

Expanding Our Autoethnographic Future

Greetings! Welcome to a defining moment for qualitative research: the creation of a journal for and about autoethnography, an innovative method and orientation to research. For nearly thirty years, autoethnography has flourished in many academic contexts. Scholars from several disciplines—including, but not limited to, education, anthropology, music, gender studies, cultural studies, media studies, communication, Asian studies, sport, sociology, accounting, performance, Latinx studies, and African American studies—have used autoethnography in their research. A Google search for “autoethnography” yields nearly a million results; a Google Scholar search for “autoethnography” yields more than forty thousand sources, many of which have hundreds—even thousands—of citations. Several international conferences foreground autoethnographic research,¹ and courses involving autoethnography are taught at many universities, and more all the time. Numerous journals welcome autoethnographic submissions,² countless books and edited collections espouse autoethnographic practices, and prominent qualitative texts include chapters about the method.³ Autoethnography can be found nearly everywhere—even in a journal about building construction⁴—but a journal devoted solely to autoethnography does not yet exist. Until now.

In this introduction, we begin by offering a brief history of autoethnography. We then explore what autoethnography is and does. We conclude by offering helpful guidance for those who might be interested in submitting to the journal, beyond what you’ll find in the official submission guidelines. We do not want to be prescriptive about what autoethnography is or how to do it—only to offer some ideas about the characteristics that distinguish autoethnography from other methods for, and orientations to, social research.

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The history of autoethnography is long and varied.⁵ As a method/orientation, the term “autoethnography” appeared formally in the 1970s but did not receive much academic attention until the 1990s.⁶ Informally, there are many works that we could consider to be “autoethnographic,” decades and centuries before the 1990s, though authors never used the term. Such works include those in which authors used their experiences to explore particular topics (e.g., time, identity), call attention to problematic cultural issues and practices, or offer reflections (e.g., fieldwork diaries) alongside more traditional research accounts.⁷ The effects of several philosophical movements contributed to the increased use and development of autoethnography as well. These include the recognition of the ways personal/cultural identities shape perception and experience (e.g., “the personal is political”); the importance of narrative and storytelling; the “crisis of representation,” particularly how social research, especially ethnography, is never neutral or objective; the increased attention to emotion; the need to address and remedy ethical violations in research; the call for more accessible academic texts; and the understanding that discourse, power, and being “made subject” are interrelated phenomena.⁸

What makes a particular work an “autoethnography”? “Autoethnography” is comprised of three interrelated components: “auto,” “ethno,” and “graphy.”⁹ Thus, autoethnographic projects use selfhood, subjectivity, and personal experience (“auto”) to describe, interpret, and represent (“graphy”) beliefs, practices, and identities of a group or culture (“ethno”). Manuscripts published in this journal must engage these components.

In every manuscript submitted, we’ll look for extensive use of, or discussion of, personal experience, selfhood, and subjectivity (“auto”). If a manuscript does not use or discuss personal experience, then it is not an autoethnography, and thus is not appropriate for this journal. Autoethnographies dismiss the “view from nowhere”; there is always a person, the author, in research/representation. With the use of personal experience, autoethnographies also rely on the techniques of life writing, particularly techniques used in autobiographies, memoirs, and personal essays. Some of these techniques include engaging in “memory work”—that is, reflecting on personal artifacts and experiences, prominent past events, shameful secrets, internal feelings, sense-making, future hopes, and difficult or formative life victories.¹⁰

However, the use of personal experience does not automatically make a manuscript autoethnographic; personal experience must be used intentionally to illuminate and interrogate cultural beliefs, practices, and identities (“ethno”). At its core, autoethnography assumes that personal experience is infused with social norms and expectations, and autoethnographers engage in rigorous self-reflection—often referred to as “reflexivity”—in order to identify and interrogate the intersections between the self and cultural life.¹¹ The “ethno” component of autoethnography also requires manuscripts to engage the purposes and practices of ethnography, such as referencing and/or critiquing extant research, identifying patterns of talk and action, interviewing others, doing fieldwork in “natural settings,” analyzing popular discourse and grand narratives about a topic, describing meaningful epiphanies and aesthetic moments, and/or providing insider access to contexts in which cultural outsiders and other research methods could never provide.¹²

