

In Praise of Subjectivity: My involvement with autoethnography, and why I think you should be interested

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Abstract: This article is adapted and developed from the author's inaugural professorial lecture University of Bolton, delivered twice – in November 2022 and March 2023. With the intention to speak directly to readers, Grant begins by defining and unpacking autoethnography, before turning to its component parts, and its historical emergence and philosophical underpinning. He then provides an answer to the question: 'Why do autoethnography?' This enables him to overview his single- and joint-authored autoethnographic work from recent years, and his current work, which links to collegiate relationships at the University of Bolton and beyond. After rebutting the main criticisms levelled against autoethnography, the author ends the article by briefly mentioning its international status in 2023.

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Defining and unpacking autoethnography

Autoethnography is a tremendous research approach for all academic disciplines. To help you understand what the approach entails, I first need to define it:

Autoethnography is a form of narrative qualitative inquiry (*qualitative inquiry that tells a story*) which values subjectivity, emotions, relationships with others, and epiphany (*important sudden realisations – ‘lightbulb moments’*) and other personal experiences as research resources. The approach connects the autobiographical with the socio-cultural. This is done in ways that combine the creative aesthetic sensibilities of the humanities (*languages and literatures, the arts, history, and philosophy*) with human and social science respect for (*theory and*) empirical data (*verifiable by observation and experience*). (Grant, 2019, p.88, my added brackets)

Let’s unpack and expand this definition. Autoethnographic inquiry:

- Belongs to qualitative rather than quantitative-experimental research;
- Is more concerned about feelings, meanings and values than numbers;
- Aims more for emotional and human connection, hope and social justice rather than the raw fact provision of information – although social and human science theory and empirical data are often included in autoethnographic work, when necessary.
- Autoethnographic inquiry enables researchers, practitioners and readers to address and connect with what it feels like, and what it means, to be alive and moving along lived-through experiences.

Autoethnographic inquiry fuses the social and human sciences with the humanities, with literature, art, philosophy, dramatic performance, storytelling, and poetry. It can be text-based, in book, book chapter and article form, or more explicitly arts-based. My esteemed colleague and friend, and sometimes co-writer, Susan Young, for example, is a trailblazing world leader in animation autoethnography in critical mental health (Grant & Young, 2021).

Turning to what’s meant by *culture* and *the social* in autoethnography, whereas the social might be understood as society in broad terms, people connecting in random and planned social configurations, ‘culture’ points more to the specific local ways of meaning-making organised life within which people are entangled, for example families, jobs, work organisations, political affiliations, clubs.

What interests me the most about culture is the difference between *how things are* and *how things should be* (Grant, 2019). I don’t know about you, dear reader, but it seems to me that people in general often tend to think that how things *are*, the descriptive sense of culture, is how things should *be* in its normative sense. However, for many of us how things are just ain’t how things should be! The kind

of autoethnography that I'm most interested in, therefore, makes the culturally familiar strange, and interrogates and challenges the culturally taken-for-granted.

The 3 components of autoethnography

All the component parts of the autoethnography concept, auto (self), ethno (society, culture), and graphy (representation, analysis), need to be in evidence in autoethnographic work.

The balance between these three components will vary, depending...on the topic and the aims of the (researcher). However, novice researchers often get this balance drastically wrong in ways that undermine the ... ethos and purpose of the approach. Examples of this include stories written by people about themselves which have little or no analysis...or socio-cultural interrogation or implications. Thus, at worst, no apparent useful function beyond the possibility of some kind of twee (*quaint, sentimental, superficial, trivial*) connection with readers. (Grant, 2019, p.89, my added brackets)

So, whereas storytelling is central to autoethnography, autoethnography at the level of the 'auto' component is *not simply about telling stories*, in – as I've often observed – biographical chronological form: one thing happening after another. The fact that many people seem to think that it is, displays an inadequate grasp of the approach and inadequate preparation, including reading autoethnography and reading about autoethnography.

A common reason people fail at the 'ethno' component part of autoethnography seems to me because they trust the cultures they are used to and brought up to respect, to the extent that they can't see much wrong with them. Such, in my terms, uncritical cultural entrapment often results in bad autoethnography through failing to acknowledge that cultures, subsuming organisations and professional and academic disciplines, are inevitably oppressive in various ways. Cultural in- and out-groups are produced, with cultural winners and losers, and even people – the culturally *othered* – who are not recognised as being legitimately part of culture at all. My esteemed Australian colleagues, Reshmi Lahiri-Roy and Maree Martinussen (2023, p.6) have recently remarked that 'humans are less prone to question their social identity when they belong to the "norm"'. These authors pose the vital question: why examine how your social identity impacts on any lives, your own or others, when you feel so inclusive that you do not see or do difference, and so ignore, or simply don't recognise, systemic marginalisation.

