A PROVOCATIVE DISSONANCE:
EVOCATIVE ACADEMIC WRITING

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Abstract: Most academics write in a dispassionate, third-person voice. That stylistic choice is so expected in academic contexts that when an evocative, first-person voice is used instead, it feels unsettling and out of place to many of us. But why should we react so negatively to such a subversion of expectations? Is it because of the subversion itself, or is it because of an inherent incompatibility between evocative writing and realist analytical traditions? In this paper I'll show that the freedom of first-person, evocative writing in autoethnography is a strength to be embraced rather than something to be avoided. I'll further show how offering readers a more complete sensory understanding of experience and meaning isn't incompatible with realist analytical traditions. I will do this through an exploration of my current research on childhood sexual abuse, which has inspired me to set aside my initial unease with evocative writing and embark on a journey from autoethnographic skeptic to advocate.
Keywords: autoethnography; evocative; collaborative; analytic; narrative.

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There is irony in my defending autoethnography and using it for my research. It used to make me feel quite uncomfortable for no reason other than it felt so distinctly different from how academic writing is *supposed* to feel: distant and detached (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Reading a narrative, or a dialogue, or heaven forbid a text that dispensed with prose entirely and embraced poetry while seeking "intimate involvement, engagement, and embodied participation" (Ellis & Bochner, 2006) didn't feel remotely academic. The writing was often engaging, but not in an *academic* way. Autoethnography upended my expectations in a way I didn't appreciate. In reading it, it was as if I reached for a glass of water, started to drink, then spat it out when I instead tasted wine.

There's nothing wrong with wine of course, just as there's nothing wrong with evocative writing. I quite appreciate a glass now and again just as much as I read and enjoy both fiction and autobiographical narratives. I embrace drama and comedy and writing that makes me feel something. When feeling particularly ambitious I even read poetry. So it wasn't what I sensed that was the problem, but rather that what I sensed did not conform to my expectations. There was to me a qualitative separation between academic and literary writing that felt quite

DE GRUYTER

natural. Autoethnography presented me with what I felt was a stark dissonance; a literary stylistic approach (L. Anderson, 2006) and implied claims to academic merit. But why subvert the expectations of academic writing at all? Why merge the artistic with the academic? There's a time and a place for everything as the old adage goes. What is the benefit?

I began to think on dissonance in art, and soundtrack dissonance in film quickly came to mind. A piece of music is paired to a scene, but the tone of one does not match the other. This juxtaposition subverts expectations and when done well the effect of the tonal mismatch is evocative and often unsettling. Kubrick was quite adept at this. He set Vera Lynn's rendition of the hopeful "We'll Meet Again" against the backdrop of nuclear Armageddon in *Dr. Strangelove*, and approved of star Malcom MacDowell's choice to sing the overwhelmingly cheerful "Singin' in the Rain" in accompaniment to a violent rape in *A Clockwork Orange*. Soundtrack dissonance is widely used across genres in film (and television). Examples are numerous, ranging from *Guardians of the Galaxy* to *Atomic Blonde* to *A Handmaid's Tale* to *The Umbrella Academy*. You can even find it in children's films such as *WALL-E* where the song "Put On Your Sunday Clothes" from the musical *Hello, Dolly!* was paired to our first look at an abandoned, waste-ridden Earth.

Soundtrack dissonance is, of course, intentionally deployed. I wondered if evocative language was likewise being intentionally used in autoethnography in order to provoke similar feelings of discomfort. More to the point, if autoethnography is trying to unsettle us, to what end? Is it merely an attempt at subversion, or is it one of democratization? Is it being done only to shock and engage, or is it trying to grow the academic field?

Researchers argue that there is indeed a democratizing purpose behind bringing alternative writing styles into academia (Adams et al., 2015; Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Autoethnography works to "undercut conventions of writing that foster hierarchy and division," say Ellis and Bochner (2006, p. 436), and I am receptive to this idea. A distant and detached third-person voice has long been used in academic works, but the separation between evocative writing techniques and academic aims isn't natural, it's constructed. Writing this way distinguishes us from others and easily identifies us as members of Club Academia. It's a secret handshake acted out in the third-person passive, but performing it doesn't make a piece of writing good and rejecting it doesn't necessarily make a piece of writing bad.

