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Cricketing Dad: An Autoethnography into the Unknown

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Abstract

The qualitative research methodology of autoethnography has been used by the researcher to explore his own lived experience as a father, specifically focusing on his experiences with his son playing cricket. As an autoethnography, the article unfolds as a first-person narrative that endeavours to connect the personal experiences of one particular father to wider social and cultural aspects of being a parent today. The narrative draws on data spanning 18 months to explore the researcher's "unknown" world of being a cricketing Dad.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Cricket, Parenting

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Cricketing Dad: An Autoethnography into the Unknown

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The qualitative research methodology of autoethnography has been used by the researcher to explore his own lived experience as a father, specifically focusing on his experiences with his son playing cricket. As an autoethnography, the article unfolds as a first-person narrative that endeavours to connect the personal experiences of one particular father to wider social and cultural aspects of being a parent today. The narrative draws on data spanning 18 months to explore the researcher's "unknown" world of being a cricketing Dad.

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It's a warm Sunday morning and I'm sitting on a foldout chair facing a cricket oval. My son is out on the oval dressed in his cricket uniform (his "cricket whites"). He's fielding. His eyes are on a fellow team member who is about to bowl this red, hard spherical thing that is a cricket ball. I imagine my son being focused on the ball, wondering whether it might come to him once the child with the bat from the opposition team hits it. I imagine my son thinking about possible scenarios ... will he catch the ball once the batter has struck the ball? Or will he run after the ball, hoping to get it before it hits the boundary? Or will some other team member run down the ball? I look around me at the other Mums and Dads (well, mainly Dads). Some are talking, others remain silent as they watch the game progress.

I surreptitiously look at my watch. It's 9.10 a.m. The game has only been going for forty minutes. There's another two or two and a half hours ahead of me. I wonder how I'm going to make it through that time.

This is my first cricket match. Not just as the father of a child playing his first club cricket match, but the first time I have ever sat down and watched a game of cricket. I have never been to a match before or even watched a match on television. I have never had any interest in the game.

But my son does. It started a couple of months back at school. During lunch time, he started playing cricket with his classmates. The next thing I know he's watching it on TV. When we go to the library he borrows books about cricket – fiction and non-fiction. He spends time in the backyard practising his batting and his bowling. He eventually gets my wife and I playing backyard cricket with him. We are both new to this. Then his school friends tell him he should join the local cricket club. Which brings me to this moment ... A middle-aged man, father of an 11-year-old child, watching my son, hoping (praying?) that if the ball lands near him he catches it, or at least runs it down. For his team. For his teammates. I realise I'm actually feeling anxious here. And not only anxious, but uncomfortable, sitting here with these unknown parents around me, sitting on a foldout chair watching a game I essentially know nothing about. Which makes me realise it's been a long time since I've been out of my comfort zone, where I've tried something new that wasn't of my choosing. I decide to write about this. After all, a lot of what I do as an academic is write. So let's write about this I think. So I do.

But it's more than writing. It's autoethnography because my intention when writing down my autobiographical moments when it came to my induction into the world of being a cricket Dad was to delve into the whys and whats and hows of responding to this new situation in the way I did. My aim was, as Hamilton, Smith, and Worthington (2008) wrote of

autoethnography, to focus on “the social and cultural aspects of the personal” (p. 24). I have done this through presenting narratives of my lived experience. I acknowledge Speedy’s (2013) point about personal narratives not being autoethnography unless there is a critical edge brought to the writing, allowing for reflection, theorising and imagining. I have endeavoured to do this.

What follows are a series of narratives spanning an 18-month period of becoming a cricketing Dad. Like Bartleet (2009), I have chosen “crisis moments” as my narrative about the culture and practice of this new life for me, and having presented these I have endeavoured to resolve these moments, to make sense of them, not only for me, but for you as the reader. You may or may not have experienced being a cricketing or even a sporting parent, but hopefully you can experience what I experienced through my words, situate yourself where I have been, and see some of the broader cultural themes that emerged from my personal experiences.

I have labelled this autoethnography an autoethnography of the “unknown”. My experiences with cricket and being a cricketing parent were literally that – unknown to me. My prior experiences writing autoethnographically have been about exploring the known. That is, I have conducted autoethnographic work on my life as a classroom music teacher, as a teaching academic, and as a researcher. In these autoethnographies I came to the subject matter having experience in the areas I was exploring. I wrote, I reflected, and I “dug deeper” to further my understanding of my lived experiences. But this autoethnography is different – I started documenting my experiences coming from a zero knowledge and understanding basis. This was scary. And 18 months later I still do not feel as if I belong to this world.

