

# Why Autoethnography?

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**Abstract:** Autoethnography addresses the need and desire to make the human sciences more human by writing in ways that are more poignant, touching, vulnerable, and heartfelt. Since social work is a field not only of facts but also of meanings and values, researchers should not be obliged to cling to a narrow range of methodologies and writing genres that may be scientifically acceptable but poorly suited to the broad objectives of the field. Concerned more with evocation than information, autoethnography enables researchers and practitioners to address what it feels like, and what it can mean, to be alive and living in a chaotic and uncertain world, and to show others how they might endure it and move forward. As we developed evocative autoethnography, we not only questioned the boundaries between social sciences and humanities, we tried to stretch and cross them in ways that would create new practitioners and new genres for representing lived experience appealing to the hearts and senses of readers as well as their intellects.

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## Why autoethnography?

The meteoric rise of autoethnography testifies to a strong desire to invigorate the human sciences, energizing a generation of researchers and practitioners across the globe who believe that one of the most interesting things about life is its unpredictability. Concerned more with evocation than information, autoethnography enables researchers and practitioners to address what it feels like, and what it means, to be alive and living in a chaotic and uncertain world, and to show other human beings how they might endure it and move forward.

Evocative autoethnography refuses to exclude the *I*, the first-person voice because, after all, the first-person always is the one who speaks as author on the pages of a book, a monograph, or a journal. Recognizing the inherent fallibilities of representation, autoethnographers refuse to conform to the view that the human sciences should look like the natural sciences and that scholars must conduct research accordingly in distanced, objectifying, neutral, and value-free ways. We autoethnographers reject the distinction between a *higher* realm of conceptual, analytical life where predictability and certainty may be found and a *lower* realm residing in sensory, material, corporeal, and practical life, which is inherently unsteady and uncertain (Jackson, 1989). Autoethnographers, instead, seek to put their readers *in the experience*, appealing to their hearts and senses as well as their intellects (Bochner and Ellis, 2016).

The question of what constitutes legitimate research in the human sciences is unsettled and contested. Fields of inquiry change over time and as they change so do researchers' conceptions of the kinds and purposes of research as well as how research should be communicated (Bochner, 2014; Bochner and Adams, 2020). The desire for a genre of writing or performing empirical research that would be self-reflexive, consciousness-raising, value-centered, and absorbing within the human sciences is not new. For example, Witkin (2000) published an editorial at the turn of the century in which he called for the development of alternative genres of writing in the field of social work. He urged researchers and practitioners to feel free to shape their writing to the needs and objectives of the field rather than to received ideas about how one ought to write in a science-based discipline. If social work is a field not only of facts but also of meanings and values, then researchers should not be obliged to cling to a narrow range of methodologies and writing genres that may be scientifically acceptable but poorly suited to the broad objectives of the field (Witkin, 2000). Regrettably, the overly standardized and confining forms of writing recognized as legitimate in the field—the third-person, objectifying, neutral scientific voice—often rearrange lived experiences of human beings in conceptual and jargon-saturated ways that leave human pain and suffering inconspicuous, and their unfolding human journeys inaccessible.

This craving for objectivity, standardization, and methodological conformity can feel alienating, leaving many seasoned scholars drained and numb. Richardson

(1994) articulated several reasons her discipline, sociology, needed to be infused with greater energy and vitality: Our work is underread; undergraduates find themselves bored to tears by most of the publications they are assigned; graduate students often say our scholarship is dry and inaccessible; seasoned scholars confess they don't finish half of what they start reading; and the public hardly knows we exist.

What can the human sciences do about this? How might they attract a wider range of participating readers? Witken's (2000) answer: Promote evocative, critical, and reflexive modes of writing that better express the profession's commitment to human rights and social justice. Populate our books and monographs with fully human, social beings. Legitimate more varied, alternative writing genres. One alternative that Witkin (2000) identified for reaching these goals is *autoethnography*.

## **Our aspirations**

Witten's inspiring editorial and the four literary-leaning research papers he solicited for that issue dovetail with a project that had been capturing our attention for much of the previous decade (and the twenty-two years that followed). From the beginning of our collaboration in 1990, we believed that the human sciences needed to become more human—more poignant, touching, vulnerable, and heartfelt. Entering the middle years of our academic lives, we yearned to do research that was fulfilling and with which we had a personal and emotional connection. We longed to use forms of expressing lived experience in which we would not need to suppress our subjectivity, where we could become more attuned to the subjectively felt experiences of others, and where we would be liberated to reflect on the consequences of our work not only for others, but also for ourselves. We wanted to be able to express all parts of ourselves—emotional, spiritual, intellectual, moral – and integrate these parts into our work, as we do in our lives. We embraced subjectivity because, as Le Guin (1989, p. 151) observed, 'to be subjective is to be embodied, to be a body, vulnerable, violable' – in other words, to be alive.

