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Autoethnography and Family Research

This article describes how autoethnography, a research method that uses—and even foregrounds—personal experience, can be used as a method for studying families. We first define autoethnography, describe orientations to autoethnographic research, and review research that has used autoethnography as a method for studying families. Although autoethnography has numerous strengths, four qualities make it especially suitable for doing family research. We describe how autoethnography can allow researchers to offer insider accounts of families; study everyday, unexpected experiences of families, especially as they face unique or difficult situations; write against limited extant research about families; and make research more accessible to nonacademic audiences. We conclude by offering criteria for evaluating autoethnography, including risks and limitations of the method.

In "A Feminist Critique of Family Studies" (2009), Alexis Walker reflected on her six-year term as editor of *Journal of Marriage and Family*. At the end of that book chapter, Walker included some of her personal familial experiences while editing the journal: her brother being

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shot on a hunting trip, her sister committing suicide after having suffered years of mental illness, her father being diagnosed with cancer, and her partner taking a significant pay cut and giving up a fulfilling career. She also shared her own diagnosis of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. In considering these experiences, Walker asked:

> Was I reading about these things in manuscripts submitted to the [*Journal of Marriage and Family*]? No. Instead, I was reading about the effects of cohabitation on children's math scores, the ways in which number and type of marital status transitions affect adolescent externalizing behavior, and how fathers would be more involved with their children if mothers worked hard to foster their involvement. (p. 26)

From our perspective, Walker (2009) described feeling conflicted between publishing traditional, impersonal research essays that often perpetuate harmful ideals (e.g., the inappropriateness of women working, the dangers of cohabitation)—and publishing more feminist essays that foreground lived experience, social inequalities, and power and privilege in familial contexts. Further, she inquired about academic writing that could assist in "negotiating the daily family life experience of adult sibling relationships, life threatening health crises, aging parents, mental illness, income loss, and chronic illness" in a way that "makes life experience come alive" (p. 26). Although Walker did not self-identify as an autoethnographer or use the term *autoethnography* in the chapter, she argued for using subjectivity and reflexivity in research, as well as research committed to social inequality and cultural change.

Autoethnography is a research method that can address Walker's concerns about family studies given that the method uses, and even foregrounds, a researcher's subjectivity, reflexivity, and personal experience (*auto-*) in an attempt to represent (*-graphy*) cultural experiences (*ethno-*). Autoethnography developed in response to social research that privileges "objectivity," "researcher neutrality," and "stable meanings"—meanings that allegedly exist "independently of culture, social context and researcher activity and interpretation" (Grant, Short, & Turner, 2013, p. 3). Instead, autoethnography helps researchers "achieve an understanding of their lives and their circumstances" (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 111) not just through studying others but also through deep reflection of the self as a (social) person. In these ways, autoethnography emphasizes particularity and personal experience.

In this article, we describe how autoethnography can be used as a method for studying family life and experience. We first define autoethnography and describe orientations to autoethnographic research. We then review research that has used autoethnography as a method for studying families and outline key strengths of autoethnography for family research. We conclude by offering criteria for evaluating autoethnographic research, including the risks and limitations of autoethnography.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

As a research method, autoethnography can offer novel and nuanced insights about how family members think, act, navigate, and coauthor their social worlds. By turning the research lens toward the self, sharing highly personal accounts, and theorizing about one's lived experiences, family studies researchers can use autoethnography to ask unique questions about family life, questions not necessarily possible with other research methods. Of course, and as with any research method, autoethnography has both strengths and limitations, many of which we address throughout this article.

Although the term *autoethnography* was not in widespread use in family studies before the mid-1990s, some family researchers—especially feminist family researchers—advocated for, and demonstrated the importance of, personal experience, subjectivity, and reflexivity in research (e.g., Fox & Murry, 2000; Sollie

& Leslie, 1994). Scholars in sociology (e.g., Ellis, 1995; Ellis & Flaherty, 1992; Richardson, 1990), anthropology (Behar, 1996; Reed-Danahay, 1997), and communication (e.g., Ellis & Bochner, 1996, 2000) also played key roles in demonstrating the importance of personal experience and defining what it means to do autoethnographic research. These works greatly influenced research in the social sciences and the humanities especially as scholars, to borrow the words of Leslie and Sollie (1994), began to "make explicit the values guiding our work" and reject the idea of "value-free research" (p. 5).

We conceive of autoethnography as a method that combines tenets and techniques of ethnography and autobiography. Ethnography is a research method for understanding, representing, and sometimes critiquing a cultural practice, experience, identity, or group. Ethnography is both a practice (e.g., "I am doing ethnography") and a product (e.g., "I wrote an ethnography"). To do ethnography, the researcher—the ethnographer—often conducts "fieldwork," which includes participating in and observing cultural life, collecting relevant artifacts such as photographs or diaries, conducting informal and formal interviews with others, and reviewing extant research and theories that may relate to the cultural practice, experience, identity, or group. The ethnographer also tries to conduct fieldwork in "natural settings"—that is, everyday contexts of the practice, experience, identity, or group that would exist regardless of the ethnographer's presence. To write or produce an ethnography, researchers seek to generate comprehensive and concrete accounts—"thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973, p. 10)—of their fieldwork experiences.

An autobiography is a firsthand account of a life, a genre of writing that can include personal narratives, memoirs, and diaries. Similar to ethnography, autobiography can be understood as both a practice (e.g., "I am doing autobiography") and a product (e.g., "I wrote an autobiography"). The purpose of an autobiography is to illustrate how people make sense of their experiences and, in so doing, to offer an account of the past, highlight key life lessons, and provide some guidance for future personal and/or social experiences. To do autobiography, people often rely on personal experience, memory and retrospection, artifacts such as photographs and diaries, and conversations with others about the past. To write or produce an autobiography, people

typically use accessible and conversational language, as well as storytelling techniques such as plot, character development, and narrative voice.

