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## Learning and doing autoethnography: resonance, vulnerability and exposure

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**Learning and doing autoethnography: resonance, vulnerability and exposure.**

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**Conducting autoethnography**

This chapter offers a brief overview of different types of autoethnography and also presents an autoethnographic account, often called a *vignette*, to illustrate and at the same time explore three key concepts experienced whilst embarking on a research journey based on autoethnographic methods: resonance, vulnerability and exposure.

Doing autoethnography means opening up to a different way of being an academic, reading and writing for academic purposes. Boyrlorn and Orbe (2014) reflect on how this method allows researchers to make the link between their heads and hearts possible. Autoethnography (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011) can be understood as a methodology, a method and a text. Many definitions have been provided over the years, with some aspects given different degrees of importance. Many highlight the key relational trait of autoethnography, understood as a way to link the self to the social context (Reed-Danahay, 1997), to develop a critique of the self within social context(s) (Spry, 2001), and to democratise experiences of cultures with the aim to offer a counter-narrative to 'dominant expressions of discursive power' (Neumann, 1996:189), and even to change the world (Holman Jones, 2005). This relational dynamic is reflected in the tension between the author and the subject of the research inquiry, the observer and the observed (Ellis, 2009), articulated through a blurred genre of storytelling that contributes to existing research, embraces vulnerability and often compels a response from the audience (Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis, 2013). The key stance in this approach is the fact that individuals, as Sartre would suggest (1974), are *singular universals* who have individual experiences contextualised within specific historical times, socio-economic circumstances and cultural backgrounds which shape the way they perform and understand their lives. Chang (2008) states that autoethnography as a method involves systematic collection of data which is analysed and interpreted to achieve cultural understandings by linking the self to the understanding of others. This point was also explored earlier by Denzin (1997:227) who explains how this method involves 'turning of the ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context wherein self experiences occur'.

Although this approach has been used for decades in various fields in the social sciences, management and organisation studies have only seen a significant increase of autoethnographic methods over the past decade. This research approach involves 'the study of the self' (Reed-Danahay, 1997: 9) to advance organisational understanding, sociological investigations and more broadly research in a number of fields. The key principles of autoethnographic research are based on the belief that rich qualitative data is particularly suitable to understand sense-making processes, emotions and a range of other human experiences in the workplace. Individual stories and personal experiences can offer nuanced and kaleidoscopic understandings of the lives of people in organisations, which cannot be explored and illuminated in the same depth via quantitative data only. Autoethnographic narratives then have the vantage point of authorship that merges academic insight and

lifeworld experience being brought together to offer accounts that can contribute to a range of empirical and theoretical concerns.

**Finding autoethnography – developing  the autoethnographic 'style'**
Autoethnography is a way of analysing (*graphy*) the personal (*auto*) and how it relates to the wider socio-cultural (*ethno*) experience. This approach recognises the power of stories and storytelling in understanding the multifaceted experiences of people, especially recognising the importance for these stories to be told by those who live those experiences, rather than others who observe from the outside. As such, another key tenet of autoethnography is its embracing of aspects that are often excluded from canonical research in organization studies such as emotions, subjectivity and the influence of the researcher on the study.

I had never even heard of autoethnography until the end of my first year as a doctoral student, when I attended a course in ethnography during the University of Essex Summer School offering a deep dive into a number of methodologies and methods for the Social Sciences (although many of these are also used and useful in the Humanities). The truth is that I wanted to attend the course on qualitative interviewing, but it was over-subscribed, so I decided to give ethnography a go. I cannot stress enough how glad I am of that choice, because it changed my life as a researcher. Up until that moment, I had still been surrounded by research that was mainstream in character and fairly quantitative in approach. From my previous studies in research methods, I knew that the study I wanted to pursue for my PhD was located within the interpretive paradigm, but I had planned to focus on more traditional data collection – namely a survey questionnaire and qualitative interviews. I was concerned mostly with having 'enough' respondents to make the sample 'relevant', with generalisations and contributions that would allow me to pass the viva and to publish afterwards, and with the development of a 'proper' academic voice (usually understood in the third person) that would make me feel and look like I knew what I was doing as a researcher. One of the ten sessions within that 'Introduction to ethnography' course focussed on autoethnography, and it led me on a path of discovery that felt both attractive and a little forbidden – could I really use my experience to contribute to research? Could 'I' be not only part of the considerations of the researcher's position in the study, but instead central to it? I decided to investigate further, with some encouragement from my supervisor (Professor Heather Höpfl).

