Doing Autoethnography: Facing Challenges, Taking Choices, Accepting Responsibilities

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Abstract

In this article, I address six particular challenges that autoethnographers may face during their journey to understand how culture flows through the self while the self flows through culture. I ask how autoethnographers zoom into personal lives while staying focused on the study of culture, whether they should prefer hard data or soft impressions, to what extent autoethnography can be done collaboratively, whether evocative autoethnography is better than the analytic one, whether we own the stories that we tell in our texts, and in what way autoethnographers are either self-indulged narcissists or self-reflexive and vulnerable scholars. Addressing these challenges, I refer to the existing literature to illuminate the choices that autoethnographers have and to elaborate on the responsibility that they have for others and themselves, alike.

Keywords

autoethnography, ethics, memory as data, evocative, analytic, collaborative

Introduction

Autoethnography combines elements from autobiographical research (i.e., to retroactively and selectively write about past experiences with specific focus on turning points that are perceived as having particular influence on the course of life) and ethnographic research (i.e., to study of cultural practices) (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010). Much has been written with regard to the specific practical and ethical issues, problems, obstacles, or pitfalls that are related to this combination (see, for example, Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2007; Forber-Pratt, 2015; Hernandez & Ngunjiri, 2013; Tolich, 2010; Tullis, 2013; Wyatt, 2006). Like it is the case with any other research approach, autoethnographers face various challenges, they have to make decisions, and they ought to accept the responsibilities associated with this particular form of ethnographic research.

Although the literature addresses the numerous challenges related to autoethnography, not all of them received the attention that they deserve. For example, I miss a more comprehensive account of the discussion that has been developed with regard to memory as constituting the "data" in autoethnography. In addition, I believe that there is a need for a more balanced argument addressing the role of evocative and analytic autoethnography. Furthermore, I feel that a more systematic exploration is necessary of how autoethnographers could respond to the challenges that autoethnography poses. For example, the recommendation

to seek consent, either in advance or retrospectively (e.g., Tolich, 2010), or to decide for process consent (Ellis, 2007), constitute options, which should in fact be further discussed in terms of their relevance and feasibility. In addition to the literature, being engaged in autoethnographic research myself, I had to learn that autoethnography constitutes a fantastic chance for conducting rich, insightful, and thick (if I may use Gertz, 1973, notion here) cultural studies. However, in the course of an autoethnographic study, one continuously encounters the requirement to make critical choices with regard to both conducting the research and publishing the ethnographic account and one has to take the consequences that follow these decisions.

Sensing that some aspects need to be addressed more comprehensively and more reflexively constitutes the main motivation for this text. Furthermore, I believe that the aspects included in this article constitute key considerations for scholars, who have only recently begun to turn to autoethnography, as well as for those, who consider themselves as more experienced autoethnographers. Using input from autoethnographic research carried out in various academic

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fields and drawing on my own experiences, I raise six questions. These questions address the challenges that I regard as crucial for autoethnography. I refer to the debates that have been developed around these challenges, and I offer ways to deal with them.

How to Zoom Into Personal Lives While Staying Focused on Studying Culture?

Although many autoethnographers study themselves and their lives, their interest is (or should be) to learn about culture (Austin & Hickey, 2007; Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013; Pathak, 2010). This focus on understanding "the ethno" distinguishes autoethnography from autobiography (e.g., Brettel, 1997; McIlveen, Beccaria, du Preez, & Patton, 2010). Autoethnographers use features from autobiographical research, thereby retroactively and selectively writing about past experiences with a specific focus on epiphanies that are deemed to have a particular influence on the course of life. However, autobiography is considered to be less concerned with embedding the personal account into the cultural setting. Therefore, too much emphasis on the autobiographical may risk divorcing the life trajectory from existing social constraints (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Autoethnographers need to move beyond the writing of selves, argues Denshire (2014). Culture is mobilized to understand how the self is located in the world (Grant, 2010) searching for the nexus of both self and culture (Pelias, 2004). Therefore, autoethnographic research requires balancing the "auto" and the "ethno" to the extent that there is sufficient emphasis on the cultural settings to enable a research or a text to pass as autoethnography. The crux to the matter, however, is to determine how to balance the study of personal lives, on one hand, and the focus on how these stories are embedded in and informed by a cultural context, on the other hand (Chang, 2008; Denshire, 2014; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006).

According to Morse (2002), this can be challenging, particularly in cases where own experiences overwhelm the story. In such instances, an autoethnographic text may turn into an autobiographical account giving priority to the perspective of the author, thereby losing sight of how the author's voice is informed by culture. Roth (2009) argues that neglecting the "ethno" within autoethnographic accounts happens rather often.