Autoethnography combines techniques of doing ethnography and techniques of doing autobiography. As such, many autoethnographies include a mixture of fieldwork, observation, acknowledgment of extant research and theories, and cultural participation and analysis (ethnography), as well as personal experience, memory, and storytelling techniques (autobiography). As Gilgun (2012) has written, autoethnographers use "personal narratives that are similar to autobiographies except that researchers provide an implicit or explicit social research analysis" (p. 83). Allen and Piercy (2005) made a similar observation, noting that autoethnography is different from "traditional social science methodologies" in its ability to blend "theoretical analysis with storytelling and the content of life" (p. 162). An ethnography that does not use personal experience, memory, or storytelling techniques cannot be an autoethnography, just as an autobiography without any fieldwork, observation, acknowledgment of extant research or theories, or cultural participation and analysis cannot be an autoethnography.

The primary assumption of autoethnography is that (general) culture flows through the (specific) self; a person cannot live absent of or from cultural influences (e.g., language, technology, social interaction). Thus, autoethnographers presume that writing about the self is simultaneously writing about cultural values, practices, and experiences. It is a method that "can provide first-person details of culture—details that help us understand and critique the social structures and processes constituting that culture" (Allen & Piercy, 2005, p. 162). As Pelias (2014) has written, "When I tell the most intimate details of my life, I do so always aware that all my personal feelings are located interpersonally. To be personal is to be with others" (p. 151). At its core, autoethnography invokes a person's relationships with others and with society, even when the focus is not explicitly on these relationships. Even though autoethnography allows for the observation of natural settings, the method is also highly subjective and rife with important ethical dilemmas that must be considered a part of the research and writing process.

Autoethnographers use reflexivity—a process of accounting for personal perspectives and positionalities (e.g., age, race, ability) and engaging in rigorous and honest "self-critique" (Allen, 2000, p. 12)—to "explore and interrogate sociocultural forces and discursive practices" that shape personal experience (Grant et al., 2013, p. 5; see Berry & Clair, 2011). Sometimes autoethnographers use reflexivity to make explicit personal–cultural connections, such as when they use personal experience to call attention to or critique cultural issues such as Whiteness and social privilege (Blume & De Reus, 2009), cohabitation and parenting (Jago, 2011), the importance of same-gender marriage and divorce (Allen, 2007), and sexual abuse and trauma (Rambo Ronai, 1996). But sometimes an autoethnographer does not explicitly acknowledge personal–cultural connections, and instead allows readers to make those connections (e.g., Denzin, 2006; Ellis, 1996; Richardson, 2013).

Autoethnographers typically write about life-changing epiphanies (Denzin, 2013), mundane "aesthetic moments" (Bolen, 2014), difficult repetitions or patterns of experience (Adams, 2010; Boylorn, 2011), and/or experiences about which they have questions or find confusing. "I tend to write about experiences that knock me for a loop and challenge the construction of meaning I have put together for myself," Ellis (2004) wrote. "I write when my world falls apart or the meaning I have constructed for myself is in danger of doing so" (Ellis, 2004, p. 33).

To best understand the potential of autoethnography for family research, it is important to acknowledge different orientations to autoethnography and how researchers may emphasize the ethnography–autobiography continuum. Some autoethnographies are more social scientific and some are more interpretive and humanistic. Some autoethnographies—especially feminist, queer, and postcolonial autoethnographies—tend to engage in more critical theorizing and address issues of power, oppression, and social justice. Still other autoethnographies seek to be more creative and artistic. These orientations can influence how a researcher understands, designs, and evaluates an autoethnographic project.

Social-scientific-oriented autoethnographies —what some people refer to as "analytic autoethnographies" (Anderson, 2006)—use personal experience to provide an interpretive context for the work as well as to frame interview data, fieldwork experiences, findings,

and conclusions. (Anderson has since clarified his use of *analytic autoethnography* and has critiqued common misuses of the term; see Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013.) Similar to early autobiographical accounts of doing ethnographic fieldwork (e.g., Malinowski, 1967), social-scientific autoethnographies may include personal experience as separate from, and often secondary to, the primary research report (e.g., Heath, 2012). Social-scientific autoethnographies tend to be concerned with systematic data collection and coding procedures (e.g., Chang, 2008; Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2012); research questions (e.g., Adams, 2011); issues such as bias, reliability, validity, and generalizability (e.g., Burnard, 2007; Philaretou & Allen, 2006); and triangulation (e.g., Manning & Kunkel, 2014b). Through the use of the format of introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, and discussion, these autoethnographies also often resemble traditional research reports (e.g., Marvasti, 2006; Zibricky, 2014).

Embracing the ethnographic tenet of "thick description" (Geertz, 1973, p. 10)— that is, recording cultural experience in comprehensive, concrete, and engaging ways— "interpretive-humanistic autoethnographies" are often the most ethnographic autoethnographies. These autoethnographies emphasize cultural analysis and fieldwork, foreground perception and sense making, and use personal experiences as a way to describe, and facilitate an understanding of, cultural expectations and experiences (e.g., Anderson, 2011; Ellis, 1996). Some interpretive-humanistic autoethnographies use ethnographic research techniques such as interviews, fieldwork, and participant observation (e.g., Boylorn, 2013b; Goodall, 2006), and some make personal experience and thick description the sole focus of a project (e.g., Denzin, 2006; Jago, 2002; Richardson, 2013). Interpretive-humanistic autoethnographies make few, if any, references to systematic data collection, triangulation, coding, bias, reliability, validity, and generalizability, and they are not beholden to the conventions of social-scientific writing.

