Toward a Moderate Autoethnography

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Abstract
Autoethnography is an avant-garde method of qualitative inquiry that has captured the attention of an ever-increasing number of scholars from a variety of disciplines. Personal experience methods can offer a new and unique vantage point from which to make a contribution to social science yet, autoethnography has been criticized for being self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective, and individualized. Methodological discussions about this method are polarized. As an autoethnographer and qualitative methodologist with an interest in personal experience methods, I have had the opportunity to review several autoethnographic manuscripts over the years. As my reviews accumulated, I began to see themes in my responses and it became apparent that I was advocating for an approach to autoethnography that lies in contrast to the frequently offered methodological polemics from philosophically divergent scholars. In this article, I draw from the reviews I have done to address topics such as applications and purposes for autoethnography, the degree of theory and analysis used within the method, data sources and dissemination of findings, and ethical issues. I then connect the concerns I see in the reviewed manuscripts to examples in the autoethnographic literature. Ultimately, I propose a moderate and balanced treatment of autoethnography that allows for innovation, imagination, and the representation of a range of voices in qualitative inquiry while also sustaining confidence in the quality, rigor, and usefulness of academic research.

Keywords
autoethnography, self, academic convention, theory, methodological innovation

What is Already Known?
Autoethnography is an intriguing method that is increasingly utilized to study social phenomena through the lens of the author/researcher’s personal experience. Approaches range from analytic to evocative, although evocative autoethnography is becoming more prominent. Methodological debates are polarized.

What this Paper Adds:
The current state of autoethnography is explored through the author’s experience as a reviewer of autoethnographic manuscripts. Characteristics of contemporary autoethnography are linked to published examples of both evocative and analytic autoethnographies, in order to illuminate the issues inherent in polarized approaches. A middle ground is proposed that would tap into the unique value of personal experience, while maintaining the scholarly potential of autoethnography.

Introduction
Autoethnography is an avant-garde method of qualitative inquiry that has captured the attention of an ever-increasing number of scholars from a variety of disciplines. Grounded in postmodern philosophy that makes room for diverse and nontraditional ways of knowing, autoethnographic work produces “highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding” (Sparkes, 2000, p. 21). Personal experience methods are said to offer a new and unique vantage point from which to make a contribution to social science by considering “macro and micro linkages; structure, agency and their intersection; [and] social reproduction and social change” (Laslett, 1999, p. 392). Yet, despite the strong influence of postmodernism in contemporary qualitative inquiry, autoethnography has been criticized for being self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective, and individualized (Atkinson, 1997; Sparkes, 2000). Polarized methodological debates abound.

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As an autoethnographer and qualitative methodologist with an interest in personal experience methods (Wall, 2006, 2008, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c; Wall & Shankar, 2008), I have had several opportunities to review the manuscripts of other authors who use autoethnography to investigate social phenomena and who discuss and consider the methodological issues inherent in this form of inquiry. As my reviews accumulated, I began to see themes in my responses, and it became apparent that I was advocating for an approach to autoethnography that lies in contrast to the frequently offered methodological polemics from philosophically divergent scholars. In this article, I draw from the reviews I have done to address topics such as applications and purposes for autoethnography, the degree of theory and analysis used within the method, data sources and dissemination of findings, and ethical issues. Ultimately, I propose a moderate and balanced treatment of autoethnography that allows for innovation, imagination, and the representation of a range of voices in qualitative inquiry while also sustaining confidence in the quality, rigor, and usefulness of academic research.