> There are many examples in the public domain—books, refereed journal articles, and other forms of representation—where the author associates with auto/ethnography but that have little to do with the ethno and everything with the auto. Authors write about their being conflicted by something, about their upheavals, about their selves, about their self-consciousness, completely failing to address not only the ethno in their method but also the very constitutional Other prerequisite to the existence of the Self. (Roth, 2009, p. 5)

For him, writing about the self without acknowledging the other violates ethical conditions that are related to being a human in a social world. In addition, one could argue that overemphasizing the "auto" may contradict the very fundamentals of ethnographic research, namely, to learn about culture.

So, putting too much emphasis on the "auto," hence, personal feelings, impressions, thoughts, attitudes, experiences, and so on, authors may become accused conducting autobiography not autoethnography. However, this coin has two sides. Therefore, too much emphasis on the "ethno," in turn, may lead to the charge of slipping into more traditional forms of ethnography. How to achieve or maintain an appropriate balance between the auto and the ethno is difficult to determine. I have not yet been able to come across many suggestions in this regard. However, I consider the sharing stories-approach of Hayler (2013) as particularly helpful. Sharing the stories that autoethnographers create with other members of the cultural setting, from Hayler's point of view, enables to create dialogue beyond the self. Therefore I regard it as fruitful method linking the self and the social.

Despite the usefulness of Hayler's approach, providing particular recommendations or even a guideline may be entirely impossible, given the polymorph nature of autoethnographic projects. In any case, the reviewers will tell the authors of autoethnographic accounts whether they believe that one loses sight of the ethno. What I do to avoid such a comment is to continuously ask myself to what extent my personal story enables me and the readers to understand culture. This helps me to zoom out of the auto to be able to see the ethno. Or with the words of Ellis (2004),

> Back and forth auto-ethnographers gaze. First they look through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience and then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. (p. 37)

Hard Data or Soft Impressions?

One of the reviewers of one of my autoethnography articles prompted me to include entries from my diary, even though I argued in the text that these entries only supported the reconstruction of my story, yet, not yielded any insight themselves. Responding to the reviewer's call, I submissively included some diary entries in the text. Yet, I also added a reflexive note in the article, discussing the role of memory in autoethnographic research. I drew parallels to qualitative interview studies, arguing that in such cases it is perfectly acceptable that interview partners memorize without referring to any written notes. Similarly, I asked for accepting autoethnography that is reconstructed from memory as being valid and rigorous (Winkler, 2014).

Looking into the literature, there appears to be a more or less clear line of critique with regard to the use of memory as "data" within autoethnography. Chang (2008) reminds autoethnographers about the problem of solely relying on memory as a "building block of autoethnography" (p. 71). She recommends using diaries and journals to avoid questions about reliability. Anderson and Glass-Coffin (2013) contend that field notes constitute "a core-method of inquiry in autoethnographic research" (p. 66) in addition to personal documents and interviews. Remaining silent about the role of memorizing indicates to me that for Anderson & Glass-Coffin, memory (either as the only source of data or in addition to diaries and so on) may not constitute a relevant method.

The scholars who are critical toward memorizing as a source for providing accepted or valued data within autoethnography seem to expect that there need to be hard data available from which to create an autoethnographic account, writes Wall (2008). She refers to Duncan (2004), who emphasizes the need to have "hard" evidence to support "soft" impression. Furthermore, she points to Muncey's (2005) reminder that memory and its distortions can turn into a critical (I read "problematic") aspect. And memories may in fact be unruly and unreliable which brings some researchers to see various tensions with regard to using memorized information as data (Giorgio, 2013).

However, if we take autoethnography to be a particular form of ethnographic research, Coffey (1999) reminds us that "[e]thnography is an act of memory" (p. 127). Ethnographic fieldwork, hence the various field notes and other information, is shaped through memories, and so is autoethnography. "As autoethnographers, we use memory for much of our data; through memory, we ground our analysis; our memories inform our epistemologies and methodologies" (Giorgio, 2013, p. 406). The interpretive work in autoethnographic research is informed from many sources and one of them is our memories (Vickers, 2007). As Chang (2013) in a recent text emphasizes, "Recalling is a free-spirited way of bringing out memories about critical events, people, place, behaviours, talks, thoughts, perspectives, opinions, and emotions pertaining to the research topic" (p. 113). Therefore, memories constitute data that should be acknowledged as equally valuable to written notes, recorded material, or otherwise collected information. Many autoethnographers, like other ethnographers, use various forms of data to create their account and to make their point. In some cases, all they have available are their memories, and therefore, recalled events, conversations, feelings, and experiences constitute the material on which the autoethnography is built. Therefore, I believe that asking autoethnographers to provide hard evidence for their claims and arguing that memories may be too distorted and unreliable to constitute accepted data misses the point. Asking autoethnographers to include entries from their diary into the written account may lead to the illusion that this will enhance the credibility of an article, thereby creating a sense of objectivity and thus, probably, violating the ontological and epistemological assumptions of autoethnographic research.

Does the Syllable "Auto" Mean Doing Autoethnography Alone?

