Me and Goldilocks…Searching for What Is "Just Right" in Trauma Research: An Autoethnography

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This is a reflexive account of the tensions and dilemmas emerging from my experience as a woman qualitative researcher researching trauma and tragedy in communities. Framed as an autoethnography, using my conflictual childhood feelings about Goldilocks as an overarching metaphor, I will weave fairy tale and experience into an examination of the impact I can have on individuals, families, and communities in the course in pursuing research. I will attempt to highlight the edges of research culture and ethical conduct, the politics of trespass and the rights of individuals and communities while trying to discover what is "just right." Keywords: Trauma Research, Autoethnography, Ethics, Harm to Participants and Communities, Research Culture, Participants' Rights

As I was engaged in a funded research project examining the impact of trauma (in this particular case, a murder) on issues of communality, healing and community resilience, I encountered two unsettling events that caused me to question not only my position as a researcher, but also my way of being in the world. As is often true of troubling, difficult or ambiguous events, there was no clear-cut answer or right course of action. I felt the "tug of obligation and responsibility" (Ellis, 2007, p. 26). So I turned to writing as a way of knowing (Richardson, 2000) in order to work out these dilemmas, not only for myself, but also with regards to the research culture in which I work and my socio-cultural roots as a woman whose early childhood was spent in 1950s America. I attempted to use writing to create alternate pathways of meaning that were both imaginative and analytical (Goodall, 2009), guided by a narrative sensibility, to connect both myself and the reader to these events, their messy and unfinished endings, and the larger questions they posed about social science research. And as Goodall points out

> The very act of writing a story, or telling a tale in public or just to a friend, changes not so much how or what we know… *it alters the way we think about* what we know and how we know it. (p. 14)

So I turned to autoethnography to figure out what to do, how to be, and what this struggle meant (Bochner & Ellis, 2006).

Autoethnography as Method

Linked to the surge in academic literature examining the role of the qualitative researcher in the research process, autoethnography is a practice in self-reflection, a method of study, and a genre of research representation in which the researcher is viewed as a viable source of data (Leavy, 2009). It explores the researcher's personal experience and connects this autobiographical story to wider cultural, social, and political meanings and understandings (Ellis, 2004). I wanted to dive deep into my reflexive musings about these unsettling events (Why was I so bothered?); to raise my conscious awareness by exploring my physical feelings, thoughts and emotions surrounding them (What were those feelings of

nausea about?); and to allow the emotional experience to converge with the knowledge this awareness generated (What does this suggest about being a researcher?). My writing took the form of a narrative autoethnography (Berger, 2001), since it is akin to the autobiographic narrative end of the continuum (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013). I use my story as an entry point to examine and explain the dilemmas of researching community trauma, the tacit conventions of research culture, and how our socio-cultural history may shape our way of being researchers. It is this connection between the self and society that makes this work distinctly autoethnographic (Chang et al., 2013).

Writing this autoethnography

Writing an autoethnography involves a systemic process of introspection, "…a back-and-forth movement between experiencing and examining a vulnerable self and observing and revealing the broader context of that experience" (Ellis, 2007, p. 14). Muncey (2005) suggested starting with snapshots to begin the creation of a "patchwork of feelings, experiences, emotions, and behaviors that portray a more complete view of… life" (p. 10). In my case, rather than use actual photos, I drew upon two figurative snapshot moments that occurred in the course of researching one especially tough case. Since memory is an elusive and tricky companion, I relied primarily on my researcher notes as the source material for this piece. I first constructed a thematically focused autobiographical timeline (Chang, 2008) of the events surrounding my experiences. I then began to write out this timeline using a narrative structure, cycling between the autoethnography, my extensive notes, and my timeline. It was then that the image of Goldilocks began to emerge as a both a metaphor (Muncey, 2005) and a cultural artifact (Chang, 2008). I went back and read several versions of the tale, evoking and recording childhood memories. I began to rewrite the autoethnography, incorporating an inquiry into how this fairy tale was invisibly shaping how I was conceptualizing my notions of trauma research. I also went back to colleagues to tap their memories of our conversations regarding the ethical implications of these events. As I wrote, I went through a re-iterative cycle of searching for recurring topics, illuminating cultural themes, analyzing what I included, what I omitted, and how I characterized the relationships (Chang, 2008). It was at this time that I also began to incorporate constructs that deepened or widened my understanding of these experiences.

One powerful dimension of writing this autoethnography involved performing it three times to different audiences. Though not envisioned as a performance, I found that speaking this story aloud in the presence of others allowed me to peel back additional layers. I began to live Pelias' (1999) point that performance is also a way of knowing, an act of becoming, and a strategy for discovering oneself by trying on scripts to test their fit. After each performance, I would journal about the thoughts, feelings, and reactions I had, both to the piece and to audience members' comments. I then incorporated these insights in the autoethnography.

