



Autoethnographic Responsibilities

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Abstract The author identifies key responsibilities in declaring, justifying, and advocating for autoethnography as an orientation to research, including the need to recognize various perspectives for doing autoethnography and establishing criteria for evaluating autoethnography.

Keywords: *perspectives of autoethnography, evaluating autoethnography*

Autoethnography prospers in many academic contexts. Scholars from numerous disciplines, including, but not limited to, business, education, health, psychology, sociology, music, communication, and performance, use autoethnography in their research. Courses solely devoted to autoethnography are taught at many universities, multiple conferences welcome autoethnographic research, and numerous books, edited collections, and special journal issues foreground autoethnographic practice. However, such prosperity warrants responsibilities.

In this essay, I identify key responsibilities in declaring, justifying, and advocating for autoethnography as an orientation to research. I specifically discuss the need to recognize various perspectives for doing autoethnography and establishing criteria for evaluating autoethnography.

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Without being too restrictive or conclusive, I believe there are important, identifiable, and interrelated perspectives for doing autoethnography (Adams & Manning, 2015; Manning & Adams, 2015).

Some autoethnographies are more analytic and social scientific (Anderson, 2006). These treat personal experience as tangential to the fieldwork experience (Heath, 2012), code and thematize personal experience (Kestenbaum et al., 2015), and/or adhere to traditional academic-writing structures and practices (Zibricky, 2014). I tend to find these autoethnographies in disciplines such as business, education, health, and psychology and not as often in sociology, music, communication, or performance.

There are interpretive/humanistic autoethnographies that use personal experience to offer “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) of cultural experience in an attempt to promote an understanding of these experiences (Boylorn, 2013; Richardson, 2016; Speedy, 2015).

There are critical autoethnographies—often informed by feminist, critical race, queer, postcolonial, indigenous, and crip sensibilities—that focus intentionally, and fiercely, on identifying and remedying social harms and injustices (Berry, 2016; Boylorn & Orbe, 2014; Briscoe & Khalifa, 2015; Zibricky, 2014).

There are creative, performative, and evocative autoethnographies that offer accessible, concrete, emotional, and embodied accounts of personal and cultural experience (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Pelias, 2016; Speedy, 2015; Spry, 2016).

I mention these perspectives for three reasons. First, contrary to the narrow understanding of autoethnography offered by some writers (Atkinson, 2015; Tolich, 2010), not everyone understands or practices autoethnography in the same way. As such, I believe we have a responsibility to recognize and respect various perspectives for doing autoethnography.

Second, although perspectives blur and are contingent upon the project, I am responsible for understanding and articulating my perspective(s) when doing autoethnography. For example, I might use an abstract, preface, footnote, playbill, or the main text to offer a brief definition of autoethnography, articulate my perspective(s) of autoethnography, and describe how I use personal experience. Articulating my perspective(s) does not need to be excessive, defensive, or pierced with citation—but I believe that I should at least acknowledge it.

Third, by articulating my perspective(s) of autoethnography, I help readers and audiences understand my work. If I do not articulate my perspective(s) for a given project, then I risk others evaluating my work in unfortunate and untenable ways.

For example, if I do not note that I am doing critical autoethnography, the social scientific autoethnographer might argue that I am too partial and careless with my research, or, as a critical and evocative autoethnographer, I might dismiss an interpretive/humanistic autoethnography as not critical or evocative enough—that is, unless the author says that they do not intend to be critical or evocative. I frequently encounter these evaluations—of others judging an autoethnography as not critical enough, or as too social scientific, or as too descriptive and not evocative, or as too evocative and lacking cultural insight. But these comments, especially when made by fellow autoethnographers, are simple, ignorant, and arrogant.

I recognize that even mentioning these perspectives may make some autoethnographers uncomfortable, and trying to compare different perspectives—e.g., social

scientific autoethnography vs. evocative autoethnography—would be, as Denzin (2006) notes, comparing apples and oranges. However, to our irritation—or excitement—these perspectives have become well-recognized apples and oranges—with interpretive/humanistic autoethnographies and critical autoethnographies possibly being grapes and kiwis. But they're all fruit, and they can motivate different questions about, and insights into, personal and cultural experiences.

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In “Pursuing Excellence in Qualitative Inquiry,” Ken Gergen (2014) asks, “How can newcomers to [qualitative] inquiry proceed if they cannot ascertain what counts as ‘good work?’ And how can journal editors and reviewers conduct responsible evaluations if the criteria for excellence are obscure?” (p. 49).

Evaluation is a tricky and contested endeavor, but I believe we must continually establish, articulate, challenge, and revise criteria for determining what counts as excellent autoethnography; as Patton (2002) writes, “judging quality requires criteria” (p. 542). If we care about quality and if we immerse ourselves in situations in which evaluation matters—a thesis or dissertation defense, publishing an article or a book, seeking tenure and/or promotion, or, as Pelias (2000) astutely observes, throughout much of our waking lives—then I charge autoethnographers with the responsibility of offering explicit criteria for evaluating autoethnography—recognizing, however, that criteria are contingent upon the aforementioned perspectives of autoethnography. I do not want to outsource the evaluative task to others who are unfamiliar with, or who doubt, autoethnography.

For example, given the use of story in evocative autoethnographies, I might advocate criteria used to evaluate stories—maybe a writer’s use of plot, dialogue, and narrative voice. Conversely, I might show how stories make traditional evaluative criteria irrelevant—criteria such as generalizability, reliability, validity, truthfulness, and accuracy. For example, it would not make sense to determine if stories such as *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Little Prince*, or *The Wrinkle in Time* are generalizable, reliable, valid, truthful, or accurate.

Evaluative criteria are also contingent upon our perspectives of autoethnography. For example, like Gergen (2014), I may agree that “good autoethnographic reporting” approximates “works of literature,” “provides insights into the lives of a particular group,” and links personal experience to “broader theoretical issues” (p. 56). However, these criteria may not be appropriate for all autoethnographic work, such as social scientific autoethnographies that do not approximate works of literature; evocative, performative, and creative autoethnographies that do not explicitly engage

broad theoretical issues; or critical autoethnographies that not only provide insights into the lives of a particular group *but also* offer ways to improve the lives of group members.

We need to have the evaluation discussion more often, in more venues, and by more autoethnographers. We need to more frequently discuss what we can, or should, do or ask—and *not* do or ask—about the autoethnographies we read, hear, and share. We need to help newcomers to autoethnography understand its various practices, and we need to help editors and reviewers understand what counts as effective and excellent autoethnography.

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As an autoethnographer, I believe in certain responsibilities.

I believe that I should not apologize for autoethnography or worry about ignorant and arrogant skeptics. Instead, I should be accountable and able to articulate my perspective of autoethnography and what I hope to accomplish with a project.

I believe that I cannot tell stories and expect no feedback or evaluation, or think that my personal tales are beyond critique, or assume that others will recognize the purpose of my work.

I believe that caring about the future of autoethnography means showing what autoethnography can do that other research perspectives and practices cannot accomplish, as well as explaining and justifying autoethnography to unfamiliar others: students and colleagues, human subjects committees, journal reviewers and editors, and book publishers.

Adhering to these responsibilities, I believe that I/we can maintain and expand the infrastructure for autoethnographic research—research that, as many autoethnographers already know, allows us to do compassionate and consequential research as well as try to live reflective, meaningful, and socially just lives.

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