"The notion of collaboration requiring group interaction seems directly at odds with that of a study of self. How can a study of self be done collaboratively?" question Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez (2012, p. 17). Emerald and Carpenter's (2014) study constitutes one example of how the self could be studied collaboratively. Carpenter tells the story of her journey as retiring scholar, hence, a narrative about the transition from working life to retirement. Emerald contributes to this story about identity and time by offering interpretations on Carpenter's reflections. Emerald does, however, rarely act as an active voice in the text. Kempster and Steward (2010) also conducted a co-constructed autoethnography. They write about their roles in the process: "The role of Steve (first co-author) was to interrogate James (second co-author) by examining the emergent narrative" (p. 211). Kempster and Steward (2010) explain that both authors engaged in various circles of narrative writing and examination to arrive at an authentic and honest narrative that enables to learn about the experience of situated learning of a senior manager. Other examples of collaborative autoethnographies are Vande Berg and Trujillo (2008) on love and cancer, Learmonth and Humphreys (2012) on visiting academic conferences, Kidd and Finlayson (2015) on the supervisor–doctoral student relationship, and Garbati and Rothschild (2016) on the lasting impact of a study abroad (see, for more examples, Hockney & Allen-Collinson, 2006; Snoeren, Raaijmakers, Niessen, & Abma, 2015).

Although the majority of autoethnographic research has been conducted and written alone, there are more and more proponents of a more collaborative approach to autoethnography. My aim here, however, is not to provide a full-fledged overview of the numerous aspects related to collaborative autoethnography. I rather intend to make the case for an alternative that allows to cooperatively engage in autoethnographic journeys.

I am of course not the first author addressing this alternative. Chang (2013), Chang et al. (2012), and Geist-Martin et al. (2010) refer to collaborative autoethnography. Norris, Sawyer, and Lund (2012) write of duoethnography; Ellis (2007) and Kempster and Iszatt-White (2013) point toward the possibility of co-constructed autoethnography; and Crawley and Husakouskaya (2013) use the term co-autoethnography. However, collaborative autoethnography still constitutes a relatively new genre within autoethnographic research, albeit a promising one. Allen-Collinson (2013) identifies collaborative autoethnography as a new

trend. Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (2013) see collaborative autoethnography as one promising future direction in autoethnography. Collaborative autoethnography and co-generative dialogue could, according to Roth (2009), contribute to achieving polyphony in autoethnographic texts. In this sense, it may help to avoid the risk of privileging one perspective that would be associated with individual autoethnography (Chang, 2013). Having more than one author on board could help to have multiple voices in the story, hence, to fulfill the requirement to embed the life that is under study into the social-cultural environment. Using observer triangulation and peer debriefing as methods in their collaborative autoethnographic study, Lietz, Langer, and Furman (2006) go so far as to argue that this enhances rigor in autoethnographic research.

Since 2012, there is a good book source available (i.e., Chang et al., 2012) covering the various aspects associated with collaborative autoethnography. Among other things, Chang et al. offer a typology of collaborative autoethnography, delve into numerous practical issues, and outline both benefits and challenges of collaborative autoethnography. With regard to the challenges, the potential pitfalls related to collaborative autoethnography to a large extent resemble the problems inherent in other approaches of collaborative qualitative research. There is, however, one challenge to add. This challenge is related to the circumstance that in some autoethnographies, there are several persons involved in making one person's life explicit. In some of the examples presented above, the life of one of the authors became the subject of the autoethnographic account while the other authors contributed in various ways. Collaborative researchers, as Chang (2013) notes, have to balance diverse perspectives, namely, that of author, researcher, and participants. All authors may become involved in writing about one author's life. This is clearly more challenging than collectively writing about the findings of an interview study, because the collective autoethnography involves juggling multiple roles (Hernandez & Ngunjiri, 2013) that "can impact preexisting [and future] relational statuses" (p. 266).

There is one additional issue that I see. When I presented one of my individual autoethnographies at a conference, there was one scholar asking whether I received some help from another person in my study. Help in what regard, I asked, learning that help meant to achieve assistance in terms of interpretation and enhanced researcher reflexivity. I responded that this was not the case and rather emotionally added that I do not see the point in that another person assists me making sense of my own life. Although my reply may have been a bit harsh, this was probably due to the fact that all of a sudden, I sensed that there was an elephant in the room. And this elephant had the terms "objectivity", "neutrality", and "bias" painted all over its skin.

Evocative Versus Analytic Autoethnography?

Autoethnography has an evocative tradition (Muncey, 2010). This tradition, or the dominant mode of autoethnographic research (Anderson, 2006), "favors emotional self-reflexivity as a rich data source" (Chang et al., 2012, p. 19). In so doing, evocative autoethnography constitutes one of Van Maanen's (2011) alternatives to realist ethnographic tales. More specifically, the evocative tradition of autoethnography leans toward interpretivist and postmodern/poststructuralist conceptions of ethnographic research, "in which the realist conventions and objective observer positions of standard ethnography have been called into question" (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 2). Bringing "the reader to feel the feelings of the other" (Denzin, 1997, p. 228) constitutes the primary objective of the text. Autoethnographers want to move readers "affectively, aesthetically, rationally" (Gannon, 2013, p. 236), thereby focusing on the narrative text, yet, not on abstract explanations. Autoethnographies, from this point of view, constitute descriptions aiming at "emotional evocation" (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013, p. 65). The reader is invited "to understand a way of life" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 737).