Unlike social-scientific-oriented and interpretive-humanistic-oriented autoethnographies, "critical autoethnographies" use personal experience to offer accounts of contentious and unjust cultural values, practices, and experiences (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014). Critical autoethnographies are often informed by feminist (Allen & Piercy, 2005), queer (Adams & Holman Jones, 2008), and/or postcolonial (Pathak, 2013) values and sensibilities, and they tend to call attention to, and attempt to change, personal experiences with oppression (e.g., Boylorn, 2011), systemic instances of harm (e.g., Allen, 2007; Brown & William-White, 2010; Calafell, 2013), and/or silent or suppressed experiences in research and representation (e.g., Griffin, 2011; Rambo Ronai, 1996). Similar to interpretive-humanistic-oriented autoethnographies, critical autoethnographies have few, if any, references to systematic data collection, triangulation, coding, reliability, validity, and generalizability. Further, given the critical orientation, "bias" is explicitly reclaimed: rather than describe only *what* exists, the critical autoethnographer also describes *what should (not)* exist.

Some researchers use autoethnography to create dramatic and evocative accounts of personal or cultural experience; as Bochner (2012) wrote, "Autoethnographers are in the business of storying lives. As storytellers, we are preoccupied with plots, and plots are driven by misadventures, reversals of fortune, blows of fate and lives spinning out of control" (p. 217). In the spirit of story, these "creative-artistic autoethnographies" emphasize storytelling techniques such as narrative voice (e.g., Pelias, 2000), composite characters, character development, and dramatic tension (e.g., Ellis, 2004), and in an effort to appeal to nonacademic audiences, they avoid the traditional research report format by embracing a variety of representational forms and media, including fiction (e.g., Leavy, 2013), poetry (e.g., Faulkner, 2009; Furman, 2006), blogs (e.g., Boylorn, 2013a), performance (e.g., Pelias, 2014), art (e.g., Metta, 2013), and music (e.g., Bartleet & Ellis, 2009). Creative-artistic autoethnographers also tend to assume that research questions and findings emerge through the creative *process* (Colyar, 2008; Richardson, 1994)—although they would avoid using academic jargon such as *research questions* or *findings*, as well as terms such as *systematic data collection*, *triangulation*, *coding*, *reliability*, *validity*, and *generalizability*, because these terms may disrupt the flow and accessibility of the story.

Although we have discussed the four orientations of autoethnography separately, these orientations often overlap in practice. For example, Heath's (2012) longitudinal

autoethnographic study documented the process of working with two families in the Piedmont Carolinas (United States) for more than three decades. Heath described how these families used language, conceptualized education, and adjusted after economic difficulties. Specifically, Heath used personal experience to provide an interpretive context for the work, frame fieldwork experiences and interview data, and show how particular relational patterns are connected with general cultural trends. Given the focus on systematic data collection and thick description, in tone and form this study is more social scientific and interpretive-humanistic than it is critical or creative-artistic.

Another example is Boylorn's (2013b) autoethnographic study of Black women living in the rural Southern United States. This study offered a thick description of the everyday values, practices, and experiences of these women and did not explicitly advocate for cultural change; in these ways, it resembles an interpretive-humanistic autoethnography. However, the study also resembles a critical autoethnography, as Boylorn used Black feminism, womanism, and intersectionality theory to describe the familial experiences of rural Black women, experiences that are often silent or suppressed in more traditional academic research. Further, given the use of poetry and evocative writing, the form is more creative-artistic and less social scientific.

A final example is Zibricky's (2014) article about the everyday experiences of and reactions to motherhood and autism, particularly the "emotional and practical hardships" that she and her son experience (p. 43). In form, this autoethnography has more of a social-scientific orientation in its treatment of personal experiences as data, engaging in systematic analysis of these experiences, and developing themes from this analysis. But this autoethnography is also critical in its orientation, especially given the use of critical theories associated with motherhood and disability studies and in the ways it calls attention to conflicting discourses of motherhood and disability—discourses Zibricky sought to change with the use of personal experience and autoethnography. As her work as well as the other studies reviewed in this section illustrate, autoethnography is flexible in its use.

A (Brief) Review of Autoethnography and Research on Families

On the basis of our experiences as autoethnographic researchers and writers, we believe that autoethnography has much to offer the interdisciplinary field of family studies. We also believe one of the best ways to be inspired about how autoethnography can be used is to read the good autoethnographic work of others. Informed by these beliefs, we review some notable contributions from different disciplines that have used autoethnography as a way to explore families. Although this review is far from exhaustive, we believe it will guide nascent and experienced researchers to exemplary works that take advantage of autoethnography as both process and product. Because autoethnography does not shy away from personal experiences, we begin by sharing our experiences with autoethnographic inquiry.

I (Tony) have used autoethnography to describe the ways my same-sex attraction complicates my relationship with family members, the time when a cousin called me "the family faggot," moments when family members neglected or treated my intimate and meaningful relationships with men as less important than heterosexual commitments, and dilemmas I encountered after coming out to my family, such as the time when an aunt did not allow my partner and me to visit (Adams, 2006, 2011, 2014). Throughout all of this work, I make sure to combine my personal experience with interviews, mass-mediated texts, and extant research on sexual orientation, coming out of the closet, and familial relationships.

