor meaning, intelligibility, and interpretation as their goals, whereas the realists look more to facts and representation. Given these differences, it's hard to agree on how to go about achieving our purposes (Bochner, 1985). Then there's also power politics.

This conversation makes me laugh, because I'm usually the "let's get along" and "here are the ways in which we overlap rather than divide" person, and you're more into power politics. Now we've switched sides. I've become more watchful. I don't want to give in to people who then, instead of meeting me halfway, view my giving in as a weakness and an opportunity to control my voice with theirs.

I try not to think in terms of power politics, but I also know that if I ignore that reality, I stand to lose a lot of ground. Granted, my work has flourished from my concentrating on what I do well, rather than defending it and debating with people who criticize what I do. But sometimes that debate becomes important, because many graduate students and young professors need senior scholars to take a position and speak back, to help them in their quest for their autoethnographic projects to be taken seriously. So sometimes I think we need to come on strong and show that we're not going to roll over and play dead. We're resisting encroachment and defending what we care about. But I'm aware that this position is inconsistent with what I've argued in the past and has its consequences, such as conflict with people who have more similarities with me than differences.
Laura: Exactly. Perhaps the first step toward mutual accommodation with productive, collaborative debate is to find a language of interdependency to replace or at least augment the language of war and opposition. You present something along this line in your response to Bill Tierney, who critiqued autoethnography (Ellis, 2002a).

Carolyn: Yes—I suggested that we respond to critique with “yes, and . . .” rather than “yes, but . . .”

Laura: Yes, and a language of interdependency would explain how autoethnography needs realist ethnography, how stories call out for theory, how theories require specific cases. We need to surrender the battle metaphors about “laying claim,” “seizing ground,” “defending our turf,” and “giving power” to the other side and imagine new ways of relating—sharing the loaf, swimming alongside each other, planting a bountiful garden with many varieties of fruits, vegetables, and flowers, and so on. The use of warlike metaphors fosters an equation of argument with violence (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Because “through language an entire world can be actualized” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 39), we should consider carefully the implications of our choice to actualize a pervasively violent world. I don’t want to suggest that we pretend there is no conflict but that we introduce language into our debates that offers some hope of accommodation rather than merely reinvoking the same old power struggle over who’s right and who’s wrong.

Carolyn: Part of a solution is to see oneself as interdependent with members of a relevant community, such as the community of ethnographers. For example, in the response to Anderson (Ellis & Bochner, 2006), I pointed out commonalities among all of us who do ethnography, no matter how we label ourselves. I worry sometimes that we aren’t accomplishing as much as we could if all ethnographers joined together and thought of themselves as a community with multiple shared goals and mutual standards. That would make us a stronger coalition against the positivists, with whom we have more differences than we do with each other. Of course, that just changes the oppositional group.

Laura: I’d like to know if it is possible to stand next to the positivists rather than against them.

Carolyn: I’m not sure we have enough in common with them, or they with us, to make standing next to each other a worthwhile goal.

Laura: Aren’t you and I the perfect example? Within the context of our relationship, we care deeply about each other. We stand together. Yet we do different work, and we disagree, if not on what is legitimate, then on priorities, on what is most valuable and worthy of spending our time on. This realization pained me at first, because I not only cared about you but also wanted you to be proud of me. Perhaps it disappointed you as well. But we moved past that and constructed a way of relating that celebrates our commonalities and respects our differences. As in our relationship, methodologists could address differences of opinion by making room for commonalities and differences (oh no—is that dichotomy?). I don’t want to sound hopelessly optimistic, and I know material outcomes are at stake (like tenure).

Carolyn: You and I get along because we love and respect each other but also because we see ourselves as having more commonalities than differences in the areas that matter. We are both academics, ethnographers, social scientists, communication scholars, women, responsible people, and so on. Besides, you’re not a positivist! Just kidding. Our differences really don’t amount to much. What’s more interesting to me is when the differences do matter. If you wrote a piece that attacked autoethnography, then our differences would be more salient. The same might be true if I attacked the work you do, which is some of what you felt in the initial stages of your dissertation. It’s not as though our work and relationships can’t survive some criticism and disagreement; they
can. And sometimes they're enhanced as a result, as I said before. But if all we hear is critique, especially disrespectful critique... well, it has an effect. At some point, it would be nice to show some appreciation for the work of others. Maybe academics just don't show enough respect for what those doing different work are achieving. We're schooled in the "shootout at the OK Corral" mode. That's hard to get rid of—try as we might—for us as well as "them."

Laura: I agree that more traditional researchers seldom express respect for autoethnographers, at least not overtly, and many offer criticism. And I am continually amazed by how much casual bashing of others' work I hear in the hallways at conferences (let alone in sessions), by people ranging all across the methodological continuum. Perhaps I find this particularly painful because my work spans a larger than average chunk of the continuum, leaving me vulnerable to critique from a great number of positions. I am left to ponder, could we move past tolerance to appreciation of differences? And can we do that without reinforcing dichotomies? Maybe not. Maybe I'm too idealistic, and dichotomies really are needed for clarification and debate.

Carolyn: No, don't give up that easily. We need the large, messy middle ground to hold us all together, and right now I feel pretty messy. This conversation makes me aware that I can and often do construct my position about dichotomies from both sides... I mean, at numerous points along the continuum. While I see this kind of questioning and messiness as functional for helping me think through what's going on, it's not a strength that is appreciated often in the academy. The academy rewards us for "taking and defending a position." Maybe that's what leads to dichotomies—the push to take a position, make a case, defend our work.

Laura: As you know, I'm happiest in the messy middle ground. Do you think we can ever find a peaceful academic corral to replace the oppositional "shootout" one?

Carolyn: I surely hope so. But wait a second...

Laura and Carolyn (Together): Oh, no, isn't that another dichotomy?

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