

September 2013

## Autobiographical Research Another Brick in the Wall: Analyzing a Perfectionist through Bricolage

Tracy D. Keats

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/taboo>

---

### Recommended Citation

Keats, T. D. (2017). Autobiographical Research Another Brick in the Wall: Analyzing a Perfectionist through Bricolage. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, 13 (2). <https://doi.org/10.31390/taboo.13.2.04>

## Autobiographical Research Another Brick in the Wall: Analyzing a Perfectionist through Bricolage

Tracy D. Keats

I was introduced to the bricolage in educational research when Shirley Steinberg asked me to conduct autobiographical primary research—a more interesting, enlightening, and rigorous experience than I could have ever expected. Writing an autobiography elicited a multitude of thoughts and feelings, not the least of which were apprehension, excitement, intrigue, fear, and doubt. The process has proven natural yet intense because the research is genuine and intimate. In production and analysis of the text, I have used multiple research methods including thematic analysis, textual analysis, ethnography, critical hermeneutics, and psychoanalysis.

Steinberg attributes the term *bricolage* to Claude Levi-Strauss (1966) and describes it as a sort of toolbox that “involves taking research strategies from a variety of scholarly disciplines and traditions as they are needed in the unfolding context of the research situation” (Steinberg, 2006, p. 119). Drawing from Denzin and Lincoln’s (2000) work, Joe Kincheloe (2001) depicts the bricolage as a concept moving qualitative research into the future. Kincheloe argues that knowledge and research are more subjective than we are willing or perhaps able to admit. He therefore reasons convincingly for Nietzsche’s notion of perspectivism: the more perspectives a researcher is able to engage, the more understanding can be gained. This contradicts a common critique that interdisciplinarity and thus bricolage are superficial by nature. Instead, Kincheloe attests, a vigilant bricoleur recognizes the limitations of a single methodology and the inherent interconnectedness of social, cultural, psychological, and pedagogical inquiry.

The bricoleur becomes an expert on the relationships connecting cultural context, meaning making, power, and oppression within disciplinary boundaries. Their rigorous understanding of these dynamics possibly makes them more aware of the influence of such factors on the everyday practices of the discipline than those who have traditionally operated as scholars within the discipline. (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 684)

A researcher is therefore able to construct the most useful bricolage from a variety of strategies and based on an exploration and understanding of the object of inquiry within its existing contexts.

In exploring the various stories of my life and attempting to find meaning in autobiographical images, insights, and interpretations, the process of bricolage offers a rich, complex analysis from which I am able to gain deeper and wider understanding of the influences that shaped me as an educator (Steinberg, 2006).

### Phenomenological Reading

#### *Structure*

Almost immediately, it was apparent that my biggest struggle with writing an autobiography was conceptualizing the final product. I like to begin with a goal in mind so that I can continually evaluate progress along the path. To sit down and simply write was difficult. What was even more difficult was dealing with the randomness of childhood memories that flooded once the gates were opened. Where would each story appear in the text, and in what order? What was important and what was irrelevant?

Structure emerged as a concrete theme in many instances but also as an emotional, overlying theme upon further analysis of my experience in creating the autobiographical document.

The value placed on a logical, ordered way of doing things was established early in the manner my parents and maternal grandmother ran our household. Although the children—three brothers, a sister, and myself—were intensely involved in multiple and varied activities, our home was scheduled and clean. Disorganization was not tolerated. Without order, nothing would be accomplished. Evidence of this can be found in the daily lunchtime routine during elementary school: dismissal bell, board the appropriately numbered school bus, follow the path home, eat a meal and watch cartoons, return to the bus stop with three minutes to spare. Other household examples include how Nan went about daily chores such as making the beds and doing the laundry, as well as mom's organization of her office when she was completing her Masters degree.

My paternal grandparents upheld a similar standard of organization, running a convenience store where everything had its place on the shelves. In their home, there was a clear distinction between the formal living room and the casual family room, from the type and condition of the furniture to the nature and quality of the mounted photographs.

The appearance and maintenance of structure throughout my childhood meant that I was conditioned to approach situations and challenges in a certain way. From the mundane (such as an orderly spice rack) to the complex (understanding expectations and strategizing success), there is a constant need to build and preserve a structured environment so that I can function effectively.