One challenge I had to face is the fact that there isn't *one way* or *the right way* to do autoethnography. Today, in contrast with my experience years ago, there are a plethora of books that explore this method, starting with *The Handbook of Autoethnography* (Jones, Adams, and Ellis, 2016). However, there is no definitive rulebook or manual on how to go about *doing* it, because all autoethnographers have their own way of approaching this method. My first recommendation for those who want to come close to autoethnography and possibly move the first step towards using this approach and method is to *read published autoethnographies*. This will give you a sense of what autoethnography can do, how it can touch people, how it can give voice to silenced topics, how it can bring the margins to the centre. I started with the work of Caroline Ellis, and I still cannot think of a better introduction to understanding this method than her book *The Ethnographic I* (2004), which is the starting point I suggest to my students. In addition to being beautifully written, this volume is an excellent entrance gate to a different mind frame, which can lead to the understanding of what autoethnography is and how it feels. A more general overview of the historical development of the methodology, the process and product of the autoethnographic method is provided by Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) in *Autoethnography: An Overview.* In terms of

articles, it may be interesting to look at different autoethnographic experiences published in journals in the field of organization studies such as *Gender, Work and Organization*; *Organization*; *Management Learning*. More generally, the journal *Qualitative Inquiry* has always been a welcoming home for different types of autoethnographies across subject areas, and as I write this chapter in 2020, we now have a new specific *Journal of Autoethnography* at the University of California Press.

The second recommendation I would offer is to *be part of related conversations.* Try to attend conferences, workshops and network events where you can attend paper presentations that include autoethnography. If you are not able to do so, try to spot autoethnographic papers within qualitative or critical streams that may be part of larger conferences that you have access to, or look for funded workshops by research councils and other bodies that often allow free participation and bursaries for doctoral students and early career researchers. There are groups focussing on various types of ethnography on social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook) where you can get in touch with people who are keen autoethnographers, even if you do not have anyone who does this in your immediate community. There are also conferences entirely dedicated to ethnographic studies (like the *Annual Ethnography Symposium*) and others linking this methodology to various disciplines where you are likely to meet more scholars who engage in this method, who can become mentors, co-authors, external examiners, reviewers, or simply academic friends.

Being part of these conversations – from the early conference stages to the final published article – is important not only to gain access to the latest development in the field, but also to understand how an autoethnographic narrative is developed and then contextualised within a subject literature and how its contribution is shaped and redefined along the way. As an article reviewer, I find that one of the challenges in early attempts at publishing autoethnographies is precisely the ability to link the personal narrative to the field, the specific literature and context. It's as if one's energy, skills and academic abilities become exhausted through the writing of the autoethnographic account, the emotional labour involved in translating experience into words, the self-negotiations in deciding whether the text should be shared and published, and the 'letting go' of the story. For this reason, as an author I find it useful to let my autoethnographic narrative 'decant' for some time in order to distance myself from it, or work on what I call the 'academic afterlife' of the narrative with a co-author (see below on *blended autoethnography*).

The autoethnographic approach and the specific narrative used in this type of research is still somewhat limited in many subject areas, because the language used and style is somewhat in contrast to more traditional and canonical ways of understanding and doing research (Spry, 2001). As students in the further and higher education contexts, we are often taught to take ourselves out of the research or text,  and that in order to give credibility to our study or essay our opinion is not enough, or that our story is meaningless, because we need to root our ideas solely into the literature and 'stand of the shoulders of giants'. Whilst the importance of understanding the literature we want to speak to, highlighting one's contribution, and making sure our study is firmly located within an academic conversation that involves other research is still fundamental to autoethnographic research, the main difference here is that in this method the author is fundamentally and explicitly present, and contributing to knowledge creation. Therefore, the third person or passive narrative style of writing becomes a more personal one, where the researcher and their world(s) become intertwined with the literature, the critical engagement in the topic, and the advancement of understanding in and of that empirical situ.

**Finding your autoethnographic 'voice'**

Finding your 'voice' is challenging, and it takes time. Also, your voice will grow – as a scholar in general and also as an autoethnographer – change and develop as you go through different stages as a researcher in your career and as a human being in life. I have different styles of writing academic papers and tone depending on whether I use autoethnography or not in my methods of inquiry. My first attempt at writing autoethnographically was during my PhD, and that narrative was eventually published years later in an article which advocates the use of autoethnography to negotiate identity challenges during doctoral studies (Boncori and Smith, 2020). In one section I reminisce about the time I encountered this method:

> *"I found autoethnography, it's like my academic grail – I can totally use my own life experience in my PhD research. It feels a bit like cheating though, or at least that's what all my positivist quantitative colleagues say. How can I be objective … well that's not the point, is it? It's like we speak different languages and see the world through different glasses for real. Jay laughed at me when I tried to explain ethnography. Never heard of it in Italy – 'why don't they teach us methodology and methods in this much detail?' (p.278)*

That is my early voice, which is similar yet different from my voice today, as I think it has become braver in its embracing of exposure and willingness to show vulnerability (one of the last published examples is Boncori and Smith, 2019).

My third recommendation to those who want to embark in an autoethnographic study is to *write*. All autoethnography is retrospective in some way, as the narrative is developed post facto – you can write throughout the course of an experience or shortly after having lived through those moments, or the recollection can be related to something that happened further away along the continuum of past experiences (I differentiate the two by calling the latter '*autoethnography a posteriori*', Boncori and Vine, 2014). All writing is in itself selective as we choose what to focus our research gaze on, what to highlight in the narrative, and what to emphasise through adjectives and punctuation – the aim here is not to provide a comprehensive factual recollection of the 'facts', but rather to offer a window into the personal experience of a certain event or phenomenon.