In addition to the “auto” and the “ethno,” autoethnographers must seriously consider the “graphy” as well. Autoethnographers should use their fieldwork and experiences to create accessible, concrete, and sometimes evocative representations—“thick descriptions”¹³—of this work and these experiences. Autoethnographers should “show” and “tell” what happened. Autoethnographers also take ethics seriously: they must worry about how they implicate and represent themselves, others, and the happenings of a group.¹⁴

We expect every manuscript to engage at least some aspects of the “auto,” “ethno,” and “graphy,” and these components will inform how we assess manuscripts. Yet, how such engagement occurs will depend on the particular project. Various approaches to autoethnography—analytical, evocative, critical, performance, indigenous, blackgirl, community, collaborative, exo-autoethnography, Black feminist, auto-archeology, autocritography, and likely others¹⁵—emphasize the “auto,” “ethno,” and “graphy” differently. Some manuscripts will foreground personal experience (“auto”) and evocative representation (“graphy”) but may implicitly reference extant research or discern patterns of social interaction (“ethno”). Some manuscripts will use personal experience (“auto”) alongside formal interviews or artifacts (“ethno”) but may be more structured with representing the research (“graphy”). Some manuscripts will use poetry, music, photographs, drawings, and videos; others will use traditional prose, at least predominantly.

We do not prescribe any particular way to do autoethnography, but we do want to offer two preliminary cautions about manuscripts, beyond the journal’s guidelines. First, manuscripts should not apologize for autoethnography or discuss why autoethnography isn’t a useful method or approach. The essence of this journal is to recognize the vast presence and promote the usefulness of autoethnography. We are interested in learning what autoethnography can do, as a method, that other methods cannot. Constructive criticism about autoethnography is welcomed, as long as the criticism is intended to enhance autoethnographic practice. Autoethnography isn’t better than other research methods, only different; it has purposes, goals, and issues distinct from other forms of inquiry. To paraphrase what Eric Eisenberg once told me (Andrew): “You can look at a sunset and break it down into its various parts through a scientific lens of light angles and refraction. That’s one way. Or you can sit back and experience the sunset.” Of course, among these two methods of interacting with sunsets falls an extremely wide range of other possibilities; for all we know, everyone experiences a sunset in their own way. We want to hear about those.

We also will not avoid topics of critical concern for autoethnography. For instance, there are ethical quandaries and complications in all research, and some unique to autoethnography (e.g., Do we need others’ permission to share our experiences?). There are philosophical questions of identity, authorship, research, and writing, particularly as we live in poststructuralist, postmodernist, and postqualitative times; for example, if we are all fragmented into various positionalities and subjectivities, how can we claim, or

aspire, to write from the perspective of the singular “I”? How can we ever, through writing, sufficiently represent our fragmented lives? These issues need continual exploring.

Second, given that this journal is defined by a method and orientation to research, manuscripts will not have to defend or justify the use and importance of autoethnography. Extensive discussions defining autoethnography are not necessary; rather, it is important for authors to discuss how they used autoethnography, as well as variations and innovative techniques for the method/orientation. Because this is an international and interdisciplinary journal with readers from diverse backgrounds, we encourage authors to emphasize their topic of inquiry—family secrets, quitting one’s job, systemic racism, bullying, *ad infinitum*.

OUR GOALS

Before we present an overview of the content and philosophy of the journal, we’d like to give you some background on ourselves. This is the *Journal of Autoethnography*, so that feels like a requirement, yes?

I (Tony) first encountered autoethnography when I entered the Master’s program in Speech Communication at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, in 2001. Lenore Langsdorf, my thesis advisor, advocated for the use of narrative and personal experience in research; I took courses on autoethnography and performance theory with Ron Pelias; and Elyse Pineau and Craig Gingrich-Philbrook were doing innovative work on auto-performance and embodiment.

I (Andrew) began my Master’s program in Communication at Saint Louis University in 2002, after working in the private sector. As such, I was interested in organizations, not autoethnography. Yet, Paaige Turner immersed me in critical feminist ethnographic organizational research. Rob Anderson and I delved into philosophical theories of identity and performance. My thesis advisor, Bob Krizek, tied all of this together, providing me with the tools to be an ethnographer, as well as an understanding of the value of researching topics of personal importance.

