

To Be an Autoethnographer or Not to Be—That Is the Question

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Abstract: It is the most personal article I have ever written, revealing my fears, hesitations, reflections, and decisions. I am still striving to write a scientific and academic paper, still looking for that academic framework that would allow this article to be recognized as a scientific text, with the reflection on that internal pressure and need to make it scientific. This is an article about the process of becoming an autoethnographer, creating a tool, shaping identity and research strategy, and becoming one.

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Introducing the Story

Underpinning the article, and more broadly, my first experience with autoethnography is anxiety. My fear is about methodological correctness, compliance with the intention of the creators, the conditions in which my work may be considered correct, or errors due to which it could be considered inconsistent. I am even more afraid that I do not feel like a young researcher anymore, even though I am taking my first autoethnographic steps, I have a lot of field experience, analytical practice, and thorough methodological education behind me (Marciniak 2020). Perhaps even too thorough, providing me with a wealth of beliefs, values, and ideas that evoke that fear. I am afraid of what I have been taught to be afraid of—crossing methodological boundaries, procedural decadence, and squander-

ing my achievements and traditions. Being a novice researcher would give me an excuse for possible mistakes, and it would make me more flexible in my learning to take these first steps. Being experienced raises my expectations of myself and, at the same time, causes fear of how much ability I have to open up to what is new. Now, I can feel the challenge of ‘shifting’ from one approach to another, from one paradigm to another (Klevan and Grant 2022). In this article, I am writing about that shift.

Since I am going to write about autoethnography, I do not perceive my article as an example of autoethnography, at least not in terms of the more or less classic autoethnographic approaches pointing out that there should be at least several criteria fulfilled to call a particular research (first-person perspective) an autoethnography (see: Adams, Jones, and Ellis 2015). My intention here is to share with the readers my self-reflective writing about my path of experiencing the new method (or even new research paradigm) and shifting from one methodological mindset and habitus (as Pierre Bourdieu or Loïc Wacquant would define it, see: Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) to another. I have been educated and trained in qualitative procedural research to think and conclude conceptually in grounded theory (GT) terms. Even in the constructivist version of the GT (see: Charmaz 2014), there is still much attention directed to the outside, to the conceptualization of the outside, and not much left for the self-reflective and, especially, the evocative narration of the researcher.

Another salient note to complete the introductory story is that this article is, itself, a process. It started with my doubts about how to write it, then my attempts and failures, mainly related to my dissatisfaction and, at the same time, anxiety, about which I will write more in the next paragraph. The writing

was a process of weaning off objectivist research narration, discovering new paths of expression, and learning myself, my new Self. It was not easy or quick—I still have an image in front of my eyes, the scene I have repeated hundreds of times—me sitting by the laptop and deleting the next version of the line, paragraph, or part of this article. After a long time, I noticed how the criteria and reasons for my deletion changed significantly. At first, I did not dare to express myself. Therefore, everything I wrote seemed insufficient academically, sounding completely unscientific, and not serious enough. Later on, everything changed drastically, and the reason for my dissatisfaction with what I had written was feeling more and more often that it could have been more reflective, evocative, deeply subjective, and confessional. In the beginning, I was scared that my article would be rejected by those I know—researchers with whom I have a reciprocity of perspectives (Cicourel 1974), researchers from my previous lived experiences (*Erlebnis*) of the academic and scientific in the life-world (*Lebenswelt*, see: Schütz and Luckmann 1973). Over time, the prospect of not being accepted became much more terrifying, of being not recognized and rejected by those who do not know me—autoethnographers, contemplative researchers, and all others from similar thought collectives. It was like a fear of being excluded from the tribe and by the tribe to which I would have liked to belong. My fears and perspectives changed over time, but the process of emerging and creating this article continues until the moment here and now when I sit down to the text once again to revise it according to the reviewers’ recommendations. Being thankful for their work and comments that play a salient and last role in writing this article, I stop reshaping my narration here and convey this piece of my self-reflective work to further interaction and co-creation with the readers.

Boundaries of Autoethnography

My journey with autoethnography began when my research apparatus and precise qualitative technology failed while studying the social resonance of the altered states of consciousness, spiritual awakenings, and self-sufficient ecological and spiritual communities. Those phenomena are difficult and sometimes impossible to grasp in external observation or inducted, question-answer driven narrative, requiring different, and new to me, epistemological approaches. I went from doing sensual, self-reflective ethnography to autoethnography, experimenting with the method and myself. The reasons for such redirection were both pragmatic and transformational. On the one hand, during my research, I needed a method to go deeper into the lived experiences and understandings (*Verstehen*, see classic concept derived from works of Max Weber 1978). On the other, there was my personal need to become more authentic, expressive, and evocative as an interpretive human researcher, subjective in experiencing, but still focused on knowledge production, using the personal to tell about the social.