*Perfectionism, Individualism, and Competition*

Pursuit of perfection may have been a natural progression from, or perhaps merely a co-requisite of, structure. I write:

I did my best to do everything, be everything, succeed at everything I possibly could. I played on every school sports team possible, even after making the commitment to specialize in volleyball, and was named Athlete of the Year. I aimed for a perfect 100% grade in every class, packing my timetable with every academic option I could. I finished the year with a 97% average, including all 30-level sciences, Calculus, and French, and received awards for top marks in numerous classes and many academic scholarships for university.

I intended to stand out as the best, regardless of the task, thereby setting myself apart from others. Additionally, it is obvious throughout the text that I did anything that I was good at, and only for as long as I was good at it. Activities such as swimming and playing the piano were only enjoyable while I was competing and winning. This individualistic competition is a Euro-Canadian ideology with which I was raised in the White Christian middle class town of Gander. Herbert Northcott contrasts Canada's First Nations cultural view in *Going Native: A White Guy's Experience Teaching in an Aboriginal Context* (Northcott, 2007):

While Aboriginal culture acknowledges differential strengths, these are to be used for the benefit of the community and not for individual self-aggrandizement. The Euro-Canadian ethic of individualistic competition for the purpose of identifying the strongest seemed foreign and hostile to the Aboriginal students. (p 59)

While interscholastic and athletic competition was indeed hostile at times—for example, I remember despising a promising younger athlete who joined the table tennis team and quickly began challenging my long-standing singles title—it was so normalized that it is only now that I can honestly question why such fierce individualistic competition was needed.

In school, we learned about Charles Darwin and “survival of the fittest.” Evolution yielded improved versions of individuals. Females of a species wanted to mate with the strongest, most dominant male in order to ensure his “good genes” were passed along to her offspring. The most scholarly and well-presented project won top prize at the Science Fair. Outstanding performances in the Kiwanis Music Festival earned an encore performance in *Stars of the Festival* on Friday evening. Athletes were revered in High School, earning greater privilege and higher social status than other students.

With these and many other examples, I learned what it meant to be the best and aspired to be it. Mistakes took away from perfection, and were only acceptable if they were not repeated. I learned to not only measure myself by what was possible, but also by what others were doing or not doing. Competition drove me to be better, but at the same time, allowed me an excuse to devalue others. Instead of following the typical path of Newfoundland students to a Maritimes university, my choice to

attend Carleton University was not only because of the touted Journalism program at that institution but also because very few people I knew were going there. I did not want to make the typical choice; I wanted to be different. Similarly, I did not want to be a teacher, simply because my parents were teachers.

In my Euro-Canadian world of individualistic competition, equality was not desirable and so it is a recurring theme to set myself apart through the pursuit of excellence.

### *Writing and Language*

I learned that in order to excel in school, I needed to be able to clearly and intelligently communicate with teachers, particularly through scholarly writing. Fortunately, my grandfather was an early mentor for written language. In his neat, concise and factual style, he recorded years of daily journal entries in a beautifully leather-bound series with golden labels. I ran home after school on days when I had something exciting to tell Granddad. As I dictated, he would put pen to paper, right after he noted the weather, significant news headlines, birthdays, anniversaries or holidays. Writing was serious work, and it was important to love your work:

I learned a lot about thoughtfulness and attention to detail from Granddad's journal writing. I constantly observed the care he took in scribing each word in perfect cursive, in documenting something for each of the grandchildren in the household...every day, in remembering to specifically mention those who were absent (those who lived elsewhere or who were deceased), in replacing the book in line with the previous annuals in the bookcase at the end of each writing session.

I came to love writing, particularly when it was required more often in school, and I realized that written language came easily. Although I may never be able to articulate the technicalities of the English language, I could *feel* my way into writing a good sentence—I wrote what sounded right. On reflection, it's possible to correlate this aptitude with a strong history of reading from a young age. I remember book clubs and reading competitions in elementary school that led me to experience text and storytelling on a daily basis. Of course, there were always gold stars and certificates awarded to the most accomplished readers.

Writing also emerged thematically as a means for personal expression, creativity and emotional catharsis. Evidence from my autobiography include:

The collective grief was palpable, though I was unsure how I should express my own sadness. Many years later, at Nan's funeral in the same church, I placed a handwritten letter inside her coffin and my mom reminded me that I had done the same for Granddad back when I was eight. In a letter, written as though I were speaking with him, I had expressed gratitude for everything he'd done for me, love for all the things he was to me, and regret for losing the future time with him. I'd tucked this letter inside a card addressed to Granddad and slipped it into the satin-lined box.