In his seminal article on analytic autoethnography, Anderson (2006) argued that evocative autoethnography might have an "unintended consequence of eclipsing other visions of what autoethnography can be and of obscuring the ways in which it may fit productively in other traditions of social inquiry" (p. 374). He argues that by drawing upon postmodern ideas, such as being skeptic about the possibility to generalize knowledge claims and a doubt to what extent researchers could and should represent the lives of others, evocative autoethnography may have distanced itself from the ethnographic tradition of realism. Therefore, he suggests an alternative, namely, an analytical approach of autoethnography, which is dedicated to a more traditional understanding of conducting ethnographic research. The concern of analytical autoethnography should be to develop theoretical understandings of social phenomena (Anderson, 2006). Adopting such a perspective toward autoethnography researchers should consider five so-called key features. These are "(1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis" (Anderson, 2006, p. 378). This implies, among other things, that (a) the researcher should be a full member in the research setting, (b) the researcher should also be visible as a member of the research group as well as the researcher within the published text, and (c) the research should be dedicated to the development of theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena (Anderson, 2006). The first two aspects could also be used to describe evocative autoethnography. It is the latter one that depicts the "analytic concern" (Learmonth &

Humphreys, 2012, p. 108), hence, the requirement to develop theoretical understandings beyond the data itself. This concern also emphasizes an understanding of autoethnographic research to be not only descriptive but also explanative.

Following Anderson's (2006) article, there has been an ongoing argumentation to what extent autoethnographers should embrace "poststructural sensibilities" (Grant, Short, & Turner, 2013, p. 7) and create emotional resonance, thereby explicitly refusing "to abstract and explain" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 744), or whether autoethnographers should engage in analytical ethnography, thereby involving more conventional sociological and cultural analysis (e.g., Mazzei, 2009). Given the paradigmatic nature of this dispute—that is, realism versus postmodernism/poststructuralism (Anderson, 2006; Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 2003; Gubrium & Holstein, 1997)—it sometimes results in an argument about THE right way of conducting autoethnographic research.

Some authors interpret Anderson's text as a critique of evocative autoethnography, although—as I understand his article—all he aims at is providing an alternative approach of autoethnographic research. In a later text (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013)—perhaps as a response to the argument that his initial article sparked—Anderson reflects upon the strict separation that he drew between evocative and analytic autoethnography. Anderson writes that over time, his understanding of autoethnography became more nuanced. Hence, he learned to respect and to embrace the many shapes that autoethnographic research could take, acknowledging that they all share some key features. "If in the end I remain committed to an analytic model of autoethnographic writing," he concludes, "I do so today with a greater sense of blurred boundaries as opposed to clear distinctions" (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013, p. 67).

There are also other authors, who do not regard analytical and evocative autoethnography as conflicting and competing approaches. Tullis (2013) sees autoethnographic research as existing on a continuum reaching from evocative to analytic. Colyar (2013) thinks that we find both expressive writing (evocative autoethnography), which foregrounds energy and emotion, and transactional writing (analytical autoethnography), emphasizing analysis and theorizing. Earlier, McIlveen et al. (2010) stated that there are two forms of autoethnography—analytic and evocative. Learmonth and Humphreys (2012) attempt to illuminate arguments for both evocative and analytic autoethnography. What they argue for is that both approaches have their value, and in their study, they attempt to combine them. In a similar vein, Hayler (2013) rejects the notion that evocative and analytic autoethnography need to be mutually exclusive. Analytic autoethnography, for these and other authors, constitutes an alternative mode of doing/writing autoethnography, or one that could be fruitfully combined with

more evocative modes, thereby enlarging the spectrum of autoethnographic research, hence, opening up possibilities.

Following these authors, I do not believe that disputing about the right way of conducting autoethnographic research and thereby campaigning for a paradigmatic battle does bring autoethnography anywhere. I favor multiple voices, hence, various approaches to autoethnography because they all have value and, of course, limitations. Using the words of Anderson (2006),

> All methodological approaches have their limitations. And all competent researchers must acquire not only the ability to use various research skills but also the acumen to judge when some kinds of research are likely to prove more productive than others. (p. 390)

Do We Own Our Stories?