Regarding the artistic dimension of the 'graphy' component, aspiring autoethnographers often ignore the dictum that their work needs, as I said above,

to display creative-aesthetic sensibilities. This requires them to practice writing, to gain inspiration and representational ideas from quality modern and classical literary sources. I will argue later that autoethnographic knowledge is more *made* than *found*; experimenting with different ways of writing, including prose and poetic forms, can produce different kinds of epistemic insights.

Autoethnography's historical emergence

Having defined, explained the importance of, and unpacked the component parts of the autoethnography concept, I'll now give you some sense of the historical emergence of the approach. The so-called 'crisis of representation' (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Van Maanen, 1988) arose in qualitative inquiry in the social and human sciences in the second half of the 20th century. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz described this crisis as a rejection of exclusive 'faith in brute facts, set procedures, and un-situated knowledge in the human sciences, and...in scholarship generally' (Geertz, in Holman Jones, et al., 2013, p.28). Stacy Holman Jones and her colleagues assert that:

The crisis of representation drew attention to the absence of human stories, aesthetic considerations, emotions, and embodied experiences in research projects. Storytelling, locating the researcher's point of view within a text, and scholarly writing as a literary and aesthetic event were devalued... (Holman Jones et al., 2013, p.29)

There was a critical pushback to the absence of subjectivity and human stories in the social and human sciences. Researchers were urged to demonstrate their 'sociological imagination,' as Charles Wright Mills (2000) puts it, by writing about their situated lives at the intersections of history and society. They were also urged to get interested in narrative, storytelling, literary and aesthetic representations, emotions, embodied, lived-through experiences and *subjectivity* (Ellis & Flaherty, 1992, pp.1-13).

Getting interested in subjectivity stands out as especially significant. In their landmark 1992 text, 'Agenda for the Interpretation of Lived Experience', Ellis and Flaherty asked:

Why has so little attention been given to subjectivity...many sociologists feel repelled or threatened by the unruly content of subjective experiences. They shy away from the investigation of subjectivity in much the same fashion that individuals avoid unpleasant or dangerous activities. Subjectivity can be both unpleasant and dangerous: unpleasant because emotional, cognitive, and physical experiences

frequently concern events that, in spite of their importance, are deemed inappropriate topics for polite society...dangerous because the workings of subjectivity seem to contradict so much of the rational-actor world-view on which mainstream sociology is premised. (Ellis & Flaherty, 1992, p.1)

Although Ellis and Flaherty were writing as sociologists, their words clearly apply across many disciplines in the social sciences more broadly, and in much of the humanities. From the position of mainstream applied psychology, for example, think for a moment about the problems that randomised control trial zealots still have with qualitative research in general, let alone with autoethnography (I'm saying this as an ex-cognitive behavioural academic-practitioner, where the randomised control trial is always doggedly lauded as the exclusive gold standard research methodology). In response to this, in my view prejudice, we need to look to philosophy.

Autoethnography's philosophical basis

Turning to autoethnography's philosophical underpinnings, a strong focus on subjectivity and lived experience make what counts as *being*, or being in the world, and what counts as *knowing*, or knowledge of that world, important considerations. The 'self' is a socio-cultural phenomenon. A longstanding slogan in the autoethnographic communities is that 'culture flows through self and vice versa.' We're all born into culture and society, and because both culture and society precede every one of us, the human self is a relational, social, and cultural phenomenon. In his text *The Dialogical Imagination*, the Russian philosopher Bakhtin (1982) used the 'heteroglossia' concept. Put simply, it refers to each one of us communicating through a wide society of voices, none of which can ever be claimed as exclusively personal (which, interestingly, gives the lie to people constantly claiming on their Twitter biographies that their views are 'entirely their own').

