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Slipping and sliding

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SLIPPING AND SLIDING

Autoethnographic reflections on supervising, examining and evaluating autoethnography

Sheila Trahar

Introduction

How to encompass in our minds the complexity of some lived moments in life?
How to embody in language the mix of heightened awareness and felt experience?
... You don’t do that with theories. You don’t do that with a system of ideas.
You do it with a story.

(Coles, 1989, p. 128)

I begin the autoethnography workshops that I am facilitating in a Northern European university with those words. They were written some years ago, but I like to use them – in writing and in talking about autoethnography and narrative inquiry – with people who may be less familiar with such methodologies. I have advised the participants that I will be inviting them to reflect on how autoethnography might be an approach to consider for their research and that I will ask them to do some writing that they may choose to share with others. The week is intensive and enjoyable. I trudge through the snow every day, walking gingerly, frightened of falling on treacherous footpaths. By the end of the week, I know every slippery spot on my journey and how to avoid it. It is a metaphor for the experience. At the beginning of the week, I am a stranger in the context, slithering through the unfamiliar academic culture(s), striving to avoid slippery patches. In the middle of the week, I lose my voice completely. I feel stupid and helpless. Tremendous energy is needed to force words out of my mouth. It is exhausting. I barely speak, preserving what little croaking ability I have. Voiceless, I continue to be positioned in a particular way. People have certain expectations of me and it can be treacherous underfoot. By the end of the week, I regain my voice and negotiate the slippery patches more robustly. I avoid falling – on the ice – and in the seminar room. Had I fallen on the ice, I would have hurt myself physically. In the seminar room, my old friend, fear of failure, is waiting to greet me, rubbing their hands in anticipation of tripping me up, wanting me to fall. As usual, I rise to their challenges and cynicism with gusto, confident of how powerful it is to acknowledge how we are thinking with a person, an experience, a moment. It can be uncomfortable, revelatory, exciting.
Do you learn anything about me in this short vignette? Do you need to learn anything about me? Do I need you to do so? Why have I included it? This chapter is an account of some experiences of supervising the research of those using autoethnography, of examining doctorates in which the researcher has used autoethnography and includes reflections on reviewing autoethnographic articles and books. In the chapter, I grapple with the complexities of evaluating work with which I have been entrusted because of my academic role and perceived experience and expertise – words that I always use cautiously and advisedly – indicating the criteria that I use. In addition, ‘I view autoethnography as a radical form of making embodied knowledge claims that resist the normative use of knowledge as an inherently colonial tool’ (Dutta, 2018, p. 94). I propose that using autoethnography can further the ‘decolonial possibilities’ (Zembylas, 2018, p. 1) of higher education in its challenges to dominant approaches to research. Some 12 years ago, for example, I encountered the words of Pathak (2010, p. 2), that autoethnography has the potential to disrupt ‘academic imperialism’. Similarly, I believe in autoethnography’s capacity to identify and remove ‘deeply embedded epistemic hegemonies, which have been created through the twin processes of capital expansion and colonialism’ (Dawson, 2020, p. 75) as redolent of Fricker’s (2015, p. 79) concept of ‘epistemic reciprocity’, it encourages us as researchers ‘to give and receive of ourselves and of how we understand knowledges in order to make meaning’ (Trahar, 2021, p. 294).

Memories of the workshops in the snowy, Northern European city came to me as I began thinking about and writing this chapter. So often, that is what happens. As I write, memories are triggered and, rather than push them away, I nurture them, tussle with them, going with the flow, trusting that they surge in for a reason. As I continued to write, I realised that the preparation for, and facilitation of, the workshops gave an accurate account of how I understand autoethnography, how I engage in it and how I use that understanding to supervise and examine others’ research and writing. Writing autoethnographically, therefore, sets the scene for what is to come in the chapter.