When you start doing something from scratch and learning, it can often be accompanied by uncertainty—can it be done wrong? If so, the risk is considerable and associated with ridicule, flawed results, or wasted opportunities. When I started my experience with autoethnography, I had that question in mind: can autoethnography be performed incorrectly? Are there rules, dogmas, and criteria that allow deciding what is and what is not an autoethnographic study? I have acquainted with various criteria for an autoethnography to be ‘good’ (Denzin 2000; Richardson 2000; Adams, Jones, and Ellis 2015), but I found them too blurry to be a useful hint on how not to make a mistake. Or, perhaps that ‘obfusca-

tion’ of criteria shows that it is only about a trend, an approach, about determining whether a specific autoethnography is in line with a particular school or tradition. Does autoethnography have precise or fluid boundaries?

It depends on how we grasp and understand the methodology. If it is a garden, as Antoni Sułek (2002) metaphorically puts it in his methodological textbook, the role of the method creators and their continuators is to cultivate the purity of species, separate them from each other, designate their place, and define essential morphological features. The garden has gardeners who will reduce brushwood and pull out the weed. As Barney Glaser (1992; 2003) had been doing for years concerning the methodology of grounded theory and any new procedures, analytical techniques, or modifications to it, even distancing himself from Anselm Strauss, with whom he created that methodology and who wanted to develop it in later years (Strauss 1987; Corbin and Strauss 2008). In a similar vein, I read Mitchell Allen’s reaction to the articles published in a thematic issue of the *Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej* (the Polish version of *Qualitative Sociology Review*) and the statement that their authors do not use the method as it is taught by Carolyn Ellis (see: Kafar 2020:20). The set boundary marks the dividing line between what is correct and incorrect, and what is consistent and inconsistent. I know that methodological ‘boundary work’ well as I have repeatedly assessed and judged methodological correctness, believing that the best I can do for the development of the research methodology is to guard what has been recognized and to defend it against what has not been recognized as essential for a particular method—that there was no place for the unrecognized in the garden. It is a metaphor that we live by in science, a metaphor through which we organize our study and research

(paraphrasing the title of a classic book by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson [1980]). What if we change the metaphor, if the methodology becomes a meadow for us, with an innumerable variety of species, each creating a variety of varieties? What if, instead of guarding the purity of species, we support evolution? Research methods and techniques may lose their relevance, just as paradigms will change, and yet learning will be possible not because of unchanging duration but because of constant change in response to changes in the environment. In such a science, each new emerging species, new variety can complement and supplement the wealth of resources and opportunities. In such science, each approach will find its place, it can be developed, discussed, modeled, and the final criterion of its existence will be the usefulness in the notion of social pragmatism (cf. Marciniak 2015; Bryant 2017).

The discovery of a different metaphor for methodology, going beyond the genre's pure 'garden,' imagining a methodological 'meadow' instead, was a breakthrough on my way to autoethnography. I am not the researcher I was a few years back. It seems obvious and yet not fully realized. Reviewing my achievements, field practices, and analytical techniques, I can see how much I tried to make them unchanged—more and more perfect, but not distant from their original form. At the same time, seeing other methods as shaped in their final form left me with only a limited choice of those that would fit my previous practice. How liberating and developmental was the possibility of not remaining the same researcher, combining approaches, and, above all, discovering that it is not me who is at the service of the method, but that the method is to serve me and my research practice. The beginnings, however, were not so obvious, and my path to becoming an autoethnographer began with taking the opposite

direction. At this point, I will recall the appropriate story in three scenes from the beginning of my autoethnographic writing.

It's fall 2018, one of the evenings when my home research practice is a remedy for the fall weather. I clean up my computer archives by browsing through field notes from the study of street vendors. I remember meetings and conversations, events that I witnessed and participated in. The viewed photos evoke vivid images, despite the fact that several years have passed since the end of my work in the field. This note is my reflection on the course and the effect of my work. I asked myself, would I have conducted that study from years ago differently now? How could I have created stories about my experiences, organized the conclusions that appeared in the field, and translated them into words? I begin to describe memories from a collection of photos, short notes from the field, and more extensive notes; I begin to compose fuller descriptions of my experiences. Especially those that have left such a strong impact on my research and me as a researcher, [like] meetings with the local mafia and the criminal world, and local friendships that I have observed and that I have created over time. About how I was afraid, how I missed, and how I became biased in emotional games between different groups of street vendors. I want to write again about everything I did not give space for in that study, the truth about myself. [November 10, 2011, from my personal notes]