Questions of quality (not validity)

Ethnography is humanly situated, filtered through human eyes and perceptions, bearing both the limitations and strengths of human feelings, activity, beliefs, and understandings (Richardson, 2001). Since the primary purpose of an autoethnography is to explicate personal meanings and experiences, and since the researcher's subjectivity is intentionally front and center in the account, the traditional notions of reliability, validity, and generalizability are altered (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Reliability comes to mean confidence in my credibility as a narrator—do you, the reader, believe that this is what actually happened to me? Validity in the context of autoethnography comes to mean the appearance of being true

or real—do you think that this experience is lifelike, believable, and possible, allowing you to see these events through my subjective experience? Generalizability comes to mean resonance with the reader—does this story speak to you and your experience as a researcher, and if not, does it illuminate an unfamiliar situation that you may face?

And though memory may be unreliable and reveal only partial truths (Chang, 2008), this story is offered more as a reflection of who I am, what I wrestled with, and how my experiences and feelings may resonate with others.

My Journey with Goldilocks

When I was a little girl, I loved stories… the musky, exotic stories of Scheherazade… the bloody stories of martyred saints. I would read fairy tales from all over the world.

But there was one… one story that I could never get out of my mind… one story that was incomprehensible to me… one story that filled me with indignation: The story of Goldilocks.

Goldilocks typified to me, even at the age of 4, the fecklessness of privilege… irresponsible and careless. I remember saying to my mother that it was not fair that she created such a mess, wreaked so much havoc in another's home without so much as a care in the world. And she was never punished for being such a "bad and irresponsible girl." For the life of me, I could never figure out why she rated a story.

For those of you who don't know… Goldilocks' story

Once upon a time, there was a little girl by the name of Goldilocks. She was often portrayed as beautiful with blonde curly hair and rosy red cheeks. She also appeared to me as if butter would not melt in her mouth.

She went for a walk in the forest and came upon a house. She knocked and, when no one answered, she marched right in.

Since she was hungry, she helped herself to the porridge on the table, dripping and spilling, tasting and eating from each one of the 3 bowls in turn until she found the one that was "just right."

Feeling a little tired, she waltzed into the living room and sat and wiggled in each of the 3 chairs she found there, until she discovered the one that was "just right." But as soon as she settled down and put her feet up, the chair broke into pieces!

Being sleepy by this time, she went upstairs to the bedroom. She lay down on each of the 3 beds, messing up the covers, pulling out the sheets until she found the one that was "just right." And Goldilocks fell asleep.

It was then that the owners of the cottage, a family of bears, upright citizens of the forest, came home to discover that someone had been eating their porridge, sitting on and breaking their furniture, and sleeping in their beds. Baby Bear in particular was most distraught since her food and things had suffered the most.

Just then, Goldilocks awoke and saw the three bears. She screamed, "Help," jumped up and ran away into the forest. And she never returned to the home of the three bears to clean up her mess… or to say sorry.

It has been suggested, most notably by Bettelheim (1989), that fairy tales serve as the unconscious proving ground for a young child's struggles with great developmental tasks, which, if not mastered, leave scars upon the future adult. He contended that when a child is exposed to the appropriate story at the appropriate developmental level, she can acquire insights into presumably universal conflicts. Southey's tale of Goldilocks, written in 1837, is sometimes viewed as a cautionary tale that imparts a lesson about the hazards of wandering

off and exploring unknown territory, about the conflict between order and disorder, or about the anxieties of the Freudian anal phase. The story uses a repetitive formula "just right" to weave a tale about an intruder who could not control herself when encountering the possessions of others.

However, in these modern (post) times, this psychoanalytic view has understandably fallen into disrepute. The Freudian developmental framework, the supposed universality of the themes, and the notion of a psychic reality, which is innate, fixed, and immutable are contested concepts. Now, we tend to regard fairy tales as representations of deeply rooted perceptions of social reality. As Oliver (1977) pointed out

> The beliefs of one generation are handed down to another through folklore, myths, tales, and stereotypes. Beliefs retain validity because they represent a perception of reality consonant with the prevailing social structure. They are products not of a universal unconscious need, but of the culture, which nurtured them. They serve that culture and help to shape the future in its image. By their very powers of enchantment, myths and tales serve to perpetuate the values and social relationships, which generated them. (p. 86)

Since children are the future architects of society, fairy tales indirectly exert an influence on society and culture. Stone (1985) found that adult women, more so than men, could clearly remember having read and reacted to fairy tales as children. Therefore, the gender script within Goldilocks may speak more powerfully to young girls.

