

# Unearthing Personal History: Auto-ethnography & Artifacts Inform Research on Youth Risk Taking

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I begin from the premise that research will always be affected by the subjectivity of the researcher, in the choice of research topic and in the interpretation of research findings. My study using Popular Theatre as a participatory, arts-based approach to exploring the risky experiences of youth was further informed by an autoethnographic investigation into my own experiences as a youth, an unearthing of my personal history through autobiographical writing and a (re)collection of artifacts from my youth. My arts-based methods adding a messiness to the research process and findings that reflects the complexity of the issues under investigation.

In my study, I began with an interest in better understanding the experiences of youth that may deem them “at-risk.” I had previously worked, as a teacher and Popular Theatre facilitator with so-called “at-risk” youth in various contexts. The youth, with whom I worked, whenever I mentioned “at-risk,” always took offence. They did not like being labelled “at-risk,” no doubt responding to how the label, used in the fields of education, health and criminal justice, constructs youth as deficient and deviant (Roman, 1996). As Roman suggests there is a need to reframe the concept “at-risk” to include the perceptions of youth, in order to better understand their experiences and better address their needs.

To explore youth perceptions of their “at-risk” or risky behaviour, I conducted a series of workshops with a group of drama students at a rural Alberta high school whose population consisted mostly of Aboriginal students. Tragically, Aboriginal students in Alberta are amongst those most often labelled “at-risk” of dropping out of school (Alberta Learning 2001). To engage the students in articulating and exploring their perceptions of their experiences, I invited them to participate in a Popular Theatre process.

Popular Theatre is theatre for individual and social change (Boal, 1979/74; Prentki & Selman, 2000). It involves members of a community, in identifying issues of concern, analyzing conditions and causes, and searching for solutions or alternative responses. It draws on participants’ experiences to collectively create theatre and engage in discussion of issues through theatrical means. Our Popular Theatre work focused on issues that the students identified as relevant to their lives. We entitled our project “Life in the Sticks.” Through a collective process, we created a series of scenes depicting what they initially saw as their issues, determined by their rural environment. The stories students told, the vignettes they created and our ensuing theatrical discussions became a sort of “ethnodrama” (Denzin, 1997), revealing risk-taking behaviours, including substance abuse, risky sexual activity and rule breaking, as common to the experiences of these youth. Ultimately, however, they rejected the notion of being “at-risk,” claiming that their risky behaviours were a matter of personal choice and habit. They reclaimed their agency, but left me wondering what motivated these risky choices.

One scene that students created, which we called “*The Bus Trip*,” was based on an incident that occurred at the school the previous year, in which many of my students were involved. It depicted a group of kids being caught for illicitly drinking alcohol on the bus ride home

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from a class trip. In devising the scene, students took on the roles of characters and improvised the situation. The excerpt below is from one of a series of ethnodramatic vignettes I wrote, after the fact, as an arts-based method of representing my work with students. It shows a moment we enacted between two young men whose idea it was to buy the alcohol. In the midst of our re-enactment, I stopped the action temporarily, a common Popular Theatre technique, to delve deeper into the motivation underlying their decision:

*Teacher and a group of drama students are in the midst of analyzing a scene they have collectively created about students being caught drinking on the bus during a class trip.*

Teacher: Let's do an out-scene to when they actually bought the alcohol, okay? You're all on the bus . . . It's going to stop at the rest stop. Everyone gets off and we'll see the scene between Shadzz and Daryl deciding what to do. Okay?

*They set up the scene and improvise. The bus stops at the rest stop and they all get off. Shadzz and Daryl meet on the sidewalk.*

Shadzz: *(to Daryl in character)* So give me some money, man.

Daryl: What for?

Shadzz: I'm gonna get the stuff, remember?

Daryl: Na, forget it.

Shadzz: Come'on man you said back there that you wanted to.

Daryl: . . . I don't know . . .

Shadzz: Come'on, it's just around the corner. I'll go get it and bring it back here.

Daryl: Na . . .

Shadzz: What's the matter? Nobody's gonna know.

Daryl: I don't know Shadzz.

Shadzz: Come'on, Daryl.