**Methodological Background of Autoethnography**

Qualitative research in the social sciences has often involved a personal connection between the researcher and the field being studied (Anderson, 2006). Most often, however, although researchers may have studied settings in which they were closely involved in their personal lives, there has been a general tendency to limit any significant emphasis on the researcher himself or herself as a part of the study (Anderson, 2006). There have been some exceptions such as *A Chinese village* by Yang (1945), which is an autoethnography written entirely from the author’s memories of his childhood, and Wallace’s detailed descriptions of his everyday activities in *Driving to work* (1965) and *A day at the office* (1972). Yet, even by 1979 when David Hayano first coined the term “autoethnography,” his purpose in using this term was to describe traditional ethnography among one’s own people. He explicitly stated,

I also acknowledge but disregard studies . . . which analyze one’s own life through the procedures of ethnography. These studies are not only autoethnographic, they are self-ethnographic, but it is not immediately shown how they are applicable to other cultural members. (p. 103)

Despite this reproof, the term autoethnography has since been taken up by those who use it precisely to name such self-ethnographic studies. Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner have been leaders in the development of autoethnography as a research method, explaining that the primary purpose of personal writing is to “understand [ . . . ] some aspect of a life lived in a cultural context” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 742). Since the turn to personal experience research as framed by Ellis and Bochner, there has been a virtual explosion of interest in autoethnographic work. According to Muncey (2010) who has monitored the rates of autoethnographic work in the literature, there were approximately 5–10 new autoethnographic articles per year between the years 1990 and 2002. Since 2003, however, there have been about 35 new autoethnographic articles per year, based on a simple keyword search using the term autoethnography (Muncey, 2010). Autoethnographies cover a range of purposes such as seeking meaning in difficult situations (Ellis & Bochner, 2006), exploring issues of personal importance within an explicitly acknowledged social context (e.g., Holt, 2001; Sparkes, 1996), or critiquing extant literature on a topic of personal significance (e.g., Muncey, 2005; Wall, 2012a, 2012b). Substantively, they deal with an incredible diversity of topics such as work activities and experiences (Duncan, 2004; Mischenko, 2005), illness and injury (Ettorre, 2005; Sparkes, 1996), academic life (Pelias, 2003), family life (Muncey, 2005; Wall, 2012a, 2012b), and membership in alternative cultural communities (Calley Jones, 2010).

Although autoethnography has attracted considerable attention and has flourished as an emerging qualitative method, Hayano’s (1979) admonitions linger. At present, there is a debate about the extent to which autoethnography should be narrative, emotional, therapeutic, and self-focused as opposed to theoretical, analytical, and scholarly, with a more traditional understanding of self as connected to a particular ethnographic context rather than the focus of it (Anderson, 2006; Atkinson, 1997, 2006; Denzin, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Muncey, 2010). In a published debate appearing in the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, Anderson (2006) argued in favor of an analytic form of autoethnography that is congruent with Hayano’s earlier support for a view of autoethnography as realist ethnography that includes, but is not limited to, the reflexively positioned self of the author/ethnographer, arguing that “autoethnography loses its sociological promise when it devolves into self-absorption” (p. 385). Similarly, Atkinson (2006) offered support for Anderson’s version of analytic autoethnography, which is essentially traditional ethnography with the personal commitments of the ethnographer made explicit, observing that “the goals of analysis and theorizing are too often lost to sight in contemporary fashions for subjective and evocative ethnographic work” (p. 400).

Conversely, those who see autoethnography as more aligned with postmodern sensibilities and ways of knowing advocate for an evocative, narrative form of autoethnography that “shows struggle, passion, embodied life, and the collaborative creation of sense-making in situations in which people have to cope with dire circumstances and loss of meaning” (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 433). They lament Anderson’s more conservative position noting that he “wants to take autoethnography which, as a mode of inquiry, was designed to be unruly, dangerous, vulnerable, rebellious, and creative and bring it under the control of reason, logic, and analysis” (p. 433). Ellis and Bochner’s perspective has been enormously influential in the field of qualitative inquiry and has led to the production of very personal, experimental autoethnographic writing, which many have found intriguing. This perspective on autoethnography is richly and exclusively represented in the recent and influential *Handbook of autoethnography* (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2005).
In many of the manuscripts pertaining to autoethnography that I have reviewed, I have seen the high potential that is inherent in this approach and the rich opportunities that exist for the emergence of unique perspectives on social phenomena. Some authors have made it very clear that there are marginalized perspectives on certain topics that are given voice through autoethnography. For example, two authors wrote about important life events and their encounters with the health system in dealing with these incidences. The authors were able to demonstrate that their respective topics had been understudied, especially from the patient’s perspective. Their papers offered the potential to inform health professionals about the patient experience and contribute an informative perspective on how these particular medical issues could be better managed. In response to one manuscript, I commented that “there seems to be a lot of rich experience in the story that is worthy of examination and analysis.” On another, I noted that the paper was “wonderfully interesting” and relevant to a topic that was “in need of further exploration in [the discipline].” One manuscript, which was eventually accepted for publication, was an engaging and evocative story about a profound health experience that the author had not only told quite artfully but also analyzed thematically and theoretically. It made a significant, highly unique, insightful, and useful contribution to academic and professional knowledge development.