Each of us had been well 'trained' in the orthodox, empiricist traditions of social science inquiry and had mastered the conventional vocabulary associated with it – prediction and control, reliability and validity, distance and neutrality, rigor, abstraction, generalization and hypothesis-testing. Our graduate professors told us, 'Keep yourself out of the text. Don't write in the first person, because that's unprofessional. Frame your observations in the lexicon of sociological or psychological concepts.' For us, and many of our colleagues, however, the distanced, third person voice did not come naturally. It felt not only unnatural but also inauthentic (Hurst and Carson, 2021).

Though the two of us started our academic lives at different times, at different

universities, and in different disciplines (Communication Studies and Sociology), we had similar experiences. As graduate students, then as beginning professors, we did not feel as if we could challenge the boundaries of what constituted 'legitimate' research in our field. Senior scholars were the gatekeepers, not us. At first, we simply wanted to please our teachers and mentors. Then we felt as if we had to gain the approval of our colleagues and senior professors who would be judging the significance of our work. They were our principal audience. Rarely, if ever, were we asked who was using our research, or what difference our work was making out in the world.

As time passed, we gained experience and some success publishing traditional research articles in mainstream journals. Our uneasiness, however, continued to escalate. Increasingly, we felt alienated trying to conform to these methodological directives and the defensive writing conventions aligned with them. Adhering to these rules inhibited our desire to form personal and caring relations with the people we studied, and stifled our yearning to write in ways that could bring our readers closer to the experiences we were trying to convey. We wanted readers to inhabit what we wrote, to *enter into* the experiences we were depicting actively, instead of *standing apart* from them as spectators. We were no longer convinced that the traditional empiricist way of talking, thinking about, and studying people was *the one and only* vocabulary that could point us toward the better possible worlds we were seeking to make through our research.

We were not alone. Consider academic psychology, for example. 'Academic psychology did not have to become scientific,' writes Freeman (2016) 'certainly not in the way it has...it could have emerged in a quite different form, more particular, more historical, more cultural, more artful' (p. 363). Imagine that, an artful science of psychology! Imagine psychologists allowing the people they study to live on the page. Instead of relying on analysis grounded in statistics, the appeal of academic psychology could have rested on the poetic resonance of evocation. What if psychology had become principally a storytelling kind of science that embraced artful resonance as the means of bringing readers into encounters with the otherness of others, evoking feelings deep in the hearts of readers who connected as both witnesses and participants in moments of living that bring meaning out of chaos? *Oh, if only!*

In the early months of our relationship, when the two of us talked to each other about our estrangement from the mainstream of our respective disciplines, we realized we had lost faith in the orthodoxy. We no longer wanted to be a part of that conversation, using that vocabulary, playing that language game (Ellis and Bochner, 1992; Ellis and Flaherty, 1992). But what other ways of talking, thinking, studying, and writing about actual people were available?

## Paradigm shift

We met in January 1990 and have been immersed in conversation ever since. We try to live up to Broyard's image of talk as 'the kiss of life' (1992, p. 33). We have seen for ourselves how good conversation in the context of a trusting and wilful connection can resuscitate what has been traumatized, breathing new life into a relationship gasping for air, not only how we related to each other (Ellis and Bochner, 1992), but also to what research could be and do.

We think of *evocative autoethnography* (Bochner and Ellis, 2016) as emblematic of that observation, a genre of writing that potentially changes and enhances people's lives, both writers and readers, and also is a pleasure to read. Evocative autoethnography encourages others – readers and/or audiences – to enter, dwell in, encounter, and allow themselves to converse with what they hear.

Initially, we imagined a project that would be designed to break away from the mechanistic 'creature science' (Becker, 1968) that had long dominated research in the human sciences. Inspired by 'the narrative turn' (MacIntyre, 1984; Bruner, 1990; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Kreisworth, 1992), we endorsed storytelling modes of writing and performing lived experiences in which qualitative researchers across a wide array of academic disciplines would feel liberated to experiment with hybrid forms of ethnographic representation that blend, bend, and blur the genres of essay, short story, memoir, journalism, diary, and field research (Bochner 1994; Ellis 1997; Ellis and Bochner, 1996b).