Daryl: Okay, what the hell . . . Here. (*Daryl gives Shadzz some money.*)

Teacher: Stop there – for a minute. Daryl, I want to ask your character a question . . . You hesitated to give him the money. Why did you hesitate?

Daryl: I wasn't sure if I wanted to risk it.

Teacher: So, is there risk involved in what you're doing here?

Daryl: Ya.

Teacher: What kind of risk?

Daryl: Well, what we're doing is against the rules. Teacher:  
Whose rules?

Daryl: The school rules I guess.

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Teacher: And where's the risk in that?

Daryl: Well, we might get caught.

Shadzz: And expelled.

Teacher: You admit there may be negative consequences . . . so why do you do it?

Daryl: I don't know?

Teacher: Shadzz, what about your character?

*Shadzz thinks.*

Shadzz: I don't know, just for the rush.

Teacher: For the rush? Is that what risk-taking about? That's why someone might drink booze on a bus trip?

Shadzz: Ya, it's fun.

Teacher: *(Addressing other students on stage and in the audience.)* Have any of you experienced what Shadzz is talking about? Does doing something risky give you a rush?

Tess: Well, YA!

*(Echoes of agreement around the room.)*

Through the dramatic process of taking on roles, re-enacting

the incident and answering questions in character, aspects of students' understandings of the issues were revealed. In Popular Theatre, the function of drama is as a tool for exploration. The notion of drama as an art form is secondary to the investigation of issues that the form allows. Yet, the dramatic process is integral in the way it draws out responses that are experiential and embodied. Shadzz's suggestion that his character took the risk "for the rush," was a response based on his experience of acting out the situation.

The Popular Theatre process, which had students act out experiences from their collective past, was an autoethnographic exploration. Their memories of the bus trip, re-told as a story and improvised in a scene are living artifacts that help them/us better understand the experiences being investigated.

Students' responses to my questions about risk-taking piqued my interest and led me into a review of literature on youth and risk. I found compelling research on adolescent risk taking that suggested rather than focusing on what adults perceive as negative consequences of adolescent behaviour we should consider what youth perceive as the positive outcomes of risky behaviour or the negative outcomes of not participating in risky behaviour (Anderson, et al., 1993; Lopes, 1993).

Also persuasive was Lyng's (1990) "Edgework," a social psychological theory of voluntary risk taking, which sees risk taking as self-created opportunities for free and spontaneous action in response to overwhelming social constraints. Shadzz's response of doing it "for the rush" echoes other research on risk taking applying Lyng's theory of Edgework (Ferrell, 1995; Ferrell, Milovanovic & Lyng, 2001).

A psychoanalytic interpretation of self-destructive or risky behaviour gave further insight. In the unconscious struggle between

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the life drive and the death drive, Copjec suggests, the tendency is for the subject to “recoil before the violence and obscenity of the superego’s incitement to jouissance, to a boundless and aggressive enjoyment” (1994, p. 92). Is it possible that in our postmodern consumer/producer culture, with the loss of authority of the Law, youth are less inclined to resist the call of the superego?

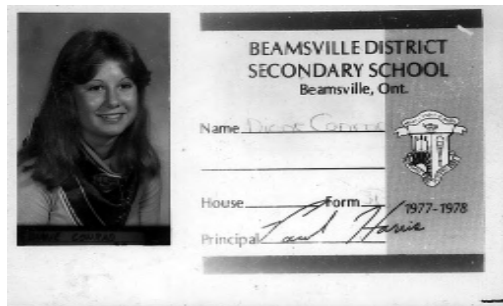
At some point during the process of this investigation, I realized, or became willing to admit to myself, that my interest in working with “at-risk” youth was grounded in my own risky behaviour as a youth. I could no longer disavow or sublimate the significance of my personal history to the research I was conducting. This began an autoethnographic inquiry (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) into my youth. The unearthing of my personal history involved the recovery of a collection of artifacts from my past (Slattery, 2001) and the writing/telling of stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) of my youthful risk-taking experiences that resonated with what the students and the theory were revealing.