With Jonathan Wyatt, I also coedited a special issue of *Qualitative Inquiry* (Adams & Wyatt, 2012) featuring autoethnographies about father–son relationships. Jonathan and I then edited the book *On (Writing) Families: Autoethnographies of Presence and Absence, Love and Loss* (Wyatt & Adams, 2014)—a collection of autoethnographies about parent–child relationships written by researchers representing multiple disciplines, including geography, psychology, counseling and psychotherapy, art therapy, education, and communication, as well as exercise, nutrition, and health sciences. Contributors to these collections use personal experience, evocative writing, emotion and vulnerability, and rigorous reflexivity to describe—and sometimes critique—their experiences as parents, children, and families. They

show processes of "figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their [familial] struggles" (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 111).

I (Jimmie) appreciate combining autoethnography with more traditional qualitative research. In an essay that featured qualitative interview data about viewers' relationships to the program *Grey's Anatomy* (Manning, 2008), I started and ended the essay with autoethnographic reflections about how my chosen kin and I placed ourselves into the program and how my experience helped me understand the interviewee data. I have used autoethnography with rhetorical and media criticism as well. For example, in a media criticism of *Catfish: The TV Show* I used autoethnography to describe a time I met someone online who was much different in person (Manning, 2015b). I also use autoethnography as a form of self-reflection to have a better sense of my assumptions, goals, and desires that I bring into a non-autoethnographic research project. Recently, before starting interview research with families who enacted purity pledges (e.g., Manning 2014, 2015c), I came to a better sense of where I stood as a researcher by writing an autoethnography about the interactions I had with my nieces taking a purity pledge and wearing purity rings (Manning, 2011).

I have also used autoethnography to explore my experiences with alcoholism in my family. For example, I wrote an essay—with the intention of it being used as a classroom case study—about the first time I acknowledged to my mother that other people knew my father was an alcoholic (Manning, 2015a). I tried to help readers see some of the everyday elements of being part of an alcoholic family—the secrecy, the sense of never knowing what would upset my father, my family's interactions with other people—and how they all blend together into a coherent experience. I also explored my father's alcoholism through an essay in which I examined my personal distractions while trying to watch the television program *Mad Men* (Manning, 2012). When seeing how Don Draper's family, friends, and coworkers responded to his alcoholism, the show reminded me of my past experience, even though my father bared little ostensible physical or behavioral resemblance to Don and my family was not much like the Drapers. Yet there he and we were on the television screen, even as we were not. Such paradoxes are difficult to observe in most research, but they

can be worked out through careful reflection and writing in autoethnographic inquiry.

Other researchers have used autoethnography to examine familial experiences. For example, some researchers used autoethnography as a way of exploring personal and cultural experiences of motherhood. Exemplars include Faulkner's (2012, 2014) critical and creative-artistic autoethnographies that describe the vulnerability of motherhood and child rearing, complicated medical discourses that come with pregnancy, and candid insights about being too old or less productive after having a child. Pineau's (2000, 2013) critical and creative-artistic autoethnographies offer another view of motherhood as she described and critiqued invasive medical practices as drawn from the everyday moments of nursing her dying mother and giving birth to her daughter. Foster (2010) shared her stories of infertility and the (im)possibility of being both a good mother and a good feminist. Her highly personal story allows readers to witness her journey of reconciling these two roles. And as previously mentioned, Zibricky (2014) described the everyday experiences of and reactions to motherhood and autism, as well as the "emotional and practical hardships" that she and Cameron, her son, experience (p. 43). Zibricky also used reflexivity and vulnerability in skillful ways: "It was me who had the problem with letting go of therapy" for Cameron, she wrote. "For over 10 years I spent nearly every day trying to normalize Cameron." She then added, "I also wanted society to see that I was a 'good mother' doing a good job of raising my son" (p. 43).

Other scholars have used autoethnography to offer insights about grief over the loss of a parent, child, or sibling. Paxton (2014) combined memory, personal experiences with the death of his mother, and techniques of fiction with extant research and theories on grief. His work offers insights into mother-son relationships, an underexplored dyad in family studies, as well as a practical sense of how children can deal with grief after the death of a parent. In much of Ellis's work on grief and loss, she merged personal experiences with extant research and theories on grief and loss, and she did so in relation to her partner (Ellis, 1995), her mother (Ellis, 2001), and the death of her brother (Ellis, 1993, 2014). Ellis's work is particularly notable because it examined how grief is personally

experienced across the life span and in comparison to other family relationships or situations. Wyatt (2006, 2008) used creative-artistic writing to demonstrate the ways he continues to miss his father and to keep his father alive with writing. Wyatt also asked intriguing questions about the ethics of representing others who have passed away, specifically acknowledging the tension between sharing personal stories and simultaneously showing how those stories can involve others.

Some researchers have used autoethnography to study gender, race, and racism in the context of families. As mentioned, Boylorn (2013b) has used autoethnography to describe the everyday familial experiences of Black women living in Sweetwater, a rural community in North Carolina. She offered a nuanced sense of how race and gender are constitutive of Black family experiences for women. Blume and De Reus (2009) used autoethnography to explore and deconstruct White privilege. They specifically described instances of racial discrimination connected to early family life, from living in particular neighborhoods and playing racist childhood games to developing ways to resist White privilege. The authors use intersectionality theory to critique racism, Whiteness, and family studies, allowing readers to see lived sibling behavior in ways that other research methods probably would not allow. And although Brown (1991) does not use the term *autoethnography*, she effectively used personal experience to write against social scientific, Eurocentric research about African American families. Specifically, she demonstrated how much of this research mischaracterizes the roles within African American families (e.g., by not understanding how washerwomen were community-building entrepreneurs) and misrepresents African American family life (e.g., by suggesting that African American women focus more on kinship or familial relationships and less on friendships with other women; by showing that extant research fails to recognize how or why community friendships are also considered familial relationships).