It makes no sense to talk or write about separate or isolated selves. So rather than suppressing *subjectivity*, this should be regarded as an important resource in the ongoing story of being human, rather than an irritant. However, autoethnographers continue to be criticized for being *too* subjective, for not being objective enough. The problem with this criticism is that, as Trude Klevan and I argued, borrowing from Donna Haraway (Klevan & Grant, 2022), much of our knowledge is *situated*, thus *nuanced*. It emerges from the specific circumstances that people find themselves in, which abstract, 'objective', catch-all 'truths' can't adequately account for. That's why autoethnographers favour first person writing,¹ to challenge the rhetoric of 'God's eye view' knowledge. Knowledge which, because it's usually written in the third person, seems to drop down from the heavens and, often disingenuously, gives the

appearance of objectivity, authority, neutrality, and exhaustive explanation.

Being born into culture and society, means being born into stories about how the world, the world for each one of us, works. The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (2007, p.167) argues that the narrative character of human life should prompt people to answer the existential question, 'What am I to do?' with another question: 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?' (p.250). Being born into stories gives us a sense of individual and collective moral identity in our social and cultural communities (MacIntyre, 2005, pp.293-294). This is important in helping us maintain our cherished social connections and citizen values.

On the other hand, being caught up in some stories can often feel like a tyrannical, unwanted burden. I wonder what you think about this? A few years back I coined the term 'narrative entrapment' in my critical mental health autoethnographic work, to capture this feeling. An obvious example of unwanted narrative entrapment for many is being in receipt of the 'diagnosis of social exclusion': 'Borderline Personality Disorder.' People, women usually, in receipt of this diagnosis are stigmatised and *othered* as a result. I'll return to this issue later, but for the moment will focus on a fundamental question.

Why should we do autoethnography?

You may already have asked yourself this. My esteemed colleague Tony Adams and his associates (Adams et al., 2015, p.37) argue several good reasons for embracing autoethnography as a research approach. In addition to their list, immediately below, I've added 'to write oneself into a preferred identity.' You create knowledge of the self you want to be by writing about it (Grant & Zeeman, 2012). Why is this important? The actor and comedian Lenny Henry recently answered this succinctly: 'If you don't control your narrative somebody else will.'

- To critique, make contributions to, and/or extend existing research and theory.
- To embrace vulnerability as a way to understand emotions and improve social life.
- To disrupt taboos, break silences, and reclaim lost and disregarded voices.
- To make research accessible to multiple audiences. (Adams, et al., 2015, p.37)
- To write oneself into a preferred identity (Grant & Zeeman, 2012)

The therapeutic promise of autoethnography, as Hernandez and her colleagues (Hernandez, et al., 2022) have recently argued, is that it's transformative. However, this requires you to take the risk of writing yourself into your own future, and as the philosopher Laurie Ann Paul (2014) puts it, you can't know what that's going to be like until you get there. Autoethnography demands us to, critically reflexively and

courageously, bring knowledge of ourselves and our emerging worlds into being. We write stories that can be used as exemplars, and, regarding critical mental health, recovery exemplars, not to be slavishly copied, but to be used as guides. We can also write in the service of making moral sense of our lives (Freeman, 2010; Grant, Forthcoming), in developing, in Mark Freeman's terms 'hindsight wisdom.'

Autoethnography is also important in calling out social inequities, cruelties, and exploitation. This is sometimes referred to as 'writing to right'. The philosopher Miranda Fricker (2007) stresses the need to fight against 'epistemic injustices.' Injustices that are tied up with knowledge. According to Fricker, there are two variants of epistemic injustice: 'testimonial' and 'hermeneutical.' Testimonial injustice occurs when someone's story is not seen as credible because of prejudices held against them; when their reported lived-through experiences are ignored, or trivialised. Hermeneutical injustice happens when someone's experiences are not well understood by themselves or by others; when they don't have the knowledge and discursive resources to speak truth back to power.

In providing people with interpretive resources and guiding exemplar stories, autoethnography aids hermeneutical and testimonial justice. It can function as a pushback against the worst excesses of being objectivised and pathologized; of being narratively entrapped in distanced, mainstream research, and related practices and dominant discourses. Related to this, as social histories, autoethnographies can thus also function as 'testimonio' or historical 'witness account' narratives of lived-through experiences. More often than not, such accounts demand to be trusted rather than regarded with suspicion, given that they were written by people with first-hand experience of the events being narrated: *I was there. This happened to me.* I am sure you will have such stories of your own, which deserve to be told.

As an example from our own collaborative work, Susan Young and I recently wrote the autoethnographic article 'Troubling Tolichism...', which addressed the testimonial and hermeneutic injustices she experienced. It was published in the *Journal of Autoethnography* (Grant & Young, 2021). Among other issues, the article addressed Susan's sexual and emotional abuse within the UK psychiatric system, perpetrated by psychiatrists and denied by those psychiatrists and their lawyers. Their collective, and, we argued, misogynistic position amounted to: 'How can a woman with the "Borderline Personality Disorder" label be believed?'