One may feel uncertain about what and when to write, or how often. I would suggest that, in this case, it is important to write whenever it feels like there is something to say, whether it is a crucial epiphany or something that 'feels' relevant. In some cases, there may be a turning point within a life experience, a phenomenon, or a process, that produces a moment of understanding and 'illumination' as an epiphany, whose effects "linger— recollections, memories, images, feelings—long after a crucial incident is supposedly finished" (Bochner, 1984, p.595). Other times we write about the ordinary, which may seem insignificant and yet still touch others deeply, with great potential for affective connections, as described by Kathleen Stewart (2007, p.1-2)

> *"The ordinary is a shifting assemblage of practices and practical knowledges, a scene of both liveness and exhaustion, a dream of escape or of the simple life. Ordinary affects are the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences."*

My fourth recommendation, although it may seem redundant after the previous one, is *don't overthink your writing*. Write whatever you are urged to put on paper, whatever seems relevant or 'feels right'. At this stage, do not think of the analysis of the story, or the editing for a future possible publication. Later on, Lindh and Thorgren's (2016) concept of 'critical event recognition' will often apply whilst analysing autoethnographic accounts, as well as thematic analysis, or even text and corpus analysis. In my experience, the writing is better done unfiltered and unhinged from considerations of data analysis. Just write, whenever you can: write an account of when you are developing ideas, or when you have resolved those ideas; conversations you have with others that influence, share or challenge your thinking; surprises or unexpected encounters in your research; routines, processes or everyday habits. You can also decide to limit your writing to specific research questions (I, for instance, have different writing notebooks depending on what the nature or topic of the writing is). Keep *all* your writing – whether it's messy scribbles at the back of lecture notes, or a writing journal you update at a specific time every day; whether you write with a pen when inspiration strikes or record voice notes to yourself on your phone. In my experience, even though there may seem to be no order or logic in what you produce, connections will start to unfold, and differences will begin to manifest, once you bring those together later on in your analysis. It's ok for academic writing to start as chaotic before it finds its final form of coherence.

Two things in my past that I think helped me find and refine my voice were a course on creative writing I attended as a teenager, and an early career path outside of academia focussing on marketing and communication. The creative writing course allowed me to think of different styles of writing – for example regarding what types of novels, stories, document analysis and reporting I liked; whether I had a preference towards being 'dropped' directly in the middle of a story, or whether I felt the need for an introduction; whether there was a predilection towards linear plots or unravelling ones – but also about the style of language used in the narrative. In terms of style, my autoethnographic voice seems to pivot around two focal tools: punctuation and qualification. My inner voice has a specific pace, which is translated onto the paper/online word document via punctuation. This is like the *tempo* in a music piece *(e.g. lento, staccato, allegro)*, which in my opinion is an essential part of an author's ability to set the right tone and guide the reader's consumption of the narrative. The second feature of my voice is what I tried to encapsulate within the term 'qualification', and it has to do with adjectives and adverbs. These two types of words serve a specific purpose to qualify a term, articulate an action, and specify connotations. The careful and purposeful use of adjectives allows the author to transform a two-dimensional sketch into a three-dimensional creation that jumps out of the pages to touch the reader's emotions, memory, and conscience. I also have a personal preference for some literary devices such as alliteration (the recurrence of the same sound at the start of a string of words in a phrase) and parallelism in sentence structures. But this is only *my way* of writing to translate my inner voice into a written narrative, not *the way* of writing autoethnographies. The more you write without overthinking, the more you will be able to understand what is *your way*.

The second experience I mentioned above is my work in marketing and communication. This, I think, has been useful to focus my attention on three aspects of my writing: the audience, the message and clarity. Depending on the topic of my writing – whether it is a general narrative of one's experience or of a specific subject – I imagine an archetypal ideal reader. It may be an older version of my little daughter, or a friendly colleague, or a stranger. Understanding who the audience is usually has the effect of slightly

shaping a difference in the edges of my narrative style, the level of informality, and the amount of jargon I use.  In my mind, I then try to identify and understand my message and its purpose as comprehensively and coherently as I can. Unless the purpose of the text is to evoke disorientation and chaos, the embedding of clarity and logic sequencing within my narrative is paramount in order to ensure that the audience is able to understand and empathise with my story.

Finally, in order to develop your autoethnographic voice I would recommend that you *amplify the researcher's gaze*. This means enhancing awareness and bringing some aspects of your experience to the forefront. For example, it is useful to shed light on the senses and sensations involved: what did you smell during an experience; what are the sounds, textures and colours of the world around you; how did you feel before, during and after that event; what colour and taste would you associate with that situations; what was around you that you could note which usually goes unspoken? If you had to describe that moment as a photograph, what details could you highlight? You can also think of making relationships, power dynamics and connections more explicit – between people, systems, subjects and objects.