There is nothing new about conducting this kind of autoethnographic work. Exploring new situations and experiences are present in a lot of autoethnographic work. For example, there is Lee’s (2010) account of experiencing physical struggle when confined to bed after laser eye surgery, or Lollar’s (2010) account of loss following a house fire. These are two quite spectacular and moving autoethnographies. As I re-read their narratives I felt a sense of connection with both authors, articulating their fears and frustrations in experiencing such a new situation, as was my experience as a cricketing Dad.

The main data source in this study were my own personal journals where I documented my experiences and responses to these experiences. Duncan (2004) and Hamilton, Smith, and Worthington (2008) stress that autoethnography should draw on multiple sources of data – not just the memories and recollections of the autoethnographer – to add to the credibility and rigour of the autoethnography. With this in mind, and to endeavour further understanding of my experiences I also talked with key people who were part of this autoethnography, namely my son Jack, Wendy - my partner and mother of Jack, and three of the other cricketing Dads I was in regular contact with during the cricket season. These were not interviews, but they were more than casual conversations. I would raise issues that I had been grappling with in my own journaling with these people to get their perspectives and would take notes during our conversations that I would refer to later.

Data was collected over an 18-month period, beginning with Jack joining the local cricket club through his first season of cricket and into his second season of cricket. Being an autoethnographic narrative the focus is on “the feelings evoked by the account [the narrative] to speak to the reader in place of traditional analysis. Therefore, attempts at abstraction are resisted because, by definition, autoethnography is evocative” (Dillow, 2009, p. 1347). That is, “the analysis is built into the story—the story is somewhat like its own theory” (Jensen-Hart & Williams, 2010, p. 451). In writing and rewriting each part of the narrative I was continually “analysing” the data. Having done this, as Denzin and Lincoln (1997) wrote of autoethnography, I am now “letting it go, hoping for readers who will bring the same careful attention to ... [my] words in the context of their own lives” (p. 208).

... Back to that first cricket match. It's half-time drinks break. My son walks up to me, having spent the last 90 minutes in the hot sun, most of the time in the field except for a short spell bowling to the batting opposition. "Did you see me bowl?" he asks excitedly. "I didn't bowl anyone out, but the coach said I did really well stopping the batter from making more than one run." He's beaming, which makes me beam too. He sits down next to me and drinks. "Enjoying yourself?" I ask. He nods and smiles, telling me that this is really good. I wish I could say I am experiencing similar elation but I'm not. I have a sore back and neck from sitting in this cheap foldout chair and I am so bored watching this game, I cannot recall time ever moving slower. I have a newspaper with me and after forty minutes I can't help myself, I take it out and start reading. I look up at the other cricketing Mums and Dads – they are all still watching the match, either commenting to each other about what's happening or sitting there transfixed by the "action." I guiltily put the newspaper down.

Drinks end, the two teams head back to the oval. Jack's team is now batting. But it's an hour before he gets a turn at batting. He sees himself as a bowler; this morning he expressed some fear about batting, about facing that hard red ball being hurled towards him at 40 kilometres an hour. I watch as a boy who looks to be at least a couple of years older than Jack runs up and bowls the ball. It heads straight towards Jack's head, protected by a cricket helmet. I watch him move quickly and BOOM! The ball hits the stumps, he's bowled out. "Bad luck, mate," says one of the Dads next to me, "it happens to the best of us." I rise from my chair and walk down towards the edge of the oval. I see Jack walk towards me, taking his helmet off. His lower lip is quivering, I see his eyes tear up. But he doesn't cry. His teammates say "bad luck" and "you'll be right next time" and other words of consolation. He comes to me, I hug him, tell him it's okay and he'll be right next time. He says nothing, just lets me hold him. He's shuddering. I feel that he's only just managing to hold back those tears. One of the other Dads is down there with the team. He walks over to us. "Cheer up Jack, you did okay. That was their fastest bowler." He taps Jack on the shoulder. Jack looks up. "Take a look at this, Jack." He picks up Jack's bat and begins telling him how he should have been holding the bat and this and that about standing in certain positions when facing a fast bowler. I am in awe that this man knows this stuff, and Jack is now looking, nodding, no hint of tears. He takes the bat and practices what this Dad has just been telling him. "That's it," says the Dad. "You've got it." And Jack is beaming.

