

# Tensions in managing the online network development of autoethnographers: A four-way dialogue

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**Abstract:** Although literature exists on the methodological development of autoethnographers in the classroom context, little has been written about achieving such development in online networks of dispersed individuals, and the social psychological difficulties between senior members of such networks that might ensue. This conversational autoethnography developed after Alec Grant, the first author, angrily withdrew by email from the South Coast Autoethnography Network (SCAN). Since its inception in 2013, the hub, or centre of operating activity of SCAN has historically been mostly shared between a small number of academics working in, or associated with, Sussex University and the University of Brighton in the south coast of England. With around 65 participants, SCAN aims to facilitate the development of autoethnographers, with many of its members inexperienced in the approach to differing degrees. In their conversational exchange, the authors explore, respond to, and try to make sense of and resolve, the tensions that developed in the group before and after Alec's withdrawal from it. The authors believe that this article captures many of the interpersonal difficulties that might inevitably arise between senior members, in autoethnographic networks internationally. They therefore hope that it will serve as a useful resource for individual readers and network groups.

**Keywords:** autoethnography; autoethnography groups; online autoethnography networking; autoethnographer mentoring; autoethnographer development

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## Introduction

Useful literature exists on facilitating the methodological development of autoethnographers in the classroom context (Alexander, 2013; Ellis, 2003). However, little has been written about achieving such development in online networks of dispersed individuals, and how social psychological difficulties between senior members of such networks can emerge.

This four-way conversational autoethnography developed after Alec Grant, the first author, angrily withdrew by email from the South Coast Autoethnography Network (SCAN). Since its inception in 2013, the hub, or centre of operating activity of SCAN has historically been mostly shared between a small number of academics working in, or associated with, Sussex University and the University of Brighton in the south coast of England. At the time of writing, the second and fourth authors, Jamie and Ali, are the co-coordinators of the network. It has around 65 participants, who are mainly academics spread across the south and midlands of England, with a minority in other countries in and outside the UK and abroad. SCAN aims to facilitate the development of autoethnographers, with many of its members inexperienced in the approach to differing degrees. Since the start of the COVID pandemic, the group has met via Zoom.

In their conversational exchange, the authors explore, respond to, and try to make sense of tensions that developed in the group before and after Alec's withdrawal from it. Since the conversation builds on an original extended disagreement between Alec and Trude (Klevan and Grant, 2022, pp.90-126), Trude as third author participates in the conversation as a valued insider to the context rather than the specific situation.

We believe that the perspectives expressed in this article capture many of the tensions that inevitably might arise between senior members, in autoethnographic networks internationally. We therefore hope that it will serve as a useful resource for – as far as is possible – identifying, making some sense of, and resolving these tensions before they become too destructive. In deliberately resisting writing a conventional author consensus conclusion to the article, our hope is that readers will 'pick up the baton' of the conversation and extend on it, in ways that make sense in differing environmental contexts.

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One thing we want to do  
is to hold a place of tension  
between differently situated knowledges  
between people  
with different perspectives on  
and different notions of  
what autoethnography is and does  
we deeply value your perspective and experience

and are saddened by your choice to remove yourself  
from the conversation going forwards.

the conversation doesn't move forward  
beyond the comfortable and untroubling  
perspectives are never allowed to be developed  
made adequately explicit  
critically drilled down  
there's little coordinator role modelling  
in all the time I've known you  
I rarely hear about your autoethnographic work  
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## Alec

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of March, 2022, I sent an email to Jamie and Ali:

'I'm writing to let you know that I've decided to leave the South Coast Autoethnography Network. This hasn't been an easy decision to make... as you know, I co-founded it nearly a decade ago. I want to make clear my reasons for exiting... I believe that it's lost its original impetus, dynamism and energy. No longer is it a space devoted to encouraging neophyte autoethnographers to present their work-in-progress, or pressing concerns, and engage in in-depth critical dialogue about issues emerging from both. Nor is it a group where co-ordinators 'lead from the front' in being willing...to share their autoethnographic work-in-progress and related difficulties – supervision, teaching, writing for publication.

Sadly, I've felt over several meetings now that the group has morphed into what might be described as a kind of therapy/encounter group for perpetually beginner writers, who are presumed to be delicate and in constant need of 'holding'. The themes of *trust* and *safety* are in my view over-emphasised, at the expense of the time and encouragement and role-modelling that should be given to *risk-taking* and *courage*, and serious critical dialogue and debate... In short I think this current group ethos is patronising, infantilising and time-wasting ...'

The meeting of the Autoethnography Interest Group immediately preceding my exit from it was devoted to 'ethical dilemmas in autoethnography.' I sent group members 'Troubling Tolichism...' (Grant and Young, 2022) in a mass email prior to the meeting, as this paper directly addressed the topic. However, little acknowledgement was given to it at the event.