In 2004, we met as doctoral students at the University of South Florida (USF). There, we learned our autoethnographic craft from two of the most prolific autoethnographers: Art Bochner and Carolyn Ellis. Informally, we both call Art and Carolyn our parents, and, like most children, we acquired some of their habits and also diverged from them. For instance, I (Tony) have written about the ways autoethnography can be used to study sexuality, popular culture texts, and interpersonal and familial communication. I (Andrew) have pursued the way autoethnography can be used in organizational contexts, as well as its philosophical underpinnings. More than fifteen years into our professional and personal relationship, it has taken the advent of this journal for the two of us to finally write together.

We, along with the Editors and Associate Editors, have worked on developing this journal for nearly a decade. And it has now happened. The journal has found a stellar home with the University of California Press, a nonprofit organization that values progressive politics and a commitment to social justice. We are extremely grateful to David Famiano, Cheryl Owen, and the rest of the team at the press.

So, what can you expect from this new journal? We view autoethnography as *interdisciplinary* and *international*. As noted earlier, *interdisciplinary* means that manuscripts will be driven by method and orientation, not topic or discipline. This is not a journal on communication, management, social media, family relationships, business, music, or popular culture, although we hope to include articles on all of these topics and more. Autoethnography as *international* means the journal is not confined to experiences and issues specific to the United States. Both of these characteristics also influenced how we assembled the editorial board: we wanted to make it as diverse as possible, not only in terms of social identities such as ethnicity and race, gender and sexuality, but also in terms of discipline, career level, location, and nationality. Limited resources such as funding and time still require us to publish manuscripts in English, but we are trying to envision ways to publish in additional languages. We encourage authors to pursue translation opportunities for their work published in the journal. Further, although the journal is still a print form, we welcome—and will try to accommodate—the diversity of representational forms for doing autoethnography.

We plan for each journal issue to include three sections: a selection of articles, a forum, and book reviews:

Articles: We expect that individuals conducting original research will most often submit articles. These will be autoethnographies, or manuscripts that discuss autoethnographic topics and issues. All articles will go through anonymous peer review. We also welcome proposals for special journal issues. We will begin the process of selecting special issues with the second volume (2021).

Forums: Each forum section will center on a theme related to autoethnography. For the first volume (2020), we have chosen four themes: “The Importance of Autoethnography” (Issue 1), “Contemporary Challenges of Autoethnography” (Issue 2), “The Future of Autoethnography” (Issue 3), and “Writing Autoethnography” (Issue 4). For later volumes, we will accept proposal forums devoted to contemporary topics that could be explored via autoethnography. Possible topics are reproductive rights, racism, politics, ethics, immigration, and end-of-life issues. (The list of topics is endless.)

Book Reviews: Given the eclectic international and interdisciplinary nature of autoethnography, we firmly believe that book reviews are a necessary part of this academic journal. As such, we are ecstatic to have two book review editors for the journal, Esther Fitzpatrick and Jeni Hunnicutt. Contact either regarding books you would like to review, or, if you are an author or editor, books you would like to see reviewed.

Autoethnography as method and orientation to research is here to stay. We’ve each been reading and doing autoethnography for nearly twenty years, and we still find the use of personal experience as/in social research exciting and valuable. For us, autoethnographies, and articles about autoethnography, enlighten our intellect, engage our emotions, and

pique our curiosities. They can make what seems mysterious to outsiders comprehensible and make tacit knowledge explicit. They teach us about ourselves, our friends, our families, our workplaces, our world. They offer us the ability to empathize with others, make strategic and positive personal and cultural change, and become better and just researchers and people. Thank you for joining us as we begin this exciting new chapter. ■