So what was Goldilocks really trying to tell me? How has she shaped my thinking and beliefs about the world, about me, and about my place as a researcher in the world?

The now…

Goldilocks has been on my mind a lot lately. In one instance, she has appeared as the image of my Jungian shadowed self… those aspects of me I want to disown… a personification of my fears when doing trauma research… of going into a community and committing symbolic violence, as described by Bourdieu (1990)… of making a mess because I am not doing the research "just right"… of the research culture I live in that proclaims "Publish (and get grant money) or perish." Results… results… results…

She most recently appeared while I was carrying out a major research project examining the impact of trauma on communities.

Once upon a time, I got a phone message.

> *"Yes, I would like to speak to Dr. Reilly…*
> *This is Mrs. A."*

I recognized the name immediately. She was the mother of the young man who had murdered a teen-aged girl; she herself was charged with being an accessory after the fact. It was an event that tore a small rural community apart and impacted greatly on the young people who lived there. It happened two years before in the small town where I was conducting research into how residents and schools can help regain a livable balance after a traumatic event.

And I knew why she was calling me.

She wanted me to stop the research.

As I reflected on what I would say to her, I came face-to-face with dilemmas that we never covered in any of the myriad research methods classes or seminars I have taken over

the course of my academic and professional life or in any of the ethical discussions or Ethics Review Board (ERB) protocols: What do you do when the research you are conducting can both help and harm individuals or a community? Or, more specifically, harm one individual?

It took me two days to summon up the courage to return Mrs. A.'s phone call. I spent the intervening time going over my research notes, scanning the interview transcripts completed so far, and all the news materials I had collected. I checked my records to see if she had ever responded to the introduction letter I had sent out long before I began the research.

I also spent a good deal of time reflecting on what I would or would not say to Mrs. A., bracketing the rumors and innuendo that had emerged about her during the interviews I had conducted. I did not want to be encumbered by others' opinions of her… or at least to limit this as much as I could.

When I decided to call her back, I made sure I would not be interrupted by placing a big "***Do Not Disturb***" sign on my office door. As I dialed the number, as I waited through three rings, I began again to feel anxious. By the fourth ring, I began to compose the message I would leave in case she had voice mail. And, I admit, I felt a bit relieved that maybe I would not have to do this today. However, on the fifth ring, she answered.

I introduced myself, and asked her why she has called me. She then launched into a confused, sometimes blaming, sometimes beseeching plea for me to stop the research. She claimed it was doing her harm, even though the focus was not on the crime of which she and her son were found guilty, but rather how the systems including the town officials, social service personnel, and schools helped residents to regain a livable balance after this distressing trauma. She claimed that: the instances of vandalism against her home and property were precipitated by the research (From my research notes I determined that the events she mentioned preceded my research entry); the local police advised her that the research was fanning flames of resentment against her (I phoned the local police authority who denied ever saying such a thing, and he said that there were no recent instances of vandalism; in fact, he confirmed my suspicion that the community's anger was so deep it did not need an outside trigger); and my research kept the crime in the forefront of everyone's mind, and therefore, she would not be able to sell her house (where the murder had been committed). Though I doubted that my tentative forays were reminding the townspeople of an incident that most people described as the single most devastating event to happen in the community, I could not allay my fears that perhaps she had a point. The research project was important; I also had responsibility to the funder to carry out the project. But I could not shake my sense of responsibility to not cause further harm. This was a woman who had lost her husband and son, who was reviled and shunned in the small community that been her home her entire life, and whose name was synonymous with bad mothering. Despite her complicity, did she not deserve the same consideration of other research participants?

So, though I decided not to stop the research, I shifted the main focus onto the regional high school community, which was 45 kilometers away, to give her time to sell her home.

Research Culture, Ethical Behavior, and Notions of Harm

Our research culture outlines ethical behavior, generally, as procedural ethics, the kind mandated by institutional ethics committees to ensure procedures adequately deal with five main concerns: informed consent, confidentiality, rights to privacy, deception, and protecting human subjects from harm. I had notified her of the project before I began and invited her to express any concerns or ask any questions she might have-- I did this long before I entered the community. I was very aware of the politics of trespass and the rights of

individuals and communities. And, according to every precept outlined in the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (CIHR, NSERC, & SSHRC, 2010) governing research in Canada, I was researching ethically. But with this instance, I have come to understand that this approach to ethics encourages a checklist mentality to ethical conduct, seeing ethics protocol forms as a magic wand that will somehow miraculously produce ethical research. As Ellis (2007) observed, there are "no definitive rules or universal principles that can tell you precisely what to do in every situation or relationship you may encounter, other than the vague and generic 'do no harm'" (p. 5). I was left deeply questioning my behavior. Unlike Goldilocks, I did not want to make a bigger mess in this woman's life. I wanted to conduct my trauma research "just right." So, I came to employ an added dimension of ethics, what Ellis (2007) calls relational ethics, which requires me to act from my heart as well as my mind, to acknowledge my bonds to others, and initiate and maintain ongoing conversations.