I was angry when I wrote that email, and the 'found' poem at the start of the paper derives from the subsequent email exchange I had with Jamie. The need to

engage with relational ethical demands to a reasonable degree notwithstanding, I'd become dissatisfied with the over-emphasis on 'trust and safety,' which I believe was constantly promoted by Ali and Jamie. I think this – for me – tedious mantra is by no means a local phenomenon. I've heard variants of it again and again, on online mid-pandemic zoom meetings in other parts of the UK and beyond, and in international conferences.

From a critical paradigm perspective, it's predictable that in our times autoethnography networks will be subjected to a centripetally pulling back into cultural line with the neoliberal academy (see Klevan and Grant, 2022). My own critical sensibilities might explain why I see this as a wide cultural phenomenon. However, I remain ambivalent about the extent to which much of what I'm saying might just be my confirmation bias at play? Wearing the psychology and psychotherapy hats of my previous academic incarnations, I think that – at worst – the 'trust and safety' emphasis might constitute a form of projection and avoidance on the part of autoethnography network coordinators. This may serve to keep at least some network members always on the perpetual point of being about to start doing autoethnography. On the other hand, might everything I've said be simply me projecting my prejudices or biases of what autoethnography is or ought to be about? Elsewhere (Grant, Forthcoming a) I have argued that autoethnography is a broad orientation, so who am I to criticize?

## **Trude**

How do we encourage neophyte autoethnographers to engage in critical dialogues and to stretch and challenge the boundaries of the work of themselves and others? I was not in the situation you refer to above, thus my reflections are more general. As you say, Alec, you and I have had our disagreements regarding these matters in our book, in our email correspondence and in face-to-face meetings. I agree and disagree with you. Perhaps I shall start with the disagreeing.

I see promoting critical thinking and critical dialogues as important missions of autoethnographic work. How is this best done? There is of course not one definitive and 'true' answer to that. However, I do not believe that risk-taking and courage contradict trust and safety. Moving beyond one's comfort zone and critically questioning and interrogating ways of thinking and writing in academia requires a certain foundation of trust. This is perhaps especially true for students and novice researchers. As a former social worker and mental health practitioner, and currently as a mental health teacher and researcher, I have several times experienced how a trusting relationship and safe atmosphere is key to collaboration, learning and questioning. When entering academia, the sometimes hostile and critical ways people approached each other's work surprised me. When questioning this, I was told that 'this is the academic discourse, and students just need to learn how it

works.' I don't buy this. To me, this way of treating each other creates insecurity, with academics biting before engaging in dialogue. This stifles the courage needed to critically question and trouble knowledge and ways of thinking and writing.

Perhaps courage should be developed rather than assumed? I find that the community and trust in autoethnographic groups and conferences can be an important prerequisite for building courage and confidence to question and trouble 'this is how it is done' cultures in the academy and elsewhere. In our – dialogic – book, I share with you how in my development as an academic, support and being invited into an autoethnographic 'academic home' was valuable. It was a place for breathing, for laughing, for thinking, for not being mocked and for not needing to be on the alert and defend myself.

On the other hand, if a home becomes too cosy and unified, it might lack having room for people who challenge its assumptions, ideas, and house-rules. It becomes an air-tight and suffocating house with no exchange of air. As Minnich (2016, p.132) writes, there is a danger in intense union: 'Thinking cannot thrive where agreement is required.'

## Alec

Your points are well made and well taken, Trude. I do need to work on developing more humility, and power dynamics are always at work in groups. Those with a wealth of experience and knowledge that others can learn from, can also effectively silence those others. I also completely agree with you that trust and safety are important foundational pre-requisites upon which to build autoethnographic risk-taking and courage, as we stressed in our book.

That said, *criticality* in the context of the critical theoretical paradigm (Kincheloe et al., 2018) does not entail conscious hostility or disparagement of another person's work. There's a difference between criticality, subsuming critical pedagogy and mentoring, and ordinary public senses of the meaning of 'being critical.' I think a big problem is that people often fail to recognise or acknowledge that difference.

What I continue to have problems with from a critical paradigm perspective is what I'd describe as a form of – consciously intended or otherwise – nurturing of *neophyte autoethnographic practitioner developmental stuckism*, where trust and safety become the end-point destination rather than a necessary stop off on the journey. Of course, I agree with you that courage is certainly something that needs careful nurturing, rather than being simply assumed to be there, waiting to be activated. However, think of the analogy of an observational safari where guides only take people to see the gentle, non-threatening animals – small antelopes rather than huge rhinos, for example.