NOTES

1. Conferences that foreground autoethnographic research include Doing Autoethnography, British Autoethnography, Critical Autoethnography, and the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry. Additional conferences that feature autoethnography include the Organization for the Study of Communication, Language, and Gender, the European Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, The Qualitative Report, and Contemporary Ethnography Across the Disciplines.
2. Journals that welcome autoethnographic submissions include the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *The Ethnographic Edge*, *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, *Storytelling, Self, Society*, *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, *Health Communication*, *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, *Text and Performance Quarterly*, *Liminalities*, *Cultural Studies* <=> *Critical Methodologies*, *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research*, *Qualitative Inquiry*, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *International Review of Qualitative Research*, *Art/Research International*, and *The Qualitative Report*.
3. The last few decades have seen many important autoethnographies and collections about autoethnography. Although we highlight a few of these sources in these endnotes, we also stress that citation is political: in this brief introduction to a new journal about autoethnography, we will not argue who does, or has done, autoethnography the best and, by absence of citation, who hasn't done autoethnography well enough. So here, in endnotes, we highlight key texts with which we're familiar and simultaneously emphasize that there are thousands of people who do, and have done, autoethnography but who we do not mention because of our limited perspectives and space limitations.
4. Peter Vincent Livesey and Goran Runeson, "Autoethnography and Theory Testing," *Construction Economics and Building* 18 (2018): 40–54. doi:10.5130/AJCEB.v18i3.6139
5. For extensive histories of autoethnography, see Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography as Method* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2008); Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject" in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed., eds. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 733–68; Carolyn Ellis and Tony E. Adams, "The Purposes, Practices, and Principles of Autoethnographic Research," in *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Patricia Leavy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 254–76.
6. "Autoethnography" appeared formally in the works of Karl G. Heider, "What do People do? Dani Auto-ethnography," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 31 (1975): 3–17. doi:10.1177/1541344608326899; Walter Goldschmidt, "Anthropology and the Coming Crisis: An Auto-ethnographic Appraisal," *American Anthropologist* 79 (June 1977): 293–308. doi:10.1525/aa.1977.79.2.02a00060; and David M. Hayano, "Auto-ethnography: Paradigms, Problems, and Prospects," *Human Organization* 38 (Spring 1979): 99–104. doi:10.17730/humo.38.1.u761n5601t4g318v. Yet it was not until the 1990s when authors began to use and expand on the term. Influential books about or related to autoethnography include Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Carolyn Ellis, *Final Negotiations: A Story of Love, Loss, and Chronic Illness* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1995). Carolyn Ellis and Michael G. Flaherty, eds. *Investigating Subjectivity: Research on Lived Experience* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1992); Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner, *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1996); Ronald J. Pelias,

- Writing Performance: Poeticizing the Researcher's Body* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999); Deborah Reed-Danahay, ed. *Auto/Ethnography* (New York: Berg, 1997); Laurel Richardson, *Fields of Play: Constructing an Academic Life* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997); and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Species* (New York: Zed Books, 1999).
7. We're thinking here of social and literary critics, philosophers, and autobiographers who used their personal experience to identify and interrogate cultural issues. Examples include works by John Dewey, Virginia Woolf, C.P. Cavafy, W.E.B. DuBois, Jean-Paul Sartre, James Baldwin, George Orwell, Michel Foucault, Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Anzaldúa, Søren Kierkegaard, Audre Lorde, Hunter Thompson, Margaret Mead, and Bronislaw Malinowski.
 8. Works about these various philosophical movements include James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986); Robert Coles, *The Call of Stories* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989); Dwight Conquergood, "Between Experience and Meaning: Performance as a Paradigm for Meaningful Action," in *Renewal and Revision: The Future of Interpretation*, ed. Ted Colson (Denton, TX: NB Omega Publication, 1986): 26–59; Alice A. Deck, "Autoethnography: Zora Neale Hurston, Noni Jabavu, and Cross-Disciplinary Discourse," in *Black American Literature Forum* 24 (St. Louis, MO: St. Louis University, 1990): 237–56; Norman K. Denzin, *Interpretive Biography* (Walnut Creek, CA: Sage, 1989); H.L. Goodall, *Writing the New Ethnography* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2000); Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985); Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984); Shulamit Reinharz, *On Becoming a Social Scientist* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction 1984); John Van Maanen, *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); and Irving Kenneth Zola, *Missing Pieces: A Chronicle of Living with a Disability* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1982).
 9. Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12 (2010): <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs101108>.
 10. Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories* (New York: Routledge, 2016): 152. See also Arthur P. Bochner, *Coming to Narrative: A Personal History of Paradigm Change in the Human Sciences* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2014); Stacy Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams and Carolyn Ellis, *Handbook of Autoethnography* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2013); Robert Krizek, "Ethnography as the Excavation of Personal Narrative," in *Expressions of Ethnography*, ed. Robin Clair (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 141–51.
 11. As Allen-Collinson wrote, "At the heart of autoethnography, for me, is that ever shifting focus between levels: from the macro, wide sociological angle on socio-cultural framework, to the micro, zoom focus on the embedded self." Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson, "Autoethnography as the engagement of self/other, self/culture, self/politics, selves/futures," in Stacy Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams, and Carolyn Ellis, eds, *Handbook of Autoethnography* (2013): 296. See also Keith Berry and Robin P. Clair, "Special Issue: The Call of Ethnographic Reflexivity: Narrating the Self's Presence in Ethnography," *Cultural Studies ⇔ Critical Methodologies* 11, no. 2 (2011): 95–209.
 12. See Robin Boylorn and Mark Orbe, *Critical Autoethnography: Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2014); Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Andrew F. Herrmann, *Organizational Autoethnographies: Power and Identity in our Working Lives* (New York: Routledge, 2017); and Van Maanen, *Tales of the Field*.
 13. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 10.
 14. As Barbara Jago noted, "You can't do 'good' autoethnographic work without constantly questioning the ethics of your pursuit. As soon as you put that 'I' on the page, you can't avoid asking