Our goal was transgressive. We not only questioned the boundaries between social sciences, arts, and humanities; we tried to stretch and cross them in ways that would create new practitioners and new genres of representation. In the process, we hoped to create new readers and a new generation of students drawn to a different kind of empirical inquiry. The work of inquiry in the human sciences would no longer be restricted to knowing – the *epistemological* – but would also be directed toward caring, feeling, and being – the *ontological*. Ideally, readers would not only know but also *feel* the truth of autoethnographic accounts of lived experiences and thus be more fully immersed and engaged by them – morally, aesthetically, politically, and intellectually (Bochner and Ellis, 1996).

By the mid-1990s a clear vision of an alternative, qualitative social science had emerged. 'The age of a putative value-free social science appears to be over,' Denzin (1994) declared in the first *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (1994, p. 501), denouncing the privileged status of positivist and post-positivist claims to universal, authoritative knowledge. 'I believe the methods for making sense of experience are always personal,' he conceded. 'One learns about method by thinking about how one makes sense of one's own life' (Denzin, 1994, p. 501). The obvious alternative was a personal, narrative understanding, 'a sense of what I have become which can only be given in a story' (Taylor, 1989, p. 48).

In 1997, Denzin published *Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the*

21<sup>st</sup> Century in which he praised efforts like ours to make social science texts ‘a means for the reader’s own moral experience’ (p. 202), and called special attention to *narratives of the self* that ‘show us how to feel the sufferings of others’ (p. 201), privilege emotions and emotionality, and ‘humanize the ethnographic disciplines’ (p. 215). Still, the term *autoethnography* appeared only once in Denzin’s text, and only as a footnote to Carolyn’s chapter on evocative autoethnography (Ellis, 1997). But Denzin may have intuited the enormous paradigm-shifting potential of autoethnography, because he invited us to author the first handbook chapter that would explicitly highlight autoethnography and personal narrative (Ellis and Bochner, 2000).

Although we recognized that autoethnography was a blurred genre that covered many different forms of first-person accounts and narratives of personal experience – self-ethnographies, socio-autobiographies, confessional tales, ethnographic memoirs, indigenous ethnographies, and ethno-autobiographies – we decided to use our monograph to treat autoethnography as a *genus* or *genre* under which many species of autobiographical narrative and self-ethnography could fall. In effect, we were engaging in a rhetorical process of forming a narrative identity for a loosely-aligned community of scholars. In light of the thrilling and enthusiastic responses to *Composing Ethnography* (Ellis and Bochner, 1996a) and a special issue of *Contemporary Ethnography* we had edited on ‘Taking Ethnography into the Twenty-First Century’ (Ellis and Bochner, 1996b), we formed the distinct impression of an expanding population of scholars across the globe who identified with our project but lacked the feeling of solidarity and community that a unifying narrative identity could provide. By identifying *autoethnography as a versatile genre of primarily first-person writing* with fluid and expansive boundaries, we were encouraging others to see themselves as one of us and attach themselves to the ideals of an autoethnographic way of life and work. We knew we were not alone. Many other people were seeking to facilitate greater tolerance, if not genuine enthusiasm, for the new ground that was being broken by writers, artists, and performers eager to experiment with genre-bending and messy-text forms of representation that depart from the conventions of third-person, silent authorship. But to be candid, we did not anticipate what would take place over the next twenty-two years. In 1999, when we were writing our handbook chapter, we were able to identify fewer than 50 scholarly articles or chapters focusing explicitly on autoethnography. In 2014, a Google Scholar search yielded over 17,000. This morning, there were more than 70,000!

Many factors have contributed to the rapid escalation of interest in, enthusiasm for, and legitimation of autoethnography. The opportunities that came our way to give workshops and present keynotes in New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, South America, Asia, Canada, Finland, Denmark, Poland, China, Great Britain, Malaysia, and Israel bolstered our confidence that we and our colleagues had identified a strong desire across the globe to bring subjectivity, emotion, and vulnerable writing into the human sciences. Edited books and chapters (for example, Adams, Boylorn,

and Tillmann, 2021; Adams and Holman Jones, 2008; Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Carless and Douglass, 2013; Ellis and Adams, 2014; Holman Jones, 2005; Holman Jones and Adams, 2010), texts (such as Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis, 2015; Bochner and Ellis, 2016; Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004; 2009; Spry, 2011), two 700 page handbooks (Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis, 2013; Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis, 2022), anthologies (Sikes, 2013), and journals such as *Journal of Autoethnography*, *Qualitative Inquiry* and *International Review of Qualitative Research* also validated the relevance, significance, and breadth of autoethnographic inquiry and lay the groundwork for a future pedagogy and ontology of autoethnography.

