Handbook of Autoethnography

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Section Introduction

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For as long as autoethnography has existed, some scholars have promoted this method as profoundly ethical, instructive, and even transformational scholarship (e.g., Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Spry, 2001). Others have denied its power and potential, pointing to selected practices or exemplars as self-indulgent, overly subjective, or without scholarly merit (Atkinson, 2006; Walford, 2004). Published debates about autoethnography’s merits in journals and edited volumes are augmented with insightful and divergent conference presentations, lively discussions in graduate seminars, and, of course, passionate rants at the pub or coffee shop. The dissents about which autoethnographic works should be published and in which journals or other venues, win awards, and be taught as part of (inter)disciplinary canons remain contentious, and whether or not autoethnography is taught in methods courses of undergraduate and graduate programs generates ongoing disagreements as well.

So what makes autoethnography worth teaching, publishing, or holding up as an exemplar? And how do those of us who practice autoethnography—as one of our methodological tools or as our primary method—explain its processes, products, and politics? These questions both spark enduring debates and form a useful framework for the chapters in this section.

I relish both formal and informal debates about autoethnography (and qualitative methods, more broadly) and have no wish to have them resolved. I come to my love of methodological debate naturally, having participated in intercollegiate debate while a student at the University of Vermont and married for more than a quarter century (and counting) to a former member of my debate squad. Moreover, I am the academic child of two equally extraordinary but markedly different graduate mentors—a feminist, postpositivist qualitative scholar who later dipped a toe in autoethnographic waters (Buzzanell & D’Enbeau, 2009) and the generative goddess of autoethnography herself, Dr. Carolyn Ellis. Now I teach these contested terrains, briefly but passionately, in undergraduate qualitative methods and feminist methods courses. I feel called to write more about qualitative methods than I do about my various research topics, including communication in healthcare delivery and in extended/chosen families, and I engage directly with methodological and epistemological debates (e.g., Ellingson, 1998, 2009, 2017; Ellingson & Sotirin, 2019, 2020).

The authors in this section rightfully decry neoliberal influences on academic publishing, which encourage quantity over quality and may discourage vulnerable forms of scholarship such as autoethnography. James Salvo takes on the critical topic of rejection in publishing, both in the bias against autoethnography in some journals and in the evaluation of autoethnography by hiring and tenure committees. He suggests that some autoethnographies remain unpublished not because they are of poor quality but because they are not sufficiently innovative or appeal only to a niche market. In this way, he positions autoethnography as part of the larger academic publishing industry in which rejection is just part of the game. Alec Grant, Nigel Patrick Short, and Lydia Turner, on the other hand, stake out purposes of publishing autoethnography as contributing to ongoing discussions and enabling others to think with stories, which can foster empathy, compassion, and connections across differences.

And then there are the spirited debates over which criteria are used to evaluate the quality of autoethnography...
autoethnography and whether the very notion of criteria is appropriate, given their positivist legacy and partisan nature. Andrew C. Sparkes provides a comprehensive overview of sets of autoethnographic criteria, including the one I teach and use in peer reviews (Richardson, 2000). He concludes that criteria are best viewed as socially constructed lists of characteristics, echoing Gingrich-Philbrook’s (2013) admonishment to avoid thinking of criteria as “magic contract[s] for power relations” (p. 619). Sophie Tamas takes a different tack, offering a sublime narrative in which she considers what makes autoethnography valuable and how to foster those qualities and skills in students, as a reviewer or mentor, and in herself as an autoethnographer. She values not just the articulate and evocative accounts but also the leaky, even somewhat incoherent autoethnographies for their powerful resonance with life.

Further, two chapters chart possibilities of autoethnography as part of graduate curriculum and mentoring relationships, and for understanding the institution of higher education. Sandra L. Pensoneau-Conway and Darren J. Valenta suggest autoethnography promotes a special relational bond for faculty and students both in the process of creation and in the accounts that enable consideration of the “co-authoredness of our lives.” Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan, Daisy Pillay, and Inbanathan Naicker turn to autoethnography on higher education, learning reflexively about teaching, leading, and publishing in academia through this method. They suggest that autoethnography in academia requires commitment and mindfulness, which may push back against neoliberal imperatives by promoting generativity over productivity. They offer a hopeful vision of autoethnography as a way for students to engage with their own and others’ experiences and perspectives, fostering compassion and connection.

These insightful chapters introduce and ponder far more than they determine, and that is as it should be. Salvo urges autoethnographers to embrace plurality of forms, criteria, and positions on truth, purpose, and beauty. Autoethnographic truths of evocative detail, emotional vulnerability, analytic insight, and innovative thinking can never be singular. To my mind, the plurality or multiplicity inherent to this method will inevitably foster dissent and debate. Debate is, after all, a classic pedagogical tool, helping students and scholars at all career stages to better articulate and weigh relative strengths, challenges, values, and consequences of competing or complementary stances. A case in point—Carolyn Ellis and I have lovingly disagreed for years on the ways in which analytic and evocative forms of autoethnography (and the paradigms that undergird them) should be thought of as incommensurate or as necessarily overlapping and interdependent (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008, pp. 459–463). She points out that our close relationship provides a foundation of trust and commonality that makes it easier for generative rather than bitter or unproductive debate, and I agree.

In today’s increasingly polarized politics in much of the world, debates can degenerate into petty, pointless, and crude attempts to score points with catchy tag lines and sound-bite insults. But sincere debates can help us better understand the world in all of its glorious complexity and variety. Certainly, the complexities and nuances of autoethnography have been wielded against its practitioners and proponents by those who reject it. Yet the amazing insights autoethnography presents to readers and audiences offer bountiful antidotes to detractors’ venom. Bochner argued years ago that “[a]utoethnography is a way of life” and a very good way indeed (Ethnogs, FemNogs, Rip Tupp, 2011), in part because this method makes room for marginalized peoples and delegitimized experiences. Autoethnography shape-shifts to meet the needs of feminist, queer, critical race/antiracist, disabled, and immigrant/transnational people, and the stories of bullying, sexual assault, and other forms of physical and emotional violence. Debates about autoethnography need not be about invalidating others but can instead be about playfulness, plurality of perspectives, and possibilities. I invite readers to remain open to the multiplicity of jumping off points provided by the authors in this section, considering what each offers while resisting the urge to take a singular stand on any of the dynamic topics they illuminate.

REFERENCES


(Eds.), *Handbook of constructionist research* (pp. 445–465). Guilford.