I've been sitting for two hours trying to turn my data into thick descriptions of my experiences. And it doesn't work for me at all. Instead of expanding the narrative, my mind tries to organize everything. As if writing a story, I was simultaneously coding and organizing it conceptually. Coding, coding. Could I stop coding and not generate categories? Can I see

the whole picture without its internal conceptual structure? With each subsequent sentence that I am not happy with, I feel an internal critic appearing within me. The critic that criticizes not me but the method—autoethnography. What a strange idea of autoethnographic writing; I am a grounded theory researcher. The more difficult it is for me to feel at ease in autoethnographic trials, the more I am strengthened in my identity as a grounded theory researcher. And I easily reject as ‘not mine’ and ‘not for me’ everything that is not related to that identity. I feel my attempts to redirect me to the known and safe harbor, to the working techniques I know and with which I feel comfortable. And then, my attention and my assessment follow. Here and now, I have a hard time writing even a page describing my experience that I would be really happy with. But, writing an article critical to autoethnography would come to me with satisfying ease, even fulfillment, listing all those first-person methodological mutations that I am now forcing myself to do. Maybe that’s what I should start doing—writing critically. [November 11, 2018, from my personal notes]

Today, I experienced a specific catharsis; I feel how much tension there was in my attempts at self-reflective writing. As if I were looking for internal enthusiasm, flow, and release, but, on the contrary, I did not feel free; I felt embarrassed by the fact that instead of categorizing and structuring thoughts, I would compose these thoughts into literary or even poetic descriptions. Writing that way is enjoyable, but I felt as if I had compromised my entire scientific education. And the mentioned catharsis came to me like enlightenment. Staring at the computer screen, hunched and motionless and suspended in thinking about the next sentence to be written, and at the same time, generating new categories in my mind: “resistance,” “emptiness in thoughts,” “body reactions,” I suddenly exper-

ience a flash in my thoughts. I will not write about becoming an autoethnographer! I will write about how I do not become one! How it did not work out, how it is not for everyone, and how I tried and experienced disappointment with the results. Suddenly, all the tension in my body is released, and I can take a deep breath of relief and relax in the chair. I got it! That is my desired flow—how not to become an autoethnographer! [December 08, 2018, from my personal notes]

That moment was groundbreaking and surprising for me at the same time. I saw myself as a rebel, but turned out to be a traditionalist. My attempts at evocative writing caused me a lot of frustration and confusion; I stopped feeling the difference between what is my literary and scientific descriptions. Autoethnography fell outside my scientific framework of research. At the same time, I understood that the scientific and methodological correctness criteria depend on our background, scientific competence, and personal stories as researchers and humans (Pillow 2003; Sykes 2014; Kacperczyk 2020; Klevan and Grant 2022). When I read about the factors Lauren Richardson (2000) uses when reviewing personal narrative papers, her openness for emotional affection, dramatic recall, unusual phrasing, and metaphors as a means to take the reader for the “evocative ride,” I reflected on her personal background. In the criteria mentioned by Arthur Bochner (2000), I recognize his attitude and mindset with all the means to simultaneously understand and feel the story, search for concrete details as experienced facts, on the one hand, and need to move beyond superficially releasing vulnerability and honesty of the experienced feelings, on the other. As an activist, Norman Denzin (2000:256) is primarily interested in making autoethnography contribute to changing the world and making it a better place, presenting

cultural and political issues, and articulating a politics of hope. Everyone is looking for a part of themselves and their truth by reading autoethnographies of others and writing their own (Bochner and Ellis 2016; Hughes and Pennington 2016). For me, it was not the moment to formulate my criteria of ‘good autoethnography’ because the only thing that interested me at that moment was not to cease to be a social researcher. My choices have been shaped by my beliefs about what was necessary for research to meet the criteria of scientific research so that I could have considered that what I have been doing concerning autoethnography was genuine research (see: Zgrzebnicki 2020), not merely the everyday and mundane experiences of life in its various aspects and contexts defined by the research topic. Being convinced that it was impossible to reconcile my criteria of good qualitative research with the specificity and essence of autoethnography, I decided to write without giving up my habits or views on the methodological correctness of qualitative research. In my descriptions and practices, I discovered and reconstructed more and more strategies for coping with genre purity inside a garden of the social research methodology.

