



Book Review

An Autoethnography of Becoming a Qualitative Researcher: A Dialogic View of Academic Development

By Trude Klevan and Alec Grant

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If I gave this book review a title, I might call it a *Troubling Trialogue: Joining the Conversation on Becoming a Qualitative Researcher*. I say this because in reading Trude Klevan and Alec Grant's book—a dialogue about becoming a researcher—I found myself scribbling in the margins often and wanting to engage in the conversation. My notes look like, *Oh, that's what I call the dangers of identity maintenance; How true that we need friendship for our freedom, also and maybe especially at work; and Writing as both creating and self-protection!! Oh, yes – wow, and damn!* The work as a whole frequently left me in a paradoxical state of knitted-brow soberness and light-hearted elation.

The book is a collection of eight chapters based on five years of active email correspondence between the authors, prefaced with a foreword by qualitative researchers Pat Sikes, Ken Gale, and Jonathan Wyatt. Each chapter has a theme that is suggested by a title; the chapters contain reflections by both authors in the form of written conversations. The correspondence originally began when Trude Klevan reached out to Alec Grant as she became increasingly restless and discontented with assumptions in academia about being a researcher. In interviewing those who had used mental health services in Norway, Trude, who was often invited into participants' homes to do this, felt she was being given a gift

and that it was not enough to simply put her own unquestioned analysis on to those stories:

Often, they would state something like this, ‘And this is the actual reason I wanted to participate in the study.’ Thus, although they had been informed in advance about the aims of the study, they had also defined their own aims. It occurred to me that they had stories they wanted to share, representing their own, personal, way of making meaning in their experiences. (p. 54)

Klevan and Grant’s book is not a typical narrative on becoming, however. If the title leads the reader to expect a biographical account of events, steps, and conscious choices, they will be (usefully) upset. This book instead reveals the ‘mess’ of what it is like to begin to ask questions about one’s professional field and follow one’s ambition into the world of intellectual rigour while being honest about everything one brings to it—including doubt about established research practices. The stories of becoming a qualitative researcher in this book trouble the idea that we can come at our research in any neutral or formalistic way. This lack of neutrality of course has been described in the literature as ‘subjectivity’, but these authors take their explorations further and their message seems to be: Go more deeply into that subjectivity and unpack it *as part of your research*. This is indeed the added value of autoethnographic work which underscores that we ‘through dialogue, can co-create new stories and meanings’ (p. 56) and that ‘the possibility to develop and share stories can be life-saving. It is like a hatch being opened, allowing for fresh air and light to come in’ (p. 56).

A key premise is indeed that the personal ‘I’ and how we are positioned cannot be put aside when we do research. Our experiences, our thinking, our default narratives, our wounding, our culture, our internalized parental voices all influence what we see, why we see it, and how we see it. The implication of this, Trude and Alec argue, is that research should not be seen to test hypotheses and fill knowledge gaps, but to ‘trouble the world. Troubling—which in this context means challenging the tacit assumptions governing specific aspects of life—clearly needs a troubler. As such, in doing research, being—or, perhaps more so, becoming—a qualitative researcher can also be argued to be about troubling oneself and one’s ways of reasoning’ (p. 5).

The authors do this troubling by making their own stories and questions visible in a dialogue and unpacking further each other’s thinking. In their own words, ‘We aim to show, through dialogue, both how dialogue

can be used as a propelling force in moving a story forward and how “life is a story” processes and issues are entangled with human development and interactions’ (p. 45). In their chapter on the narrative turn (Chapter 4) they take time to explore what narrative means and construct ideas, while in dialogue, of what narratives do for humans, emphasizing story as a process where humans are constantly in the making and that stories are shaped through dialogue:

It involves a mutual recognition of each other as intentional and dialogic beings who can give accounts of ourselves and engage in conversation about topics of shared interest. This also recognizes human beings as relational; we become and do narrative through dialogue with others, ourselves and our surroundings. (p. 46)

Reading the book, I noted having three distinct experiences. First, attempting to find a central thread as I began reading was difficult, and I spent a lot of time with the book, thinking it would be wise to read it from start to finish, but instead jumped ahead to the final chapters and then returned to the middle in order to understand the beginning. I had to give up on finding the thread and decided to savour the stories and conversation to gain a sense of the whole and its intention. It was much like viewing one of those digital posters that looks like colourful barcodes stitched together and then suddenly seeing the 3-D dolphin emerge. Of course, one exclaims, There it was all along!

Second, I enjoyed getting to know the authors more personally, especially in the stories of Trude’s childhood and reflecting on what I had already read about Alec in relation to what he shared here. As I write this review, images of Trude in her Norwegian pine tree echo as well as the words of her well-meaning father saying she is not much of a planner. Alec’s stories of his mother as a negative but useful role model also resonate, and the powerful images of her death by suicide which Grant describes in an impressive article called *Drinking to Relax* (2017). As a reader, I was left with the realistic sense of all of us wrestling free of the stories we tell about ourselves and others tell about us, while also acknowledging how we can never be free of them entirely.

The third sensation was of feeling freed: in the neoliberal fear-based culture of our universities—where saying the wrong thing, i.e., anything that may be politically incorrect, seems risky, and hurt feelings seem to be valid ammunition—this book offers a refuge and encouragement for risking. Friendships in academic and creative work have always been important for the reasons Klevan and Grant put forward here: to unpack

our assumptions, to accompany each other in doing risky and innovative work, in feeling less alone, in transgressing and continuing the necessary subversion of patriarchy and other dominant discourses that function as insidious and invasive species.