It is this view that will inform what follows. First, I will introduce the subject of my PhD dissertation and show how the topic's evolution led me down the unlikely road toward autoethnography. I will discuss the use of evocative language and its implications, the usefulness of a research group of one, explicit versus implicit analysis, and lastly, a potential way to correct for the privileged position of the autoethnographer's story.

In this exploration, I hope to show that the freedom of first-person, evocative writing that so subverts academic expectations and can feel quite uncomfortable to academic readers is a strength to be embraced rather than something to be avoided. By exploring this in the context of my current research and the methodological approach I have chosen, I hope to show how doing so isn't incompatible with realist analytical traditions. Instead, communicating in a more human way (R. Anderson, 2001), sharing with readers a more complete sensory understanding of experience and meaning while committing to a realist analytical approach, may offer both research and the reader the best of both worlds.

First steps into autoethnography

That I've come to embrace autoethnography as a method for my own research was not something that I would have predicted for myself. Instead, it has been an evolution that started as I began to think through both the aims of my dissertation topic and the ethical considerations of my desired approach. I knew that I wanted to write a cultural sociology of the childhood sexual abuse (CSA) of boys in the United States, paying particular attention to gender norms, shame, and group identity. My initial research plan was to keep my childhood history with CSA at arm's length. I would conduct narrative interviews with perpetrators, not victims. I felt that a safe way to engage the topic. I could research a social phenomenon meaningful to me, and do so in a way somewhat emotionally removed from my own CSA experiences. True, it would be difficult to hear the stories of those who committed child sexual abuse, but I would not hear the fears of the victims or see struggles against shame that mirrored my own. After a short time, however, I realized that I would not be researching what was truly of interest to me. What would interviewing perpetrators tell me about the cultural placement of shame associated with having experienced CSA as a child? What would it say about how the gender of the perpetrator seems to generate very different types of shame in male victims?

Seeing that I needed to change course, I decided to instead interview men who were sexually abused as children. I would preface my dissertation with a confessional, addressing my biases and explaining why the topic was meaningful to me (Van Maanen, 2011), but not go any further into the subject. I would keep my story out of the research itself. I felt that my experiences were my own, and while I'm not particularly hesitant to discuss what happened, I didn't feel it necessary to include them. Surely I could meet my research aims by conducting narrative interviews with a participant group.

My feelings changed, however, when thinking through the ethical considerations of my proposal. Could I really ask men who had been abused as children to open up about their childhood experiences while keeping mine safely private? I expected that my insider status would allow me access (L. Anderson, 2006) to support groups for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, but could I ethically use that status, engage with interviewees openly as a person who shared similar experiences, but then keep those experiences out of the research itself? Reasonable people could come to different conclusions here, but I felt that I could not.

But what was I to do? I didn't know much about autoethnography and my initial impressions of author saturated work were admittedly negative. I jumped into texts on the subject, looking for the right approach. I understood that within academia, opinions on the validity of autoethnography as a research method are polarized due to perceived associations with postmodernist epistemological assumptions and its embrace of writing styles ranging from first-person narratives to poetry (L. Anderson, 2006). I've certainly observed such resistance at my home university. Autoethnography emerged from the postmodern "crisis in representation" (Adams & Herrmann, 2020; L. Anderson, 2006) after all, and often there is clear intentional distance placed between it and realist ethnographic traditions (L. Anderson, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 2006). It's just not how "proper" research is done.

What I did not know, however, was that there is a similar polarization among the proponents of autoethnography, with evocative and analytic approaches each having vocal

advocates and critics (L. Anderson, 2006; Denzin, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 2006). While much autoethnography incorporates aspects of both, evocative autoethnography and analytical autoethnography often seem to be at odds, as many a polemical paper could attest (Denzin, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Evocative autoethnography "was designed to be unruly, dangerous, vulnerable, rebellious, and creative," while analytical autoethnography is focused on "reason, logic, and analysis" (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 433). And while the evocative approach is dominant and the term autoethnography is more often associated with the evocative form (L. Anderson, 2006; Charmaz, 2006), it was clear that autoethnography as a method isn't rigidly defined and that it's often used to describe very different things (Adams, 2017; Adams & Herrmann, 2020; Charmaz, 2006).