How Not to Become an Autoethnographer

Contrary to appearances, my intricate plan did not assume either a methodological subversion or some sublime form of epistemological self-aggression. I genuinely wished to give the autoethnographic approach a try, but without making any concessions, giving up my experience-based perception of research and analytical practices, which turned out to be my failure as I predicted that one could not become an autoethnographer without ceasing to be a social researcher. Even in my phrasing—autoethnographic approach—my cautious and skepti-

cal attitude is revealed. It is easier to try out some new approach, check, and taste to see whether it fits or not, whether we like it or not (like a wine or a dish) than decide to immerse in the experience, do autoethnography as a holistic strategy rather than trying it out as an optional approach. Minimizing immersion in my experience, reflection, and writing took many other forms.

Emotional Distancing

In 2019, I entered the field of research with an autoethnographic approach and readiness to explore the New Age subculture from a first-person perspective, describing my experiences of a community of people experiencing spontaneous spiritual awakenings. By participating in group practices and meditations, entering into various interactions, conducting conversations, and observing everything around me, I experienced emotions and body, reflected on my thoughts, and described everything intensively. And when I read my descriptions afterward, I noticed a specific way of approaching and presenting my feelings. I wrote about them in the first person as about my experiences, emotions, thoughts, and feelings in the body, but, at the same time, keeping a distance from them. As if my inner observing ‘I’ was detached from my feelings, making them the subject of observation, reflection, and description, in the way that ‘I’ describes ‘Me.’ At the same time, I felt that this internal distinction between ‘I’ and ‘Me’ is related to a different dimension than George Herbert Mead’s (1967) “Me” as the socialized aspect of the person and the “I” as the active aspect. That time, it was about ‘I—emotionally distanced’ in describing ‘Me—emotionally engaged’ in the situation, as if one part of my Self were inside the lived experience and the other part outside that experience, narrating from a distance. Perhaps, it is

nothing new for the general mind and self-association, but in that particular situation, I realized such a divide was a kind of sophisticated cognitive strategy. Doing autoethnography in that manner, I replicated a typical split into the researcher ('I') investigating, analyzing, and describing experiences of the participant ('Me'), and in the same way, I distanced myself from the emotions, feelings, and sensations of the one under study (see: Pitard 2017). In a common research tradition, we were all trained in emotional distancing; even when we enter the research field with sensitivity, we still distinguish between being empathetic with those we inquire about and being open to our emotions and reactions (Kacperczyk 2020; Konecki 2022). We maintain being researchers studying humans and avoid being humans studying humans. And so, it happened in my early autoethnography. All my excitement, sorrows, fears, all other lived experiences became not exactly mine because I was the one keeping an emotional distance, investigating analytically, and describing reservedly.

I have described today's group meditation in which I participated, and now I have read it aloud. The meditation experience was very emotional for me. I felt it all over my body; the sensations were literally flowing and burning inside me. I have described it all vividly, using metaphors, and choosing the words that best reflect the meaning of my experiences. I did everything to make my description stirring and evocative. And while reading this description, I have a feeling that I have achieved my goal. And yet, as a reader myself, I feel nothing. I didn't really feel anything while writing and reading the whole thing. As if I am describing not my experiences, not my emotions, as if I feel I should remain impassive about what I am writing about. It is quite an unusual experience, I can feel excited when I write, I can feel what I have writ-

ten, and I can even feel what the readers will feel, but I do not feel it myself. As if I were a fantasy novel writer, maybe even slightly attached to my characters and their fate, maybe even excited by what I come up with, but still not getting emotionally involved in the fiction story. I am looking for these feelings, I am looking for an authentic experience of my own experiences, but I feel that what separates me is my research attitude. Although this is autoethnography, and although I describe my experiences in it, I am the researcher who stays outside. [March 12, 2019, from my personal notes]

Producing Data

After a few weeks of my autoethnographic practice, another deadlock has come. I began to wonder to what extent my experience in the research field and writing about that experience alone would be sufficient to saturate topics, threads, and issues. Once again, I felt that my thinking about the study was driven by grounded theory methodology, eagerness to saturate categories, and to make conclusions integrated and dense. In line with my intention to not force myself to become (an autoethnographer) free from my previous methodological background, I decided to follow my research intuitions, even if it meant failure in my autoethnographic endeavors. In the absence of inspiration for writing, I started collecting field data in a way that was familiar and traditional to me. At last, I could have written notes about something, not myself. I wrote about situations with almost detective insight and meticulousness, about people, their experiences and reactions, and about conversations. I wrote in the first person about everything I saw, heard, and felt. I wrote as if I were (just) a data collector, a camera, a microphone, and a synthesizer. I wrote about what was on my mind as if I were writing about the contents of

the ‘hardware’ in my head. I reported on the process of gathering data in me along with the entire course of its formation. And I felt that the only way to ensure myself that I was doing scientific work was to produce data (in terms of creating tools to collect and then gather data). Of course, I was aware that when writing autoethnographically about myself, I also reflect on the set of information, but it was difficult for me to agree that that information was only the result of my experience and reflection and not a result of intentional searching, selecting, and collecting.