**Trudging through the snow: understanding autoethnography**

The handbook containing this chapter is replete with definitions of autoethnography and I do not want to be tedious by repeating many of them. At the same time, if I am writing about supervising and evaluating autoethnographic work then it seems important that I position myself within it so that the reader knows why I make the judgements that I do. Returning to the words of Coles, quoted at the beginning of the chapter, I qualify them by explaining that I am not ‘atheoretical’; on the contrary, I enjoy engaging with theories. ‘Theorizing one’s own lived experiences can be … liberatory … and a means to interpret our own as well as others’ stories’ (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014, p. 236). But I am not driven by theory. I do not strive relentlessly to fit a theory to a person, an event, a practice or to myself. In addition, theories do not fall from the sky. They have been developed in social, cultural and historical contexts that may be quite different from the context of the researcher and the research. At the same time, I expect autoethnographic texts – especially those being presented for doctoral examination – to engage with other research on a topic and seek to contribute to it. I do not find it problematic for autoethnographers to ‘integrate relevant theory and concepts to help frame their stories of personal experience prior to offering a range of interpretations of the tale as told’ (Sparkes, 2018, p. 481), provided that, as indicated, those theories and concepts are contextualised and problematised.
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My next step would be to ‘position’ autoethnography within the broader family of qualitative methodologies that include narrative inquiry, autobiography, narrative ethnography before focusing more explicitly on autoethnography:

Autoethnography involves a critical study of yourself in relation to one or more cultural context(s)

(Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 9)

followed by these oft-quoted words used to explain the approach to the reader:

An autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of the personal experience; then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract and resist cultural interpretations.

(Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739)

Each time I read these words, I take something different from them. The importance of connecting the personal to the cultural – many autoethnographies that I read overlook to do that in depth. Focusing outward, resisting cultural interpretations. Again, for me, these elements are not always so visible. I emphasise, again, the importance of context. All research needs to be contextualised and readers provided with sufficient information about the context(s) of research so that they can understand it and, crucially, why the author is making the interpretations that they are.

“Do you want people to know that about you?”, they asked.

“Why would I not?”, I replied: journeying to autoethnography

Using autoethnography in my PhD to write about my selves in my cultures, provoked critical examination of the philosophical perspectives underpinning how I saw the world and my theoretical understandings of approaches to learning and teaching. Until I embarked on my doctorate, I had never questioned the geopolitical contexts and historical timeframes from which the Rogerian, humanistic, student-centred approach that I espoused (see, for example, Rogers, 1994) had emerged. ‘The problem is in part a failure to recognize that knowledge is not simply about epistemology (ways of knowing), but also ontology (ways of being)’ (Stein, 2020, p. 166). Interrogating mine and others’ ontologies, through autoethnography, has helped me to ‘learn to be otherwise’ (Stein, 2019, pp. 150–1). Perhaps, inevitably, therefore, I look for similar questioning when supervising and reading others’ work.

I did not claim to be an autoethnographer in my PhD, rather that my research developed autoethnographic dimensions through intense and critical reflexivity on the issues that I was exploring – and I was mindful of its critics. In turning the PhD into a book (Trahar, 2011), I encountered more criticisms of autoethnography such as ‘retreat into autoethnography is an abrogation of the honourable trade of the scholar’ (Delamont, 2009, p. 51) and, more latterly, that it may be construed as ‘a form of “soft research” or “me-search” that is atheoretical, ungeneralizable and self-absorbed’ (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014, p. 235). In my dissertation I was transparent about my fear of the danger of being ‘self-indulgent, rather than self-knowing, self-respectful … or self-luminous’ (Sparkes, 2002, p. 214) and I am now wary that ‘a focus on
independent experiences can in some cases jeopardise larger cultural issues … and that multiple methods/stories are necessary to give a wide representation of difference and displacement’ (Boylorn & Orbe, p. 237). Multiple methods/stories may be wise but, like most qualitative researchers, I do not set out to generalise ‘results’ to larger populations and so ‘generalisability’ is not a criterion I use to evaluate autoethnography. Rather, I believe that autoethnography ‘has the potential to resonate with those in similar circumstances who may then be moved to reflect critically on their experiences and perhaps act differently or, at least, puzzle over similar questions’ (Trahar, 2017a, p. 280). Further, that, as practitioners and researchers, we attempt to understand the emotional dimensions of our experiences and, possibly, theorise them so that they may be of value to readers.