Autoethnography is thus vital in exposing the gulf between conventionally accepted cultural business as usual and individual lived-experiential problems with this. This is what my autoethnographic colleagues and I have endeavoured to do over the last two decades. My own single and joint authored autoethnographic and autoethnography-related work has included: *writing about my own breakdown and recovery* (Grant, 2010a,b, 2018a, 2020a,b; Grant and Zeeman, 2012; Grant, et al., 2011; Short, et al., 2007); *critiquing mainstream mental health and mental health nurse education* (Grant, 2011, 2014, 2015, 2016abc, 2018b, 2019; Grant & Radcliffe, 2015; Grant & Barlow, 2016; Grant & Gadsby, 2018; Grant, et al., 2015a,b; Klevan,

et al., 2016; Naish, et al., 2016; Short & Grant, 2016; Zeeman, et al., 2014a,b); and *critiquing higher education qualitative research culture more broadly* (Grant, 2014, 2016c; Klevan and Grant, 2022).

Writing about my own problems in living and ‘recovery’ (I think that ‘discovery’ is a much more appropriate word), and doing so with co-writers engaged in similar journeys, gave us the chance to critically explore the relational and organisational politics of ‘mental health treatment and care’ in stark, close-in detail, and how we experienced ourselves at odds with this. Critically writing against some of the dominant narratives on what ‘recovery’ is supposed to be about, helped us realise that conditions conducive to *discovery* (recovery) can often be down to: the persistence of good friends and colleagues; combating the iatrogenic nature of mainstream mental health services (services which often add to rather than alleviate psychological distress); and quite a bit of luck.

In my autoethnographic work on mental health nurse education, I aimed to uncover the contradictions between the *rhetoric* of educational ideology and the *reality* of both practice and life more generally for mental health nurses and their educators. I’ve argued that dishonesty and deception are always an inevitable part of their on- and off-duty lives, and of mine in the past (Grant, 2016b). Prior to my retirement from the University of Brighton in 2017, I regularly found myself teaching and writing against the grain of mainstream mental health education and practice. I saw these two areas resting on a constantly unscrutinised, but to me obvious, fallacy. This was the categorical distinction made between mental health workers and service users or patients: in short, *nurses well, services users ill*, and a flawed knowledge base uncritically supportive of this distinction (Grant, 2015, 2018b; Grant & Radcliffe, 2015). My standpoint position was also grounded in the lack of fit between my evolving hybrid scholarly identity (or hyphenated identity as mental health academic-ex inpatient-current survivor of institutional psychiatric culture) and this distinction.

My current and recent autoethnographic work.

With an eye to developing the autoethnographic agenda at Bolton, and thanks to the good editorial offices and collegiate support of Professor Jerome Carson and his colleagues there, I’ve had three new single- and joint-authored articles published since the formal approval of my Visiting Professor title last year: one in a special issue of the *British Journal of Mental Health Nursing*, titled ‘What has autoethnography got to offer mental health nursing?’ (Grant, 2022). Another co-written article for the special edition on Autoethnography of the *Social Work and Social Sciences Review* journal, titled ‘Tensions in Managing the Online Network Development of Autoethnographers: A four-way dialogue’ (Grant et al., 2022). Finally, ‘Crafting and

recognising good enough autoethnographies: a practical guide and checklist' (Grant, 2023) was recently published in the *Mental Health and Social Inclusion* journal.

My edited Routledge volume, *Writing Philosophical Autoethnography*, is currently in the Routledge production process and should be published towards the end of this year. As the title suggests, my aim in this collection is to make philosophy much more of an explicitly central concern in autoethnographic work. It has an autoethnographic 'all-star' cast, with chapters from the renowned autoethnographers, Art Bochner, Georgina Tuari Stewart, Renata Ferdinand, and Mark Freeman, among others.

Dr Lizzie Lloyd-Parkes from the University of South Wales and myself are currently editing another Routledge text: *Meaningful Journeys: Autoethnographies of Quest and Identity Transformation*. This volume will also be of interest to psychology, mental health and education communities and stakeholders.

Finally, Jerome Carson and I are currently editing *Autoethnographies in Psychology and Mental Health: New Voices* – again a Routledge volume. It has an international authorship, with, in addition to current and past Bolton postgraduate students, and staff, contributing chapters, writers from Hong Kong and India among other locations.