**Different types of autoethnography**

Understanding your style and developing your voice will also influence and be influenced by the form of autoethnographic narrative that you will choose to pursue, as there are different types of autoethnographic inquiry. Analytical (Anderson, 2006) and evocative (Ellis, 2004) autoethnography tend to be the most commonly cited types within a range of approaches to this method, each with a stronger emphasis on theory and analysis over narrative and literary investigations of the self, respectively. These two types of autoethnography can also be seen as the end points of a methodological continuum spanning from analytical autoethnography marked by 'objectivity' and a more positivist mindframe on the one hand, and 'subjectivity' within an interpretive approach ascribed to evocative autoethnography on the other. However, although it is important to be aware of the different *foci* of the various autoethnographic approaches explored in current studies, it should be recognised that that these are not exclusionary, and boundaries are often blurred. Indeed, Wall (2008) advocates the use of an approach that sits somewhere along the middle of that continuum. This is also the preferred *locus* of my own autoethnographic research, with a slight pull towards the evocative end of the continuum as I aim to 'show' the experience through an evocative narrative that touches people, whilst at the same time I want to analyse and problematize issues or critical nodes  that become apparent through my narrative.

As a passionate (auto)ethnographer, I do not believe in objective social science research, as all literature and data is designed, collected, read and interpreted by human beings who cannot detach their mind from their bodies, their cultural background, their beliefs and so on. All published academic outputs go through a conscious or unconscious process of selection dictating which information has to be shared and what needs to remain unspoken (Veletsianos and Stewart, 2016), either only by the author or also by editors and reviewers. We choose which quotes to select, which literature we want to speak to, which data needs to be included and how to analyse it. In agreement with Martinez, I believe that in this type of research 'my words are an extension of my flesh. My theory is an extension of my life' (Martinez, 2013: 381).

Three more types of autoethnography are worth mentioning here – critical, queer and interpretive. Boylorn and Orbe's edited collection (2016:16) focuses on a number of aspects

involved in doing critical autoethnography, which is centred around the aim to give voice to marginalised experiences and to shed light on unexamined questions whilst paying particular attention to multiple social identities and intersectional issues: "we privilege individual experiences and corporate realities in order to theorise about what we can learn relationally, personally, and culturally through personal narratives". In order to do this, critical autoethnography consciously blends multidimensional perspectives, personal experiences, cultural and interpersonal relations, different identities and examples of everyday interactions through a critical lens. This is similar to what is pursued though *critical ethnography* (see Madison, 2012), which addresses ethical issues, privilege and marginalization within specific contexts and lived domains. This approach then is particularly suitable to illuminate the experience of groups of people or individuals who have been marginalised in society and organisational contexts.

Within queer methods and methodologies (see Browne and Nash, 2010), queer autoethnography is a prime example of how this reflexive method can disrupt normative and patriarchal representations of gender and sexuality, at the intersection with other identities and social movements (see for instance Adjepong, 2019 in relation to race). For Morgensen (2015), queer ethnography is empowered through the displacement of 'rational' and 'scientific' scholarship by providing accounts that position and challenge both those who are objects and subjects of the ethnographic gaze. Instead of relying on generalizations, statistics and existing categories of observable 'scientific truths' or evidence, queer methods can be a powerful tool to explore positionalities, fluidities and changes, and to go beyond the surface 'to embrace multiplicity, misalignments, and silences' (Adjepong, 2019:17).

Interpretive autoethnography (Denzin, 2014) is concerned with a person's life experiences and performances. Like other forms of autoethnography, it does not seek to find 'the truth' – if such a thing exists – in people's narrative, but instead to rely on how individuals make sense of their experience through verbal and written text, to crack open the uncontested mainstream narrative of human experience in organisations (and contexts in other fields of research), and to offer alternative entry points to knowledge. Clearly, the reader's gaze through that fissure is filtered by the narrator's interpretation of their story and their memory, just like the narratives we collect through other qualitative methods such as interviews, diaries and focus groups.

Autoethnography can be published as an individual narrative, or as duo-ethnography (also referred to as co-autoethnography, involving autoethnographic texts created by two different authors which are either juxtaposed or intertwined), or as multi-voice autoethnography (where more than two people contribute autoethnographic vignettes, often created through performances in interpretive autoethnographic studies). Less frequent are examples of what Charlie Smith and I call *blended autoethnography,* whereby the co-authored piece the autoethnographic narrative is only written by one author, while the analysis and discussion is theorised, conducted and developed by both (see for instance Boncori and Smith, 2019). I find that blended autoethnography is particularly useful in the early stage of the adoption of this method, when distancing from the personal narrative may be even more challenging and when the availability of a co-author's perspective may support a more thorough analysis.

**Autoethnography in Organization Studies**

Recent studies have shown the potential of autoethnography in management and organization studies by exploring, for instance, embodied and emotional experiences of non-

binary gender identity (O'Shea, 2019), birthing (Huopalainen and Satama, 2019) and mental health (Smith and Ulus, 2019). Autoethnography not only exposes, but also to problematizes lived experiences (Porschitz and Siler, 2017). As such, I consider autoethnography a feminist project, and a political one, as it is through the use of autoethnography itself that individual voices can implement critical resistance against the silencing of embodied, sensorial and emotional narratives of living and working in organisations. Through autoethnographic accounts we can question masculine ideals of the disembodied worker by stepping back and stepping up against established patriarchal forms of writing in and of organizations. Indeed, various types of resistance (feminist or otherwise) can be articulated in the autoethnographic space (Alexander, 2012).