Even though autoethnography has been used extensively for more than three decades, an autoethnographer may still encounter criticisms of being an inadequate researcher, failing to provide sufficient insights, or for using personal experience and “first-person voice” (Adams, 2018, p. 203).

As I supervise, examine and read autoethnography, I am, inevitably, judging it. Judging it by criteria that are congruent with my values and my understanding of the approach – as I explain throughout the chapter – but, at the same time, I feel a responsibility to be mindful of the requirements for the PhD, that, so often, still reside within dominant, colonial narratives sustained in the criteria for academic performances. Even though, as Adams (2018) states, autoethnography is no longer a ‘new’ methodological approach, those who use it can continue to be exhorted to explain in detail their methodological rationale, to justify, to elaborate, to position and to articulate the limitations as well as the affordances, much more so than those who use other methodologies. This creates a tension for me as, while I and others have argued for the need to ‘decolonise’ academic writing (see, for example, Trahar et al., 2019) and to ‘dive into the belly of the beast … to try and challenge it from within’ (Heinemann & Castro Varela, 2017, p. 271), many of us operate within institutions that privilege particular knowledges and research approaches. The extent to which we need to be complicit – for the sake of the doctoral researcher – while at the same time critiquing such dominance remains a carefully balanced judgement call.

Skating on the ice: supervising autoethnographic doctoral research

Words dance on the page, alternating with the images, replicating the dance form that they love and practise and that is prominent in their research. I have to read some words several times, so that I understand them. I am jolted into my familiar position of not being clever enough, not good enough to do what I do. Maybe I am a fraud, suffering from imposter syndrome? What gives me the right to supervise, examine and critique autoethnography? Jonathan Wyatt, in writing with Inés Bárcenas Taland (2018, p. 227), proposes that ‘it is not about me. Supervising autoethnography is about others, and it is about the other in me. I may have doubts but autoethnography is precious and important and political.’ I, too, have doubts about autoethnography but I have doubts about almost everything. Doubting helps me to critique and to move forward. But supervising is about me. It is about how I read and respond to what is offered to me, the words, the images, the performances. How I use my understandings of autoethnography to advise, to support, to encourage risk taking. It is important, precious and political.

They write about how teaching is relegated to a lower position than research in higher education. Their words resonate so powerfully with me, they provoke a visceral response. Many are words I could have written and, indeed, I have written similar ones elsewhere.
Did my words speak to others in ways that theirs speak to me? Are my words evaluated as I am evaluating theirs?

I am making judgements using several criteria synthesised from others who have articulated them (see, for example, Holman-Jones, 2005). Andrew Sparkes, who has written extensively about evaluating autoethnography, concludes in a recent (2020) article that:

> It’s a messy, tentative, contingent process in which I feel (original emphasis) my way into the piece in front of me, reading it multiple times with gaps in between where a cocktail of thoughts and emotions mingle in my body as I drift towards certain kinds of judgment call over others.

(p. 299)

Much of this resonates with me, in particular the ‘reading it multiple times’. Do I do that because I want to evaluate the dissertation more favourably? So that their writing will be ‘good enough’ to be awarded the doctorate? So that they will be able to mount a persuasive defence in the face of those who may be sceptical about their approach? But I also have to be moved, emotionally, by the writing. I have to believe in the writer. I want to ‘think’ differently through reading the work and possibly to ‘act’ differently too. I want it to be written eloquently – a word which is loaded with subjective judgement. All of the autoethnography that I read is in English, which, so often, is not the author’s first language. As a supervisor, I encourage the researcher to use their first language when appropriate. I want to stumble, to puzzle over the meaning of paragraphs that are inaccessible because they are in a language that I do not speak or understand. I want to feel excluded from the writing. To empathise with those who have to write in English in order to be published and to ensure that their readers and examiners understand them (Trahar et al., 2019). But what if what they are writing has nothing whatsoever to do with their research? Does it matter? What I can understand is congruent with their methodological approach and with what they provide accounts of. I trust them as a writer, as a researcher, as a human being, a trust that has been developed through our relationship. But what happens when I do not have that relationship? That the relationship with the author is formed through what I read, such as when I am a doctoral examiner or reviewer? I still have to feel my way into it.

