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# Analytic Autoethnography

Leon Anderson

*Ohio University*

Autoethnography has recently become a popular form of qualitative research. The current discourse on this genre of research refers almost exclusively to “evocative autoethnography” that draws upon postmodern sensibilities and whose advocates distance themselves from realist and analytic ethnographic traditions. The dominance of evocative autoethnography has obscured recognition of the compatibility of autoethnographic research with more traditional ethnographic practices. The author proposes the term *analytic autoethnography* to refer to research in which the researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in published texts, and (3) committed to developing theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena. After briefly tracing the history of proto-autoethnographic research among realist ethnographers, the author proposes five key features of analytic autoethnography. He concludes with a consideration of the advantages and limitations of this genre of qualitative research.

**Keywords:** *autoethnography; analytic ethnography; qualitative research*

Over the past fifteen years, we have seen an impressive growth of research that has been variously referred to as auto-anthropology, auto-biographical ethnography or sociology, personal or self-narrative research and writing, and perhaps most commonly, autoethnography. This scholarship has been linked, explicitly and implicitly by different authors, to various “turns” in the social sciences and humanities: the turn toward blurred genres of writing, a heightened self-reflexivity in ethnographic research, an increased focus on emotion in the social sciences, and the postmodern skepticism regarding generalization of knowledge claims. The practice of autoethnography in sociology has been championed predominantly by interdisciplinary symbolic interactionists with postmodern or poststructuralist sensitivities, including prominently Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner, who have experimented with and exemplified variations of autoethnography and

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have encouraged students and colleagues to work within this emerging genre. Indeed, the writings of Ellis and Bochner (e.g., Ellis 1991, 1995, 2004; Ellis and Bochner 2000; Bochner and Ellis 2001), as well as other symbolic interactionists like Laurel Richardson (1994) and Norman Denzin (1989, 1997), have served a critical role in defining autoethnography in the era of methodological innovation broadly characterized by Denzin and Lincoln (2000) as recent “moments” of qualitative inquiry.<sup>1</sup>

I applaud the energy, creativity, and enthusiasm of these scholars for articulating a theoretical paradigm for the form of autoethnography that they promote and for producing and encouraging texts (and performances) that exemplify ethnography within this paradigm. But I am concerned that the impressive success of advocacy for what Ellis (1997, 2004) refers to as “evocative or emotional autoethnography” may have the unintended consequence of eclipsing other visions of what autoethnography can be and of obscuring the ways in which it may fit productively in other traditions of social inquiry.

In this article, I call attention to the value of autoethnographic research within what I term the analytic ethnographic paradigm. I make my case in two ways. First, I present a history of self-related ethnographic study with an eye toward charting a stream of work that has sought to incorporate aspects of autoethnography into analytic ethnographic practice. Second, I propose what I believe are five key features of analytic autoethnography—features that clearly differentiate it from “evocative autoethnography” while also marking it as a distinct subgenre within the broader practice of analytic ethnography. I conclude by considering what I feel are the most compelling advantages and the most obvious limitations of analytic autoethnography.

I hope that this article will be of interest to a range of scholars. First, I want to share my thoughts on the practice of autoethnography with other analytic ethnographers who are interested in expanding and refining research within the realist ethnographic tradition. Such scholars may be open to ethnographic study in which the researcher is deeply self-identified as a member, while being troubled by the epistemological paradigm within which current autoethnography discourse is embedded. Second, I want to reach current graduate students and other novices in field research who are contending with the pull of various approaches to qualitative inquiry. This latter group includes both methodological fence-sitters and scholars across a wide range of disciplines that have embraced qualitative research in recent years when many approaches to qualitative methods have been developed in close conjunction with postmodern sensitivities. My goal is to clarify the potential practice and promise of an alternative to evocative autoethnography, one that is consistent with qualitative inquiry rooted in traditional symbolic interactionism.

Before proceeding, however, it is probably useful to provide the reader with some basic sense of what I mean by the term *analytic autoethnography*. Put most simply, *analytic autoethnography* refers to ethnographic work in which the researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in the researcher's published texts, and (3) committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena. While I will provide a more elaborate description of analytic autoethnography in the following pages, this short definition captures its essential elements.