Nevertheless, in spite of the rich potential for contributions to knowledge contained in many of these manuscripts, a number of issues continued to arise for me that made me anxious about the direction in which autoethnography appears to be headed. These concerns centered around terminology and appropriate applications of the method, the emotional dimensions of autoethnography, the quality of data and its analysis and presentation, and the ethical issues pertinent to this approach to knowledge development.

My Reviews as Data

In this article, I reflect on my reviews and identify the themes that I see as important to consider in the ongoing development of autoethnography. I use the content of 15 reviews that I completed between 2006 and 2015 for a number of research journals. In some cases, I reviewed research papers that used autoethnography as a method to explore a particular social phenomenon, while in other examples, I reviewed methodologically focused manuscripts (12 of the 15 were rejected by me and other reviewers). In drawing on my reviews to consider the state and direction of autoethnography, I present my perspective using only my own thoughts, words, and suggestions to the anonymous authors. I take care not to reveal any specific details regarding the topics of any of the papers or use any of the authors’ phrasing as I illustrate my points, in order to preserve the anonymity of the authors whose papers I read. It is important to note that my choice of publication outlet for this article should not be taken as evidence that I have reviewed for this journal.

Insights From My Reviews

As I have reviewed autoethnographic manuscripts that have been produced in line with evocative ethnography, I have been troubled and have seen merit in giving attention to some of the traditional elements of scholarly inquiry, as encouraged by Anderson (2006) and Atkinson (2006). As I reread my accumulated reviews, I could see an emerging philosophy contained within them. In this article, I aim to explicate that philosophy in support of a balanced and moderate approach to autoethnography, an approach that settles somewhere in between the polarized debates. Indeed, the dichotomy of evocative versus analytic autoethnography is more of a continuum than a binary (Allen-Collinson, 2013), and there are examples of autoethnographic work that fall at all points along it (some of which I will highlight later to support the philosophy I first noticed emerging from my reviews). It is the middle that I wish to explicate and promote—a point on the continuum that is scarcely represented in the methodological literature about autoethnography.

The Naming and Applications of Autoethnography

This first area of concern relates to the naming of personal experience methods and the range of work that falls under the label of autoethnography. One manuscript, in particular, highlighted the confusion that can exist when working with and attempting to label the analysis of personal experience. In the paper, the author used the terms “autobiography,” “narrative,” and autoethnography interchangeably throughout his or her manuscript, raising questions about the specific meanings of these terms and causing me to wonder whether each of these terms indicate approaches with unique forms and purposes or whether they can appropriately be subsumed under one label. As I noted in my review, autobiography, narrative, and autoethnography may be alike enough, with “the common point being the use of personal experience to illuminate a structural, cultural, or institutional issue” but whether this commonality is enough to allow the interchangeable use of the terms is, as I see it, questionable and worthy of continued discussion.

On the other hand, I noted in a number of my reviews a tendency to apply the label autoethnography to purposes that might have been labeled otherwise before the idea of autoethnography rose to popularity. For example, one author referred to her work as autoethnographic because she was writing about her self-reflections in the process of qualitative data analysis in a specific research project. As I said to her, I “wonder if there is a line between what can be considered autoethnographic and what is perhaps more appropriately thought of as accounting for self or locating oneself in the research.” Similarly, another manuscript was essentially “a reflection on the research process.” Again, I expressed to the author my concerns about using autoethnography as a method in his or her particular case. While there are certainly blurred boundaries in research, most autoethnographies deal with substantive topics/phenomena of sociological interest. In my review of these manuscripts,
I concluded that the reflexive analysis of research experiences should not be labeled as autoethnographic. Even though they serve an important purpose, they are essentially methodological articles rather than explorations of substantive social issues.