I'm not. I'm feeling beyond inadequate. How come this guy has this knowledge and can get Jack smiling, actually *beaming*? All I could do was hold my son as he stewed in his misery.

The game finishes. Jack's team wins. He's ecstatic, particularly when his coach commends him for his fielding. Then it's packing up time. Mr Cricketing Advice Dad from before is with me packing the chairs away. "Your son will come good. He's new to all this. Me, I've been doing it since I was a five-year-old. And I've played competition cricket for decades, I still do." He winks at me. "It'll all be good mate, stick with it."

Stick with it. I really don't want to. I *really* don't want to. The idea of doing this for the next three months fills me with dread. Until Jack says to me, "That was the best Sunday morning *ever*." So I decide to stick with it.

"Come on Dad, let's play some cricket." I've just gotten home from work. I'm tired and just want to put my feet up. "Come on, Dad, *pleeeeeease*, I've been looking forward to

playing all day.” I change, then head out the back door into the backyard. Jack has the bat ready, some balls, the wickets are up and he decides I should bat first.

When we first started with backyard cricket I did okay. I hit more balls than Jack did. I bowled him out more times than he bowled me out. Not that I was counting ... But that rapidly changed as he played more and more cricket at school and at club level. Now he pretty much beats me in every game we play – and we play a lot. The sun is starting to set but we are only halfway through our game. The neighbours emerge and sit on their outdoor deck, drinks in hand. We wave at each other. I get back to my bowling. As I run up and throw a badly timed ball at Jack I am aware that they are behind me, looking down on me. I can just imagine what they are thinking about this middle-aged man doing some really bad bowling to his son. I tell Jack I’ll bowl him just six more balls and then we’ll go inside. “But we won’t have finished the game! Come *on*!! We’ve got to finish the game!” I say no we don’t but he persists with “This is so unfair, you promised a full game. This is just so *wrong*!!!” So now my neighbours don’t just know I’m a bad cricketer, but I’m a parent who breaks a promise to his kid and a parent who has a child who clearly feels okay about taking verbal abuse from his son. Nice.

I bowl six more balls and call the end of the game. Jack is fuming, still going on about how unfair it all is. As I head back indoors my neighbours wave. Rod (the Dad) says, “Mate, I don’t know how you have the energy to do that at the end of a working day ... more power to you.” I realise I’ve never seen him in his backyard playing cricket or any other sport with his two boys.

Jack’s 12th birthday party was shaping up to be a good one. It was to be held in an indoor cricket centre. The management would provide food and two staff members would coordinate and referee a cricket game with the children who attended. Jack hadn’t been this excited about a birthday party in years. Wendy and I were pretty happy too – we didn’t have to organise anything. The manager of the centre said, “All you have to do is send out the party invitations and show up on the day.”

So here we are on the day, the kids are inside playing a game of cricket. They are all running about and having fun. Wendy and I are helping put food out for the half time break – lots of party food. We look on, watching the children play. Wendy takes some photos on her phone. I look on, cheering Jack’s team on.

At half time the boys run into the room where the food and drinks are set up. They eat and drink, talking with each other excitedly. Jack opens his presents, most of which are cricket themed. Then the referee for the match wanders in. “You’re doing a great job,” I comment. “The kids are having a great time.”

“Yes,” he says, “they love their cricket. You two can join in for the second half if you like.”

I look at Wendy. She shakes her head and says, “I couldn’t keep up with them.”

“No problem,” says the referee as he corrals the boys out of the room to play the second half. As he does this I see three faces I know enter the centre – one of the cricketing Dads with his daughter and son, both who play in Jack’s club cricket team. We nod at each other, say fancy meeting you here, and then he asks what’s happening. I explain that this is Jack’s cricket birthday party. He looks on and says, “So it’s just a party thing. No pads, head protection, and they’re using a soft ball.”

I say, “It’s only a game, a birthday game.”

“Hmm,” he says. “Come on kids, let’s pad up and get over to the bowling machine. We have to practice for the weekend’s match.”

This cricket Dad is a nice person. He helps out at club training and is always on the outskirts of the field when a game is in play, preparing his two children for their stint at batting or bowling.