Scholars have used autoethnography to investigate familial experiences of lesbian and gay persons as well. Barton (2012) focused on the intersection of religion and families, weaving her familial experiences throughout more formal interviews with persons who identify as lesbian and gay. Tillmann (2015) used autoethnography

to conduct interviews with gay men and their relatives, and she described the ways in which her experiences informed the interviews. And Allen (2007) used autoethnography to illustrate the lived experiences of (same-gender) partner separation, ambiguous loss, and how (same-gender) marriage—a "legal chaperon when partners are unable or unwilling to manage their separation, dissolution, and postdivorce parenting in a productive manner" (p. 181)—can help "normalize family boundaries" and determine who counts as legitimate family members (p. 182).

Reviewing studies in particular topical areas can illustrate the influence of autoethnography on and in family research. To extend the possibilities of such influence, we now examine the particular strengths of autoethnographic inquiry for family studies.

STRENGTHS OF AUTOETHNOGRAPHY FOR FAMILY RESEARCH

Although autoethnography has numerous strengths, four particular qualities make it especially suitable for doing family research. In this section, we describe how autoethnography can allow researchers to offer insider accounts of families; to study everyday, unexpected experiences of families, especially as they encounter unique or difficult situations; to write against limited extant research about families; and to make research more accessible to nonacademic audiences. We especially encourage researchers to explicitly articulate these strengths in their autoethnographic research; doing so can allow family scholars to expand their epistemological reach and to generate new insights about family life.

Offering Insider Accounts of Families

One strength of autoethnography for family research is the ability for a researcher to use personal experience to provide *insider accounts* of familial experiences—that is, to describe familial experiences from the vantage point of the author and to record experiences that outsiders may have a difficulty accessing.

Others have noted the benefits of personal experience and insider accounts. For example, Brown (1991) critiqued the

> Eurocentric tendency to assume that those of us who have been trained to analyze people's lives

are better able to understand them than the people whose lives they actually are. I have come to have great respect for people's abilities to understand their own lives. And I have learned to listen, not just to what they tell me about the particulars of their lives, but also to the ways in which they define themselves for themselves. (p. 90)

Pelias (2014) described the ways in which personal experience allows him to "function as an insider, an ethnographer who uses his privileged position to uncover the familiar, to understand what a given experience might say about the human condition" (p. 152). In discussing her use of personal experience and memoir, Cvetkovich (2012) noted, "I wanted to capture how depression feels—the everyday sensations that don't immediately connect to any larger diagnosis or explanatory framework" (p. 79). And Tillmann-Healy (1996) wrote, "I can show you a view [of an eating disorder] no physician or therapist can, because, in the midst of an otherwise 'normal' life, I experience how a bulimic *lives* and *feels*" (p. 80). Autoethnographic accounts can allow for deep and highly personal accounts about the most private of situations (e.g., living with depression) in the most unreachable of places (e.g., a physician's office) and for extended periods of time.

Further, one defining characteristic of families is that family members often have a shared history with and a future commitment to one another (Galvin, Bylund, & Brommel, 2012). Family outsiders—people who do not have this shared history or future commitment—may have a difficult time trying to access the lived, personal, embodied experiences of this history and commitment. However, an insider—a member of the family—can describe this history and commitment in novel and nuanced ways. As Philaretou and Allen (2006) have written, "The autoethnographer, being a trusted member in his/her circle of close friends and an indispensable part of the family system, can use his/her influence to delve into the nature of the family dynamics" (p. 68). As such, an autoethnographer can use personal experience to offer a comprehensive, longitudinal history of and commitment to parents, children, and relatives—a history and commitment that may not be able to be captured by a survey, experiment, interview, or even traditional ethnographic research. Here, we offer an example to illustrate how autoethnography might be able to examine difficult-to-access familial contexts.

In *Pathways to Madness*, Henry (1965) used ethnography to live with families for about 1 week, made field notes about their interactions, and then wrote up his observations of familial experiences. The primary "data" Henry used stemmed from the interactions he observed during the week, as well as any documents and conversations he had with family members about their past. As Henry demonstrated, this method for studying family life is important: With ethnography, the researcher could observe familial relationships as lived in their natural settings—environments that are familiar to, and created by, the family, and an environment that will continue to exist before and after the researcher's presence. With enough time and rapport, the researcher could become an intimate participant in the family and, therefore, observe everyday rules and behaviors of family life as well as comments and information about families that may not be able to be revealed using a method (e.g., surveys, interviews) that does not require as much time with participants.

Although these are strengths of ethnography for studying family life, there are also limitations. For instance, given the time necessary to spend with a family and the need to cultivate rapport with family members, the ethnographer may have the resources (e.g., time, money, health) to observe only one particular family. Further, given that the ethnographer may enter and eventually leave the family, the family's interactional history and their future interactions and commitments may never be observed directly. Even the best ethnographers would have a limited snapshot from which to assess and draw conclusions about a family (e.g., Heath, 2012).

For qualitative researchers of families, especially ethnographers, one methodological issue is being able to access and study the ways in which families are lived, in their natural settings. Such direct, long-term access to these settings may become even more of an issue if the ethnographer focuses on sensitive topics such as abuse, secrecy, or sexual intimacy. To compile a thorough thick description, the ethnographer may have to increasingly gain access to observe private settings such as the primary dwelling space and settings within that space (e.g., bedrooms, bathrooms), as well as gain access to internal interactions and personal information, such as everyday conversations (e.g., in person, telephone), financial records, and even particular emails or online chat contexts such as Skype

or Facebook. However, given the use of personal experience, autoethnography can make an excellent alternative for accessing insider experiences, extend knowledge about family life, and address limitations of other research methods.