Doloriert and Sambrook (2009) propose a continuum on which the various auto–ethno relationships could be located. On the one end of the continuum, there is the "researcher-and-researched" relationship. Here the autoethnographer is not the participant in the study, but a complete member researcher using her or his voice to speak for the cultural group (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2009). Examples are collaborative autoethnographies and autoethnographic studies where the researcher purposefully decided to include studying others by, for example, using interviews (e.g., Marschall, 2015) or questionnaires (e.g., Small, 2015). This type of the auto–ethno relationship resembles ethnographic research where the ethnographer is an observing participant, hence, a member of the cultural group combining own experiences and material gathered from other group members. On the other end of Doloriert and Sambrook's (2009) continuum, there is the "researcher-is researched" relationship. Here autoethnographers turn the analytical lens toward themselves, investigating how they are entangled in a cultural setting. The researcher becomes the central focus of the investigation and thereby the sole participant (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2009). This implies that the "auto becomes the ethno" (p. 30). The majority of autoethnographic research relates to the latter end of the continuum. Therefore, as Forber-Pratt (2015) states, one could be tempted to argue that ethical considerations exclusively apply to the researcher being the only participant of the study. This, however, is not the case.

Sparkes (2013) reminds us that "[o]ur stories are not our own" (p. 207). Writing about one's experiences unavoidably involves writing about others and how social interaction constitutes Self–Other relationships (e.g., Morse, 2002; Tamas, 2011; Tolich, 2010). Morse (2002) argues that autoethnographers do not own their narratives (see also Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) as the story includes "information about others who are, by association, recognizable,

even if their names have been changed" (p. 1159). Therefore, "The text of the self is also, always, simultaneously, a text that brings others into being, too" (Gannon, 2013, p. 230).

Addressing this aspect, autoethnography echoes the reflexive voices of its sister genres, autobiography and memoir, such as Harrison and Lyon (1993), Hardwig (1997), Couser (2004), Eakin (2004), Castro (2013), and Karr (2015). All these authors problematize the circumstance that autobiography and memoir is as much about the self of the author as it is about others (e.g., friends, colleagues, family members), who become included into the text. Therefore, the relationship between the author and these others needs to be addressed from an ethical point of view. However, there are also texts in the autobiography genre that do not pay much attention to this aspect (e.g., Anderson, 2011).

Back to autoethnography: Wall (2008) reminds us that one needs to be concerned about the ethics of representing others, "who are unable to represent themselves in writing" (p. 49). In this regard, Tolich (2010) emphasizes that the various others who are mentioned in autoethnographic accounts also have rights. He expressed his dissatisfaction with a number of texts that did not sufficiently pay attention to this aspect. He is particularly critical of Jago's (2002) autoethnography and the incident that followed after the editors/reviewers found out that there had been numerous individuals mentioned in the text (some with their real name), who apparently did not know about the article.

So there are ethical aspects inherent in the relationships that autoethnographers establish through writing others into their texts (e.g., Roth, 2009; Turner, 2013). The discussion of these ethical questions gained much momentum during the past 15 years. On the one hand, this discussion addresses the circumstance that others may become part of the story without having been informed. On the other hand, the discussion centers on the aspect of who tells the story, hence, individual versus multiple voices.

One suggestion of how to cope with the former problem is to seek informed consent prior to the research (Tolich, 2010). As Tullis (2013) clarifies, "The goal of securing informed consent is to ensure that participants are making an informed, voluntary and autonomous decision to participate or appear in a text or performance" (p. 249). Before beginning autoethnographic research/writing, the scholar should contact everyone who (potentially) might become involved in the account to seek informed consent. Given the emerging nature of autoethnographic journeys (Ellis, 2007), this is hardly feasible, though. In contrast to more conventional studies where the researcher is able to clearly specify the "sample" before beginning the research, autoethnographies do not resemble predesigned qualitative studies (Tullis, 2013). The research and the text emerge while engaging in recollection, referring to diary entries, emotional recalls, and incorporating various snippets of collected material such as past conversations or observations.

Due to this emergent nature, in some cases, informed consent also needs to be sought retrospectively (Winkler, 2013). However, it could have coercive effects on "research participants" to volunteer ex post, warns Tolich (2010). He questions

> whether genuine consent can be gained retrospectively without creating a conflict of interest weighted in favor of the author rather than the research subject. Seeking informed consent after writing an article is problematic and potentially coercive, placing undue obligation on research "subjects" to volunteer. (p. 1600)

Tullis (2013), however, offers one example of why retrospective consent seeking may be appropriate in autoethnographic research. During her research with hospice patients, she found herself in settings laden with emotion "as family members surrounded their loved one's bed praying or saying their final goodbyes" (p. 248). Tullis found it the least inappropriate seeking consent in such situations and therefore decided to ask the participants for their consent at a later point in time.

Ellis (2007) proposes a process approach toward consent seeking in autoethnographic research. This constitutes a more feasible alternative to seeking informed consent prior to autoethnographic studies (Ellis, 2007). Process consent involves "checking at each stage to make sure participants still want to be part of the project" (p. 24). Although this sounds reasonable, Winkler (2013) poses questions such as at what particular stages of the research and how often an autoethnographer should ensure consent from the persons involved in the story? Furthermore, what is going to happen in such cases where one looses contact to some of the "former" participants?

