Creating criteria for evaluating autoethnography and the pedagogical potential of lists

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Pelias (2011) describes himself sitting at his desk trying to contemplate what qualitative work he wants to applaud and what efforts seem lacking. He's curious as to why he is seduced by some work but not others, why the best work seems to engage and the weaker work seems to fall flat and leave him cold. Sitting there he is ready to consider other readings, but then he continues, putting an *evaluative self* forward that lists twelve contrasts between a flat piece and an engaging piece. One of these is as follows.

> The flat piece, a cold dinner, is forced down, taken in with little pleasure. It lacks the heat of the chef's passions, the chef's sensuous self who knows, without spice, all is bland. The engaging piece makes each mouthful worthy of comment, encourages lingering, savoring, remembering. In it's presence, I want to invite my colleagues and students to enjoy its flavors. (Pelias, 2011, p. 666)

The list of contrasts provided by Pelias (2011) articulate the criteria he calls upon and the process he goes through when acting as an evaluative self. No doubt others, myself included, have gone though a similar process when faced with a journal paper to review, assess a student project, or respond in a class to the question: 'But how do you know if a qualitative study is any good?' Perhaps all this stimulated Tracey (2010, p. 840) to propose the following eight, universal, criteria for judging excellence in qualitative research.

- Worthy topic
- Rich rigor
- Sincerity
- Credibility
- Resonance
- Ethical
- Meaningful coherence

Likewise, in order to hold creative analytical practice ethnography to high and difficult standards, Richardson (2000, p. 254) outlines the following five criteria she uses when reviewing papers or monographs submitted for social scientific publication.

- Substantive contribution
- Aesthetic merit
- Reflexivity
- Impact
- Expression of a reality

Reflecting on how arts-based research might be judged, Barone and Eisner (2012, pp. 148-154) propose the following six criteria.

- Incisiveness
- Concision
- Coherence
- Generativity
- Social significance
- Evocation and illumination.

More lists of criteria for judging various forms of qualitative research could be added. To deal with each in-depth would be, however, to labour the point made by Sparkes and Smith (2014) that when it comes to the criteria issue, scholars tend to create and use lists according to their specific needs and purposes. It is none the less so for the creative analytical practice of autoethnography.

Lists of criteria for judging autoethnography

Autoethnography is a blurred genre. This said, Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis (2013) propose a list of key characteristics that they believe bind autoethnographies together and differentiate them from other kinds of personal scholarship, such as, autobiography. These are purposefully commenting on/critiquing of culture practices; making contributions to existing research; embracing vulnerability with a purpose; and creating a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response.

Just how the characteristics outlined by Holman Jones et al. (2013) are played out in practice is, however, up for grabs. As Holman Jones (2005, p. 765) states following her review of various definitions of autoethnography, 'Taking these words as a point of departure, I create my own responses to the call: Autoethnography is …'. As part of this process, she develops a list of actions and accomplishments that she looks for in her work and the work of others.

- Participation as reciprocity
- Partiality, reflexivity, and citationality as strategies for dialogue (and not mastery
- Dialogue as a space of debate and negotiation
- Personal narrative and storytelling as an obligation to critique
- Evocation and emotion as incitements to action
- Engaged embodiment as a condition for change.

(Holman Jones, 2005, p. 773)

Similarly, Denzin (2014, p. 78) grapples with the problem of how best to judge what he calls 'performance' autoethnography. For him, this requires 'performative criteria'

to evaluate whether or not performance texts accomplish the following:

- Unsettle, criticize and challenge taken-for-granted, repressed meanings
- Invite moral and ethical dialogue while reflexively clarifying their own moral position
- Engender resistance and offer utopian thoughts about how things can be made different
- Demonstrate that they care, that they are kind
- Show, instead of tell, while using the rule that less is more
- Exhibit interpretive sufficiency, representational adequacy, and authentic adequacy
- Are political, functional, collective, and committed

In contrast, Bochner and Ellis (2016) use the term, 'evocative' autoethnography and put forward a list of criteria that include looking for abundant concrete details, wanting to feel the flesh and blood emotions of people coping with life's contingencies and being offered structurally complex narratives that are told in a temporal framework representing the curve of time. As Bochner states in a conversation with Ellis and a group of students

> I expect evocative autoethnographers to examine their actions and dig underneath them, displaying the self on the page, taking a measure of life's limitations, of cultural scripts that resist transformation, of contradictory feelings, ambivalence, and layers of subjectivity, squeezing comedy out of life's tragedies … I hold the author to a demanding standard of ethical self-consciousness … And finally, I want a story that moves me, my heart and belly as well as my head; I want a story that doesn't just refer to subjective life, but instead acts it out in ways that show me what life feels like now and what it can mean. (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 213).