The unearthing of artifacts began before I became consciously aware of where my investigation was leading me. On a trip home to Ontario a few summers ago, I visited a friend, with whose family I resided during my grade 12 year, working as their nanny for room and board. In their dark, dank, farmhouse cellar, I had stored a number of boxes of my stuff. From these boxes, that summer, I recovered a number of items about which I had all but forgotten. Though I was not sure why, at the time, I felt these items, yellowed and smelling of mildew, were somehow significant to my research. I gathered them together and brought them back to Edmonton with me.

Like the artifacts themselves, the unearthing of them, the (re)collection of the items from their resting-place in the cellar, and the recreation of the unearthing through my re-telling of it, are part of

my arts-based process. My story of unearthing, and the stories of my youth that the artifacts embody, are artifacts too, as are my students' memories/story/scene of the bus trip. Stories and storytelling in various forms, improvised drama are vital artifacts to this autoethnographic process, as the ways in which I have arrived at new understanding.

The artifacts I unearthed, dated from 1977 to 1980, my last three years of high school. Along with fresh-faced photos of me and my friends, old drama festival programs, my fake I.D. used to get into bars underage and a tattered cheerleading badge, included: My grade 11 yearbook, the inside covers scrawled with my classmates' comments; a research project I completed on parent-youth conflict for my grade 12 sociology class; a small Hallmark date book from 1979, decorated with a bouquet of orange flowers, with the words "Date Book" scratched out and re-titled "Dope Book;" and a one-act play I wrote for my grade 13 playwriting class entitled "*Some Joke.*"





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struck by the way they expose the edge I was playing between being a good student and “having fun:”

“I decided I wouldn’t put something ignorant. So I’ll just say work hard in physics and get your homework done so you can lend it to me. Love Bob.”

“Remember as you go though life keep your eye on the donut not the hole. Good luck in Math (as if you need any). Darlene”

“Toke. Toke. Toke. Have fun enjoy life but Toke period 5. Luv Sue”

“Roll roll roll the joint. Pass it down the line. Take a toke. Inhale the smoke. And blow your little mind. Sam & Janice”



From an autoethnographic perspective, these comments disrupt taken-for-granted notions about the “good student” and the “drug user,” that may contribute to a re-

examination of such labels.

An excerpt from my sociology project, for which I received a 93%, reflects the conflict situation I experienced at home, and my attempt to understand it:

Late adolescence is a time of extreme frustration. I can verify this by the experiences of myself and my friends. The pressures upon every teen by parents, close friends as well as peers, school or the labour force and the rest of society are great . . . Often he [sic] cannot talk to his parents because they will not accept his viewpoints and he feels he has no one to encourage him, and therefore he releases his frustrations through aggressive or rebellious behaviour.

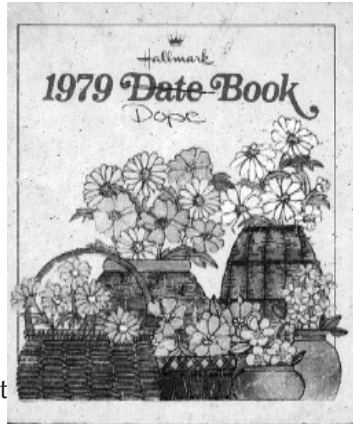
Whether my aim was to understand our motivation or find excuses for the rebellious behaviour of my friends and myself, my feelings of teenage angst are exposed.

The “Dope Book’s” cryptic scribbles in the squares allotted for each day are incriminating, recording illicit events in the lives of my friends and I including the numbers of reefers we smoked each day:

*“Wednesday January 3, 1979 - Karen, Alice, Rhoda 3 reefers – 5 more with Brad and Jerry”*

*Friday February 23, 1979 - Ellen’s all nighter – Karen, Alice, Rhoda – Acid & lotsa reefers.”*

*“Saturday March 10, 1979 – Reefers at Mark’s – the gruesome 4some”*



I cannot help but wonder what compelled me to keep such a record. Was it a way of assuring myself that my experiences were real; a way of bragging, if only to myself, of my friendships and edgy behaviour? Or a way of capturing that feeling of reckless abandon - the overflow of jouissance?