Fifteen years ago, the opportunities for publishing autoethnographic accounts in internationally recognised high-quality management and organisation studies journals, or edited collections like this one, were rather limited. Mainstream critiques branded this type of research as 'naval gazing', indulgent or as 'an easy way out' to avoid doing 'proper scientific work' based on quantifiable evidence and large data sets. This method is more than a self-narrative, and it goes beyond the written exercise about the researcher's positionality, reflexivity and visibility within their studies (Vryan, 2006; Wall, 2016). Generations of scholars (see for instance the work by Ellis and Bochner, 2006) have contributed to the recognition of autoethnography as a rigorous research method within the broader ethnographic approach, which can illuminate the experience of those who are at the margins by shedding light and giving voice to experiences that are often silenced or neglected. Key factors in ensuring the credibility, reliability and dependability of the method are inextricably linked to narrator's integrity (Ellis, 2009; Bochner, 2002). Autoethnographic integrity revolves around honesty, reflexivity and the ability to unearth unconscious – and often uncomfortable – dynamics to foster meaning making. True reflexivity surfaces weaknesses, contradictions, imperfections and conflicts that researchers often try to hide in traditional studies, especially at the start of one's career, in order to identify and be identified with the fantasmatic and elusive image of the professional, rational, disembodied academic.

In the following sections I will present my autoethnographic account in the form of three vignettes. In reality, those texts are all part of one writing session. The vignettes are then interspersed with some commentary to contextualise and discuss some critical points on resonance, exposure and vulnerability. As I explore below in more detail, the choice to focus on these three specific aspects stems from what I have come to appreciate as the three key strengths of the autoethnographic method. Resonance speaks to the power of narrative and storytelling, which has been passed on and (re)ignited for centuries both orally and in writing in order to provide exemplars of life experiences, explain values and morals, empathise with others and learn lessons (Bochner, 2001, 2002; Fisher, 1984). When the experience of an/other resonates with us, the differences between us becomea smaller. Exposure is a *conditio sine qua non* of autoethnographic research (Ellis, 2004) as we need to expose how we relate to others, sexpose the aspects or elements of life that are traditionally hidden from academic research (Ellis, 2010), and let ourselves be exposed to and from the worlds within and outside our being. Finally, from exposure comes vulnerability, which is a place of genuine engagement and feeling, embodied knowing and sensorial understanding. Vulnerability also fosters critical academic engagement with the unknown or the undisclosed, the invisible and the uncomfortable which reside at the heart of autoethnographic inquiry (see for instance O'Shea, 2019).

**Resonance**

*As I sit in front of my laptop to write the special issue article, I glance at the handwritten notes next to me. I have been delaying this moment; the moment when I read again the words I wrote the day I lost my baby. I remember that moment so vividly, I still feel that dread, slouched down at the top of that beautiful wood staircase, hiding from people attending the conference across the landing, spiralling down to the ground floor. I remember the heightened awareness of my body, the feeling of a part of me detaching from my flesh, flowing away unannounced, and unnoticed by anyone else. I remember some people walking past me, engrossed in their conversations, checking their conference schedule, making academic or politically astute decisions on whose presentation to see next. Perhaps they noticed a strange woman writing furiously on the back of her conference programme and in the margins of a tired schedule, trying to make no noise whilst crying in the most remote corner of the building she could find. I know that the emotions I transcribed on paper that day are raw and unfiltered. I know it will be difficult to read those again, to live those again, to feel those again, to hear them echoing in the crowded corridors of my bereaved inner self.*

*My hands stop mid-air on the keyboard, suspended not just in time and motion, but also in volition. Do I really want to do this? Should I let go of my hesitation and just include the whole narrative, virtually unedited, the same words I wrote that day? It may be too much for me to bare, too much for me to bear. Too personal to share for a mid-career foreign woman academic. But isn't this what autoethnography is all about – honesty and sharing of intimate narratives? And I do so very believe in this methodology, in this mindframe and this method. Maybe I just lack confidence in my ability to do the method justice. Maybe my foreignness taints my language in a way that words become flattened out of emotion, unable to inspire a surge of empathy and understanding, too constrained by clunky grammatical structures and clumsy prepositional constructs. Maybe I am just not good enough. Maybe my story is simply not interesting enough. Will this drop in the academic ocean even mean anything? Is anyone really listening? This way of being an academic, reading and writing organizations clashes with everything I have been taught in my numerous education journeys; it's against every rulebook of how to play the academic game successfully; it challenges all the seemingly measurable, objective and scientific ways of understanding research. But, bizarrely, this defiant approach centred on the self is not about me, it's about a story, my story, and how it relates to other stories, and to the bigger entanglement of lives and meanings in organizations.*

Writing autoethnography is scary (Boncori and smith, 2019). In my experience, this emotional response is due to three main causes. First of all, it is difficult to share personal information, intimate reflections and vulnerable aspects of oneself with people you do not know. The second reason is perhaps linked to the use of more evocative autoethnographic narratives as I question my ability to write in a way that elicits emotion and an instinctual response in my reader. Self-doubt then feeds my imposter syndrome – is my narrative relevant? Is it enough? Does it even matter? Every time I hit the send button on a final proof that included autoethnographic text I felt a chill down my spine – should have I kept that text hidden in a secret drawer at the back of my mind? How will the people around me who know me – family, friends, close colleagues, superiors – react if they happen to see my work? Positive feedback can come to authors from comments, kind text shared through emails, and nowadays even via the sharing of an article via social media or the citing of a paper in one's work.