As ever, more lists are available. I hope, however, that what I have provided above gives a sense of how different lists of criteria have been developed for judging qualitative research in general, and autoethnography in particular. I have also tried to given a flavour of the kinds of criteria that have been called upon in the creation of such lists.

Working with lists

Any list of criteria can be used in a foundational, prescriptive and normative manner to police the boundaries of autoethnography and control its practitioners. Here, a list of predetermined criteria is defined as permanent and universal to be applied to *any* form of inquiry regardless of its intents and purposes. This list quickly becomes a rigid quality appraisal 'checklist' that is then used to set standards of 'quality control' for all forms of qualitative research. Criteria in this situation operate in an exclusionary and punitive manner to produce a closed system of judgment that establishes and maintains a narrow band of what constitutes good autoethnography or any other form of creative analytical practice. Consequently, innovative forms of autoethnography along with novel forms of representation are, by definition, excluded and/or demeaned as not worthy of attention.

But, of course, none of the scholars cited earlier want their suggested lists of criteria to be used in this negative way. For example, Pelias (2011, p. 666) states the following.

> I wish to articulate what I like and what I don't without imposing my evaluative stance but having one that guides my practice as a reviewer, teacher, and writer. I leave open the possibility of other evaluative and more productive schemes.

Having expressed what he does and does not like, Pelias (2011) does not insist that readers *must* adopt his standpoint or that they *must* apply his list of criteria regardless of the nature of their inquiry and their intentions and purposes. He simply offers the criteria he uses for consideration by others in their own work *if they so wish*.

Barone and Eisner (2012) also express their own particular standpoint and emphasise that each of the criteria they have included in their list for judging arts-based research functions as *cues for perception*. They offer these criteria *as starting points* for thinking about the appraisal of works of arts-based research. While their criteria may act as a common point of reflection, Barone and Eisner do not want them to be seen as a fixed recipe that all must follow as this would lead to rigid standardisation at the cost of innovation.

> So, finally, we invite you, the readers, to use your own judgement in applying these criteria to the examples of the works of arts based research included in this book and to those many that are not included. But we also urge you to use your imagination in ascertaining other criteria that may emerge from your encounters with arts based work in the future. (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 154-155)

Even though she speaks of universal criteria, Tracy (2010, p. 837) believes the model she proposes is capable of being adapted to different theoretical frames and perspectives since it 'leaves space for dialogue, imagination, growth and improvisation.' Having noted that rules and guidelines can be helpful, she warns that 'grasping too strongly to any list of rules – and treating them as commandments rather than human made ideas is an act of delusion, suffering, and pain' (p. 849). The danger lies in viewing any list of criteria as fixed and inflexible, thereby reducing them to a checklist and defeating their purpose and utility.

The invitation by scholars to use their lists comes with the expectation that researchers approach them with the openness with which they were intended. The requirement of openness is enhanced if we adopt the non-foundational, or relativistic position as described by Smith and Hodkinson (2005, pp. 922-933). Here, rather than seeing criteria as abstract standards they are viewed as socially constructed lists of characteristics.

> As we approach judgment in any given case, we have in mind a list of characteristics that we use to judge the quality of that production. This is not a well-defined and precisely specified list; to the contrary, this list of characteristics is always open-ended, in part unarticulated, and always subject to constant interpretation reinterpretation … Our lists are invariably rooted in our standpoints and are elaborated through social interactions.

We might, therefore, discuss the characteristics of a particular approach to inquiry, such as evocative or performance autoethnography, and simply note that these criteria are the way different researchers seem to be conducting their particular kind of autoethnography at the moment. Thus, relativists, in providing their own lists or using those created by others, including those like Tracy's (2010) that claim universality, are willing to describe what one *might* do, but are not prepared to mandate what one *must* do across all contexts and on all occasions prior to any piece of research being conducted.