Thus, I discovered another strategy of escaping from full immersion into the autoethnography experience, focusing all attention and all activities on data production, moving from simply ‘being’ in the research field or situation to complex and often procedurally defined ‘doing’ in the field. Doing gives a sense of activity and agency and allows a researcher to maintain the impression of control over the course of the research process (Stephen 2017; Konecki 2021). This is **my** process during which I gather **my** data that become mine because **I have decided** how, when, and what should be collected. As an ‘owner’ of my research, I create the research, data, method, and result. It becomes clear to me that I am touching here on a paradox and trap of autoethnography. The more I try to **do** autoethnography, the more I risk forcing data and conclusions; I begin to construct phenomena and processes that are the result of my doubts and distrust of my experiences as a sufficient source of reflective data. The more I allow myself to **be**, autoethnography becomes and shapes in the line of the states, feelings, and processes manifested in my experience. When I allow myself to be, I allow whatever is essential to emerging. That, of course, gives me another concern that the data can be so ‘easily’ available, at my fingertips,

in me. As a researcher, should I start reaching inside myself instead of hours and days spent laboriously accessing key informants, followed by hours, days, and weeks of interviews, conversations, field observations, taking photos, and collecting other visual data? Well-educated and methodologically trained, I am ready for such an effort because it will increase the value and importance of the collected data. In the face of everyday immersion into my experiences to catch emotions, thoughts, and reflections from them, I feel not only unprepared but also intimidated—as if I have chosen the easiest way. Although, it is a complicated, long, and uncertain road, leading to undefined results.

God Bless Leon Anderson!

The discovery of analytic autoethnography (Anderson 2006) must have been a real salvation for many researchers in my position. At least it was for me—like a lifebuoy or even a raft thrown on a stormy ocean over which atmospheric fronts of objective and subjective methodologies are pressing against each other. In this raging methodological ocean of approaches and paradigms, an ordinary researcher looking for the horizon or directions can quickly drown or crash into rocks. From the one direction, wind gusts are coming, driven by “postmodern sensibilities” (as Leon Anderson calls it [2006:373]) that open a wide space of possibilities for evocation and first-person experience-based inquiring. From another direction, the same steady wind has been blowing for years, the wind of longing for the realist and analytic research praxis. Amid the storm, lost researchers are trying to find their way. Some people, like me, feel that those old winds “no longer help me do the kind of work I want to do” (see: Denzin 2006:419) and sail where I want to sail. But, at the same time, those researchers, just like me, feel

not ready enough, not courageous enough to put the sails out and catch the new winds. Other researchers, especially those of the tireless sea-wolf type, value traditions too much to change their sailing style, feeling ready only to slightly change course towards the new. Everyone is doing their best not to get carried away by the waves and winds and not to stop floating on the surface to survive. And when it started to get difficult, Leon Anderson and his analytic autoethnography came to the rescue; thanks to this, we can have the cake and eat the cake. We can analytically do autoethnography, study from the first-person perspective without giving up the analytic research agenda, and write about emotions, but not get too emotional during the course (cf. Ellis and Bochner 2006). We can still be objective, external, and emotionally distanced from our emotions and their descriptions, which become just material for analysis, just like the rest of the data we produce. Analytic autoethnography seemed to me the perfect solution, a solution that dozens of qualitative researchers around the world were waiting for, and maybe even thousands. Certainly, many of my colleagues with whom I spoke at that time.