A tempting departure from realism

Writing in the first-person offers an exciting degree of freedom in comparison to realist academic writing. In narrating my own story, in using my experiences to connect to readers emotionally, I can communicate in a natural human way (R. Anderson, 2001) rather than over an artificially constructed distance. My experiences and my feelings about those experiences exist, after all (Adams & Herrmann, 2020). Why paper over them? Why treat my "real-world" emotional intelligence as an irrelevance when it can be a vital tool to enrich my research into social and cultural phenomenon?

Perhaps it has been living through the social restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic that has so stirred within me the desire to embrace the most natural form of communication on offer. I find that more than anything else, it is the sensory richness of human interaction that I miss. Staying at home, socially isolating, I can talk to people over the phone and I can exchange messages or emails. But there aren't any opportunities for shared sensory observations to lead us down undiscovered conversational avenues. I can't do something as simple as hug a friend when they tell me of the death of a loved one. Touch, smell, and the sights and sounds lying just on the edge of a shared periphery are gone. FaceTime and Skype offer only a facsimile of natural human contact; a lesser, depreciated form.

Writing dispassionately, textually running from the vulnerability of the first-person for the safety of the third, is just as unnatural, just as depreciated. Intentionally cutting off our readers from what we feel places them in a sensory lockdown where they're kept safe from the joys, the hates, and the frustrations that color our experiences. Autoethnographers *want* their readers to feel those things; they want their readers to care about what they're reading and to empathize with the author's experiences (L. Anderson, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 2006). But as in life, this desire isn't necessarily innocent and should raise questions of intent.

Autoethnography may explore sensitive topics (Adams, 2017; Adams et al., 2015; Stahlke Wall, 2016; Winkler, 2018), allowing the author to navigate their own painful experiences (Adams et al., 2015; Winkler, 2018). But this exploration should be more than just a cathartic attempt at public self-therapy (Stahlke Wall, 2016) or self-transformation (Atkinson, 2006). Some autoethnographers do pursue purposefully therapeutic goals, but the sociological value of this has been rightly challenged (Stahlke Wall, 2016). Autoethnography is also often activist, looking to bring about social change (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Writing evocatively can facilitate this as the empathetic bond (R. Anderson, 2001) that results from sharing

"struggle, passion, embodied life," (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 433) can lead readers to reassess their own preconceptions (Chang, 2008).

The democratization of writing that comes from embracing an evocative, first-person approach opens communicative doors to people who might find the distant third-person style too cold and too claustrophobic for a proper exploration of their intimate personal experiences. The move away from an overly specialized academic writing style and towards more accessible storytelling forms could also make the work more readable to non-academic audiences, helping to democratize it (Adams et al., 2015). But depending on the literary complexity of the form taken, a given piece of autoethnographic writing might only displace inaccessibility rather than solve for it (Stahlke Wall, 2016). And if the author fails to avoid the pitfall of focusing on narrative at the expense of explicit analysis (Chang, 2008), the work may lose its academic value (Stahlke Wall, 2016).

A bridge too far?

Having an affinity for realist analytical traditions, it's not surprising than I see strong advantages to the analytical autoethnographic approach. While autoethnography opens doors to experiential understandings that might otherwise be closed to social researchers (Adams et al., 2015), I'm not comfortable with the idea of doing research with a participant group of one. Opinions are varied within autoethnography as to whether additional participants are necessary (L. Anderson, 2006; Vryan, 2006), but I agree that the way I interpret my experiences and the meanings I associate with them are not necessarily representative of the group (L. Anderson, 2006). In exploring a topic as sensitive as CSA, I feel that it could be misleading to lean too heavily into my own understandings.

Autoethnographers, though, are often so focused on the telling of their own story that they don't make explicitly clear that their perspective is one of potentially many (L. Anderson, 2006; Charmaz, 2006), and some rightly question the degree to which readers critically engage with the author's representation (Charmaz, 2006). Traditional realist ethnographic approaches seem do a better job at capturing different interpretations and meanings within the group. By drawing on a participant group greater than one, by eschewing evocative language that sways the reader and plays on their empathy, they arguably minimize the chances of the reader misconstruing representativeness. While evocative autoethnography makes no claims to universality, this is largely left unspoken in much autoethnographic work (Charmaz, 2006). I would agree that when using evocative language to share personal experiences of social phenomena in academic writing the resultant sympathetic bond between reader and author could, to some extent, lead them to universalize the perspectives and interpretations they've read (Charmaz, 2006).