On thinner ice: examining autoethnographic doctoral research

“I’ve been given your name by a colleague who suggests that you’d be ideal as an examiner”. The warm glow suffuses me as I read the email. I – or rather my experience – is still wanted. I look at the abstract. A fascinating subject. They write well. I respond positively.

“How should I evaluate this as autoethnography?” they asked, in the doctoral viva. What a good question, I thought and appropriated it, using it as an examiner, irrespective of the methodological approach taken. Many doctoral researchers overlook to identify criteria that they would like others to use to evaluate their work. There are different types of autoethnography (for an overview see, for example, Sparkes, 2020) and different criteria for evaluating each one – although some may be similar. Explaining the approach, as appropriate, and illustrating familiarity with the criteria, identifying those that they would like to be used to evaluate their research is helpful for the reader and for the examiner and can avoid unnecessary questions.

The dissertation begins well and I am drawn into it immediately. Then I start to puzzle over what it is actually about. Have I missed something? I go back, read the beginning again. There are hints but nothing is stated explicitly. I know that the other examiner has been chosen for
their expertise on the topic and that they are not familiar with autoethnography. That means I may have to convince them of its worth, provided, of course, that I am convinced. If an author specifies that they are using an autoethnographic approach in their dissertation or article, then ‘I begin to expect a contribution that displays the general characteristics of the genre. This is my first act of judgment’ (Sparkes, 2022, p. 264). I am captivated by the writing but at other times, feel it is somewhat lacklustre, as if the writer is afraid of taking too many risks. There is a lovely use of metaphor but it is not played with sufficiently to enable clear meaning. They have read voraciously but the literature is described rather than engaged with at a deep, intimate level. I want to feel that the writing ‘plays, opens closed doors, discovers hidden passageways, creates new spaces’ (Pelias, 2011, p. 666) and that ‘it is mischievous, utopian, saying the unsayable, the forbidden, the dangerous. It knows the master’s (sic) house can be rebuilt. It believes there should be no master (sic)’ (ibid.). Rather, the author seems to believe that there is a ‘master’, and that ‘his’ house is too powerful to be rebuilt, even though they claim they would like to do so. Adams (2018, p. 205) advises that ‘as authors, we should describe which values we use in autoethnography; as reviewers, we should do our best to respect an author’s autoethnographic orientation’. I want to do that but I need to be clear about what it is. They identify different autoethnographic approaches but I am puzzled as to whether they have settled on one or are using all of them. At the same time, I would like them to have reflected on possible criteria for their orientation(s), how they are formed and whether they need to be problematised as a concept, perhaps by heeding:

Any evaluation of autoethnography, then, is simply another story from a highly situated, privileged, empowered subject about something he or she experienced. To evaluate autoethnography in a genuinely useful way, you have to open yourself up to being changed by it, to heeding its call to surrender your entitlement.

(Gingrich-Philbrook, 2013, p. 618, cited in Sparkes, 2018, p. 265)

I want to be changed by it, to surrender any entitlement that I may have, but there are elements missing. There are questions to be asked, in my report, in the viva.

**Even slipperier: autoethnography as a decolonial act**

“What would a PhD look like if it were to be decolonised?”, they asked. The question came in the last moments of our final meeting in South Africa. I loved it! They had spoken my thoughts. There then followed a wonderful conversation about who determined the PhD should be the way it is, what it has to contain, how it should be written.

I read their words about decoloniality, decolonisation. Perhaps I should focus more on autoethnography’s potential to ‘decolonise’ in this chapter that I have been invited to write at a late stage. The idea has been gnawing away at me, with that voice that always tries to quieten it, that voice that asks whether I have the right to even talk about decoloniality, as a white woman from a colonising nation. I have reflected on this elsewhere (Trahar, 2021), always qualifying my right to do so, striving to position myself and to be transparent about my European perspectives, even though I am gradually dismantling them. Heinemann and Castro Varela (2017) ask ‘is it trustworthy to talk about decolonisation using European theories? But then, is there such a thing as a dilemma free zone?’ (p. 261). The researcher whose dissertation I am reading uses the words of Tlostanova et al. (2016, p. 215) to emphasise that global coloniality ‘is always manifested in particular local forms and conditions, as well as personal histories and experiences’. Their writing is always powerful and, like me, they tussle with their own
identities as they soldier on, bravely and creatively, reflecting critically on themselves as a higher education practitioner in an institution reluctant to question the dominance of its practices.