And:

I did not become dedicated to journal writing, but I did find other ways to express myself through pen and paper, and word processor. I wrote long letters to people, sometimes sending them, sometimes not. I wrote extensive fictional stories, placing heroes in fantastical situations. I welcomed writing assignments at school and spent long hours writing, reading and rewriting.

Such a strong emphasis on the written word leads me to de-emphasize spoken language. While my oral communication is well within the acceptable, it must be noted that written presentation is much preferred to its direct alternative—giving a speech or delivering a lecture. This phenomenon is something missing from my autobiography: I do not mention being able to win a verbal argument, for example, or talk my way out of being in trouble—both things that kids are known to do.

### *Feminism*

It is only recently that I began to consciously learn societal limitations of being a girl. With competitive success as a beacon, I lived as though there was nothing I couldn't do, nothing I couldn't be. When there weren't girls' teams, I played on the boys' teams. I was consistently the top student in my classes, regardless of gender, and my physical stature at 6'2" was an exclamation mark. When an opportunity arose, I took it. And when I was ready to move onto the next "thing," I usually did it with free will.

In analysing why I became a teacher, a coach, and a mentor for young females, an underlying theme of feminism emerges. Although I do not talk much about my mother, she is presented in my autobiography as an educated, methodical, and liberated role model. She was the more vocal leader in our family, my father taking a quieter position. While Mom taught elementary school each day, my grandmother took on the household duties, displaying important take-charge qualities and an unwavering work ethic. Both ladies assumed complete control of their responsibilities and played important symbolic roles for me, never once submitting to a paternalistic assumption.

Outside of my own home, however, I encountered very few strong female role models. I remember scorning my Junior High music teacher because she appeared weak, although what made her appear that way is questionable. While I was socialized as a girl, I was also socialized to believe that women needed to acquire the male quality of strength and assertiveness. Therein lies my struggle between individualistic competitiveness and feminism. I was immersed in a culture that represented masculinity as dominant and invulnerable and femininity as passive and pleasing, naturalizing sexism (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). In psychoanalysis, I believe that "male" and "female" qualities are available to everyone, and I always craved a female leader who would show me the way—a mentor to teach me how to balance and blend the gender dichotomy.

*Privilege*

The all-encompassing theme of my autobiography is privilege. I was denied nothing and offered every opportunity to lead a successful life. This realization is somewhat disheartening, as I have always believed in self-creation, earning what you receive, and reward for the work you put in.

There are two aspects of my identity from which I do not derive power, however: that I am female, as previously discussed, and that I am a Newfie. My hometown was regarded as “multicultural” within a unique Canadian province, but Gander is a less severe stereotype of a Newfoundland community. Media, anecdotes, and Newfie jokes portray Newfoundlanders as uneducated, poor, primitive labourers—the gypsies of Canada. The most recognizable identifier is the “Newfie accent,” similar to Brad Pitt’s in *Snatch*. How could I be blamed for “neutralizing” my accent in order to fit in with the “other” of the normal Mainlander? This is an indication of the direction of power in that a minoritized group can emulate the dominant group in order to gain status (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012), but Mainlanders would only ever imitate a Newfie accent for entertainment.

Regardless of my minority struggles as a female Newfoundlander, I have been afforded much power in my Euro-Canadian culture. In *The Great White North? Exploring Whiteness, Privilege and Identity in Education*, Paul Carr and Darren Lund assert :

Power does have a colour in Canada, despite official multiculturalism, making our nation appear superficially to be a harmonious society in which anyone can be successful with the right attitude and effort. The meritocratic myth has worked against people of colour in Canada for hundreds of years. It is problematic that White people so effortlessly invoke deficits in individual efforts as an explanation of underachievement by some racial minorities. (Carr & Lund, 2007)

It is with this understanding that I have always explained the opposite phenomenon: overachievement is also a product of individual efforts. Upon further analysis, however, I must admit that White privilege has also played a part.

My White privilege is highlighted by the absence of ethnic minorities throughout my autobiography. While my hometown was considered more “neutral” than others, at least from my point of view, my experiences with people of colour are limited. I remember one Brown girl, and one half-Asian boy; I remember nothing about their “otherness” but rather presumed they were no different than me. They had the same opportunities to show their stuff, the same chance to win; they just had to do it. I never considered that they might have limitations beyond their control.