Today, at the University, we discussed the possibilities of using autoethnography, more of a backstage conversation than an official scientific discussion, but it allowed me to better understand the motives behind the choice of analytic autoethnography. Of course, among the arguments, there were many expressions of appreciation for the compromise introduced by Anderson's approach, the advantages, and the possibility of combining analytic autoethnography with other methods. But it didn't hit me at all. We talked, and I had stopped listening to the words, the content was relegated to the background, and all my attention was drawn to the sensations from the body. Relief. This is the first thing I felt. Relief and

such freedom as when you find out that you will be forgiven for something. It is a relief for my colleagues that this new method is not so different, so scary. A relief that allows you to join the conversation more freely, as experts again who know what they are talking about because this mysterious and maybe even dangerous autoethnography turns out to be quite manageable. A wild and unpredictable evocation can be domesticated and arranged into an analytic pet. "God bless Leon Anderson"—one of the colleagues exclaimed, with a hint of a joke and genuine gratitude. We all laugh as we indulge in the blissful feeling of relief. We no longer have to fear our own emotions, we don't have to become evocative autoethnographers who would inevitably be confused with humans. We can remain scientific researchers investigating humans, even if from a first-person perspective, still analytically. [May 14, 2019, from my personal notes]

Then I realized how much we do to avoid leaving our methodological and cognitive comfort zone. As researchers in the process of transitioning from the methodological garden to the meadows of methods, we will develop many strategies that allow us to leave at least one foot in a place known and safe for our scientific identity, our emotional constitution, and our scientific ego. Sometimes we will weave familiar techniques and research routines into our autoethnography, and sometimes we will even create new versions of the method to justify our resistance to full immersion in the experience. And sometimes, our actions will give the impression of bizarre hybrids, and other times of methodological *déjà vu*, as Denzin (2006) put it. In the end, even Leon Anderson shifted his view on autoethnography and confessed that the ideal and true autoethnography is evocative (Anderson and Glass-Coffin 2016).

Justifications and Explanations

On my way to becoming an autoethnographer, I discovered another interesting practice—masking the truth. I asked myself why I had chosen autoethnography in the first place. And then, going further, why had I opted for qualitative sociology, for the interpretative paradigm? And it began my process of reconstructing the context and causal conditions, all that tangle of biographical, interactive, situational reasons and aspirations that ultimately shaped my choices. And then, I asked my colleagues about it, listening to their plethora of reasons and myriads of complex factors, both intentional and accidental. And I read texts, articles, and books, looking for traces of those individual determinants of autoethnography selection, often dramatic turning points that inspired me to become an autoethnographer. The justifications and explanations that we create to each time convince the readers (and maybe ourselves) about the rightness of our choice. Sometimes those will only be methodological arguments about adjusting the method to the research problem. At other times, life circumstances that leave no doubt in the experience of a converting researcher—meetings on the verge of life and death, experiences of our own or those of our loved ones—as if we wanted to testify that the power of that moment triggered an irreversible decision to embark on our autoethnographic journey.

However, are we not running away from a salient truth when arguing in favor of autoethnography, regardless of whether that argument is evocative or more analytic? The truth is that we enjoy being autoethnographers. In addition to all those vital, situational, and scientific factors, we choose autoethnography because we find pleasure in being truthful with ourselves and our subjects, the plea-

sure in being authentic and experiencing authentically, and the joy in being wholesome in our mental, emotional, and embodied existence. For me, escaping the truth that autoethnography gives me more and more pleasure every day and week was the last bastion of internal resistance. I asked myself the same question over and over again: can the method I had chosen give me pleasure? Could the criterion of my methodological choice be that I like that way of conducting research? When asked about the reasons for pursuing autoethnography, apart from all the sophisticated justifications in the field of research practice and principles of methodology, can I also write that it is pleasant? As a researcher, do I have the right to pleasure while conducting research? Allowing myself to do so and facing the truth about the enjoyment of autoethnography was the final step on my way of bantering with myself. I was no longer interested in how to deceive myself anymore and not being an autoethnographer. From that moment on, I wanted to let my autoethnography become.

Rite of Passage

Just as I have exposed myself to the reader in this article, so have I exposed myself to myself. But, first, I made my every reflection, hesitation, perverse thought the subject of my reflection. I allowed my skepticism to develop and reflect on every critical thought allowing those thoughts to form my protective layers, methodological shields, and scientific armor. By succeeding on the path of not becoming an autoethnographer, I finally felt safe enough, protected, and stable on my methodological foundation to enjoy freedom of choice—to be or not to be an autoethnographer. Exposing my internal processes and external masks, I became ready to undress from my previous researcher uniform.