Studying Everyday, Unexpected Experiences of Families

Related to insider accounts of familial experiences, autoethnography allows for the examination of everyday, unexpected experiences of family life. A focus on these experiences can give a different kind of agency to researchers, as they use autoethnography to simultaneously address particular research questions and topics and reflexively adjust the project to include the particular, mundane moments that constitute the lived experience of families. To illustrate this strength of autoethnography, we use the example of familial homophobia.

Schulman (2009) has defined familial homophobia as instances when families humiliate or punish gay and lesbian family members; "exclude gay and lesbian members through outright ban"; allow gay and lesbian members a "partial participation provided that the person never shows or discusses her or his own life"; allow a same-sex lover "to be present" as long as the lover is "not fully acknowledged" as a lover; and/or "enforce a clear message" that a family member's lover is "not as important as the heterosexuals in the family and/or that their relationship is lesser than heterosexual relationships or the consequence of pathology" (pp. 23–24). If researchers decide to use Shulman's definitions of familial homophobia, how can those researchers gain direct access to these experiences? More specifically, how can researchers study the particular moments when and/or how lesbian or gay family members have been humiliated, punished, excluded, or not acknowledged, or whose relationships are treated as secondary to other familial relationships?

Researchers could survey families about topics such as homophobia and may be able to get a general sense about how families would interact, or have interacted, with a lesbian or gay family member. Researchers could also interview family members about their treatment of a lesbian or gay family member, or interview lesbian or gay family members about homophobic familial experiences. However, survey and interview responses might be tailored to what the family

member believes the researchers or other family members want to hear (Manning, 2013); concerned with protecting the family (Manning & Kunkel, 2015); and/or shrouded in ignorance, such as a mother who legitimately believes that she has never treated her (lesbian) daughter in homophobic, exclusionary ways when she actually has, at least according to Schulman's (2009) definitions of familial homophobia (see Barton, 2012; Glave, 2003–2004). Researchers could use more ethnographic methods by visiting, or even living with, families who have a lesbian or gay family member, but the researchers may still not be able to access all family interactions (e.g., those that happen via email or on the telephone or within private spaces such as the bedroom) and may be limited by the time they are able to spend with the family. Researchers could plan to attend an event such as a family reunion when a lesbian or gay person (and maybe that person's lover) may be humiliated or disregarded by family members, but doing so might assume, or even hope, that homophobic interactions will happen at such an event.

As gay men, we cannot prepare for the particular moments when familial homophobia will happen or when others will tell us (unsolicited) stories about familial homophobia; for us, familial homophobia happens unexpectedly in a variety of familial contexts—contexts that would be difficult to study using other research methods (Adams, 2011, 2014). Given that autoethnography values the use of personal experience, as researchers we can investigate, and provide accounts of, homophobic experiences as they occur in these unexpected moments in everyday familial settings. Granted, we may be required to take great care in masking unsolicited and mundane information, especially if others do not know that we may write about them (see Barton, 2011).

Other researchers use autoethnography in a similar way. In an article about the importance of same-gender divorce, Allen (2007) used autoethnography to describe her contentious separation ("divorce") from a woman, and how, post-breakup and absent marital laws, her ex-partner refused Allen from seeing the ex-partner's (biological) son—a child Allen helped to raise. Allen also described unexpected, everyday comments others made about the breakup and about Allen's son. "In trying to live with the uncertainty of my son's physical absence," Allen wrote:

> My sense of confusion was compounded by well-meaning but not so well-informed people in the community; for example, "He isn't really your son, why can't you just let go?," "Why are you still crying about that—aren't you over that yet?" (p. 180)

In this account, Allen (2007) offered an insider account of the experiences of a same-gender breakup and the importance of marriage and divorce, as well as insight into mundane, unexpected experiences (e.g., everyday comments from others) that illustrate assumptions about who counts as a family—knowledge and experiences that are more difficult to capture with other research methods.

Writing Against Extant Research About Families

A third interrelated strength of autoethnography for family research is the ability for a researcher to use personal experience to describe the particularities of family life and to write against status quos inherent in family research (Allen & Piercy, 2005)—that is, against common norms and assumptions about families, misperceptions and gaps in existing research, and harmful themes, patterns, and generalizations. As Allen (2000) has noted, the "emotional and subjective reactions to the empirical literature I was reading gave me the energy and confidence to challenge the received (i.e., published) wisdom and to chart a different course" (p. 10).

Other researchers have used personal experience and autoethnography in this way. Brown (1991) used her personal experience to demonstrate the failures of traditional, social-scientific research. She specifically described how her mother influenced her academic training as a historian and showed how existing research and representations about the family lives of African American women contradicted her knowledge of the historical record of the African American community she inherited from her mother. Rambo Ronai (1996) used autoethnography to write about her experiences as a child living with a mentally retarded mother, as "the literature has ignored the lived experience of children of mentally retarded parents" (p. 110). Zibricky (2014) used autoethnography to provide insider knowledge about raising a child with autism. Informed by feminism and disability studies, she noted, "Little is known about mothers raising

disabled children" (p. 40). Zibricky used "lived experience" to offer insights about the "culture of motherhood" and to write against harmful "longstanding beliefs of a patriarchal society where mothers are expected to be held responsible for the moral regulation of their children" and to be "expert mothers at all times to their dependent children" (p. 41). Carter (2002) used autoethnography to juxtapose general trends and sterile facts about spousal abuse with personal experiences of abuse—the particularities of how abuse might look, as well as how difficult it might be to leave an abusive relationship. Looking across these examples, the researchers not only offered insider accounts of historical misrepresentation, mental impairment, motherhood and autism, and spousal abuse but also used their particular experiences to write against research that has neglected those experiences.