The play I wrote in grade 13 was based on a real incident from my life involving my boyfriend, at the time, Bobby, and his cousin, Suzy. One night during a house party, the night before Suzy was to be sent off to jail for vehicular manslaughter, intoxicated Bobby dashed out the door to take off in Suzy's car, which Suzy had allegedly sold him. Suzy was right behind him wielding a kitchen knife. The argument that ensued ended with Suzy breaking down:

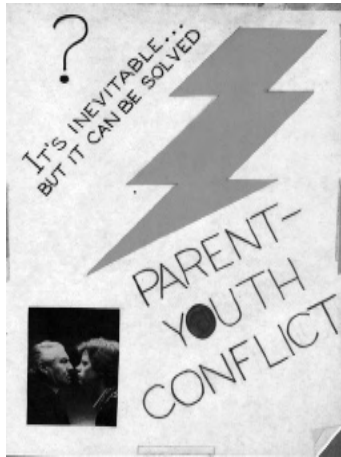
Bobby: (*trying to calm Suzy down*) Okay, okay, you don't have to freak out.

Suzy: Well I am freaking out. Do you wanna know why? Because I'm a freak Bobby. I'm a killer, a maniac, I don't even deserve to live.

Bobby: That's bullshit Suz.

Suzy: They hate me Bobby. I can see it in their eyes. I know why her husband hates me, but what did I do to all of them?

Bobby: They just don't understand, Suz. They've always hated you, and me, even before the accident. They hate us because we have long hair and do drugs and don't live they want us to.



Aside  
at risk through

these boys, even back then, I was trying to understand the risky, illicit experiences of my friends from their perspective.

from putting myself  
my association with

Now, from my vantage point of researcher looking back, these artifacts reveal experiences of my youth, including my risky experiences. They also reveal my perspectives, as a youth, around the very questions of youth behaviour that I am still investigating.

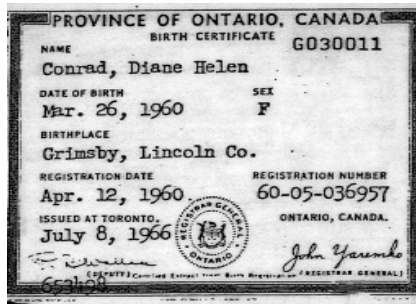
In exploring these artifacts and the stories they tell, I use my personal knowledge to help me in my research, and my research to help

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me make sense of my life experiences. The artifacts and stories help explain my personal connection to my research, express my subjectivity and vulnerability as a researcher (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Adding my stories to those of my students is also an ethical act through which I explore the relationship between the research participants and myself as researcher (Fine, et al., 2000). As a critical researcher, if I ask my participants to share their stories, I have a responsibility to share mine. Thus impelled, the disclosure of my “wayward” past puts me in a risky position alongside the youth experiences I am investigating. A risk perhaps, but a more equitable and empathetic position from which to seek answers about risk-taking. By taking the risk of exposing myself, I experience the anxieties associated with risk as well as the euphoria of exploring the edge of what counts as legitimate research. My disclosure undermines notions of power and authority traditionally associated with the role of the researcher.

My autoethnographic exploration is intended, not as an act of self-discovery, but as a cultural (Ang, 1994) or sub-cultural self-reading, through which the social location and sub-cultural understandings that I bring to my research become explicit – I deliberately construct a position from which to speak for political purposes. Combined, the findings from my Popular Theatre work with students, the theory on risk taking, and my personal understandings via my stories and artifacts, provide a layered exploration (Ronai, 1999) of youth behaviour adding a messiness to “at-risk” that I hope may present a more just version of the truth. My intent is not to validate or legitimate risky youth experiences, as their illegitimacy is what makes them significant. Nor do I mean to present risky youth experiences as unproblematic. Rather, I want to offer one possible counter-narrative that interrupts the “common sense” or taken-for-granted understandings of “at-risk.” As Foucault suggests, attention to knowledge defined as illegitimate by the dominant discourse allows the possibility for things to be

otherwise (1980). Privileging the perceptions of youth regarding their risky behaviour opens a space for re-framing “at-risk,” presenting a more complex picture than one of deviance and deficiency currently suggested by the label -towards an understanding of youth and risk that more fully reflects their reality and better responds to their needs.



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