And there's a deeper issue which I think can also be discerned from a critical paradigm perspective. Borrowing from Derridean deconstructionist principles,

‘trust’ and ‘safety’ imply not just their disparaged general opposites – ‘mistrust’ and ‘danger’ - but a kind of tacit wariness of anything that challenges the conventional qualitative inquiry relational ethical status quo. I think this can be reinforced by senior group members projecting their fears about rocking the broader cultural and organisational boats onto the less confident and experienced. In that regard, ‘trust’ and ‘safety’ can constitute codes for collusion in avoidance – for trying to never offend anybody, and, at worst, for never really getting properly going with autoethnography, or at least non-anodyne autoethnography.

But I like your ‘safe academic home’ description, Trude, and I think that attachment theory provides us with a useful analogy here. If children have secure bases from which to leave to explore and return to when necessary, they are likely to grow in terms of confidence and risk taking. If attachments are anxious-avoidant... well, you know the rest. In related terms I think it’s useful to consider a Vygotskian educational idea. As understood by Nardo (2021), Vygotsky’s ‘Zone of Proximal Development’ concept has it that developmental leaps in consciousness and related behaviour depend on the right sort of facilitative environmental conditions, role modelling and language. Carolyn Ellis, Art Bochner, myself and many others argue that autoethnography needs to be *lived*. If it’s not apparent that this is happening among group facilitators and other senior members – if risk-friendly autoethnography is *not lived*, in terms of not being practiced or role modelled, at all or sufficiently – then an incoherent, contradictory double message ensues. I believe this simply amounts to ‘Do/don’t do autoethnography.’

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Early April, 2022: Jamie emails Alec to suggest meeting up after Easter to continue the conversation about Alec’s exit from the group. Alec agrees and they meet in a café in Seaford, on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May. Both found the meeting helpful, clarificatory and productive, and as a result of it Alec willingly agreed to rejoin SCAN. Later that day, Alec sent the text of this paper – completed as far as the three asterisks above – to Jamie. An email exchange ensued:

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## Jamie

As we spoke about this morning, Alec, encouraging neophyte autoethnographers is exactly what we have been trying to do for the last few months. Paradoxically, this task was made more difficult by what you shared (Grant, Forthcoming a) in the October meeting. In your commitment to developing critical and high quality autoethnography, you took some punches at underdeveloped and ‘naïve’ autoethnography. At the time, I heard these comments through the ears of those neophyte autoethnographers who were part of that meeting and I felt uncomfortable with the comments, as did others who later wrote to me. I had no doubt that the

neophyte autoethnographers present would internalise your comments, thinking 'he's talking about us' and then be reluctant to share their work in future meetings. You need to be mindful, Alec, in the way you speak about other people's work. To put it bluntly, you did, in a general sense, disparage other people's work back in the October meeting. You did it perhaps assuming that the audience you were speaking to would agree. But, as I mentioned, half the audience were neophyte autoethnographers, and probably internalised your comments as referring to them.

As a result of this, my co-convenor and I wanted to give new autoethnographers a go at sharing their work. We also wanted to demonstrate that autoethnography is multiple, that the philosophical autoethnographic approach that you are proposing is just one means of developing high quality autoethnography, and not the only one. I hope you can see now how you also played a role in sending the group in the direction it subsequently went. We have been focusing on trust and safety, but this is not to exclude risk-taking and courage. I honestly believe that all these things can and should co-exist.

Alec, I hope you can also now see why not just little, but no acknowledgement was given to the Grant and Young (2021) paper during the Autoethnography Group meeting on the 16<sup>th</sup> March. Since you were a senior and authoritative voice and presence in the (Zoom) room, we were keen to not let the final word gravitate towards you, but to rather encourage participation and polyvocality. Hence, our decision to get three people to share about an ethical problem or dilemma and then to develop discussion based on these instances rather than around the paper you shared. This is in no way to downplay the paper, which I very much enjoyed reading and would love to discuss at some point, perhaps in another meeting. But not allowing the paper to become the centre of discussion was an active strategy on our part.

In respect to your initial email correspondence with us, I was not at all aggrieved about *the content* of what you wrote, but rather that you wrote it 'on your way out'! As I mentioned, my co-convenor and I agreed with much of the content, but because you had already (apparently) walked out and slammed the door, there appeared to be no place for 'holding the tension in relationship' and for ongoing meaningful dialogue. There were some uncomfortable challenges in your email that necessitated further conversation. Being uncomfortable is part of life (and growth) and I welcome it. So please bring the challenges into the home and house, where we all can benefit.