This book is particularly useful for those embarking on autoethnographic or qualitative research, especially if they feel they've been stilted when they learned theory or worked with a supervisor who questioned the usefulness of the method.

Also valuable about this book are the terminologies used and created. There are a handful of terms that readers/researchers can benefit from and use in explaining their own research challenges and assumptions. *Mentrangressing*, which at first sounded like an unfortunate portmanteau, but means 'breaking the rules of instructive pedagogy about qualitative inquiry by researching outside of the normative box' (p. 28) appears repeatedly.

Other terms of interest were—not all of them created by the authors themselves—*wild time* (time to create and let ideas evolve more organically, in opposition to neoliberal time associated with impact factors and the length of publication lists); *narrative smoothing* (p. 54) referring to how we shape stories to protect and present ourselves; *orgstupe* (one of Alec's creations that I will leave for the reader to seek out), *creeping institutionalism*, and *thick description*—the latter referring to the importance of 'the carefully observed life across shifting cultural contexts, describing the mundane' as the 16th-century French writer Michel de Montaigne did (p. 47) and that is reminiscent of Brenda Ueland's 'microscopic listening' for those who know her inspiring book *If You Want to Write* (1938).

To me, one of Alec Grant's most useful contributions to the conversation is *narrative entrapment*, and it is interesting and valuable how Trude Klevan points to areas where he may be trapping her or himself. Always with humour and kindness, these two are able to continue their dialogue in writing—and in person when they talk about workshops they taught together—with the intent to explore and nudge each other, but always with the intention of deepening understanding. While Alec questions the need for 'solidarity' in the research process, a term that Trude Kleve brings forward, they agree on the intentionality of the friendship. True to Grant's irascible nature, he even goes so far as to trouble the concept of friendship and name the dangers:

because such stories become padded out with sugar-coating narrative retrofit distortions and post hoc rationalizations that give them their best possible gloss. According to Strawson, this can serve the function of mutual, public impression-managed, narcissism, obscuring what is actually going on in friendship. (p. 108)

Ultimately, Trude draws the conclusion, which the book seems to exemplify throughout, that 'Friendship gives access to some of the inner and outer voices of the other person, and through that our own voices and traces of previous experiences can be activated' (p. 109).

While finalizing this book review, I was able to go to Eastbourne to meet Alec Grant in person after correspondence with him via emails and text messages for about a year. Like Trude, I was also motivated to learn more in conversation with Alec and also do not see him as a mentor, but rather a colleague with valuable experience. By coincidence, Trude and I were born the same year (1970) and my intellectual mate and partner, Frans Meijers (1950–2018) was of the same generation as Alec (1952). In exploring, only briefly, our life histories, Alec and I discovered that he was walking around Nijmegen, the city of my birth, as a young British airman, while Frans was a long-haired university student and I was being pushed about in a pram by my Dutch mother. One can imagine the unlikely characters crossings the street at the same moment in the opening scene of a movie—how an airman, a sociologist, and a baby would later meet in an in-depth (partly asynchronous!) dialogue seems bizarre and unlikely (especially in light of the fact we three all became qualitative researchers drawn to narrative and dialogical learning). Notice how here too, I am inclined to make stories of these fragments as Trude and Alec propose; there is joy in this, and it creates a semblance of meaning. In similar fashion to Trude, I reflect on how I grew up in Canada, surrounded by pine trees and a beloved dog (and a stepfather with roots in Northern Sweden close to the Norwegian border) and like Trude, was misplaced and grew up in part in another country, and reflect on how *our displacement* or sense of being orphaned from safety and familiarity is likely a drive to begin telling stories. As one of my first writing teachers Eunice Scarfe told us in her classes, these are all reasons for becoming a writer.

As I write, I realize I have probably broken three rules of doing a 'proper' academic book review, and I will own up to this in the very spirit of Trude and Alec's book. The implied rules I am breaking are 1) I must be impartial, though this ignores the fact we cannot transcend subjectivity and therefore should articulate how it plays a role in our interpretation. I know Alec and consider us friends, and I too work using an

autoethnographic approach, which I call *writing the self*. Alec and I are about to meet for the first time in person and go for an Italian lunch in Eastbourne; will that make me less likely to critique this book? Will my understanding of autoethnographic process make me less critical about their ideas on becoming, using themselves as an example? 2) Another rule I have broken is that I have talked about myself in a book review that is not about me; perhaps a critic of autoethnography will remind me to ‘stay out of it’ while I know, even if I had not known either author personally, I would not have been able to keep my perspective out of it—as the authors rightly argue, what we see, how we see it, and why we see this, and not that, are the things we bring to our writing and research. 3) I will not finish this book review until I have spoken with Alec and asked him to read it through; as I said above, I have joined the ‘becoming dialogue’ and am not outside it. Of course, I will divulge what contribution he (and possibly Trude) will make to the final version.

Both Alec and Trude appreciated reading the draft of this book review and felt it gave an inspired account of their work; they did not suggest any changes. Our conversation will undoubtedly continue, in part in a new project around the theme of pilgrimage, of which the dialogue in this book is already an example. Before reading this book, I would have said becoming a qualitative researcher meant tuning in to the layers of what is happening with the people we research; now I say that we can only do this well when we look at our own layers in the story of our own perpetual becoming.

References

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