I felt that I wanted to symbolically leave behind all the habits I no longer needed for my research practice. Leave the beliefs about what is correct and incorrect, judgments about what is consistent and inconsistent with the scientific framework of research, and leave patterns and unreflective choices. I want to leave all the thoughts that I cannot or that I am not suitable. I want to leave all my internal limitations that stand in the way of combining my achievements and my current interests, practices developed in research experience and new possibilities of autoethnography. And I saw in the mirror all the layers applied to me, all garments symbolically representing veils and shields creating my professional academic image, constructing my previous authority of the reliable qualitative researcher. Breathe in and out; it seems simple. By taking off each subsequent layer and piece of clothing, I take off another surface I no longer need. Nothing special. And yet the next movements did not come to me as easily as I imagined. Without effort, without rushing, I began to feel a growing fear. Nothing, such a play, it doesn't matter; I take off my clothes while standing in front of the mirror. It's getting weird with each subsequent move. My breath starts to get shallower, and I begin to smile nervously at my mirror reflection as if I want to make fun of what I am doing, downplay the meaning of it and turn this transformative experience into an eccentric performance in front of myself. I feel ashamed and judge myself. Such feelings stop the process of undressing, and the whole thing is more and more filled with long moments of stillness and staring in the mirror. I feel sad. As if I were saying goodbye to something important to me, as if something was irretrievably gone, and I forget about my breath in all this. Inhale and exhale, deeply, with sound. What do I mean—I ask myself. And I'm starting to realize that now it's not about the fear of peeling off and leaving all of them behind. Now it's about the fear of being exposed, of standing in my

naked truth, my emotions, mentality, and body. Am I ready to be fully exposed to the reader, to others, and to myself? I take off the last items of clothing, slowly, carefully, a bit as if I were following the movement and its inertia. And I watch. Surprisingly, I have no shame, no pride. I feel calm. I look at myself, without decorations, without uniforms or protective clothing. I am just like the others, I am a human. [August 12, 2019, from my personal notes]

Autoethnographer Is Becoming

The consent to be me, seeing myself in my truth, and the willingness to show myself to others in its narrative form was, for me, a transition from the dimension of 'trying' to the dimension of 'becoming.' In that way, the time of learning myself and discovering the aspects of me that make up my autoethnographic experience began.

The first thing I started to learn was trust. But, first, there was a discovery of how much my practice was based on a lack of trust so far. I did not trust the methods I used, still suspecting they were limited, insufficient, and requiring mixing and refinement. I did not trust the data that still seemed incomplete, one-sided, and required triangulation. I did not trust the respondents, considering that even if they were honest and open with me in sharing their experiences, they would not be aware enough to be a source of complete and consistent information. I did not trust myself, my research decisions, my analytical competencies, my 'shortcuts,' and that 'somehow it will be.' I did not trust that as a social researcher, I and my research work may deserve appreciation. Trust that I do not have to defend myself in the sociological and scientific mainstream and that there are enough references to the existing body of literature and still up to date. Lack of trust made me feel

constantly insecure about my actions and hostile to the actions of others. I was afraid of my creativity and authenticity, not sure where it would lead me (probably leading me astray), and therefore I preferred to choose ‘what is known and accepted’ even if it often meant “pretentious and nebulous verbosity, interminable repetition of platitudes and...research for things that have been found long ago and many times since” (Andreski 1974:11). Building trust meant being ready to experience autoethnography, curiosity, and willingness to explore the method, its possibilities, limits, and variations. It also meant patience, letting the specifics of the method emerge in experience and, at the same time, being grounded in it. As I deepened my confidence in the method, I deepened my confidence in myself. In the beginning, it was about the (research) choices I made, and with time, about the deeper aspects of me—trusting my intuition and the fact that feeling or not feeling something is always about something, trusting my emotions even if they are sometimes difficult to explain or ambiguous, trusting my truth, readiness to express it, and that everything comes at the right moment.

By deepening my confidence as a researcher, I discovered dialogical selves that interplay with each other during an autoethnographic journey (cf. Coffey 1999). The experiencing self—involving, encountering, confronting, and feeling situations, events, and occurrences. Reflecting self—rethinking, revising, and reconsidering own emotions, states of mind, and physical sensations, naming them, defining, and shaping them into impressions. The expressing self—reconstructing experiences and reflections into meanings, symbols, narratives, and performances to evoke experiencing and reflecting selves of readers and resonate with their expressions. The interplay between those three selves of

the autoethnographer and similar selves of the recipients creates this unusual, often elusive, but powerful interaction between the writer and the reader that constitutes the uniqueness of autoethnography. Being aware of that, I let myself become a writer, artist, performer, and spiritual being while still being a social researcher. I allow myself to have empathy, intuition, sensations, and multiple ways of expression (cf. Berger 2013). And I discovered my researcher’s body (Valtonen and Haanpää 2018).