## Alec

I agree, Jamie, that I need to be more interpersonally tactful in meetings and make a point of checking out if people have any problems with what I'm saying more often, to encourage dialogue among the diffident. That said, I stand by everything I read from my chapter (Grant, Forthcoming a). My position in it is thoroughly argued from my particular (but not the only – I never said it was) standpoint position, in

which I critically discuss my premises and reasons for getting the volume in which it sits together in the first place.

I know I can sometimes be harsh, tactless, dismissive, insensitive, sometimes cruel in effect rather than intention, and – because of my age, seniority, strong voice, and uncompromising style – quite intimidating. I am an irascible man by disposition, with a way of being in the world that's often combative. On the other hand, I bend over backwards to help and encourage neophyte autoethnographers on an individual basis, as those who've been on the receiving end of my efforts will testify.

And although I'm sympathetic to what you say above, I do wish I'd known about the 'managing Alec' agenda earlier after the October meeting. There are intra-group relational ethical issues on both sides at play here. Yes, I should have invited dialogue from the outset, rather than angrily 'taking my ball home' and proclaiming that I didn't want to play with you folks again. Equally, though, isn't there an ethical issue with Ali and you knowing – since October last year – what I didn't know, and trying to manage my responses in the interests of limiting my potential for causing further upset, without me being at all aware of this? I could see that I was being 'policed', but I didn't know why.

And yes, I think the trick is in how to manage the co-existence between trust and safety and risk taking.

## **Jamie**

Yes, I agree, Alec. There are relational ethical issues on both sides here. Perhaps I assumed – probably wrongly on reflection now – that you wouldn't be open to such critique. I objectified the imagined you in a particular way, rather than inviting the living, breathing you into conversation and dialogue. I know I was also busy with other things, and let it slip. But perhaps confronting and challenging you also required an expression of risk and courage that, at the time, I wasn't willing to make? I'm sorry for that, in particular for underestimating your ability to receive critique and respond so positively to it. I can see how not knowing the concerns that I had after that meeting (to be active in creating a space for new autoethnographers to share their work and of 'managing' the voices of the more experienced to not hinder that task) led to developing frustration on your part, finally leading to you blowing out with us and leaving the group. Ironically, just as your contribution in October led to us actively taking the very approach that frustrated you, our lack of transparency with you after the October meeting eventually backfired on us through you becoming angry and leaving the group. I agree that there are mutual and shared ethical responsibilities here, and lessons to be learned (for us all, obviously) on how to do things better in the future.

You mention above that you are 'an irascible man,' with an interpersonal style that's often 'combative.' Of course, such self-reflection and self-knowledge is

commendable, as you demonstrate another self here, more measured and reflexive in nature, that is able to reflect back on the more impassioned and combative self. Your initial email exchange with us, however, carried all the forcefulness of the latter without the nuance of the former. This was hard to receive, particularly as there seemed to be a move – perhaps misread on our part – whereby you appeared to be wanting to end the conversation, having said your piece. Of course, this is the danger of email, that it can appear blunt and finalised. But it was also the reason why I referred in our subsequent communication to ‘chasing you down for a coffee in Seaford.’ I felt there was some important dialogue that needed to take place, and part of that involved you hearing our side of the story, which was something your initial emails didn’t seem to invite.

I know that you believe it’s helpful to autoethnographic communities to talk through the issues involved here, and I welcome this conversation, Alec. Thematically, I pick up the main concerns as following:

*How do we create, encourage and craft high quality autoethnography? And how do we, at the same time, encourage neophyte autoethnographers to get going with the craft?*

I believe that the spaces we create and work in are big enough to do both, along with a lot of other necessary work.

Trude has nailed things in her question above:

*How do we encourage neophyte autoethnographers to engage in critical dialogues and to stretch and challenge the boundaries of the work of themselves and others?*

The ironic thing here, Alec, is that I think most of our autoethnography group (even those relatively new to autoethnography) would agree that this is a central mission and concern. In this light, your dismissal of the group dynamic as ‘patronising, infantilising and time-wasting’ appears particularly harsh. Do we progress the mission by ‘othering’ in this way? And if your initial emails were coming from a place of anger, as you admit they were, what role does anger play in this journey?

## **Alec**

I’m with you in most of what you say here, Jamie, but – to labour the point – wasn’t I being *othered* in the judgements you were making about me? Moreover, I don’t hold with the pathologization of anger. In extrapolating from her thesis, I’m with Cherry (2021) in seeing anger as an important epistemic resource across situations in general. The trick is managing this in a temperate way. In that regard I’m still very much a work-in-progress, while remaining invested in the *critical* as opposed to the *liberal-humanist* paradigm, when the former is understood as the development of

critically culturally reflexive sensibilities, and the latter as interpersonally nurturing and supportive of individual choice.