Smith and Deemer (2000) emphasize that any list we bring to judgment is always open-ended and we have the capacity to add to or subtract characteristics from the lists. This is necessarily so because the criteria used to judge a piece of research can change depending upon the context and the purposes. A characteristic of research we thought important at one time and in one place may take on diminished importance at another time and place s perspectives, climates, cultures, and goals change. Equally, something innovative might come along that does not fit well with existing lists of criteria. For Smith and Deemer this 'opens up the possibility that one must reformulate one's list and possibly replace the exemplars one calls upon in the never-ending process of making judgments' (p. 889). Regarding this possibility, Smith and Hodkinson (2005, p. 922) note the following:

> The limits for recasting our lists derive not primarily from theoretical labor but rather from the practical use to which lists are put as well as from the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which they are used. The limits of modification are worked and reworked within the context of actual practices or applications.

That the creation and reworking of lists of criteria is accomplished in the *doing* and engagement with actual inquiries rather than via the distillation of some abstracted epistemology is evident in the work of Holman Jones (2005). Speaking of the list of criteria she has developed for judging her own work and that of others, she notes that they are *changing* and 'are generated in the doing of this writing rather than outside or prior to it' (773). Likewise, Gingrich-Philbrook (2013, p. 619) argues that lists 'make so much more sense as something developed over time and experience, something that changes and grows, adapts to different writers, writing different projects, for different purposes, at different times.' Indeed, even when discussing universal criteria for judging qualitative research, Tracy (2010) acknowledges that understanding qualitative goodness is best appreciated by embodying the methods ourselves as apprentices in the practice of research, and also vicariously studying the dilemmas of others.

A good example of researchers actively engaging with criteria in practice is provided in the work of Gordon and Patterson (2013). They explored each of Tracy's (2010) universal eight criteria for judging excellence in qualitative research by applying them to two separate studies they had conducted within a womanist caring framework. Having undertaken this task, Gordon and Patterson concluded as follows.

> Tracy's universal criteria for qualitative research worked with the womanist caring frame. While the means for achieving her criteria manifested somewhat differently in each of our studies, they provided a useful guide for us to analyze and evaluate our own work. We believe Tracy's criteria, her end

goals, could work with other theoretical frames, as well, taking shape according to each study's frame and purpose … Tracy's criteria for quality in qualitative research are powerful because they are universal but not fixed. That is, researchers can work toward the end goals through variant means. (Gordon and Patterson, 2013, p. 693)

This said, in exploring Tracy's (2010) criteria in relation to their own work, Gordon and Patterson (2013) found they lacked grounding in an ethical framework. From their perspective, Tracy mistakenly treats ethics as a stand- alone category whereas for them, using womanist caring as a framework to guide research places ethics at the heart of the research process from start to finish. Gordon and Patterson, therefore, depart from Tracy in that they do not believe that ethics can, or should, be bracketed into its own discrete category. Accordingly, they develop and build on her thinking to foreground ethics as an overarching framework for criteria rather than a standalone category. Whether one agrees with this point of departure or not, the key point is that this departure, its challenge to and modification of the list of criteria proposed by Tracy comes about via Gordon and Patterson's practical application of her work to the *doing* of their own studies and not by a process of disengaged abstraction. Their work further indicates that regardless of Tracy's claims of universality that her list of criteria can be utilized in a relativistic manner without accepting such claims. In short, people do not own the lists they create and do not control how they are used once they enter the public domain.

The pedagogical potential of lists

 As a teacher of qualitative inquiry I recognize that newcomers to the field can be bewildered by the vast array of criteria that are available for judging their own work and that of others. For Tracy (2010, p. 849) such bewilderment can be reduced initially by offering students her eight universal criteria as this provides them with what she calls a 'common language of excellence for qualitative research.' Equally, the lists of criteria provided earlier by, for example, Holman Jones (2005) for judging autoethnography, by Denzin (2014) for judging performance autoethnography, and Bochner and Ellis (2016) for judging evocative autoethnography, can also be used initially to reduce bewilderment by providing a common language or set of characteristics for discussing what goodness might mean in relation to autoethnography in its various forms.

Such lists, I have found in my teaching, when used as *starting points* can provide an initial sense of security and direction for newcomers/ when they take the risk and engage with autoethnography for the first time. In this instance, Gingrich-Philbrook (2013, p. 619) notes the following.

> Budding autoethnographers may very well want the reassurance of a checklist outlining things a good autoethnography does, the quality it possesses, because that might help them decide when they have finished a piece they're working on. Wouldn't it be great to have a kind of a cross between an existential oven-timer and a drag-queen fairy godmother to look over your shoulder at the screen and say 'Bing! You're done, Honey; this shit is *baked*; anyone who tell you different, I will come over and stomp their ass'?