Another prominent and controversial use for autoethnography has been healing and therapy. This application was reflected in a number of the manuscripts that I reviewed, which created, for me, a level of discomfort. In my response to one author I asked, “How does therapy make a sociological contribution? I see the importance of using personal experience but, in my estimation, the resolution of personal issues ought to occur in an entirely different context than an academic attempt to add to social knowledge.” While I was careful to be respectful and to honor the heartfelt stories of the authors in my comments to them, I often felt as though I was being manipulated by the writers who used evocative and painful descriptions of their experiences in their texts. I felt constrained in my ability to make critical comments on the papers they had written because of the intense and personal nature of the stories, even though the papers had been written explicitly for academic purposes. There were also several moments where I was uncomfortable with the level of emotion and disclosure contained in the writing. I was led to ask, “Does autoethnography have to be painful? Do we really want to put our uncensored selves out there for all to see—in the name of research?” and I wondered: “What topics might there be for autoethnography that aren’t about personal redemption and healing?”

**Story, Analysis, and Dissemination**

The emotional nature and therapeutic purposes of autoethnography were heightened in some of the papers I read because of the lack of analysis of the personal story. Time and again, I asked authors to “provide some kind of analysis of the description of the experience to link the personal with the social,” which “would prevent the paper from appearing self-indulgent, therapeutic, and egocentric.” Most manuscripts contained lengthy sections of story. In many cases, I found the narratives “to be very interesting and engaging and full of detail for analysis” and could “see a number of sociological themes within [them]” but I repeatedly felt compelled to suggest that “it would be more helpful to expand the discussion and analysis.” In response to one manuscript about a significant health-related experience, I noted that “I would really appreciate hearing what themes the author sees in this paper and how she explicates and theorizes about them, and uses them to connect her personal experience with the broader social context so that knowledge is advanced.”

One manuscript in particular, in which the author discussed a negative life-altering event, frustrated me in its form and presentation. It was written in a literary, almost poetic fashion, which was somewhat cryptic and difficult to follow. As I said to the author, “I was just eager to have some resolution to the foreshadowing and dramatic tension,” although that was never fully accomplished from my perspective. I also challenged his or her claim that autoethnography is about telling the story rather than analyzing it, arguing instead that “abstraction is what is needed to make a personal story culturally relevant.” I explained that his or her “message should be clearly stated and the thematic areas of concern should be spelled out,” noting that “it’s not fair to the reader if you tell a literary tale and then expect them to do something with it by guessing at what you mean.”

Another methodological issue pertaining to some of the autoethnographic texts now being produced relates to the dissemination of autoethnographic findings. Some authors whose work I reviewed proposed experimental or unconventional formats and avenues for the sharing of personal experience. One paper advocated for the use of specific performance-based dissemination strategies, which, as they were described in this particular instance, had a strong potential to be offensive. The author’s claim was that like other forms of entertainment media, performance-based dissemination could make a powerful social commentary. In this case, I had to ask:

*Is this really where we want sociological research to go? Comedy, fiction, movies, reality TV, etc. can be powerful social commentaries but that does not make any of them research and does imply that research needs to take on their character, particularly when they are controversial and potentially offensive.*

Another author related autoethnographic research to other forms of personal expression, including personal musings, social networking, blogging, and reality shows. In response, I argued that, while autoethnographic contributions can certainly be made in nontextual ways, some forms of personal expression through performance “do not necessarily contain any analytical insights and are not directed at using personal experience to make a sociological contribution.”