## Jamie

Yes, that is a good point about you also being othered, Alec. As I mention above, I think I had objectified you in a particular way, as being closed and not open to critique and dialogue. In not being open with you, I didn't give you the chance to prove me wrong. As a result, Ali and I then took the approach of 'managing' you without you knowing why we were doing this. And, as I said above, I can see how this led to frustration on your part and to you eventually leaving the group. Our hand was also at work in this process, in these series of events.

I would like to just pick up on the point about anger. When I asked the question about the role that anger plays in the journey, this was meant as a genuinely open question, not a pathologization of anger, as you suggest. Of course, there are hints in the question – and this is what you no doubt picked up on – that anger does not always serve us well, particularly I think where it closes down needed dialogue and appears to break a friendship or relationship that shouldn't be broken. (Conversely, of course, there are cases where dialogue does need to end, and people do need to divide from each other.) But leaving that aside, I completely agree that anger is a valid emotion and can play a positive role. So, in the question we are considering - *How do we encourage neophyte autoethnographers to engage in critical dialogues and to stretch and challenge the boundaries of the work of themselves and others?* – I genuinely ask in an open sense, what role does anger play? Above, Trude writes:

'I definitely see promoting critical thinking and critical dialogues as important missions of autoethnographic work. How is this best done? There is of course not one definite and 'true' answer to that.'

I agree with Trude. As an anthropologist, I am sensitive to the co-existence of multiple worlds, and I see no need for the development of a single, authoritative way of doing autoethnography. Rather, Trude's question should open up an exploration of the many ways in which autoethnography can promote critical thinking and critical dialogues (alongside other kinds of work). I am not just seeking to be embracing here, or to adopt a multicultural ethos. I genuinely believe that autoethnography is multiple and we should explore and celebrate that.

With regard to your comment that in your view an over focus on trust and safety reflects a wider cultural trend, I think you are probably right, Alec. And you are right to ask what is excluded or left out through this emphasis? However, in respect to SCAN, and probably other autoethnography networks like it, I would question your critical paradigm perspective that predicts that such groups will be 'centripetally

pulled back into cultural line with the neoliberal academy.' I think that to assert this oversimplifies the dynamics involved. Ali's and my desire to create a space where people feel welcome, and more than that where they feel seen and heard, where space is given to voices that may initially be timid or full of self-doubt, is as much rooted in other aspects of our constituted selves as it is in selves constituted in the context of higher education and the neoliberal academy.

For instance, building on dynamics that I have experienced at various points in my life (in particular, my involvement in intentional Christian communities over the last twenty-five years), as well as previous experiences of hosting the autoethnography group. Just before the first lockdown in 2020, I approached Ali with the idea of creating a 'Listening Group.' Over the course of the next year, a group of us met, primarily over Zoom, to explore the power of listening, in other words to explore what listening allows or affords. This was not an interest that was rooted in the ethos of the 'neoliberal academy', but was rather inspired by observing what happens, what dynamics occur, when people actively give themselves to listening. This resonated with a theme that Ali has thought about over many years, crystallised in a piece she wrote with reference to a children's story by a German author about a small child, Momo, whose almost miraculous quality was to know how to listen (Ende, 1984).

I reflected on this experience – of being part of this listening group – through a presentation at last year's International Conference of Autoethnography, but due to other pressures of life I am yet to develop the presentation into an article. The point that I am wanting to make is that I think it is wrong to attribute this move (towards creating spaces of trust and safety) simply to dynamics inherent within the neoliberal academy. The autoethnography group that we currently convene is set up in a space that exists outside of any one institution – a space that you yourself describe as the 'Paraversity' (Klevan and Grant, 2022). This space exists on the margins of academia. (Ali, although an academic in one sense, is not employed by a university and enjoys the liberty of not being explicitly shaped within that context.)

We talk above about relational ethics and dialogue, about remaining transparent with each other, and of taking the risk and having the courage to 'intrude' – in one sense – into one another's lives, particularly where there is an issue of challenge or critique. When we met in Seaford for coffee, Alec, I did not hold back. In my directness, I risked offending you. Yet you remained open. You had the humility not to take greater offense, but rather to have your perception and perspective changed by the intrusion of another voice, another human being, another side to the story. This leads me to a series of reflections.

How does (relational) autoethnography challenge the 'auto'? The place from which the world is experienced and perceived? Are these experiences and perceptions sometimes out of line? Is this out-of-line-ness sometimes brought about through the ways in which we isolate ourselves and don't allow the perspectives of others in? Are we, in fact, not individuals but *dividuals*, part of a bigger whole? Does the 'auto' part of the autoethnography concept refer to an isolated individual or a 'dividual,'

the latter concept referring to how people depend upon and relationally complete each another? If the dividual premise is accepted, auto-ethnographic relational networking and related group communities are essential and need careful nurturing.