These thoughts are linked to one of the key concepts that, for me, are closely related to the adoption of autoethnography as a powerful method to instigate awareness and change – resonance – which I articulate into two definitions. The first meaning I ascribe to the concept of resonance is that of a positive resounding process, an echoing of experience, emotion or knowing. Resonance here can become a way of seeing and understanding one experience through another, either out of empathy or difference. The Oxford dictionary definitions of the term resonance as understood in the hard sciences highlight how this this process can also include the amplification or enhancement of one's qualities, and the transferring of energy from one to another. As I mentioned in the introductory part of this chapter, one crucial aspect of autoethnography is its relational trait, which connects the *auto* to the many, and allows social, political, institutional or organizational concerns to be seen or amplified through the prism of individual experience. In its first meaning, I use the term 'resonance' to understand and visualise a process whereby an autoethnographic narrative is sent off in the world and encounters others. By touching others and resounding in connection to their own stories, intellect or sensitivities, the autoethnographic narrative resonates with another individual experience. The original story is then interpreted and filtered through its resonance with the other, and can be further projected into the world through an altered trajectory which has been influenced by another individual interpretation, experience or knowledge. Because of the way our stories are published and disseminated, the original autoethnographic narrative then has the potential to become a resonating wave that connects the single to the plural, possibly growing exponentially as it meets others.

Resonance can thus signify a process whereby individuals can make sense of an experience through the encounter with a story shared by others, but it can also indicate a process highlighting the subversive and political value of autoethnography as a counter-narrative that sheds light on marginalised voices and 'makes some noise'. It is through that noise that a positive impact can be made as marginalised, silenced or neglected experiences become acknowledged and explored at the macro level. Extracting again some meaning from the hard sciences (especially physics and biology), we can consider how noise – often understood as something negative or undesirable that corrupts messages – 'can be used purposely, or deliberately introduced to lead to a benefit' (McDonnell and Abbott, 2009). As such, 'good noise' is captured in a form of resonance (stochastic resonance) used to describe a phenomenon where the presence of noise in nonlinear systems creates better output signal quality than its absence (McDonnell and Abbott, 2009). As such, metaphorically, it is through resonance that autoethnography can become a powerful and positive change agent stemming from the creation of noise and interference in mainstream narratives and dynamics of power.

**Exposure**

*In my career, and in my private life, I stand for principles and ideas. I speak against traditional patriarchal hegemonies and masculine norms that shape the way we understand professionalism in higher education. I advocate change, raise my fighting fist and widen open arms to give visibility to voices in the margin, to hear untold stories in organizations and human relations. Then why am I so hesitant when it's about my own voice and my personal story? I can hear the faint screeching sound of my own professional insecurities scratching at the back door of my awareness, reclaiming space in my consciousness. Will my autoethnographic work be understood as an example of top level international research? Will it be read as a form of rebellion – or even incompetence – that does not warrant support?*

*Perhaps this type of exposure would not prove beneficial to me or my career. Now that I have a job role of more responsibility, my work might become more visible, and so will my failures. Shall I follow the safer mainstream path that has been laid out for me by thousands of more accomplished scholars before? Or should I follow academics I admire, and who I want to be as an academic, and what I stand for as an individual? The former – writing traditional research through the use of methods that do not involve autoethnography – could be smoother, and, strangely enough, the easier option for me. It would be placed in a much better position, published in high ranking journals, questioned less and cited more. The tougher choice – espousing autoethnography, sharing my inner self and standing for what I believe in – is still considered by many as 'the easy way out', a cop-out solution to avoid the effort of collecting 'proper' data, analysing thousands of survey responses, or coding authoritative phrases shared in interviews. But by not taking up the challenge I would be reinforcing what I believe to be a faulty stance.*

This methodology might make academics feel insecure but, to some extent, confidence in the method is likely to increase through practice. For most academics, and definitely in my own experience, it takes time to develop an individual research identity and a strong researcher's voice. The latter is particularly exposed in autoethnographic narratives, and especially in critical autoethnography which challenges the status quo and questions inequality. The period of exploration one experiences as an early career researcher is also dedicated to the establishment of academic credibility, deeper subject expertise and professional networks. The balance between being true to one's voice and interests whilst progressing through career pathways can be challenging to navigate. Early adoption of the method (during a PhD or later on in one's career when expertise had been focussed on more traditional methods) often veers towards analytical autoethnography, which seems a 'safer bet', a more 'academic' or 'scientific' approach, a less compromising choice for inexperienced or young ethnography researchers who may test this method out whilst remaining mindful of mainstream concerns and limitations. Alternatively – like in the case of my own doctoral work (Boncori, 2013)– autoethnographic methods can be used whilst integrated or 'supported' by other data collection such as interviews, field notes and surveys. As an external examiner for doctoral theses, I have found that the exclusive use of autoethnographic accounts is often avoided by doctoral students in fear that the author's experience will be considered 'not good enough'.