**Ethical Concerns**

Several of the manuscripts that I reviewed made me uneasy from an ethical point of view. In my comments to the authors, I usually noted that “ethical permissions in the traditional sense are not required” for autoethnography, but I also noted that “there are always other characters in the story beyond the author and it’s important to consider how they are represented and included in the story,” especially given the ease with which they could be identified in a text that describes a highly particular experience. Usually I just suggested that the author offer some assurance to the reader that other characters have consented to being depicted in the text and/or that steps have been taken to protect their anonymity. However, in at least one example, I was highly troubled by the amount of detail that was offered in the text about a character that was not the author. Rich details about the other person’s experience were shared, without any indication that the person had or would have accepted such a telling of the story. As well, as I mentioned earlier, I have been uncomfortable at times with the level of personal disclosure and have asked, “At what point are we
saying too much?" This is a question about research ethics as it pertains to the limits of disclosure about ourselves, an issue that is scarcely considered in autoethnographic work.

Finally, given the emerging and as yet marginal status of autoethnography as a form of research, some authors have taken a defensive stance in their writing. Sadly, some of these defenses resemble "rants," characterized by blanket statements, accusations, pejorative labeling, and unsubstantiated opinions about convention and those who uphold it in the academy. One manuscript I reviewed was confrontational, angry, and polemical throughout while, in another paper, the author boldly suggested that autoethnographers should reject conventional views altogether. In my responses, I have asked whether realistic or ethical it is to think that autoethnographers can do this and whether "there a way to advocate for this method without a total disregard for our context [and] without resorting to attacking behavior." In an academic environment where positivist and realist ideologies can be privileged, there is indeed much work to done to advocate for qualitative methods, defend stories, and acknowledge the personal nature of knowledge. However, as I said in my reviews, this can be pursued ethically, with a respectful understanding of others' perspectives and through the use of articulate and well-considered arguments.

**Discussion**

From an analysis of my reviews over the years, it is evident that I am encouraging autoethnographic authors to move in a particular direction by asking them to be clear about their purpose, provide a level of analysis, and attend to the ethical issues that arise in this form of work. Interestingly, I see the same issues arising for me in various already published autoethnographic works, which further illustrate the state and trajectory of autoethnographic work and the important questions that must be asked, pondered, and addressed. Autoethnography as a method seems to be heading in a certain direction, toward the evocative, formless, and unruly. I wish to speak to this by drawing upon published examples as well as the existing methodological literature.

One of the key points I made in my reviews was the issue of the naming and purposes of autoethnography. Indeed, I am not the only one to raise this issue, although my ongoing need to comment on this matter in my reviews indicates that this issue has not been resolved. Ellis and Bochner (2000) provide a very long list of "similarly situated terms" that fit within "the broad rubric of autoethnography" (p. 739). However, they acknowledge that the "meanings and applications of autoethnography have evolved in a manner that makes precise definition and application difficult" (p. 739). Kathy Charmaz (2006) notes that "what stands as autoethnography remains unclear and contested...[and it] lumps interesting, boring, and revealing memoirs, recollections, personal journals, stories, and ethnographic accounts under the same name" (p. 397). She asks whether these are variants of the same genre and wonders whether ethnography leaves at some point. These are also my questions. It seems to me that if "names provide ways of knowing—and being...are rooted in actions and give rise to specific practices," as Charmaz explains (p. 396), it is of vital importance that we clarify what we mean by the name autoethnography so we know what we intend to do with it and we are able to recognize it, teach it, use it, and defend it as something understandable. Do we mean for this to be about personal musings or is it ethnography?

What we understand autoethnography to be dictates how we undertake it. This relates to one of my strongest concerns, which is the lack of analysis that I see both in the manuscripts I review and in published papers that are described as autoethnographies. There are numerous definitions of autoethnography and, although they arise from scholars on all points of the continuum of evocative-to-analytic autoethnography, they all refer in some way to a systematic approach using ethnographic strategies, the linking of personal experience to social, cultural, and political issues, and a critique of certain discourses within a cultural context with a vision and hope for change (Allen Collinson, 2013; Allen Collinson & Hockey, 2005; Chang, 2008; Duncan, 2004; Ellis, 2004; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013b; Pelias, 2003; Sparkes, 2000). By name and definition, a connection to the ethnographic research method is made. My comments on the manuscripts I reviewed reveal my assumption and belief that autoethnography is a form of scholarly research. How, then, is it possible to see presentation forms in the autoethnographic literature that are constituted entirely by unanalyzed stories, poetry, and pages of dialogue? Is this not raw data that, when presented without analysis, fails to meet the stated purpose of the method?