Making Research Accessible

Academic research generally is criticized as being inaccessible to many who would benefit from its findings. As Bochner, Ellis, and Tillmann-Healy (1998) wrote, "We want people to read our work, to find it interesting, useful, and evocative. Yet, most social science writing is not widely read because it is inaccessible, dry, and overly abstract" (p. 58). Richardson (1994) made a similar observation: "It seems foolish at best, and narcissistic and wholly self-absorbed at worst, to spend months or years doing research that ends up not being read and not making a difference to anything but the author's career" (p. 517). As these autoethnographers suggest, much academic writing is simply unreadable to people outside of a highly specialized audience. Although the writing may have scholarly merit, it is questionable how many people will benefit from it.

However, given the use of storytelling techniques and personal experience, literate nonacademic audiences often appreciate autobiographies and other forms of life writing (e.g., memoirs, diaries). Given the concrete, and evocative—thick—descriptions of fieldwork, novice readers also may more easily understand ethnographies, at least compared to jargon-laden, social-scientific reports. As Van Maanen (2011) has noted, such accessibility can keep

> the nonspecialist interested in what we do and occasionally pushes certain forms of ethnography

into the trade or general-reader domain, bring the seemingly distant and alien or proximate but puzzling worlds we study to readers beyond the warrens of our own research guilds. (p. 174)

Ethnographies—especially those that remain "relatively free from technical jargon and high-wire abstraction" (p. 174)—can "enjoy brisk and justly deserved sales in both the university and airport bookstores" (p. 136).

Taken together, these characteristics of autobiographies and ethnographies allow autoethnographers to create research texts and representations that appeal to nonacademic audiences. And as previously noted, some autoethnographers—especially critical and creative-artistic-oriented autoethnographers—may even accomplish such accessibility through the use of nonwritten media to represent their research (Bartleet, 2013), including documentary film (Tomaselli, Dyll-Myklebust, & van Grootheest, 2013), art or drawing (Metta, 2013), and music (Bartleet & Ellis, 2009). Good autoethnographic scholarship often offers the best of both worlds, providing the accessibility of an autobiography or creative art while retaining the insights and complexities of other kinds of scholarly work. These qualities fulfill what Manning and Kunkel (2014a) have critiqued as missing in traditional research: Most studies do not allow readers to *feel* emotions, *visualize* experience, or have an overall *lived sense* of a situation. A well-constructed autoethnography can do just that.

Autoethnographic Evaluations, Risks, and Limitations

Thus far, we have provided an overview of autoethnography, described orientations to autoethnographic research, reviewed autoethnographies of families, and identified four strengths of autoethnography for family research. In this final section, we discuss criteria for evaluating autoethnographic research, and we identify risks and limitations of autoethnography.

Evaluating Autoethnography

As autoethnography has developed as a research and writing practice, so too have the criteria for what constitutes a strong autoethnographic contribution. At minimum, all autoethnographies should use, and demonstrate the social and/or cultural significance of, personal experience; a report that does not use or show the significance of personal experience is not an autoethnography. Given that autoethnography combines techniques of doing autobiography with techniques of doing ethnography, autoethnographies should also combine recollection, reflexivity, and storytelling techniques (autobiography) with practices of fieldwork, observation, acknowledgment of extant research and theories, and cultural participation and analysis (ethnography); a report that does not include many of these elements is not an autoethnography.

The different orientations to autoethnography—specifically social-scientific, interpretive-humanistic, critical, and creative-artistic approaches—can also encourage different, sometimes contradictory criteria for evaluating autoethnographic research. Social-scientific-oriented autoethnographers tend to emphasize systematic data collection and coding procedures (e.g., Chang, 2008; Chang et al., 2013), formal research questions (e.g., Manning & Kunkel, 2014b), and issues such as reliability, validity, and transferability (e.g., Burnard, 2007; Philaretou & Allen, 2006). However, those using or advocating interpretive-humanistic, critical, and creative-artistic autoethnographies may not be concerned with these social-scientific criteria, and instead consider whether and/or how an autoethnography offers "abundant, concrete detail" and structurally complex narratives that deal with facts as well as feelings, and ultimately gives a "story that moves me, my heart and belly as well as my head" (Bochner, 2000, p. 271).

In comparison to some social-scientific, interpretive-humanistic, and critical autoethnographers, creative-artistic autoethnographers may meticulously foreground storytelling techniques such as narrative voice, composite characters, and dramatic tension, as well as other practices associated with art making, to create engaging and accessible accounts of personal and/or cultural experience. As such, it may be severely inappropriate, and even silly, to use criteria such as reliability, validity, and generalizability to evaluate creative-artistic autoethnographies; doing so would be akin to using social-scientific criteria to determine the value of texts like *Moby Dick*, *To Kill and Mockingbird*, and *Harry Potter*. Instead, readers and writers of creative-artistic autoethnographies should focus on the artistry of these texts, the (in)effective

use of storytelling techniques, and the kinds of arguments the autoethnographies may convey. Conversely, using creative-artistic criteria to evaluate more social-scientific autoethnographies would also be inappropriate; these texts would fail according to the standards and expectations of artistry and storytelling.