Summarizing so far, consent seeking constitutes a difficult topic in autoethnographic research. Whatever one does to receive consent from the various others, who become involved into the story, "participants cannot be fully informed because also we are not fully sure what we will do with the material, what we will write when we write about their stories and what effects our text will have" (Hernandez & Ngunjiri, 2013, p. 276).

Ellis (2007) was among the first who suggested reflecting on relational ethics within autoethnographic studies to address the issue that autoethnographers include others in their texts. Relational ethics relates to both the ethics of care and the ethics of responsibility (see also Ellis, 2009; Ellis et al., 2010), emphasizing mutual respect, dignity, connection, and negotiated consent (Tamas, 2011). In the contemporary debate, relational ethics constitutes a growth area for autoethnography (Denshire, 2014). Understanding the ethical aspects included in autoethnographic research from this perspective pays attention to the circumstance that autoethnographic subjectivity is defined as a self

whose very existence is contingent of the relationship toward others (Gannon, 2013). Being in the world requires respecting the inherently ethical nature of the relations one has toward others (Roth, 2009). Relational ethics takes the relationship between the researcher and "the researched" as its starting point. This involves caring about "the interpersonal ties and responsibilities researchers have to those they study" (Adams & Ellis, 2012, p. 189). "Mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they live and work" (Chang, 2013, p. 111) should inform the ethical standards that autoethnographers follow. This includes critical reflexivity throughout the research process and the necessity to seek informed consent from those who become involved in our story, whenever possible (Hernandez & Ngunjiri, 2013). Furthermore, presuming that those mentioned in the story will read it (Ellis, 1995), relational ethics requires paying attention to not publish anything that the researcher would not show to those referred to in their texts (Medford, 2006). Using pseudonyms and composite characters to ensure the anonymity of the people included in the research (Ellis, 2007; Morse, 2002) is also a part of engaging in relational ethics. Eventually, being critically reflexive involves continually reflecting on the autoethnographers' own responsibility and, while doing so, taking as much care as possible not to harm others, who become written into the text.

Relational ethics within autoethnography also addresses the second of the above-mentioned aspects, namely, the question of who has the right to tell the story. Caring about others and showing responsibility also means to refrain from giving priority to the researcher's view of the world and to attempt respecting others' perspectives and their voices (Roth, 2009). "[E]thnographic writing also is a w/ri(gh)ting of the world," argues Roth (2009, p. 7), and therefore, autoethnographers have to be careful not to claim the right to tell how their world, and by implication, the world of others looks like.

Earlier, Jackson and Mazzei (2008) addressed the aspect of "righting of the world" by raising a more fundamental poststructuralist critique of the self-identical narrative "I" that autoethnography constitutes. They claim that relying on phenomenological assumptions, autoethnographers reinforce the existence of the knowledgeable subject. This subject is able to know her or his experiences and is authoritative in the way that the person claims to tell the truth about these experiences and how they are situated into culture. In so doing, autoethnographers may fail to de-center the subject (St. Pierre, 2008) as they present the researcher as the testimony of experience (Pollock, 2009), hence, the privileged center who has the authority to make authentic truth claims. Jackson and Mazzei (2008) suggest to avoid the problematic assumption of "a self who is able to recognize, know, and easily capture the 'I' that has had shared

experiences with those whom s/he studies" (p. 300), which, as they claim, underlies autoethnography. As the process of knowledge production is not self-evident and is charged with power relations, they suggest to consider a poststructuralist understanding of the researcher's self and her or his experiences (see also Pollock, 2009; Scott, 1991). Such a position would allow autoethnographers to study "not only what they know but also how they know something (about themselves, about experience)" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2008, p. 308).

Yet, despite this reflexive critique, the more practical questions remain of "Who has the final word?" and "Whose version counts?" (Allen-Collinson, 2013). One of the solutions discussed by autoethnographers is to make their accounts polyphonic. Seeking feedback from those who are involved or affected by the stories, engaging in collaborative autoethnographic research, and asking colleagues or other persons for comments constitute some of the possibilities available to autoethnographers to bring multiple perspectives to their stories (e.g., Chang, 2013; Hernandez & Ngunjiri, 2013). Introducing multiple perspectives may make texts more authentic, thereby constituting a closer (i.e., more realistic) representation of the "I" and the culture under study. The recent poststructuralist discussion on voice in qualitative research, however, problematizes the tenet that adding more voices produces texts that are more real and therefore more true (e.g., MacLure, 2009; Mazzei & Jackson, 2012; St. Pierre, 2009). Pluralized voice does not guarantee more evidence, as the participants' voices do not carry the true meaning of experience (Mazzei & Jackson, 2009). Adopting this position, the autoethnographer's voice and others' voices should not be regarded "as an intention of the subject but an effect of discursive and material conditions" (p. 9). Voices, in this sense, are both influenced by and contribute to the discursive and performative constitution of the Self and the Other.