Examples of autoethnography are numerous. In the *Handbook of ethnography* (Holman Jones et al., 2013a), several exemplars are included, presumably as a way of illustrating the characteristics of an excellent autoethnographic text. Virtually all of them are stories, poems, and dialogue with little or no abstraction or connection to theory and literature. They deal with topics such as racial discourses, heteronormativity, abuse, and daily habits but it is difficult to ascertain what they are actually about without reading each of them in their entirety and even after doing so, I am not sure I am right about them. Similarly, Larrison (2010) presents a poem about participating in a qualitative research course, which can be gleaned from the abstract, which is almost the same length as the poem that constitutes the autoethnography itself. Her stated purpose is self-reflection to evoke emotional resonance and understanding and to provide a glimpse into pedagogical processes. At approximately 125 words, it is indeed a glimpse and how it contributes to learning and pedagogy is not quite clear. Richardson's (2008) “My dinner with Lord Esqy” provides another example to illustrate my concerns about level of analysis in autoethnography. This ethnographic account of her own experience of having dinner with royalty is essentially a short story, which she argues displays hierarchical and cultural differences regarding disability, alcohol, politics, and love. However, while these topics are touched on briefly and superficially
in the conversation that takes place in the story, they are not connected in any way, as the keywords might suggest, to scholarship on these topics, nor does the story illuminate these concepts further.

I want to state clearly that I do not wish to dismiss all of the aforementioned works as useless or poor. As poetry and stories they are certainly beautiful, interesting, and/or engaging and I respect the authors of them for their creativity and passion in conveying their experiences. My point here is that, regardless of their quality or beauty, it may not be appropriate to refer to them as autoethnographies. Poetry and stories have always existed and been important expressions of experience. However, they are unanalyzed texts that are not systematic, do not link personal experience with cultural issues, and do not explicitly critique or even identify the discourses they wish to challenge. If the authors wish to use them to make linkages between the micro and the macro, which is the stated purpose of autoethnography, there is a need for thick description, analysis, and theorizing.

There are examples of autoethnography that do just this and, in doing so, make a clear contribution to scholarship. Andrew Sparkes (1996) offers his story about going from elite athlete to a person permanently affected by inflammatory back disease. It is a personal and emotional telling but one that is fully supported by theory and connected to the literature in the sociology of sport. In her highly theoretical and very personal exploration of her experience at an annual witch camp, Calley Jones (2010) links her experiences explicitly and richly to queer theory, heteronormativity, and spirituality as a way of examining “a leisure practice that extends beyond the conventional understandings of leisure research in hopes of illuminating what has previously been unseen” and showing the “importance of communal and culturally relevant leisure particularly for individuals and communities that do not see themselves reflected in the dominant culture” (p. 269).

On the subject of identities at work, Mischenko (2005) uses experience and poetry as data, which are analyzed in relation to a poststructuralist, critical management lens. As she endeavors to “avoid creating an overly rational and dry text” (p. 205), she produced an “intentionally unconventional” manuscript (p. 205) that “weave[s] [her] story in and out of the theory to illustrate the potential interpretations of [her] poem” (p. 210). While it is personal, reflective, and exploratory, it loosely follows the method/findings/discussion pattern and is readable as a scholarly paper because of the format and analytic interpretations and theorizing contained within it. Her goal is not to expose herself but to address gaps in research on identity work in organizations and to expose, resist, and survive certain managerial discourses and practices. In my own work, I have sought to contribute a previously unrepresented perspective to the literature on international adoption. Although this literature is vast, there was no representation of my experience and perspectives in it. I used my unique positioning as a mother, a health care practitioner, and a sociologist to contribute an alternative discourse to literature on a social practice that significantly impacts people’s lives (Wall, 2012a, 2012b). My intention was not to evoke emotion or heal myself but to “contribute to the discourse on international adoption through a personal but thematically organized and analytical narrative” (Wall, 2012b, p. 320). A reviewer of my manuscript noted that I was able to use my experience in an “engaged but dispassionate way” to explore gaps in the literature. He or she described my paper as an excellent example of critical reflection in theory building that would offer a strong contribution to ethics, social sciences, and professional practice.