## A Brief History of Autoethnography

There has always been an autoethnographic element in qualitative sociological research. In the early years of American sociology following World War I, Robert Park's interest in the biographical backgrounds of his University of Chicago graduate students encouraged many of his students to pursue sociological involvement in settings close to their personal lives, arenas with which they had a significant degree of self-identification. Nels Anderson's *The Hobo* (1923), for instance, drew heavily on his personal experience with the lifestyle of homeless men. As Mary Jo Deegan (2001, 20) has noted, "The student sociologists [at the University of Chicago] often lived in the settings studied, walked the streets, collected quantitative and qualitative data, worked for local agencies, and had autobiographical experience emerging from these locales or ones similar to them." But while Park's students often had enduring personal connections with the social settings and groups that they studied, they seldom, if ever, took up the banner of explicit and reflexive self-observation.

An interest in biographically opportunistic research continued to characterize the wave of sociological ethnography associated with what Gary Alan Fine (1995) and others have referred to as the Second Chicago School. Under the guidance of Everett Hughes, numerous students turned an ethnographic eye to their workplaces and other settings in which they were personally involved. Ralph Turner's (1947) study of the naval disbursing officer's role, for instance, is based on his military experience in World War II. Donald Roy's (1959/1960) research on factory workers' strategies for autonomy and resistance grew out of his employment as a machine-shop worker. Fred Davis (1959) turned his work as a cab driver to ethnographic advantage. And Julius Roth's *Timetables* (1963) originated in his experience and observations as a patient in a tuberculosis hospital. While analytically more sophisticated and focused than the first wave of Chicago School studies, these later

studies continued the earlier tendency to downplay or obscure the researcher as a social actor in the settings or groups under study. So, for instance, none of the researchers just cited incorporated any self-narrative or explicitly personal anecdotes in their substantive writings. The only examples of self-narrative from these scholars came in the form of occasional methodological notes and/or what Van Maanen (1988) has referred to as “confessional tales” of fieldwork experiences.

Chicago School ethnographers of both generations, then, often had autobiographical connections to their research, but they were neither particularly self-observational in their method nor self-visible in their texts. Focused as they were on observing and analyzing others in the settings studied, they had no “language of qualitative method” (Gubrium and Holstein 1997) that assigned particular merit to self-observation.

In the 1960s and 1970s, there were some notable examples of social scientists experimenting more explicitly with self-observation and analysis. Anthropologist Anthony Wallace’s (1965) self-observational study of the cognitive “mazeway” he constructed and used for driving to work is one example. In sociology, David Sudnow’s *Ways of the Hand* (1978), in which he describes in minute detail the processes and stages of skill acquisition that he experienced as he learned to play improvisational piano jazz, represents a virtuoso example of phenomenological research based in self-observation. But both Wallace’s and Sudnow’s studies are deeply subjective and lack broader ethnographic foci. Meanwhile, from the mid-1960s until his untimely death in the 1980s, Louis Zurcher actively practiced and advocated for autobiographically situated and self-observant research. Zurcher’s (1983, 239-65) collected essays on role enactment included an extended discussion of methodological issues related to autobiographical role observation. Finally, in 1979, cultural anthropologist David Hayano published an essay on autoethnography that clearly laid out a case for self-observation in ethnographic research. Hayano argued that as anthropologists moved out of the colonial era of ethnography, they would come more and more to study the social worlds and subcultures of which they were a part. In contrast to the detached-outsider characteristic of colonial anthropologists, contemporary anthropologists would frequently be full members of the cultures they studied. Hayano exemplified this shift in *Poker Faces* (1982), which was grounded in his personal experience as a semiprofessional poker player in the public poker clubs in Gardena, California.

The history of autobiographically related ethnography in the Chicago School, as well as the autoethnographic examples provided by Zurcher and Hayano, offered potential direction for the development of autoethnography in the realist or analytic tradition. But over the intervening years, the term

*autoethnography* has become almost exclusively identified with those advocating the descriptive literary approach of evocative autoethnography.