Dutta (2018, p. 96) comments on:

the power of autoethnography as a site for interrogating the coloniality inscribed into the very production of knowledge, working through the reflexive turn inward to imagine subversive communicative structures for knowledge production that challenge the contemporary organizing of political, economic, cultural, and social colonization.

The extent to which I anticipate that the researcher will engage critically with such issues, may be contingent on the subject of the research. At the same time, however, given my anticipations that an autoethnographer will focus ‘outward on social and cultural aspects of the personal experience’ then ‘look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract and resist cultural interpretations’ (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739), as indicated earlier in this chapter, it is not unreasonable to expect that they will draw on decoloniality and decolonisation in their critical reflexivity. This is, then, another criterion that I use to evaluate.

“The false white innocence of snow” (Moorhouse, 1994, p. 373): the complexities of ethics

I feel deeply disturbed by this writing. They are giving their accounts of events that distressed them and I am discomfited by how they have been treated, in particular in education settings. I assume that this is what they want, for their reader to be uncomfortable, to share their anger, to agree that they have been treated badly and to empathise with them. I have no problem with being uncomfortable. In fact, so often I say that I am comfortable with being uncomfortable. What is it then about this writing that troubles me? Their anger evokes anger in me but then I re-read the words and I see that they do not ‘say’ they were angry – I have felt it. That means that the writing is powerful but yet I do not experience it as such. I puzzle over what it is I want to say. It feels as if it is something important about autoethnography. Is it because I find the writing overly descriptive? That there is too much detail? It is as if the author is describing events that happened to someone else, even though I am told it happened to them. The critical incidents are integrated into a scholarly narrative. The author cites multiple sources so that they are situating their ideas and themself ‘within existing conversations in the field’ (Bridges-Rhoads et al., 2018, p. 817), making authoritative arguments which, as I have clarified are criteria that I use to evaluate. Moreover, the writing is eloquent. And yet, and yet…

Now I have more reasons for feeling troubled. Others involved in these events will recognise themselves. Does the author have their permission to write about them? They name organisations. Do they have their permission? Have they considered how these people may feel if they read their accounts of events in which they played significant parts? It is not that I do not believe they should be written about, more that when I engage in autoethnography, I am never only writing about myself; other people have and have had parts to play in the events that I recall. How do I tell those stories in ways that remain respectful or as respectful as possible? As Muncey (2010, p. 3), writes ‘none of us live in a disconnected world’. In so far as it has been possible, in my own writing, I have asked permission of anyone who appears in it, sharing with them what I have written, inviting comment. Where I have not been able to do this, because I cannot locate them or because they are dead – in the case of my parents – I have written transparently about the situation. I have explained that I do not feel that I have
written about them disrespectfully and that I am expressing my own emotions in response to a particular event (see, for example, Trahar, 2017a). Readers may not agree with my perspective or interpretation, but they cannot deny me my emotional responses. I feel that I am writing at length about these ethical concerns but, too often, I encounter people who have not considered such complexities because they are ‘doing autoethnography’, and it is ‘about them’. ‘Our stories are not our own’ (Sparkes, 2013, p. 207); people are woven deeply into those that we tell and can be made vulnerable by them. Moreover:

In the process of writing about ourselves, we also write about others. In this act we run the risk of making those we write about not only recognisable to others but recognisable to themselves in ways they might not feel comfortable with or agree to even if they have given their informed consent (whatever this might mean) for the story to be told.

(ibid.)