While Jack's party cricket game continues Cricketing Dad and his children are batting balls that are launched relentlessly from the bowling machine, launching them at incredibly fast speeds, from all sorts of different angles. Cricketing Dad calls out advice to his children as they endeavour to hit these balls. He peppers this advice with positive comments to his children. Wendy is looking over at them. She says, "He takes it all very seriously, doesn't he?"

"A little too seriously," I say.

"Do you think so?" she says.

I continue to watch him and listen to what he says to his children, the advice he gives about looking at the ball, at repositioning the body depending on the angle the ball is coming at, at remembering to protect the wickets, about how to move the bat when the ball is struck. These are things I haven't heard before. This is not the kind of *constructive* advice I have been giving to Jack when we play backyard cricket. When we do that it's just a bit of fun ... isn't it? I don't really know these things.

I continue to watch and listen.

Meanwhile Jack's party cricket game is winding down. His side has won and he couldn't be happier. The boys eat and drink and laugh a lot. Jack's party finishes up and parents pick up their children. Jack looks over at Cricketing Dad and his children. "That looks like something I'd like to do," he says. "That could really help me with my batting. Can we book a session with the bowling machine, Dad?"

Jack's club cricket team makes it to the semi-finals. Jack's team is bowling first (and fielding). He comes over to me and asks about whether he thinks he should bowl fast or medium fast. I tell him I'm not sure and that he should probably ask his coach or one of the other Dads. But he says, "Dad, you should know. You've been training with me and talking with the other Dads." He's right – I have been talking with some of the other Dads about what I should work on with Jack. It had begun a few weeks earlier when I was standing next to one of the cricketing Dads who commented on how much Jack had improved over the season. He said I could work with him on his batting stance and he showed me exactly what he meant. I thanked him for the advice and we worked on it that week. The following week it was bowling technique.

"Okay then," I tell Jack, "Go out fast. They won't be expecting that."

And he does.

This game is also where Jack gets his first cricket injury. When Jack is batting, the bowler bowls a ball that strikes two of his fingers. Jack falls straight to the ground, howling in pain. Wendy and I jump up and out of our seats and head to the edge of the cricket oval as Jack comes off the field.

"How are you, buddy?" I say. "That looks like it hurt."

"It's *really* sore."

"Do we take you to a doctor now?"

Jack shakes his head and says, "I want to see if we win. Then we can go."

We sit with Jack as he sits on the sidelines. Over the next hour, I watch as the swelling on his fingers increases and the pain clearly does not subside. But he wants to stay and watch the rest of his match.

The match ends and Jack's team has lost. The team are glum. The coach brings the team together and congratulates them on a great season. He singles out each person and says

something about their performance today. When he comes to Jack he says, “Congratulations on some great fielding Jack. And congratulations on getting your first real cricket injury.”

I look at Wendy, raising an eyebrow. She returns the look. Afterwards, as we are packing up, one of the other cricketing Dads comes over and says he’s enjoyed having Jack on the team. He has two boys in the team. One of them has already had a shoulder reconstruction as a result of playing cricket. “It kept him out of action for a few months, cost a fortune in hospital bills, but he’s back. It’s part of all the fun.”

Later, driving home in the car, Wendy says to me, “I thought this was supposed to be a safe sport.” At which point Jack lists the kinds of injuries cricketers regularly get and how they get them. Wendy listens on in horror. That evening she says to me, “Maybe we should reassess this whole cricket thing ... I didn’t realise how dangerous it is.”

The following week Jack is awarded his team’s fielder of the season award. He gets a trophy for this. He wants to be photographed with it. He wants to take it to school. He wants to show it to the next-door neighbours. He wants to Skype his grandparents and show it to them. I overhear him talking to himself about being a champion fielder and then holding the trophy above his head. One evening I even find him asleep in bed hugging the trophy.

Jack has had various awards before, at school for topping his class in spelling, for doing well in a maths competition, for making it to the district competition in cross country, and he’s successfully completed five piano examinations. In fact, he’s done more advanced music examinations than any other child in his school. For all these things, he’s been proud. He keeps all his awards and certificates. But nothing takes pride of place like this cricket trophy. He informs me that we should buy a trophy cabinet for it. I say I’ll think about it.