Later, in the same project, I came to know Goldilocks in a very different way, and in this knowing, I came to be her shadow… my timidity to her risk-taking… my compliance to her rule breaking… the aspect of ethical protocols that keep us on mundane paths or those that help inadvertently to maintain a certain social order. As Booker (2006) observes, Goldilocks convinces us that the way forward, progress, lies in finding an exact middle path between opposites. In other words, *the conventional, the status quo*.

Once upon a time… Me and the Reverend

One of the surprising findings from this research project was the impact of the extensive media coverage on the townspeople's sense of communality and the quality of their community life (Kay, Reilly, Connolly, & Cohen, 2010). Communality refers to the cohesive threads, which positively bind a community together to create a certain, safe, and wholesome environment in which individuals can lead effective, enriching, and safe lives (Bolton, 1999). The sense of media intrusion and violation was so deep that in interview after interview, the issue of the media became more persistent. It also had a powerful influence on how I conducted the interviews. Many residents didn't want me to record them for fear they would see their words splashed on the front page of a major newspaper, even though I had explained how social science research is different from journalism. A significant number of people, 17, pointed to one particular newspaper article carried in the press as painting a hurtful picture of the community. One identifiable language community was portrayed as rich, living in the county and the township, while the other community was poor, living in the village. Residents believed that this news article was fuelled by a socio-political agenda, manufacturing tensions, rather than presenting their reality. They resented the superficial, stereotypical portrayal of their complex community.

These findings were so compelling that I decided (with a co-researcher) to publish this dimension of the research and disseminate these findings to the journalistic community. So, in carrying out my responsibilities of verifying the findings with the participants, after I reconnected by telephone, I distributed their interview transcripts via email so that they could add, delete, or correct anything using track changes. Before I sent the manuscript for review, I circulated the Findings and Discussion sections, again by email, and asked them to get back to me about anything that they felt was important. All they had to do was email me with a day and time, and I would telephone them (since it was long distance, I did not want to place the burden of cost on the participants). And that is when I heard from the Reverend.

The Reverend was a clergywoman, one of my first contacts in the community. Though she was based there only part-time, she was committed to her parish. I got the sense of her being protective of the community, but not to the point of failing to be critical of some

of the "non-Christian" (her description) actions of some town residents in response to the tragedy. In particular, she was very vocal in her criticism of the media and believed that the intense scrutiny surfaced an underground animosity, creating factions, noting that she heard one resident say that the family who was complicit in the crime could "*go to hell*."

So, I was surprised when she called me to vehemently complain about the Findings and Discussion sections. She said she never used the word *hell* (I re-listened to the audio file and she did), and wanted the word removed. She also said that she never said her daughter was harassed by the media but said it was the police instead (this was more ambiguous when I re-listened to the audio file; as with many conversations, pronoun use can be unclear about which group is being referenced). But most of all, she was calling to complain that I was perpetrating the very symbolic violence and secondary trauma that I was agitating against. She claimed that by reproducing the offending newspaper article (which was not only printed at the time, but lives on in perpetuity on the Internet), and translating it, I was committing an unethical act. By reporting on the animosity of some residents towards each other, she asserted that I was besmirching the reputation of the community. I should not be highlighting the ugly dynamics that came to characterize some of the social interactions between townsfolk. Instead, I should put my efforts into writing about the positive elements in the town. In other words, I should *make nice*.

I was taken aback! In all my years of being a qualitative researcher, I have never been accused of researching unethically. On the contrary, I have been told how sensitively I can treat deeply disturbing topics.

I had to do some deep reflecting. I told her I would not send the article out yet, and would think about her points.

I went through an agonizing week. I consulted the former chair of my departmental ethics committee. I consulted numerous texts on research ethics. I consulted colleagues well versed in qualitative research in an effort to discover what was "just right." And it was in this space that I came to appreciate Goldilocks.

So, I decided three things:

1. Even though I had evidence of what she said, I decided to abide by her wishes to delete those comments from the Findings section of this article, finding comfort in the fact that, at least this time, the deletions would not change the meaning nor impact the results;
2. I decided to keep the news article, and the translation, in the manuscript since it illustrated well the very point I was trying to make; and
3. I would not back down so easily when writing about the fragmentation and ugliness that can emerge when a community fails to successfully cope with a traumatic event.