However, from my experience and from what I have read so far, whatever autoethnographers do in terms of addressing ethical concerns within their research, there is no simple solution, no one best way, and definitely no holy grail available. I am particularly skeptical to the many attempts to the development of ethical guidelines to address the numerous ethical issues that are related to autoethnography (see, for example, Chang, 2008; Hernandez & Ngunjiri, 2013; Pathak, 2010; Tolich, 2010; Tullis, 2013). I do not deny that such guidelines could indeed be helpful. However, guidelines in some cases have the tendency to turn into foundational principles, hence, "universal standards against which to make judgements" (Sparkes, 2002, p. 224). In such cases, guidelines could be used as the final result of the ethical dispute within the autoethnographic community instead of constituting criteria that are open for discussion and situated reinterpretation (Sparkes, 2002).

Hence, rather than relying on guidelines as standards, doing autoethnography involves the sometimes-painstaking effort to continuously face up to ethical considerations and to make critical choices for oneself and others (Hernandez & Ngunjiri, 2013). In the end, there is perhaps only one insight left: "How can I do otherwise than to feel the guilt of making use of another person's life, of borrowing another person's identity, to tell my own story?" (Wall, 2008, p. 49).

Are Autoethnographers Self-Indulged Narcissists or Self-Reflexive, Self-Knowing, Self-Respectful, and Self-Sacrificing Scholars?

In his text titled "Autoethnography: Self-Indulgence or Something More?" Sparkes (2002) writes about the troubles he encountered when the work of one of his students was charged to constitute nothing more than a self-indulgent exercise. He engages in a comprehensive discussion addressing the various critiques scientific autobiographical and autoethnographic accounts may face due to a traditional understanding of the researcher's role as being outside, objective, neutral, rational, and definitely not visible in the text. From such a position, autoethnography is not about self-knowing, self-respectfulness, or self-sacrificing but about "excessive or unrestrained gratification of one's own appetites, desires, or whims" (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary).

There are several other authors, who also address the issue that autoethnographers are often charged with narcissism and self-indulgence. Coffey (1999) suggests that those who favor autoethnography are "in danger of gross self-indulgence" (p. 132). Holt (2003) and Ellis et al. (2010) write of autoethnographers being accused to be naval gazers. Doloriert and Sambrook (2009) refer to Atkinson's (1997) critique of autoethnography constituting a romantic construction of the self, a hyperauthentic exercise, and a vulgar realism. According to Haynes (2011), it is the amount of passion that is written into a text that may risk "the autoethnography being critiqued for self-indulgence" (p. 139). Recently, Pelias (2013) provides a list of authors who understand autoethnography as an act of self-indulgence or naval gazing (e.g., Buzard, 2003; Hammersley, 2008; Hantzis, 1998; Shields, 2000; Terry, 2006).

For quite a few scholars, it apparently still feels awkward when some researchers decide turning the research lens toward themselves. For Sparkes (2002) and Holt (2003), this represents the mistrust in the worth of the self. Sparkes (2002) refers to Krieger (1991), Mykhalovskiy (1996), and Rinehart (1998) explaining that the traditional view of the social sciences de-values the worth of the self in two regards, as source of data and source of interpretation. Holt (2003) refers to the requirement to consider the influence of the researcher's subjectivity within qualitative studies. Particularly within ethnography, the researcher is seen as resource for understanding the cultural world, yet, not as the source for providing data about this world. Both, Sparkes (2002) and Holt (2003) but also Allen-Collinson (2013) point to the broader discourse of what constitutes good research and a good research publication. It is the conventional understanding of research and the researcher (i.e., notions of neutrality, objectivity, rationality, and universal vs. notions of irrational, particularistic, private, and subjective) that forms the source for the charges of self-indulgence that some autoethnographers face. Ellis and Bochner (2000) move one step further contending that charges of narcissism and self-indulgence function to reinforce ethnographic orthodoxy.

Those who take a critical stance toward autoethnography may neglect the circumstance that culture flows through all of us, like Bochner and Ellis (1996) emphasize. Earlier in this text, I drew a parallel between autoethnography and interview studies. In the latter, passionate interview accounts that are taken to reveal the authentic perspective of the interview partners are often appreciated. However, providing passionate and authentic examinations of the researcher's self, Haynes (2011) argues, may result in critiques about the autoethnographer's self-indulgence.