## Alec

I agree with most of what you say, Jamie, with some reservations. I think we should be role modelling *communitas* humility *and* authority, in both cases when and where appropriate. Thought about starkly, the former without the latter seems to me to characterise encounter/therapy groups with artificially flattened hierarchies, within which de jure (according to rightful entitlement or claim) authority positions are seen as threatening and not comfortably accepted by the group. In contrast, the latter without the former is dictatorial and fear-inducing. We need to get the balance right.

In terms of nurturing, I continue to think that one stickily residual problem with an over-emphasis on trust and safety – the ‘elephant in the networking room,’ if you will – is the risk of the actual act of crafting autoethnography being placed in a constant state of deferral. I’m with Ellis (2003, p.119) in her assertion that ‘... most learning comes in the doing. You can’t be an autoethnographer without doing autoethnography.’

I understand and am to some extent in sympathy with your anthropological and humanistic take on ‘dividuality.’ However, my anti-neoliberal academy views on autoethnographic teaching and mentoring – nicely summarised by Pithouse-Morgan, et al. (2022, pp.219-220) – tend for me to outweigh an over-emphasis on humanistic concerns:

In provoking and evoking care to question one’s positionality and choices as a neoliberal subject, an ‘infinite slippage of meanings...of what is constraining, possible, and different is made available. Autoethnography offers marginalized academics a contained space to confront...unpleasant feelings, including anxiety, to negotiate a reflexive, ethical, and scholarly self.

## Jamie

I’m critical of the neoliberal academy and of some of the dynamics inherent within it. However, Alec, I think your suggestion – that stuck autoethnography interest groups are tamed and pulled back into cultural line by the pressures and values of the neoliberal academy – is an over-simplification. To return to this point, I am not sure that SCAN, as a group, is as embedded in organisational structure as you imply. Neither, I suspect, are those other autoethnography groups I know of in the UK.

Taking SCAN as an example, I see it more as a charismatic group, in the

Weberian sense (Weber 1978, pp.1114-1119; Weber & Eisenstadt 1968, pp.46-54, 254-260), carrying with it certain (soft) characteristics of an intentional community, voluntarily set up, run, and joined by choice. It exists in that kind of marginal space that traverses institutions (in that those who participate are from a broad range of situations, backgrounds and geographies) and seeks to meet in a time and space that is at the edge of universities' institutional lives. Certainly at Sussex, nobody 'polices' the group, or what we do (I know this is not your main point, as you are signalling how neoliberal values infiltrate and become 'internalised' and performed). I doubt very many people at Sussex know the group exists. Those who do are supportive. As I mentioned, Ali, my co-convenor is not employed by a university and lives on the margins of academic life. She is certainly not concerned with pulling the group back into line, and there are no institutional police that she is accountable to that are pulling *her* back into line. What I am emphasising here is that I think you misattribute the creating of dynamics of 'trust' and 'safety' to the strength of normative disciplinary, organisational and institutional norms.

When I asked whether the 'auto' at the heart of auto-ethnography is individual or dividual, I was really playing with the notion that we are relationally and inter-subjectively constituted, and pointing towards the ways in which the boundaries between us – as selves – are permeable and open to relational flow. In this understanding, the dividual, in contrast to the *individual*, is an 'open circle' (Barnes 2020, pp.61-97), open to challenge and critique and to seeing things from an-other point of view. In fact, the dialogic dividual, without the presence of a relational 'other', cannot perhaps even *access* that other point of view. Hence, the importance of community, and of listening, and – as you have correctly pointed out – of having the courage to speak.

Above, Trude mentions that 'promoting critical thinking and critical dialogues [are] important missions of autoethnographic work.' So what do critical thinking and critical dialogues look like? And how do they challenge the self and the perceptions and perspectives that the self has (the 'auto' at the heart of auto-ethnography)? How might a critical dialogue sometimes be experienced as an 'intrusion' of sorts because it challenges our habitual ways of seeing things (Barnes, 2020)? And finally, in the context of critical dialogue, is there always a background, lurking danger of 'closing the circle', of taking offence, or of rigidly defending our accustomed perspectives without really allowing the other 'voice' in? How do critical dialogues, in short, remain truly dialogic?

When you said that '*in all the time I've known you I rarely hear about your autoethnographic work,*' it surprised me that you do not remember my work, Alec. When we met in the cafe, you struggled to remember that I have indeed shared work with the group, and that you were very complimentary about it at the time. For me, this marks the importance of staying in relationship, in conversation and dialogue. Does memory reside in the individual or in the group? In the community, we can remind one another of things that individually we may forget.