But what about this chapter? I am writing about events and about how I evaluate others’ work. One person may recognise themselves, but I have their permission to draw on our relationship and they have read and approved what I have written. I have chosen to use the non-gender specific pronouns ‘they’, ‘their’ and ‘them’ which, although clumsy, protect further those whose writing on which I am reflecting and commenting. I do not name anyone and the accounts are presented as composites of my experiences, rather than being drawn from one individual. Participants in those workshops in that Northern European university may remember the woman who lost her voice. But I have not written about them – I have written about me. In 2017, I published a chapter on the ethical complexities inherent in supervising ‘international’ doctoral researchers who were using narrative approaches. In that chapter, I reproduced – with their permission – words that had been written by the researchers themselves. I did so because they had written them so eloquently and because I did not want to appropriate them in a piece of my writing. I wrote, in the chapter, about the complexities of this decision, focusing in particular on whether they gave me permission because I had been their supervisor. In addition, all gave me names to use. Some were pseudonyms, others not. In that chapter, I wrote:

I have no desire to cause “embarrassment” or “harm” to those whose accounts are included here, hence my permission seeking processes. … I hope that this chapter may open a window onto new ideas about practices, certainly those practices that, for me, constitute significant ethical complexities in doctoral supervision, complexities that, in my experience, are rarely debated.

(Trahar, 2017b, p. 506)

A crucial question to ask, therefore, and which obtains for all research is ‘Do we ask permission of people to appear?’ My answer would always be ‘yes’ but qualified by the situations I described earlier. I suggest that it is safer to assume that everyone implicated or mentioned in what we write will read it. It is important, therefore, to use a pseudonym, being mindful that nothing that we write should harm others. Finally, it is important to anticipate our own future vulnerability. Autoethnography is not easy and those who consider using it need to understand that rendering themselves vulnerable may not be what they want to do in their research. It was my supervisor who asked me whether I wanted people ‘to know that about me’, as I wrote earlier. My response ‘Why would I not?’ may seem flippant but I had shared
my writing with others whose opinions I valued. In addition, as it is through writing that I understand myself in all my complexities as well as concepts that I find difficult and opaque, to delete those parts would not have been congruent with what I was struggling. To return to the writing on which I was reflecting at the beginning of this section, in such cases, I provide clear feedback on my concerns to the author(s), advising that they consider more carefully the ethical complexities inherent in autoethnography.

**Conclusion**

Research begins with something that captures our attention, that interests us, that motivates us to ask questions about it, maybe with the aim of persuading others to our perspectives. Much social science and educational research continues to hide, using various textual techniques, the researcher and their voice, but is the researcher not always present in research, irrespective of their philosophical perspective(s) and chosen methodology(ies)? If we accept the constant presence of the researcher and their influence on the research design and the research itself, does that make the term ‘autoethnography’ superfluous? This may be a provocative question, but all writing is produced for an audience and aims to create a dialogue with that audience. The relationship with the audience may need to be considered more carefully when using autoethnography as many readers will remain cynical about the approach. In identifying criteria that they deem appropriate for the evaluation of their work, and ensuring that it meets them, researchers can challenge judgments that continue to be defined by dominant narratives of what constitutes research.

In introducing their new *Journal of Autoethnography*, the editors, Tony Adams and Andrew Herrmann, conclude by writing:

> For us, autoethnographies, and articles about autoethnography, enlighten our intellect, engage our emotions, and pique our curiosities. They can make what seems mysterious to outsiders comprehensible and make tacit knowledge explicit. They teach us about ourselves, our friends, our families, our workplaces, our world. They offer us the ability to empathize with others, make strategic and positive personal and cultural change, and become better and just researchers and people.  
>(Adams & Herrmann, 2020, p. 6)

Become better and just researchers and people. A tall order indeed. But one that should not be ignored, nor taken lightly, given the unsettled and unsettling times in which we live. In writing this chapter autoethnographically, I have striven to elucidate, through myriad experiences of supervising, examining and reviewing research that uses autoethnography, how researchers, research subjects, methodologies and methods are entangled. Acknowledging them as such, using autoethnography, strengthens, rather than diminishes educational research, rendering it more authentic and relevant for our complex worlds. To return to my metaphor at the beginning of the chapter, negotiating the icy patches so that we do not fall is tricky but, in doing so, we find the softer and firmer snow on which to walk, becoming more surefooted on our journey.

**Note**

1 I have chosen to use the non–gender-specific pronouns “they”, “them” and “their” throughout the chapter as a further precaution to protect those whose writing evokes my reflections.
References