In fact, autoethnography constitutes an approach "of personally and academically reflecting on lived experiences in ways that reveal the deep connection between the writer and her or his subject" (Goodall, 2000, p. 137). This circumstance turns autoethnographers into self-reflexive, self-knowing, and self-respectful scholars. However, it also turns them into vulnerable subjects (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013; Emerald & Carpenter, 2015; Grenier, 2015; Muncey, 2010). They "strip away the veneer of self-protection that comes with professional title and position . . . to make themselves accountable and vulnerable to the public" (Denzin, 2003, p. 137). Vulnerability surfaces to various degrees, though. On the one hand, there may be less problematic accounts such as Empson (2013) writing about her challenging and joyful journeys across the research–practice divide, Learmonth and Humphreys (2012) reflecting on their shifting and sometimes problematic academic identities at conferences, or Sparkes (2007) revealing the inconveniences during his time as research director. There are other accounts, however, where the authors delve into more personal issues, such as experiencing a major depression (Jago, 2002), a kidney failure, transplantation and recovery (Richards, 2008), or the dementia of one's mother (Salmon, 2006). Finally, there are some autoethnographers who turn to even more personal topics, therefore making themselves vulnerable through exposing intimacies to the outside world. Consider, for example, Vickers's (2007) story of being bullied, Tamas's (2011) account of spousal abuse, Ronai's (1995) experiences of sexual child abuse, and Tillmann's (2009) narrative of eating disorders. Sergi

and Hallin (2011) term such accounts "thick performances" during which researchers reveal personal aspects of their life, hence, exposing themselves to an academic audience. And this could turn out to be risky because the reaction of others "can hurt emotionally, personally and professionally" (Tullis, 2013, p. 252).

Therefore, autoethnographers need to prepare themselves that not only the texts through which they reveal parts of their personal life become scrutinized and perhaps criticized (Muncey, 2010). It may be that their life itself becomes examined and evaluated. They purposefully open up their life to learn about self and culture. Therefore, they embrace vulnerability with a purpose (Holman Jones et al., 2013). However, they also open up their life for public consumption (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006), and once the story about this life is out in the world, there is no safety net (Vickers, 2002) preventing autoethnographers from the possibility of physical or psychological harm (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2009; Ellis, 2007; Haynes, 2011; Pelias, 2004 Therefore, as much as autoethnographers should be concerned with protecting the rights of the various others, who become written into the story, they should also protect themselves (Tullis, 2013).

I have not yet experienced any harm as a result of my autoethnographic stories. At least I have not been able to detect whether the harm that I experienced stemmed from this writing. However, I am aware of this issue and I cautiously consider, how vulnerable I would like to become. I fully concur with Anderson and Glass-Coffin (2013) that autoethnographers should include everything and everyone in the inquiry, which includes "confronting painful memories and insights" (p. 75). Hence, we should fully embrace to be vulnerable in our field notes, diaries, and memories. When it comes to publishing the autoethnography, however, one should reconsider what to include about oneself and others. One needs to "be judicious and self-protective to some degree in published work" (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013, p. 76). According to Doloriert and Sambrook (2012), such self-protection includes "ethnography fiction-science" or "fictionalisation" (Watson, 2000, p. 502) but also mindful slippage, hence, the "slippage between Truth (or our experience of reality) and truthfulness because sometimes it seems appropriate—even necessary—to abbreviate, edit, or otherwise modify our life stories in our writing" (Medford, 2006, p. 853).

Autoethnographers must decide how much they want to disclose about themselves and in this vein how honest they would like to be when creating and representing their life to others (Allen-Collinson, 2013). Does this mean that we have to be creative (some may argue "dishonest") in some instances? Yes! Does that mean that we could become charged of not doing real research? Oh, yes! However, and I again use interview studies for my argument: Does any reflective qualitative researcher (and journal editor/reviewer) truly believe that our interview partners reveal everything about their life to us? Does any sensible scholar, who subscribes to interpretivism, expect that interviews constitute honest accounts revealing the (sometimes troublesome) truth?

Concluding Remarks

For some readers of this article, my text may only constitute yet another proof that researchers are better off when they avoid autoethnography as it may constitute nothing else but a minefield. I hope, however, that I was able to de-dramatize autoethnography, demonstrating that this research approach, like any other, poses challenges to the researcher, requires decisions to be made during the research, and necessitates autoethnographers to assume responsibility for what they do. Furthermore, I hope that this text also offers some advice as to how autoethnographers could accommodate some of the challenges that this article addressed.

Many of the aspects that I discussed in this text illuminate the circumstance that autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the "auto" (the self), the "ethno" (the culture), and the "graphy" (the research process) (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Reed-Danahay, 1997). This circumstance has developed autoethnography into a rather diverse field, what for both, newcomers and experienced researchers may constitute difficulties in understanding what autoethnography could be or should be. Some autoethnographers may indeed see this plurality as a problem that needs to be resolved. Others, including me, embrace this multiplicity, as it makes the field rich and interesting. Therefore, I would like to encourage researchers to embrace the possibilities that autoethnography has to offer to them and to the academic field. The numerous practical and ethical issues, problems, obstacles, or pitfalls that are raised in the literature should not be regarded as reflecting negatively on autoethnography but simply as necessary aspects that autoethnographers have to address during their journey.

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