## Alec

As I said to you at the time, Jamie, our café conversation triggered the memory that I had read your work, soon after we first met – quite a few years back. I think you raise a good point about the endurance of memory as a function of group activity. For me this confirms the vital importance of group facilitators talking about their work regularly, rather than as an early one-off.

## Jamie

With reference to Trude's statement above, 'When entering academia, the sometimes hostile and critical ways people approached each other's work surprised me,' it did me too! As someone coming into academia later in life (in my 30s) I was shocked at this culture, to be honest! And I was grateful that the cultures surrounding autoethnography appeared to be different, to have a different flavour to them. How much better we are in these places, how much richer is our critical insight allowed to be. Who can flourish in a climate of fear?

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At the beginning of July, 2022, having read the developing article, Ali sent in her response. Why she came late to the conversation becomes obvious below.

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## Ali

For me, the March 2022 SCAN incident had a long pre-history. I had greatly enjoyed the meetings for several years. I had even shared my own work on one or two occasions and found the experience encouraging – something that I needed. I had experienced Alec in the meetings, including in October 2021 when he presented his paper on 'Why should Autoethnography become more philosophical?' Over time, I had come to see him as someone who was very experienced and likeable but who spoke a lot and (for my taste) didn't always leave enough space for others to articulate their thinking. That is fine, I thought to myself, when presenting one's own work.

Immediately after the October meeting, I wrote this email to Alec and Jamie:

13 Oct 2021

A quick thank you to you, Alec. I hope it was interesting and useful for you. I thought there were some great questions and provocations.

It seems we might have to learn to live with the tension between more philosophical

rigour on the one hand and including the 'less trained' or less intellectual/academic voices on the other! And maybe there need to be different flavours of autoethnography ... all rigorous in their own way... and 'rigorous' is one of those often taken-for-granted concepts we need to keep exploring.

The discussion was certainly useful to me.

Warm regards,

Ali

I don't recall seeing any of the emails mentioned by Jamie that expressed concern about the October session. Nor did I share his impression that novice autoethnographers felt disparaged. This may help to explain why I didn't feel a need to speak to Alec at the time.

When it came to preparing for the March 2022 meeting ('Ethical dilemmas in autoethnography'), Jamie and I decided, for a change, to invite three less senior scholars to share their work. I was a little taken aback when Alec responded to the collective email invitation by sharing the 'Troubling Tolichism' paper with the whole group. I wondered if he was expecting us to discuss it at the meeting, but I decided to view it instead as a generously meant contribution in the form of some relevant background reading. I didn't acknowledge or respond to the paper in the email chain, but knowing what I now know, I would do so in future.

At the meeting itself, our intention (Jamie and mine) was to stay alert to whether the discussion started to feel unbalanced and, if necessary, encourage quieter voices to speak up. For me this was not about trying to 'make the group safe,' but about being aware of power relations which are always at work in groups.

During the meeting I encouraged the quieter voices a few times, which meant stemming the flow of more voluble members of the group. In doing so, I was fully aware that I was taking risks, but this was fine for me as I think one nearly always takes risks when speaking up in groups.

It might be worth mentioning here that I come from a scholarly tradition that favours free-flowing conversations and fully acknowledges power, anxiety, risk, and spontaneity in human interaction. We don't emphasise safety or trust above any other aspects of human relating. Against that background, I often feel bothered when people over-plan or over-control meetings. It hasn't escaped my attention, though, that I sometimes fall into the pattern of 'facilitating', possibly out of anxiety, possibly fitting in with a perceived cultural pattern, or possibly just because Zoom is a special case.

I recall, near the end of the March meeting, Alec saying he had felt 'policed'. My initial reaction was to feel provoked by this comment, but I chose to let it go at the time. It happened during the closing remarks; time was running out and I felt that it was the kind of comment that needed proper reflection.

When I received Alec's email soon after the March meeting, I felt taken aback and upset, and thought 'This is a bizarre way for an 'autoethnography elder' to behave,

putting such sharp remarks in an email.' Rather than reacting instantly, I chose (rightly or wrongly) to wait a few days. After that, I acknowledged Alec's email. Among my reasons for choosing not to 'step into the ring,' was that I was aware that the relationship with Alec was important to Jamie, and that he very much wanted Alec to stay in the group. I continued to follow the email exchanges with great interest. And since Jamie and I were the group co-ordinators, knew each other well and were neighbours in Hove at the time, from time to time we continued to share our thinking about what to do.

I note also that gender has not been mentioned. Yet there is so much literature about the very different ways in which men and women typically participate in conversations. To me, this is about masculine and feminine ways of interacting, not about all men being the same or all women being the same.