Of course it is not only budding autoethnographers who need such reassurance. I suspect that many a seasoned scholar has wished for, and found in some guise or other, the existential oven-timer and a drag-queen fairy godmother described by Gingrich-Philbrook (2013). I certainly know I have and still do. At times, we all need somebody we trust and respect to say, 'You're done, Honey; this shit is *baked*'. Indeed, as a teacher developing the confidence of my students on qualitative courses and in supporting my colleagues when they engage with creative analytical practices, I have often adopted, sometimes knowingly and sometimes less so, the role of existential oven-timer and a drag-queen fairy godmother. It is a worthy role to be celebrated.

Even when not present in corporeal form, the combined existential oven-timer and drag-queen fairy godmother can manifest itself in a list of criteria. For example, Gordon and Patterson (2013) acknowledge how Tracy's (2010) list provided them with a *useful* guide for analyzing and evaluating their own work framed by womanist caring theory, and suggest that her criteria could also prove useful with other theoretical frames depending on the intentions and purposes of the studies involved. Accordingly they propose that when writing qualitative studies for publication, Tracy's criteria can provide a *tool* for scholars to monitor the quality of their own work and they believe that scholars 'will strengthen their work if they make their use of Tracy's criteria explicit' (p. 693). Of course, any of the lists provided earlier can prove equally useful guides for the tasks described by Gordon and Patterson for other researchers depending on their starting points, intentions and purposes.

But then, I begin to worry a little about the notion of criteria as a tool, with its mechanistic, linear and functional implications, to strengthen autobiography as a process rather than a product. My students often ask me what criteria I use as reference points when I go about writing an autobiography. They feel unsettled when my answer is 'None'. By way of explanation, I offer them the words of Winterson (2012; 54) who draws attention to two kinds of writing: 'the one you write and the one that writes you. The one that writes you is dangerous. You go where you don't want to go. You look where you don't want to look'. I also ask my students to access the sublime words of Leonard Cohen in his 2011 *How I got My Song Address* at the Prince Asturias Awards in Spain. Cohen tells the audience that he feels uneasy because he has always felt some ambiguity about an award for poetry. This is because, for him, 'Poetry comes from a place that no one commands and no one conquers. So I feel somewhat like a charlatan to accept an award for an activity which I do not command. In other words, if I knew where the good songs came from I'd go there more often'.

Echoing such thoughts, I inform my students about my feeling that, as an activity I do not command, my own autoethnographic stories have always written me far more than I have ever written them as part of an embodied process rather than just a textual product. Thus, as I have suggested elsewhere (Sparkes, 2013), autoethnography is at the will of the body, often involving unbeknown yet-to-be told stories that circulate within us at the pre-objective, enfleshed, multisensory and carnal level, not yet ready for language to take its hold. When the body is ready to release its story it lets us know in subtle ways so that we can accept its gift and engage in the somatic work of crafting a tale for the telling to self and others.

Given what I had said above, it is important for me in my teaching that when it comes

to judging the products of autoethnography my students are invited to think *about* and *with* the various lists of criteria on offer that are often contested, overlapping and contradictory. I ask them to reflect on how they *feel* about any given criterion in their guts and in their flesh. They can then start to consider the ways in which this informs how they make what Beckett and Hager (2002) call 'embodied judgments' that are practical, emotional and corporeal as well as discursive in nature. I also invite students in my classes to construct their own list of criteria from existing lists and to create and add their own if they so wish. In this process, they can begin to explore why they are drawn towards and seduced by some criteria rather than others. All of which leads to a consideration of what Gadamer (1995) calls their effective histories and the *prejudices* each student brings to the selection of criteria and how they are used in judging their own work and that of others.

As Smith and Deemer (2000) remind us, in any encounter with a production, especially something 'new', one must be willing to risk one's prejudices. They point out that, 'Just as in the process of judgment one asks questions of the text or person, the person or a text must be allowed to ask questions in return' (p. 889). In approaching something novel or unfamiliar, therefore, be it a performance autoethnography or an evocative autoethnography, requires that one be willing to allow the text to challenge one's prejudices and possibly change the criteria one is using to judge the piece, thereby changing one's idea of what is and is not good inquiry. This said, Smith and Deemer point out that to be open does not mean to accept automatically, and that one may still offer reasons for rejecting something new. The outcome of any judgment is uncertain. They also stress that there is no method for engaging in the risking of one's prejudices. If anything, Smith and Deemer argue, 'to risk one's prejudices is a matter of disposition – or, better said, moral obligation – that requires one to accept that if one wishes to persuade others, one must be equally open to be persuaded'' (p. 889). This view is supported by Gingrich-Philbrook (2013, p. 618) in his following comment.