I may be judged a philistine for failing to appreciate the beauty and emotion of the autoethnographies I critique in favor of more conventional presentations of autoethnographic work. I understand that “these scholars [evocative autoethnographers] have challenged accepted views about silent authorship and author evacuated texts” (Sparkes, 2000, p. 22), which are the kinds of texts that can be privileged within “an audit culture framed by neo-liberalism and scientific imperialism” (Sparkes, 2013, p. 512). Richardson (2000) points out that writing forms are instruments of power that, through language, define both social organization and our sense of self. Autoethnographers seek to realign that power by turning to writing that makes evident the complexity of human lives through the eyes of an individual. However, as autoethnography is increasingly inclusive of evocative and esoteric writing forms such as poetry and story, it produces a different kind of inaccessibility in writing. Poetry is often cryptic by nature and stories are layered with meaning. What is the justification for claiming that these enigmatic, emotive, personal, unanalyzed texts are autoethnographic research? In what way does producing and publishing these kinds of texts democratize writing and knowledge production? Atkinson (2006) suggests that, in fact, it is a misrepresentation of academic history to claim that social scientists of the past have been forced into upholding an ideal of impersonal and dispassionate fieldwork (p. 401). Anderson (2006) traces a long history of social science that reveals the presence of the researcher in his or her own work. While it may be worthwhile to promote writing forms that increasingly acknowledge a human and involved researcher, does that require us to label poetry and stories as ethnographic research? And is it not just another kind of power play to produce mystical, poignant texts and then ask a reader to process the emotion and guess at what they mean? To me, that falls quite far outside of the “ethnographic intent” (Wolcott, 1999).

It might be easy to assume that if we turn to writing about ourselves, we do not need to concern ourselves with research ethics in the conventional sense. However, because the self exists in relation to the world and is co-constituted by other (Roth, 2009), it is not possible to avoid implicating others in the telling of our own experiences (Tullis, 2013). Ethical guidance for autoethnographers is still emerging and was scarcely available even a few short years ago when I began using this method. In the manuscripts I reviewed, I saw evidence of a lack of awareness of ethics in autoethnography and a lack of application of ethical principles in the work I reviewed. Despite a lack of documented ethical guidance, I experienced powerful ethical dilemmas in my own autoethnographic work (Wall,
A more significant ethical concern around autoethnography that requires ongoing consideration is the risk to the writer/researcher themselves. Autoethnographers can make themselves vulnerable by sharing their private stories (Tullis, 2013). Yet, conventional research ethics and research ethics boards tend not to be concerned with the impact that the research process can have on the researcher, both within qualitative research in general and within autoethnography specifically (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen & Liamputtong, 2008; Tullis, 2013). The trend toward evocative autoethnography increases this risk to self as autoethnographers share stories that are intended to be emotive, detailed, and confessional. Given that printed texts live on in static form long after they are written, it is vital that autoethnographic writers consider their present and future vulnerability as life goes on and attitudes and perspectives, both personal and social, change (Tolich, 2010; Tullis, 2013). This is especially true when autoethnography as a method attracts people so strongly motivated to share their stories of trauma, sexuality, unpopular opinions, and unconventional activities, to name a few. How much do we want to and need to put ourselves out there forever and for all? In my own experience, I struggled with this, even within a topic that is not taboo. I found that linking my experiences to theory and literature assisted me in gauging my social position and evaluating my perspectives in a way that allowed me to participate with respect for myself and my wider community, while still being able to say clearly what I needed to say and what only I could say.