Not only were “the right attitude and effort” assumed in my upbringing but achievement and success were as well. Proceeding to post-secondary education was a given, and I was encouraged to go anywhere, do anything and become anything I aspired to. I could not imagine anything as unattainable. All I had to do was win. “Euro-Canadians understand capitalism, inequality and stratification” (Northcott,

2007, p. 61), evident in the prevalence of individualistic competition, but we find it difficult to imagine ourselves as non-victors within the hierarchy.

### Methodology

In analysing my autobiographical text, I have attempted to do what Shirley Steinberg (2006) suggests is necessary: to allow the text to open and present themes for the researcher...It then becomes ready for the critical hermeneutic interpretation which is my tentative research goal” (p. 122). I have also attempted to employ a multi-perspectival research methods approach that many scholars have termed bricolage.

In direct contrast to my natural style, I wrote erratically: I found it hard to stick to a regular schedule as suggested by Stephen King (2000) in *On Writing*; I remembered and recorded aspects of my childhood randomly, just throwing them onto the page; I tried to shut down my brain and just write. I used self-monitoring throughout the process of writing as I encouraged myself to engross in reflection rather than trying to understand before having something to analyze.

When many pages were filled, a structure emerged and I was able to arrange the various stories under headings. Although there were more memories to write about and other directions to pursue, I produced a document that felt whole and complete. Within this document, a number of themes appeared—some unsurprising but others unexpected. I then re-read each word, sentence, paragraph, and section multiple times, and recorded each instance that represented a theme. This information was organized into a table, and certain biographical information was repeated in several columns. Undertaking thematic analysis in this way allowed me to see direct correlation in the various themes represented throughout my youth.

I relied heavily on ethnographic analysis and psychoanalysis in attempting to understand meaning from the emerging themes. I found myself asking questions. *Why did I do that? What was I thinking? What was I feeling?* I attempted to use hermeneutic phenomenology to interpret less concrete findings within the text such as assumptions, stereotypes and societal pressures.

What I found most interesting was attempting to understand my own positionality within the text and the complexity of researcher within the research. Here I drew from Darren Lund’s *Social Justice Activism in Education* course in which I have been challenged to investigate why I see the world in the way that I do, and to understand and accept that others have a very different perspective. This has translated to my use of bricolage as a research methodology. Kathleen Berry states:

For contemporary research content and processes such as bricolage, identifying how and why the researcher is positioned in the study is a must. Shifting positionalities (based on place, time, gender, race, class, sexuality, etc.) from which a researcher reads, writes, analyses, indicate a recognition of the part played by the socializing texts of scholarly discourses, academic expectations and contexts throughout time and space. (Berry, 2006, p. 90)



By examining the text from multiple perspectives, and considering my positionality throughout, I am able to gain a broader, albeit more complex, understanding of meaning.

### References

- Berry, K. S. (2006). Research as bricolage: Embracing relationality, multiplicity and complexity. In K. Tobin & Kincheloe, J. (eds.), *Doing educational research: A handbook*. (pp. 87-115). Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Carr, P. R., & Lund, D. E. (2007). Introduction: Scanning Whiteness. In P. R. Carr & D. E. Lund (eds.), *The great White North? Exploring Whiteness, privilege and identity in education* (pp. 1-15). Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (2000). *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (2001). Describing the bricolage: Conceptualizing a new rigor in qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 7, 679-692.
- King, S. (2000). *On writing*. New York: Scribner.
- Northcott, H. C. (2007). Going native: A White guy's experience teaching in an Aboriginal context. In P. R. Carr & D. E. Lund (eds.), *The great White North? Exploring Whiteness, privilege and identity in education* (pp. 57-66). Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Sensoy, O., & DiAngelo, R. (2012). *Is everyone really equal? An introduction to key concepts in social justice education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Steinberg, S. (2006). Critical cultural studies research: Bricolage in action. In K. Tobin & J. Kincheloe (eds.), *Doing educational research: A handbook* (pp. 119-132). Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

*Tracy D. Keats is a graduate student in the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Her M.A. thesis is entitled "We Don't Need Another Hero: Hollywood Representations of Captains in Team Sport."*