It’s now officially the “off season” for club cricket. But this is not stopping Jack practising in the backyard. The backyard cricket games continue. He’s watching the cricket on TV. We go to a live match to see Australia play Sri Lanka. “I guess this whole cricket thing isn’t going to go away, is it?” says Wendy, “whether there’s a risk of injury or not.”

“I guess not,” I say, turning on my tablet to get some up-to-date scores for how the Australian cricket team are going in their overseas tour. “Hey Jack,” I call out, “guess who just scored a half century for Australia ... ?”

I grew up in a musical family. Music was the centre of everything. My parents were musicians, and from a very early age I was learning the violin and piano. My days began by getting up at daybreak, eating breakfast, then practising my violin and piano. I did this from the age of 5 and continued all the way through university where I studied music. The expectation – from my parents and myself – was that when I graduated I would get a job playing violin in a symphony orchestra. But in an act of minor rebellion I opted out of this and went to teachers’ college. A year later I was teaching music in schools, and did so for the next decade. After that it was off to academia and the world of universities where my focus was on teaching and researching music and music education.

My parents actively discouraged me from taking part in sports. Music was where my time was to be spent best. I never really gave this a second thought. I remember as a child being satisfied with being in the school orchestra and choir, where I got to socialise with other children, then in my teenage years I saw these music ensembles as opportunities to meet and mix with girls. Although at the age of 15 my new girlfriend, who sang in the choir, asked me what sports I played. When I said none, she said she found that hard to believe. We lasted less than a fortnight.

Then I took up cross country with a vengeance. When I wasn’t practising my violin or piano or doing the mandatory school homework, I was out running. I enjoyed this. It was

solitary and it made me feel good. Soon I was competing and doing well in both school and interschool cross country competitions. I also found myself being accepted into different social groups. I was being invited to parties with people I had never mixed with. It was a whole new world. Sort of.

When I left school, I left behind cross country running. My focus was on music. When Jack was born, I was focused on music too. Sure, we'd go for walks, kick a ball around, and play chase games. Wendy and I knew the importance of physical activity for our growing child. But actual sport? Organised sport? It wasn't even on our (my) radar. It really was all about the music. Singing together since birth. Moving to music as a toddler. Beginning musical play with musical instruments as a three-year-old. Teaching Jack the piano from the age of four. This was something I believed in. This was my career, my home life, my background – I believed the power and value of music in my life and in the lives of the people around me. I'd experienced it, the sheer pleasure that playing music brought me, the intrinsic value of playing music to me. And then there were all the other “benefits” – that music brought people together, playing music with someone enhanced social skills, that it positively affected our well-being, that learning an instrument demanded discipline ... I had lived and was still living it. I *believed* it. For me – and for my son. I was, relatively speaking, an expert in this field.

In sport, I wasn't.

So, when the world of cricket became a part of my life I was a resistor, despite seeing the joy it brought to my son. Despite seeing that as he got more and more immersed in cricket it began to change his attitude to school and his friendships. Jack started at a new school the year he got interested in cricket. He was very unhappy at this new school at first, spending lunchtimes alone. Yet when he started playing cricket with a group of boys this all changed. He was part of a group, was making new friends. And this was all occurring because of cricket. I witnessed first-hand when he was talking to two of these new friends how they revered his intimate knowledge of cricket statistics that he had learnt in a relatively short period of time. His playing sport and being knowledgeable about this particular sport meant that he was an expert. I knew these things – yet I was still resistant to this new world of cricket.

Why? I wasn't the expert. I didn't *believe* in sport like I believed in music. To buy into the cricket thing I had to change – the way I thought about sport, about my parenting, about the way I behaved.

This wasn't easy. But the joy Jack got from his involvement in cricket could not be denied. So, little by little, things began to change. I moved from outsider to involvement in Jack's cricketing life, albeit through peripheral participation, “a constant process of becoming in and belonging to a community that is itself becoming and belonging to the practitioners” (Lee & Roth, 2005, p. 380). This was the community of the cricket club. I lacked the expert knowledge that the other Cricketing Dads had, that they were able to pass on to Jack, that he respected and listened to. Despite my initial boredom at having to be at his first club cricket match, I continued to attend, to support him, talk to other more knowledgeable Dads, watch what other Dads would say and do to the children to help him prepare. I was not the expert to my son when it came to cricket like I had been when it came to music. I was learning. I was outside my comfort zone.

I was starting to enjoy it.

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