> Any evaluation of autoethnography, then, is simply another story from a highly situated, privileged, empowered subject about something *he or she* experienced. To evaluate autoethnography in a genuinely useful way, you have to open yourself up to being changed by it, to heeding its call to surrender your entitlement.

Risking ones' prejudices and surrendering one's entitlement in relation to judgment criteria for autoethnography or any other form of inquiry is no easy task. It means assuming the responsibility to listen carefully and respectfully, attempting to grasp emotionally, viscerally and discursively what is being expressed in something 'different' so that judgment might be passed in an ethical, fair and caring manner. This requires, according to Sparkes (2009), and Sparkes and Smith (2014), the qualities of *connoisseurship* as described by to Eisner (1991). For him, connoisseurship involves the ability to make fine-grained discriminations among complex and subtle qualities, it is the art of appreciation and can be displayed in 'any realm in which the character, import, or value of objects, situations, and performances is distributed and variable' (p. 63). Eisner emphasizes that the term appreciation should not be conflated with 'a liking for'.

> There is no necessary relationship between appreciating something and liking it … Nothing in connoisseurship as a form of appreciation requires that our

judgments be positive. What is required (or desired) is that our experience be subtle, complex, and informed (Eisner, 1991, pp. 68–69).

In seeking to develop the characteristics of connoisseurship in myself and my students, I want to make it clear that this does not involve what Smith and Deemer (2000, p. 202) call a romanticized 'intellectual flight from power.' Part of connoisseurship requires a critical awareness and appreciation of how power and politics at the macro (e.g., national) and micro (e.g., faculty) levels operate and are interwoven into the complex social interactions that define which criteria, from all those available, are selected for use to sort out the good from the bad. As Tracy (2010, p. 838) states, 'a consequence of any delineation of criteria is political.' In relation to this, Smith and Hodkinson (2005, p. 923) remind us that researchers of *all* persuasions use whatever resources they have at their disposal to 'support, preserve, or strengthen those rules (or lists of characteristics) that they approve of or are in their interests and/or to change the rules (or lists) lists in a direction that favors their interests.'

Lists of criteria, as pedagogical devices, can be used to help students explore issues of power and politics in relation to how they are created, legitimized and used to foreground certain voices and silence others. To this end, I share with students my own experiences of crafting an autoethnographically informed piece of work that spoke truth to power and the consequences that followed when, as a hostile reaction to this work, managerial power was enacted in its most raw and questionable form (see Sparkes, 2007, 2017). Against this backdrop, I understandably encourage and help students to develop practical strategies for defending and promoting their interests in various contexts.

With regard to different contexts, it may well be correct, acceptable and in a student's interests in a PhD viva to express the view that passing judgment in qualitative inquiry is a matter of embodied interpretation, with lists of criteria being fluid and changing, open-ended and context specific, leaving us with only multiple standards and temporary criteria. In contrast, such a view might not be so well received at a job interview where the majority of the selection panel is composed of positivists or post-positivists who may be unprepared, unable or simply unwilling to call on a variety of criteria to appropriately evaluate qualitative work. In short, the likelihood is that they do not possess the qualities of connoisseurship as described earlier. In such a situation, characterized by major power differentials, it may be advantageous to call upon the 'universal' criteria named by Tracy (2010) as 'stable' ' markers of quality for qualitative research as a means of engaging in dialogue and protecting one's interest.

The tactics suggested above might be frowned upon by many as being unethical and dishonest, and interpreted as selling one's self short or just selling out completely. One might also question, however, the ethics of sending students (or young scholars in general) naively into situations where power and politics come into play about judgment criteria without preparing them in the darker arts of conceptual self-defense and strategies of self-preservation. For me, using lists as a way of learning to play the criteria game is not an act of consent to dominant views of what constitutes good or bad research. Rather, as Tracy (2010) notes, it is a strategically designed way to respond and act *within*, rather than being 'worked over' in hostile situations. All this said, I am fully aware that questions about how, as qualitative researchers, we create

and construct our lists of criteria and the uses we put them to in various contexts will not be found in epistemology. Rather, as Smith and Hodkinson (2005, p. 930) remind us, 'they will be found in our reasoning as finite practical and moral beings.'

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