Some concerns about autoethnography

'All well and good,' I hear you say, 'but what about the downside of the approach?' Turning to autoethnography's detractors, a notable figure is Dr Sarah Delamont (2009), who speaks for many in regarding autoethnography as a narcissistic substitution for proper research. Some pejorative terms associated with her objection include 'navel gazing', 'solipsism' and 'researcher laziness'. You won't be surprised to hear that I think Delamont and all the 'Delamonties' are wrong. Autoethnography, *if done rigorously and with heart and soul integrity* is far from a lazy pursuit.

Other objections people raise about autoethnography include: '*You can't generalise from it!*' and, '*What about reliability and validity!?*' These objections, which will be familiar to you if you have a background in psychology and social science, proceed from the assumption that the positivist window on the world is the only one worth looking through. You many know this already, but anyone sufficiently familiar with qualitative inquiry will tell you that *transferability* replaces *generalisability* as the appropriate concept. Transferability is established when readers accept as credible the possibility that what is depicted in the autoethnographic story could have happened in other contexts, situations, and times.

Neither is *reliability*, understood in its quantitative-experimental research sense, an appropriate concept for autoethnography. Autoethnographers and autoethnographies aren't measuring tools for non-existent, constantly unchanging subjectivities and lived-through experiences. So, invoking reliability as a major lack is fatuous.

Catalytic validity, a concept associated with Lather (2003), replaces the quantitative-experimental meaning of validity. The constant provision of autoethnographic stories as provocative spurs for progressive social change marks their catalytic validity use value.

However, if you've already read my work, you might think similarly to some social researcher and other critics of autoethnography, including the Delamonties and the subjectivity-phobics; that it's simply not appropriate, indeed that it's *extremely bad form*, for me to write about my own past alcoholism, breakdown experiences, and the relational political difficulties encountered in my higher education career. You might think that my doing so amounts to a kind of *indecent experiential exposure*, inappropriate for polite society, as, you'll remember, Ellis and Flaherty put it. I regard this as methodological 'NIMBYism'. The idea that I and my life difficulties should be written about by someone other than me presupposes that it's fair game for an assumed *non-problematic* someone else to be writing about *problematic* me from a non-involved, distanced, sanitised, supposedly more 'objective' position.

If the methodological approach of this someone else was grounded in conventional qualitative inquiry, they wouldn't have, nor might they think they need to have, direct access to my situated, lived-through experiences. They might think it perfectly okay to shoehorn decontextualised snippets of the conversation they have with me, or the statements I come out with, into themes largely of their own making. I and my experiences would, in effect, be simultaneously culturally colonised and culturally appropriated. I would be narratively entrapped in someone else's story.

You might also have some very reasonable misgivings about the relational ethical implications emerging from autoethnographic practice. It would have stretched the scope of this article to have focused too much on these, important as they are, and they are fully and comprehensively discussed in the 2021 paper I co-wrote with Susan Young, to recap, 'Troubling Tolichism' (Grant & Young, 2021). However, it's worth mentioning that in it we take issue with the sociologist Martin Tolich's much cited prescriptive guidelines on how budding autoethnographers (he's implicitly addressing women here), should observe relational ethics. It seems to us that researchers following Tolich's guidelines faithfully would end up just producing bland, anodyne work, supportive of the misogynistic status quo. In the Tolichist world you can't write about (mostly male) abusers, for example, without their retrospective or prospective informed consent, as if they're going to say 'yes, of course, no problem, go ahead!'

Our main take home message in 'Troubling Tolichism...' is that *all* list-based prescriptive advice, from Tolich and others on relational ethics, should, without exception, be subjected to the critical cultural interrogation that autoethnography purports to be about.

The status of autoethnography in 2023

To conclude, I simply want to tell you that, thankfully, the objections from the anti-subjectivist camps and the detractors hasn't dampened enthusiasm for autoethnography. Its popularity is burgeoning. This is evidenced by workshops, keynotes and autoethnography conferences across the globe, two Handbooks, thousands of journal articles, and lots of edited books, books and book chapters. And there's much more to come! There's never been a better time for you to embrace subjectivity, and autoethnography! Go for it!

Note

1. This is not an exclusive prescription. First person, or 'I-centred' writing, while preferred over the positivist, habitual style of third person writing, does not preclude the judicious use of the third and second personal in autoethnographic work.

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