For my own research, I will include a group of participants in addition to telling my own story. It's a minority approach within the field to be sure (Charmaz, 2006), but I feel that widening the scope of my autoethnographic work beyond myself will strengthen it in three ways. First, by incorporating the experiences, understandings, and interpretations of other men who experienced CSA as children, I can help to ensure that I don't give readers the mistaken impression that my experiences or my thoughts are any more or less

representative than they actually are. Second, it helps me to avoid writing an author saturated text by making my story one of many (L. Anderson, 2006). A privileged one to be sure, but I will address that later in this piece. Third, by conducting narrative interviews with many survivors of CSA, I can ensure that I have a large enough population for my cultural sociological analysis to say something meaningful about the group as a whole.

Analysis and story

Of course, the need to include explicit analysis in autoethnography is also contested (Denzin, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Vryan, 2006). While some feel that it is not the purpose of autoethnography to move beyond story in order to produce generalizing theory (Denzin, 2006, Ellis & Bochner 2006), I see it as necessary for what I would like to accomplish with my project. More than just an exploration of personal experience, I want to explore the relationship between CSA, shame, and hegemonic masculinity. Writing my story without analyzing it, without interpreting it within a greater cultural context, seems to me a job half done. What good will my work be to others if I don't find something to say about broader understandings of CSA rather than just my own?

So I embrace the goals of analytic autoethnography, including its call for an explicit interpretation of data and the production of generalizing theory (L. Anderson, 2006). But if I write in an evocative narrative style, will that lead to an incompatibility here? Can I write narratively, be present, capture emotion and detail the evolution of my thoughts while also focusing on traditional analytical goals? Ellis and Bochner worry that analyzing a story sacrifices it: "You transform the story into another language, the language of generalization and analysis, and thus you lose the very qualities that make a story a story ... we want to protect the integrity of the story and not close off conversation and engagement with it" (2006, p. 440).

However, I agree with those who argue that autoethnography and the analytical goals of ethnographic research are not mutually exclusive (L. Anderson, 2006; Atkinson, 2006). Even Ellis and Bochner aren't against traditional explicit analysis per se; they just argue against the idea that it is necessary in order to legitimize stories; they feel that stories are more than just data to be analyzed (2006, p. 444) and remind us that theory, analysis, and generalization are invented categories (2006, p. 439). I am open to their argument, and will in the future perhaps attempt a project that uses storytelling rather than traditional explicit analysis, but for this project a blending of evocative and analytical approaches is for me, the correct choice.

Still though, this blended approach would place my story in a privileged position in relation to those told by the other men I interview. Having mine be the only account not subjected to the observations or analysis of an outsider doesn't seem ethically justifiable to me. Of course, had I decided to take a realist approach to my work and exclude myself from the participant group, this wouldn't be an issue. Was I just making things harder for myself? I struggled for a while, attempting to reconcile my intention to include myself in my research with what I felt was an ethical need to de-privilege my story, until I found collaborative autoethnography, which seems to offer me a template to better do so.

Correcting for privilege

Collaborative autoethnography is a collective, cooperative approach where more than one researcher contributes to the work (Chang et al., 2013). In a typical example, each researcher would have an experience in common. They would each write their own autoethnographic story, share it with the group, and then work collectively to analyze and interpret the data (Chang et al., 2013). This paradigm, where everyone involved is both a researcher and a participant, really appeals to me as no one is in a privileged position (Chang et al., 2013). It takes the insights available to the autoethnographer through intimate experiential understanding and combines it with external analysis, echoing realist ethnographic research. But this collaborative form doesn't really fit with the independent research requirements of my PhD dissertation. So how could I adapt it to better suit my needs?