Researchers who use autoethnography also should acknowledge their orientation to the method and how the orientation, and expectations of their and/or others' autoethnographic research, may shift as throughout the research process. Doing so can provide guideposts for readers about their autoethnographic aims and what they hope to accomplish with an autoethnography. As Allen (2000) has noted, "Being explicit in what ideas, theories, and personal commitments we use to construct our arguments will help us know more clearly and honestly about where we actually disagree" (p. 8). Further, acknowledging autoethnographic orientations can allow readers to offer more constructive feedback and/or better translate the autoethnography into their own research.

Risks Associated With Autoethnographic Writing

We would be remiss not to mention some risks of autoethnography, all of which should be considered before doing autoethnography (and especially before publishing an autoethnography). Autoethnography tends to be highly personal work. In addition to the emotions involved with such writing, an autoethnographer's life will be open to scholarly or artistic critique. Researchers who use autoethnography report that they have felt personally attacked by negative readers, reviewers, and research authorities such as ethics review committees not only for using autoethnography but also for including intimate and unflattering personal experiences (see Ellis, 2009; Rambo, 2007). As Allen and Piercy (2005) wrote, "By telling a story *on* ourselves, we risk exposure to our peers, subject ourselves to scrutiny and ridicule, and relinquish some sense of control over our own narratives" (p. 156). Even though unique findings can stem from autoethnographic inquiry and autoethnography can be a "powerful way to 'take back the night' from the potential violence of our unexamined projections and resist our own protestations that we are not biased" (p. 156),

doing autoethnography can simultaneously create anxiety, vulnerability, and maybe even pain (Chatham-Carpenter, 2010). Still, these potential risks are often present in other forms of research, and researchers and participants may simultaneously find the ability to tell and share their stories rewarding processes (Manning, 2010).

Because narratives of personal experience implicate others in our lives, autoethnography can also put those people at risk (Morse, 2002). With other methods (e.g., surveys, experiments, interviews) a researcher can maintain confidentiality or anonymity for research participants. With autoethnography, de-identification becomes increasingly difficult, especially if others are referenced in, or tied to, an author's experiences. For example, if I (Tony) use autoethnography to examine personal experiences of familial homophobia, it may be difficult to disguise family members, especially if I come from a small family; these members, and even readers, may be able to identify these people in my life. When I (Jimmie) use autoethnography to talk about alcoholism in my family, it often requires pointing to my father's abusive or irresponsible behaviors, vulnerable moments experienced by my mother or other family members, disputes my family has about what did or did not happen, as well as the responses of nonimmediate family members and community members. In other words, my account implicates not just me but also my mother, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, close family friends, teachers, and coworkers. Autoethnographers often make ethical concerns their primary concerns and take great care with the personal information they use; at the very least, many autoethnographers attempt to understand who could be implicated in and/or by their representations (see Barton, 2011; Berry, 2006; Bolen & Adams, in press; Ellis, 2009).

Whereas many autoethnographers still adhere to the core requirements of research ethics such as informed consent and other requirements established by ethics review committees (Tullis, 2013), many autoethnographers also attend vigilantly to "relational ethics" by acknowledging their ties and obligations to others (Ellis, 2007). This can happen through the use of pseudonyms (e.g., Anonymous, 2015; Carter, 2002), fiction (e.g., Angrosino, 1998), collaboration (e.g., Adams & Holman Jones, 2011; Manning & Kunkel, 2015), or composite characters (e.g., Ellis, 2004). Although certainly not

required, some researchers may even find it helpful to share their autoethnographies with the people involved. For example, if an autoethnographer writes about living with a sibling who has autism, the autoethnographer may benefit from sharing the account with family members to acquire a sense of how they understand and feel about the account. The autoethnographer may even incorporate his or her reactions into the account. We suggest not that autoethnographers need to seek approval from others, but rather that sharing an account can reveal other aspects of family relations that may be important for a project.

Conclusion

Researchers across different methodological and theoretical paradigms can benefit from autoethnography. For example, autoethnography can inform statistical, postpositivist research by offering possible explanations for outliers, contradictions, variations, or highly unreliable findings. Autoethnography can also generate innovative research questions, form hypotheses, and carefully conceptualize research. And even though the accessibility of autoethnography makes it an alternative to dominant research writing, it has strong potential to influence other research conversations; as Leslie and Sollie (1994) noted, a topic is best revealed when "multiple views or methods are incorporated" into a research project (p. 12).

As we have explained throughout this article, autoethnography can offer a novel, nuanced, and intimate approach to family research that involves highly personal accounts as well as thoughtful reflection and theorizing. Autoethnography offers much potential for in-depth and accessible research about many kinds of families in many different situations and contexts. We hope that those reading this article find inspiration for doing their own autoethnographic work; can use this article to explain this work or provide scholarly justification to others who might not understand the value of autoethnographic inquiry; and/or can consider how autoethnography can inform their studies or enhance their lives.

We suspect that some readers might be curious about how to begin an autoethnography project. Although we cannot underscore enough the value of reading other autoethnographic work for inspiration, we stress that autoethnography is a process that unfolds through the research and writing process. As family researchers, we often think a lot about family processes, structures, interactions, and institutions, and we often write up our research to explain these elements of families to one another and the larger academic community. Seldom, however, do most of us write about our own families. To that end, we close with an invitation that provides an answer to where autoethnographers begin their journeys: What family stories might you tell? In what ways do your experiences of family align with, or contradict, extant research? What insights might these stories and experiences offer others? Begin by thinking about these questions; begin by writing your stories. This is how autoethnographic family research can develop.

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