- if your revelations might be harmful to you or anyone else.” Barbara J. Jago, “Chronicling an Academic Depression,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 31, no. 6 (2002): 753, doi:10.1177/089124102237823. For additional discussions about ethics and autoethnography, see Tony E. Adams, “A Review of Narrative Ethics,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 14 (2008): 175–94. doi: 10.1177/1077800407304417; Carolyn Ellis, “Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives: Relational Ethics in Research with Intimate Others,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 13, no. 1 (2007): 3–29, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800406294947>; Jillian A. Tullis, “Self and Others: Ethics in Autoethnographic Research,” in *Handbook of Autoethnography*, eds. Stacy Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams, and Carolyn Ellis (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2013): 244–61.
15. Several writers have discerned more specific purposes of autoethnography. For analytical and/or evocative autoethnography, see Leon Anderson, “Analytic Autoethnography,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35 (2006): 373–95, doi: 10.1177/0891241605280449; Bochner and Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography*; and Sarah Stahlke Wall, “Toward a Moderate Autoethnography,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 15 (2016), doi: 10.1177/1609406916674966. For auto-archaeology, see Ragan Fox, “Tales of a Fighting bobcat: An ‘Auto-Archaeology’ of Gay Identity Formation and Maintenance,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2010): 122–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10462931003650153>. For autocritography, see Michael Awkward, *Scenes of Instruction: A Memoir* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Amber Johnson, “Confessions of a Video Vixen: My Autocritography of Sexuality, Desire, and Memory,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (2014): 182–200, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10462937.2013.879991>. For blackgirl autoethnography, see Robin M. Boylorn, “On Being at Home with Myself: Blackgirl Autoethnography as Research Praxis,” *International Review of Qualitative Research* 9 (2016): 44–58. doi:10.1525/irqr.2016.9.1.44. For Black feminist autoethnography, see Rachel Alicia Griffin, “I AM an Angry Black Woman: Black Feminist Autoethnography, Voice, and Resistance,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 35, no. 2 (2012): 138–157, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2012.724524>. For collaborative autoethnography, see Heewon Chang, Faith Ngunjiri, and Kathy-Ann C. Hernandez, *Collaborative Autoethnography* (New York: Routledge, 2016). For community autoethnography, see Satoshi Toyosaki, Sandra L. Pensoneau-Conway, Nathan A. Wendt, and Kyle Leathers, “Community Autoethnography: Compiling the Personal and Resituating Whiteness,” *Cultural Studies ⇔ Critical Methodologies* 9, no. 1 (2009): 56–83, doi: 10.1177/1532708608321498. For critical autoethnography, see Boylorn and Orbe, *Critical Autoethnography*; Stacy Holman Jones, “Autoethnography: Making the Personal Political,” in N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln, eds, *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005): 763–91. For exo-autoethnography, see Anna Denejkina, “Exo-autoethnography: An Introduction,” In *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, vol. 18, no. 3 (2017), <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-18.3.2754>. For indigenous autoethnography, see Jennifer Houston, “Indigenous Autoethnography: Formulating Our knowledge, Our Way,” *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* 36 (2007): 45–50, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S132601110004695>; Paul Whitinui, “Indigenous Autoethnography: Exploring, Engaging, and Experiencing ‘Self’ as a Native Method of Inquiry,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 43 (2014): 456–87, doi: 10.1177/0891241613508148. For performance autoethnography, see Norman K. Denzin, *Performance Autoethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Pelias, *Writing Performance*; Tami Spry, *Body, Paper, Stage: Writing and Performing Autoethnography* (New York: Routledge, 2016).