Rather than work with another researcher, I decided to interview my brother and incorporate his perspective into the work. In collaborative autoethnographies, researchers have distinct and independent voices (Chang et al., 2013). Constructed dialogues will often be used to portray the interaction between them (Chang et al., 2013), and that seems a reasonable way to proceed here. My brother and I are close in age; he knew all of the perpetrators and observed my interactions with them. I'll take his story, his observations, his interpretations; after which, I'll present him with mine so that he can engage with them. While he's not an academic, opening my story to discussion in this way will still transform me into a participant in a very real sense (Chang et al., 2013). It won't completely deprivilege my narrative relative to those of the men I will interview, but it can help me to better explore my story's subjective positioning (Chang et al., 2013). Although it is more work, I don't see this effort to deprivilege my story as "just" making things harder for myself. Incorporating his story into my analysis has the added benefit of helping me to better illuminate my own meaning-making processes.

As an observer's account rather than a participant's account, my brother's narrative brings a potentially undiscovered version of myself and events to the analysis. Parts of his story may corroborate or challenge details of my own due to experiential or perspective differences, or simply because neither of us have total recall. That is not to say, however, that his story will make mine any more or less valid. My CSA experiences and the ways in which I understand them have been profoundly influential on both my identity and the ways in which I engage with others. Throughout my life, I've been vastly more ashamed of having been molested by a man for two years than I've been of having experienced the same at the hands of a woman for fourteen. How could anyone's story invalidate those feelings? How could anyone's story change the fact that I shy away from male friendships because I find it incredibly difficult to trust people who display strength without also demonstrating vulnerability? My brother's story can't possibly take away from these truths, but what it can do is offer me another perspective which can help me to better reflect upon how I understand my experiences and explore the sometimes debilitating truths I've carried with me into adulthood.

One journey ends, another begins

My unexpected journey into autoethnography started when I realized that I could not comfortably ask men to contribute their CSA stories to my research if I didn't include my

own. In this paper I have chronicled my journey, showing how the freedom of first-person, evocative writing is not something to be frowned upon or avoided in ethnographic writing, but rather a strength to be embraced. By modeling the autoethnographic approach I will use in my dissertation, I have shown that stylistic approaches outside of the distant, third-person voice aren't incompatible with realist analytical traditions.

The benefits of an evocative, first-person approach are compelling. By refusing to distance myself from my feelings or my vulnerabilities and instead channeling them into the text, I can connect to readers in a more human way by enriching their sensory experience (R. Anderson, 2001). This offers them a more complete experiential understanding (R. Anderson, 2001) than they would get from the emotionally restrictive, third-person voice in which we're used to performing. In embracing more widely used literary styles, autoethnography breaks down the unnatural writing conventions that divide us (Ellis & Bochner, 2006), democratizing both researcher and reader (Adams et al., 2015). I agree that care must be taken, however, when using poetry or other complex literary forms so that the style chosen doesn't just replace one type of inaccessibility with another (Stahlke Wall, 2016).

To be clear, these purposeful breaks from realist ethnographic traditions (L. Anderson, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 2006) do not mean that autoethnography is incompatible with realist analytical practices (L. Anderson, 2006). While there is debate within autoethnography as to whether including explicit analysis increases its value (L. Anderson, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Vryan, 2006), there is broader agreement that they are not mutually exclusive (Atkinson, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 2006). While I will include it in my work on CSA, I don't reject out of hand Ellis and Bochner's argument that theory and analysis are not any better than story when it comes to "understanding, interpreting, [and] changing people" (2006, p. 439).

That autoethnography isn't rigidly defined allows for a great deal of flexibility. I was worried that writing mine would place my story in too privileged a position, but collaborative autoethnography suggested a way to address my concerns. When researchers and participants are one and the same experiences are much more equal (Chang et al., 2013), and the work that results can benefit from both access to insider meanings (L. Anderson, 2006) and collective analysis. Embracing analysis from researchers who, if not outsiders, have a measure of distance from the particulars of a given story echoes the approach of realist ethnographic research. In adapting collaborative autoethnography for my PhD dissertation, I can subject my story to another perspective; not to validate it or correct it, but to help me reflect upon and better reveal my own meaning-making processes.

Autoethnography defies an academic taboo by embracing the dissonance of evocative language in academic writing, and as in soundtrack dissonance this subversion of expectations provokes a strong emotional reaction. But this challenge to realist writing norms is a helpful one. Evocative writing offers us a richer way of conveying experience and meaning, benefiting research, researcher, and reader. Writing my autoethnography requires a great deal of work. I will have to learn to be good at both story and analysis (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). But while this approach requires the development of additional skills, its benefits ensure that my efforts will not be in vain.

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