When I called her back to let her know of my decisions, I also included the fact that she did have control over her data, but not over what others might say, and how I might interpret the data. I did tell her that I would endeavor to contextualize the news article more clearly in order to make sure I was not perpetrating this stereotypical portrayal of the community. Needless to say, she was not pleased.

And it is now that I begin to see the bravery of Goldilocks. She is a girl who is wandering about in the woods on her own. She breaks not just the chair, but also the rules of female comportment. As Oliver (1977) notes

… Goldilocks is the first heroine of a fairy tale impelled by her own curiosity, embarking on her own voyage of discovery, braving her own dangers, and rescuing herself. The Three Bears are the neatly conventional family going for a proper morning walk while their porridge cools. They convey a picture of family cohesion, serenity, and domesticity, temporarily shattered by the presence of an intruder… Is Goldilocks seeking knowledge beyond the confines of her own world? Does she brave unknown dangers in entering a strange house, trying out its chairs, eating the porridge, sleeping in a strange bed? Indeed she does! (p. 92)

If power and culture are opposite sides of the same coin (Denzin, 2003), then the story of Goldilocks is the place of intersection of gender ideology and identity. As a white, raised-Catholic, working class woman born in 1950s America, Goldilocks forms part of my early and formative pedagogical, and therefore political (Giroux, 2000), experience. My early gender socialization that I carry with me into this trauma research, shapes my timidity. Goldilocks is a role-breaker. Behavior provides no clue to what can be predicted about her actions. The question arises, to what extent does the story of Goldilocks reflect the social anxieties of young girls to engage in conflict and to make messes, and to what extent does it serve as a vehicle for the transmission of these anxieties? By its perpetuation, this tale becomes a powerful instrument of the guardianship of maidenly niceness and compliance.

And herein lies my deeper lesson: Curiosity invites danger; adventure involves risk. Trauma research illuminates the ugly and unpleasant. It challenges the status quo of institutionalized violence, the complacency of our acceptance and consumption of it, and the cruelty that can emerge when we fail to confront it head-on. Sometimes as researchers we need to make a mess and create a fuss to highlight the pain and suffering, violence, injustice, and emotional wounding in the world. I need to come to terms with the reality that *just right* is a "holdover from modernist, empiricist dichotomous fantasies of innocent knowledge." [1]

Goldilocks is the girl who refused to be compliant with the female role of being considerate, self-sacrificing, and "nice." As I struggle to identify "what is just right" in doing trauma research, I also struggle with these notions of self-as-woman.

So, I attempt to balance this instinct of doing no harm with the impulse to speak out and break rules, of avoiding Goldilocks and embodying her, and I am left somewhere in the in-between.

Postscript

"In re-reading this section, maybe the Reverend was a bit of a Goldilocks too because she was also trying to get things just right!"

"The complaints of your participants suggest they were also trying to get things just right too!"

Two small yet significant comments from Ron Chenail, the editor-in-chief of *The Qualitative Report*.

I feel embarrassed. How could I not see that the Reverend, in particular, was shaped as much by her Goldilocks as I was shaped by mine? And then I experience my failure in

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[1] This comment was offered to me by an anonymous reviewer for another journal, and I thank her for this.

empathy. "Empathy is an incredible responsibility. People who have survived trauma… need empathetic listeners to hear their stories in order to heal" (Ellingson, 1998, p. 500). By denying the Reverend's alternate view within the original article and from this account, I hurt her with the privileging of my truth and prevent her from healing (Muncey, 2010). I encountered suffering by community members in this research project, from Mrs. A and from the Reverend, and my response was to create a callus between myself and them. With Mrs. A, I put the research on hold, making a show (to myself) of restraining my impact; with the Reverend, I wrapped myself up in the flags of "accuracy," "reliability," and "validity" to discount her perspective.

Rather than extending Friere's idea (1993), making research an act of love, envisioning myself as a researcher risking an act of love, and creating research that aims at establishing a world where it would be easier to love, I chose to close my eyes and ears and heart. Friere claimed that love for the world and for people are the most crucial characteristics of dialogue. And is not dialogue and listening at the heart of qualitative inquiry? "The only emotion not limiting but enlarging one's listening is: love" (Maturana & Poerksen, 2004).

So, in the end, I have become one of the bears, who was more invested in maintaining my (research) property rights than in addressing the feelings of someone who felt lost in the woods. I have failed to listen, because I have failed to love.

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