Exposure to risk and challenges to systemic or subject-specific conventions can be worrisome, but also highly rewarding. Self-doubt and failure (Knights and Clarke, 2014; Clarke and Knights, 2018) are inevitable companions to those who choose to pursue an academic career. The whole peer review system of outputs and academic publications (at least in the United Kingdom), as well as grants and funding processes, are based on a model where rejection is more common than acceptance. Our ideas are questioned, critiqued, criticised, opposed, welcomed and dissected on an ongoing basis – mostly with the noble aim of fostering the production of knowledge of a higher quality, and at times driven by personal agendas and spiteful attitudes. This often generates insecurities, imposter syndrome, and a stronger relationship between vulnerability and identity work (Watson, 2008; Warhurst, 2011).

**Vulnerability**

*I introduce myself with what I hope is a warm smile and a firm handshake: 'hi, I am Ilaria'. A glint under the lashes and a knowing smile respond: 'I know who you are, I love your work, it feels like I have known you forever!'. She goes in for a bear hug. I am utterly surprised and rather flattered. Maybe shocked even. She has read my research? I did a little silly hammer-time style victory dance in my butterflied stomach. My first reaction was of stunned stupor, then of course I was internal-giggle-level pleased. I used to get the same reaction when people quoted my work, when they invited me to write a chapter together, or even to review an article. At the beginning of my research career – which came a few years into the course of my academic career – every time that type of interaction occurred I actually thought people had mistaken me for someone else.*

*Surprise, pleasur;, then another type of feeling started creeping in. The third wave of emotion emanating from that fortuitous encounter was less positive, and it's connected with a common concern for autoethnographers. That woman wanted to know a million details about the background of my story, how I felt, the consequences, other people involved. I write in a stream of consciousness, I have done so since I was a young girl, and in most of the languages I speak: I can feel words storming and forming at the bottom of my stomach, then rolling on against the walls of my mind like ocean waves, knocking on my consciousness, like tingling dreamcatchers that demand attention, a pen, a notebook, an acknowledgement. I get snippets of paragraphs flashing in my mind during other activities, scattered along my days, invading processes and colonising priorities. My mind goes on override and my internal voice starts staining my inner pages with burning ink. The urge will torment me until I get the words off my system, usually on paper, but lately also on clicking keyboards. It just pours out of me in a tsunami of language, inexorably splashing out, line after line, until the monster wave retreats – peacefully, with a sense of liberated satisfaction. The only way I can explain it is that it feels like a 'Shaman Goddess of Narrative', as I call it, owns my subconscious, and there is no stopping her when she decides to pay me a visit.*

*This is why my narratives tend to be unfiltered, metaphorical, emotional, full of adjectives and messiness. I feel that I have little control over my autoethnographic text. I can only decide whether to keep it private or let it go free in the world. This also means that my words come from a place of vulnerability, rawness, sensitivity and affect which increase the exposure of my private self to others. It's not really crafted, edited, or planned in a manner similar to the other academic texts I create. Once you let it out in print, there is no turning back – it's free to roam around libraries, free to be owned by others, free to be read, interpreted and misunderstood. As academic narratives become preserved in time and space via the treasure caves of knowledge repositories, they stay immutable regardless of the changes in their maker's life. I realised that, all of a sudden, my autoethnographic text had ceased to be my story: the reader owned my experiences, my private thoughts, my vulnerability. I had given it to her by letting it go and deciding to make it public. There is an inescapable tension between the touching and intimate proximity that research on the self allows autoethnographers to share with complete strangers, or people who had only seen certain sides of our persona, and the distance we want or need to keep. The Janus nature of this method means that, on the flip side, the personal exposure at times feels like a self-imposed violation which can be challenging to manage.*

*When you give birth to a story that you consider worthy of sharing then you need to let it go. It may be cathartic, it may be a political act, a process of learning through writing, or*

*even painful. Or it may be many things at the same time. After a while, it may well be that you no longer see yourself as the person in the account you released off into the wild academic world, but people are not aware of the difference. Perhaps that is just a memory of an older version of you, a shadow of a previous self who remains unaltered in ink but then starts to develop its own existence off paper, morphed by people encountered, social understandings and theoretical trends.*

As I mentioned before, there is no 'one way' or 'the right way' of being an autoethnographer. I do not believe that people can be taught how to become a great one – we can learn the relevant ethical considerations and processes, the literary conventions, the way to analyse our text as data and other method-specific issues, but just like other arts and humanities-based expressions, one can never truly learn autoethnography from others. Similarly, no matter how much I try, I will never be able to write Hikmet's poetry, or imagine J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter,* or paint Klimt's *Kiss,* even though I can become a world-famous expert of their themes and techniques. However, I think that one can improve as an autoethnographer through the process of doing autoethnography and writing stories, by becoming more aware and purposeful in the way we engage with it, and more involved with the social, political and organizational environments around us. Time and experience have enabled me to become a better autoethnographer – more open, aware, prepared and bolder.