More importantly, the rise of autoethnography was driven by the ways in which it touched people where they lived, releasing what had become suppressed inside many people. Autoethnography struck a chord in students and seasoned scholars whose personal connection to research (and the people they studied) had been stifled and inhibited – if not crushed – by discredited methodological directives, and inhibiting writing conventions. Autoethnographic writers seek to tell personal stories that invite others to think *and* to feel. Eager to depart the safe and comfortable space of conventional academic writing in order to engage in non-alienating research practices, the new breed of qualitative researchers wanted to read and write texts that would make hearts skip a beat (Bochner, 2012; Hyde, 2010) and could help themselves and other people envision different ways of living with themselves and others. They also understood that doing, reading, and viewing research focused on human longing, pleasure, pain, loss, grief, suffering, or joy could make them feel more alive and perhaps even morally better persons. A scan of Google Scholar reveals that every discipline in the human sciences with which we are familiar has made use of one or another form of autoethnography, such as evocative, critical, collaborative, or analytical.

## **Autoethnography, A genre of doubt and a way of life**

For most of our academic lives, we devoted our teaching and research to the goal of integrating personal and academic experience. We have lived the life of academic writers, though, as retired professors, we no longer feel pressure to publish. To be candid, we have not felt any outside pressure for the past thirty years.

What we did feel was inspiration, a motivation to transgress the received view of social science inquiry as neutral, detached, and disinterested. We described our early attempts to breach conventions of writing and research as ‘breaking bad’ (Bochner and Ellis, 2016) though our approach was decidedly more loving than Walter White’s, who had not yet come onto the scene. Holman Jones (2021, pp. 35-36) has portrayed what we were doing as ‘a feral pedagogy’ of narrative and autoethnography that recognized the academy as ‘a place of deeply held exclusions.’

We used whatever ‘street-cred’ we had as senior and well-published scholars to break away from our domestication, critique homogenizing ideas about truth, reality, and knowledge, and legitimate new forms of research and writing (Holman Jones, 2018).

In the 1990s, we formulated autoethnography strategically as a mode of resistance to conventional ethnographic writing practices, as an ethnographic alternative, as a critical response to concerns about silent authorship and researcher reflexivity, and as a humanizing, moral, aesthetic, political, and personal form of representation. We took what Rorty (1991, p. 76) called ‘an experimental attitude’ that eschewed the objectivity of laws and theories in favor of a ‘radical empiricism’ in which we make ourselves experimental subjects and treat our experiences as primary data (Jackson, 1989).

Autoethnography not only permits but encourages a focus on self-understanding. But this concentration on self-understanding need not be exclusively academic. *Autoethnography is not only a research methodology but also a way of life* (Bochner, 2020). The autoethnographic way of life originates in doubt and uncertainty. To be alive is to be uncertain. Autoethnography suits us, and people similar to us, because it is a genre of doubt, a vehicle for exercising, embodying, portraying, and enacting uncertainty. In academic autoethnography our enactment of doubt can satisfy our readers’ hunger for reality and desire to know ‘what it feels like for one human being to be alive, and by implication, all human beings’ (Shields, 2013, p. 179).

Autoethnography allows a person to lean into uncertainty rather than struggle against it. The shape of autoethnography is not the exclamation point (!) but the question mark (?). Autoethnography is not a discourse of order, stability, control, and destiny but one of ambiguity, contradiction, contingency, and chance. Other genres of empirical inquiry show an insatiable appetite for abstractions, facts, and rigor; autoethnographers hunger after details, meanings, and peace of mind. These are not issues to be resolved only differences to be lived with (Rorty, 1982). We autoethnographers acknowledge our contingency and finitude; we open ourselves to otherness, dedicate ourselves to social justice and narrative ethics, and seek to apply our moral imagination and desire for edification to keep conversation going. We believe that as long as we can keep dialogue alive, we can sustain our hope of living better lives and in a more just and loving world. We know that suffering is an inevitable part of every life and, as elders, we nurture an autoethnographic temperament (Bochner, 2017) in order to prepare to face the inevitable travails of an ageist and stigmatizing society and the uncertainties of old age to which we must acclimate (Ellis, 2018). We autoethnographers want our readers to get what many of us seek in our lives – whether young or old – a sense of connection and something we can feel deep in our guts and our souls. As David Henry Wallace expressed it, ‘in a deep, significant conversation with another consciousness, I feel human and unalone’ (Miller, 1996). That is how we understand the appeal and mission of autoethnography.



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