Today, I have a reflection on my body, which is becoming more and more important to me in my autoethnographic work. It seems that as researchers, we have an extensive arsenal of cognitive tools, richer and more perfect than what we have in everyday life. And yet, our ordinary cognition is still more sophisticated. As a researcher, I need a tool, and I limit myself only to the information that I gather through that tool. When I interview—I listen; when I observe—I notice what I see. I exclude all other information and sensations, ignoring my gut feelings, neck pains, smells, and skin reactions. Of course, all those embodied impressions and signals have always been within my field research, but till now, I had nothing to do with them. There was no space for them in my observation notes, no space for them in the interview recording comment, or in my personal memo while working with data. And all because, as an analytical researcher, I would have to interpret and give them meaning and define their significance, role, and influence, which is, of course, risky and often impossible in a clear, unequivocal way. That is so scientific—if you don’t know how to classify and disambiguate something, it’s best to assume that it doesn’t exist. But, it exists, it is all that appears in my body, in my embodied experience, and I can include it in an evocative way to enrich and saturate my experiences, discoveries, and narratives. I welcome my body as a partner, a tool,

and a source. [January 08, 2020, from my personal notes]

Autoethnography Is Becoming

Just as I become an autoethnographer, so does my autoethnography. It is a process that, once started, continues in a changing dynamic, with varying intensity, but incessantly. Autoethnography continues regardless of whether we are currently in the research field or at home, or whether we observe others or ourselves. Even if it seems our attention is focused on those we observe, with whom we talk, and whose behaviors we analyze, our autoethnographic lived experience lasts. Everything shapes our experience, perception, and reflection. The dichotomy and division between me and them are blurred. I shape myself towards others; others interact with me. However, I choose to describe what I experience; it will be my experience of interacting with me and the world. And everything in that process will matter, what is recorded in our experience most clearly and what comes to us only upon reflection, what is available on the surface while writing and what is hidden in deeper memory resources. Memory, remembering, and forgetting are also part of the process—what we forget and agree not to remember is going beyond the attempt to describe facts and the objective course of phenomena in favor of descriptions of experience and experiencing, along with what is written in and what flies away. Autoethnography is becoming not a device to record objective reality from the subjective perspective but a way of articulating lived experience from the first-person perspective.

Autoethnography is also becoming in its methodological shape. We can define common criteria or divided, interchangeable bases, but still, each

autoethnography will be different, developed by a different person with their own unique set of experiences, methodological background, and conceptual and linguistic resources (Chang 2008; Chaplin 2011). Looking at my way of writing, I noticed that each of my reflective descriptions is formed and developed around some conceptual cognitive category. My thinking is organized into categories—concepts that are intended to convey the meaning of my experience. My reflections are driven by the juxtaposition and comparison of my thoughts and feelings; in my experiences, I look for contrasts, contradictions, and similarities in various dimensions. Entering into new, different experiences, experiencing new, different emotions, and reflectively comparing them with each other—that is my cognitive way. My narratives are filled with concepts and conclusions, saturated with subsequent insights sampled from my experiences. It is not hard to see how my autoethnography develops and shapes from my grounded theory background. Coming out of the methodological garden, I agree that no species will be pure and disjointed anymore. In the meadows of methods, new varieties and variants, for example, my ‘grounded evocative autoethnography’ or perhaps ‘comparative emotionally saturated autoethnography,’ will be created, and I will allow them to grow in my research experience. And finally, I will give myself time to grow, learn, and become mature in my narrative and evocation. Perhaps this text and my writing are still not vivid enough, not fully evocative, and confessional, as one of the reviewers suggested, but I perceive it as a stage of my journey, not a destination. I will give myself time to learn, experience, explore, and write more, opening my mind and my heart to the new way of researching and communicating the research, following the suggestion of the second reviewer to “go on down this path.”

Closing the Story

While sharing my story of experiencing autoethnography, I have probably shared many of the plots discussed here with other ‘becoming’ researchers and autoethnographers (Glesne 1999; Konecki 2018; Kacperczyk 2020; Klevan and Grant 2022). At the same time, everything I share here is more of a ‘trip report’ than a post-factum story. My becoming goes on; my learning goes on. This article, as my first recap of my autoethnographic

experience to date, is the next step on my way to becoming a self-reflective researcher. Hopefully, it will also be an inspiration for other confused researchers, especially those who are in dilemmas and have doubts about their path to scientific knowledge. I am grateful to all my teachers, critics, reviewers, and the named and unnamed people who shaped my experiences. This story ends with the impression with which the reader remains and the readiness for the next narratives with which I remain.

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