With hindsight, my main regret is that Jamie and I didn't seek out a conversation with Alec much earlier. I am aware that an honest conversation can be the best choice for edgy situations, and I wish I had practised what I preach. I also wish I had taken what I was noticing more seriously and acted more boldly than I did. Perhaps I too easily assumed that my position in this professional academic community was marginal and ambiguous.

## Alec

I have some final thoughts. Building on the point Ali makes in her penultimate paragraph above, at 70 I am the old man of the group. Key words: *Old* and *Man*: It will not escape readers' attention that discussions around age and gender, although implicit, don't appear in this article. I like to regard myself as having welcomed regular upgrades throughout my 50+ years as an adult male. However, accepting and agreeing with the view that all of us need to constantly try to improve on our group interpersonal sensitivity, how much can I realistically expect myself/be expected to change in the time I have left on this earth, and how much effort should I put into/be expected to put into trying to change myself?

I've always been a 'too much' man: I talk too much, argue too much, read, write, think, and everything else too much. And I regard myself as a cultural trickster (Grant, Forthcoming b) – an uncompromising contrarian who has never settled too seriously or amicably in any cultural home throughout his life. But if it hadn't been for my too muchness or contrariness, I wouldn't have got the 2020 International Conference of Autoethnography (ICAE) Inaugural Lifetime Contribution Award, 'in recognition of making a significant contribution to the development and nurturance of the field of autoethnography and those working within it.' [Lifetime Contribution Award: Alec Grant - YouTube](#)

So I'm left with two related questions:

To what extent should people in autoethnography networks be expected to adhere to within-network norms of interpersonal conformity?

Should network coordinators and members make conscious efforts to stretch the range of tolerance of critical views and idiosyncratic tendencies, even when these views and tendencies are sometimes regarded as excessive?

## Trude

I'm a night walker. I like to walk alone in the late evenings, with just my dog keeping me company. I know the area and surroundings where I live well. Even in the dark evenings of the Nordic autumn, I can find the path and know where to place my feet without using a torch. Through its spotlighting, the torchlight will put an over-emphasis on certain parts of the path, while what is outside the spotlight is left in impenetrable, pitch darkness.

Although I'm not an insider to the situation being discussed, through previous written and oral dialogues with especially you Alec, and to some extent with Jamie, traces of my voices and stories can also be considered as part of the ongoing dialogue. Encounters can contribute to inner dialogues that may linger on in our minds and bodies long after an actual meeting took place.

I am left with some thoughts from this written conversation. Firstly, I am not too fond of the term 'neophyte.' To me, this leaves an impression that there are knowers and non-knowers in the worlds of autoethnography. While not saying everyone has the same amount of knowledge and that there is no point in learning from more experienced academics, I find learning and the exchange of knowledge to be far more mutual and often unpredictable than this. We learn from those who we may not think we have much to learn from. There is power in being experienced and widely published. People listen to the more experienced. This is by no means necessarily wrong or bad – after all, the more experienced have gained such experience through hard work, through thinking, reading, writing. But the 'voice of the experienced' also risks becoming the dominant voice, the voice that knows and articulates how something is best done. It becomes *the voice*. However, in moving the field of autoethnography on, a multiplicity of voices need to participate. 'Neophyte' voices also hold valuable knowledge and experiences. For those voices to be heard and to contribute, perhaps we need to have less focus on the contrast between the neophyte and the experienced? To me, the development of knowledge in a multi-voiced group could be understood in terms of what Cohen (2018) refers to as a *centerless structure*. In a relational understanding of knowledge development, the different contributors in a structure like an autoethnography group depend on each other for their survival, with the structure collapsing if one of them withdraws.

At an epistemological level, this suggests a need to move towards a relational

epistemology, recognizing that knowledge is both created and troubled through community and relationships (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). In developing knowledge, and in troubling what counts as knowledge and how it should be developed and disseminated, a polyphony of voices, small and big, new and old, are needed. Perhaps it is important for autoethnography networks and groups to create such polyphonic arenas – arenas that may serve as centerless and safe spaces for talking, writing, dwelling and listening? For trying, failing, and failing better?

I like the idea of a ‘Listening Group,’ and about what can happen if you give yourself to listening. Stepping back, listening, dwelling and making room for small voices, soft voices, not-yet-developed voices, voices that may otherwise be left outside the spotlight, may be important in developing the field of autoethnography. Perhaps critical thinking and dialogues are also nurtured and supported by allowing for what is out there in the dusk and wilderness – the unsophisticated and yet-to-be-articulated, that which is not immediately heard or seen – to come to the fore?

I cannot let go of the thought that such nurturing is best grounded in kindness. Kindness is perhaps a bit out of fashion and is sometimes even a trait that is mocked. But I do believe that taking the courage to be critical, and to accept others being critical, is more easily achieved in an atmosphere of kindness.

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