My process, like most autoethnographic experiences, may be only relevant to me. It starts with a nagging idea – which I usually try to resist as it's personal and creates fragility – and a stream-of-consciousness type of narrative that floods my mind in moments that tend to be inappropriate for writing (whilst picking up my daughter; when students are doing group work; when I am in the suspended limbo of pre-dreamland; when scrubbing the day off in the shower; whilst choosing the best broccoli at the supermarket, and so on). That voice just won't let me be until I do something about it, whether it is writing it down or doing an initial background literature review. Has this topic been investigated before? Is it part – or should it be part – of current academic conversations? Would my story or perspective add anything to current understandings of the subjects? What am I contributing to, and to which specific strand of the literature? In some cases, I don't have all the answers yet, so I crystallise the narrative stream onto paper and revisit it later on. With time, I have grown in confidence and stopped apologising for writing about my self and experience. The first lesson I had to learn, so to speak, was to allow myself to be and be seen as vulnerable.

There is nothing inherently wrong with being vulnerable and showing that side of our being human to the rest of the world whilst operating in a professional academic capacity. Although it is often thought of as something we should hide or get over with (Harrison, 2008; Hay, 2014), the ability to reflect on, work with and expose one's vulnerability is a key skill needed in autoethnographic methods. I find it actually quite refreshing to face vulnerability within the current neoliberal academic environment where people are asked to 'promote themselves' as academic professionals, or 'fake it till you make it'. However, I think that the ability to show my vulnerability increased as I became more confident and less insecure as a researcher. Allowing others to see your vulnerability, and perhaps even empathise with it, can open up different communication channels based on emotions and shared lived experience, and foster social and relational processes based on collaboration rather than competition. Corlett et al. (2019) remind us how vulnerability should be recognised and claimed as a positive force which can prompt social support and lead to the recognition of alternative ways of understanding and responding to vulnerability. Obsolete approaches that

reject vulnerability in life and research are instigated by patriarchal norms on how an academic professional should present themselves to the world, and masculine notions of what constitutes appropriate behaviour for scholars.


**Concluding reflections**

This chapter on autoethnography sought to highlight three concepts (resonance, exposure and vulnerability) that are particularly relevant for those who are early career researchers or academics in the initial stages of their exploration of autoethnography. The potentially detrimental effect of using autoethnography as a research method is both professional and personal (Tolich, 2010; Ellis, 2007) – we are rarely lone actors in the scripts of our lives. Colleagues, family members, friends and strangers are often included or impacted from our stories, which is why they are often considered as pertinent subjects in autoethnographic ethical processes. We may also have to accept that some people do not wish to read our work, and we have to bear the responsibility of their (often unconditional) trust. We should also consider that whilst our narratives may generate empathy and positive reactions, it could also create hostility or confrontations.

I have also sought to provide some practical recommendations for those who wish to pursue autoethnographic research. These are the lessons I have learned over a decade of practice as an autoethnographer, which I wish I had realised earlier in my autoethnographic journey. First of all, take advantage of the plethora of publications currently available on autoethnography and the many excellent examples that are being published across top journals in organization studies and methodology. Secondly, get access to relevant conversations, follow early explorations of the method via conferences and workshops, and join communities of practice via face to face or online networks. Most importantly, write your stories, trying to find your style and voice, the habits and environments that work for you. Finally, write as much as you can whenever you feel is relevant, and avoid being influenced by considerations around the quality of writing, data analysis and publication appeal which can hinder the flow of your writing and contaminate the unfiltered honesty of your text.

My autoethnographic account in this chapter offers a reflection on some issues that I believe are key and need to be problematised for all autoethnographers, but especially for inexperienced ones and colleagues at the beginning of their career. The first concept I highlight is linked to the matter of resonance, understood here as a way of understanding the self through others, but also as a tool to instigate change. Then, I considered exposure and vulnerability, and the emotional labour involved in the writing and dissemination of autoethnographic material. Narratives that illuminate experiences through the incorporation of emotions, the body and the senses are pivotal in the creation of stories that others can empathise with, but also in the development of richer and more in-depth insights as the body at times feels what the mind seeks to silence. Therefore, an ability and willingness to become aware of and (re)experience a range of emotions, which may well be negative, is paramount in autoethnographic research. Finally, I have explored some concerns connected with the challenging of traditional ways of understanding academic research.

So one obvious question may be – is it worth it? Shall we bother with an approach that involves significant emotional labour and still has limited popularity in mainstream circles? Perhaps obviously, since I welcomed the invitation to write this chapter, my answer is a resounding yes. First of all, there is growing recognition of the value of autoethnographic research in many publications and conferences, and I think this trend will continue. Secondly,

and for me most importantly, I feel that some stories deserve to be told. I am not likely to be able to draw from my own experience for many topics, but there is nothing wrong in doing so when the topic warrants the exposure. I have experienced unexpected collegiality, profound satisfaction and heart-warming interactions thanks to this methodology and the sharing of my own experience, and I am sure that I will remember and treasure those more than any citation index, or research metric.

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