I am advocating for an ethical and self-focused but analytical approach to autoethnography. Clearly, not everyone will agree with my position. As I have noted, there is a polarization of perspectives on what autoethnography ought to be. Sparkes (2000) speaks of polarized reactions from his reviewers in response to his autoethnography, with some reviewers rejecting it as scholarship and others calling for more story and less theory. I have also experienced a range of responses to my autoethnographic work (Wall, 2008). However, what I wish to do in this article is draw attention to the middle ground, to encourage would-be autoethnographers to consider a balanced perspective that lies between the warring factions of evocative and analytic approaches to this method, one that captures the meanings and events of one life in an ethical way but also in a way that moves collective thinking forward—a moderate autoethnography. Anderson (2006) and Atkinson (2006) advocate for an analytic autoethnography that limits the use of self to anything other than an enhanced level of researcher reflexivity and visibility within conventional ethnography (Vryan, 2006). This, as Denzin (2006) argues, is just “déjà vu all over again” (p. 419); it prevents autoethnography from offering something new. On the other hand, Ellis and Bochner (2006) and many of the authors in the Handbook of autoethnography (Holman Jones et al., 2013a) show us a formless, evocative, literary method that, in the end, bears little or no resemblance to its ethnographic origins and is ambiguous in its contributions.

Eisner (1988) pointed out that knowledge is rooted in experience and noted that personal experience requires a method for its representation. The value of the personal viewpoint is that “there is nothing completely idiosyncratic about a single personality” (Stivers, 1993, p. 413); we are socially connected and constituted. Thus, autoethnography has tremendous potential for building sociological knowledge by tapping into unique personal experiences to illuminate those small spaces where understanding has not yet reached. However, given the emerging nature of this method, there is still much to learn about how it ought to be done and what autoethnographers should aim to contribute. I have offered the foregoing observations from an analysis of my reviews and their connection to the literature as a way of stimulating further debate about the autoethnographic method and raising questions that require further consideration. In my estimation, if we are to act too conservatively and hold fast to a traditional conception of the use of self in research (minimal, background, self as only one actor among many), such as that envisioned by Anderson (2006), we lose an opportunity to tap into legitimate and unique sources of knowledge and insight that come from a particular view of one’s place in the world. That said, I do agree with Atkinson (2006) that we lose the important goals of analysis and theorizing when undertaking passionate, evocative acts of storytelling and sense-making, such as described by Ellis and Bochner (2006).

A few others offer a similar message. Chang (2008, 2013) explains how she takes a social science approach to autoethnography and describes a conventional, systematic method that highlights personal experience within an analytical-interpretive process. Duncan (2004) expresses her belief in the value of autoethnography to “externalize [her] inner dialogue” (p. 3) and describe her intuitive understandings as a way of improving her decision-making at work. She is critical of an “overreliance on the potential of a personal writing style to evoke direct emotional responses in readers but offer no deeper levels of reflection or analytic scholarship” (p. 11). Instead she advocates for a more conservative approach that includes justification for the use of the method, methodological description, multiple sources of evidence/data (e.g., journals, sketches, e-mails, screen prints), and a clear account of the outcomes of the project and the clarity it offers. Finally, Vryan (2006) advocates for a version of analytic autoethnography that goes beyond enhanced researcher positioning within traditional ethnographic work (as proposed by Anderson, 2006). Instead, Vryan envisions analytic autoethnography as method that makes it possible to study the uniquely deep and rich experience of a single life, which, when analyzed, has social relevance and utility.
After years of reviewing autoethnographic texts and following the literature, I felt increasingly compelled to speak into the swirling polemics of autoethnographic methodology. Debates are seldom tame but perhaps there is a way forward by finding the middle ground. I believe in autoethnography, which uses “the power of one” to explore and critically analyze the complexity of social events or topics for the purpose of transformation and social justice (Gibbs, 2013). Commentators on both sides of the methodological debate concerning autoethnography have valid points to make. A moderate autoethnography would reconcile the best of these ideas and combine the power of the personal perspective with the value of analysis and theory, so that sociological understanding is advanced in ways it might never have otherwise been.

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