Ellis and those who have followed her lead reject traditional realist and analytic ethnographic epistemological assumptions, voicing a principled belief that the value and integrity of evocative autoethnography is violated by framing it in terms of conventional sociological analysis. Norman Denzin (1997, 228) writes that evocative autoethnographers “bypass the representational problem by invoking an epistemology of emotion, moving the reader to feel the feelings of the other.” Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner (2000, 744) further explain that in evocative autoethnography, “the mode of storytelling is akin to the novel or biography and thus fractures the boundaries that normally separate social science from literature . . . the narrative text refuses to abstract and explain.” Evocative autoethnographers have argued that narrative fidelity to and compelling description of subjective emotional experiences create an emotional resonance with the reader that is the key goal of their scholarship. The genre of autoethnographic writing that they have developed shares postmodern sensibilities—especially the skepticism toward representation of “the other” and misgivings regarding generalizing theoretical discourse. Evocative autoethnography requires considerable narrative and expressive skills—exemplified in the well-crafted prose, poetry, and performances of Carolyn Ellis, Laurel Richardson, Carol Rambo Ronai, and others. One of the strengths of the contributions by these scholars is that they have not just produced discourse about evocative autoethnography. They have also modeled autoethnographic scholarship and mentored students and colleagues. In the past decade, evocative autoethnographers have published fairly extensively, especially (although not exclusively) on topics related to emotionally wrenching experiences, such as illness, death, victimization, and divorce. They remain largely marginalized in mainstream social science venues, due to their rejection of traditional social science values and styles of writing. But they have gained entrée into many traditionally realist qualitative-research journals (e.g., *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *Symbolic Interaction*, and *Qualitative Sociology*) and have been influential in the creation of newer postmodern-friendly journals (e.g., *Qualitative Inquiry*), handbooks (e.g., Denzin and Lincoln’s *Handbook of Qualitative Inquiry*), and even book series (e.g., the AltaMira Press series on “Ethnographic Alternatives”).

The evocative autoethnographers’ critiques of traditional social science—and realist ethnography in particular—are well-catalogued, as are realist or analytic ethnographers’ critiques of evocative ethnography. They range across broad paradigmatic divides that are relevant to this article but not its focus.<sup>2</sup> My goal is not to revisit these debates but rather to clarify an approach

to autoethnography that is consistent with traditional symbolic interactionist epistemological assumptions and goals rather than rejecting them. Furthermore, I share with Paul Atkinson, Amanda Coffey, and Sara Delamont (2003)—as well as many other analytically oriented qualitative researchers—an interest in critically examining new forms of inquiry and practice to assess their potential value for improving and expanding the analytic ethnographic craft. In the following section, I discuss five key features of analytic autoethnography as a viable and valuable subgenre in the realist ethnographic tradition.

### Key Features of Analytic Autoethnography

The five key features of analytic autoethnography that I propose include (1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis. In discussing these features, I will draw upon several realist ethnographic texts that exemplify the autoethnographic impulse—albeit often only partially. I will also bring in examples from my own current research with recreational skydivers since my interest in and understanding of autoethnography have developed as I have grappled with many of the issues presented here during the course of that research.

But, most consistently in the following discussion, I will refer to *The Body Silent* (1987) by cultural anthropologist Robert Murphy, since that book provides a particularly rich embodiment of the kind of autoethnographic research that I am seeking to promote. Like many evocative autoethnographies, *The Body Silent* is an “illness ethnography.” In this book, Murphy turns his ethnographic gaze toward his experience with spinal disease. *The Body Silent*, he writes,

was conceived in the realization that my long illness with a disease of the spinal cord has been a kind of extended anthropological field trip, for through it I have sojourned in a social world no less strange to me at first than those of the Amazon forests. (Murphy 1987, xi)

In *The Body Silent*, Murphy embraces a traditional ethnographic agenda of seeking to understand the topic under study by placing it within a social analytic context. Unlike Ellis and Bochner's (2000, 44) call for a “narrative text [that] refuses to abstract and explain,” Murphy's book seeks connections to broader social science theory—especially in using his own experiences to

argue that conceptions of liminality provide a more accurate and meaningful analytic framework for understanding human disability than does a deviance perspective. In making his case, Murphy forcefully demonstrates that deeply personal and self-observant ethnography can rise above idiographic particularity to address broader theoretical issues. *The Silent Body* is somewhat unique in providing such a sustained autoethnographic focus in the analytic tradition. As such, it is particularly useful as an exemplar of the features discussed below.

## CMR

The first and most obvious feature of autoethnography is that the researcher is a complete member in the social world under study, whether that world is what Joseph Kotarba (1980) has referred to as an “amorphous social world” of largely unconnected individuals, such as those who experience physical disability like Murphy (1987) and the depression sufferers studied by David Karp (1996), or a social world with clear locales and subculture, such as the truck drivers studied by Lawrence Ouellet (1994) and the recreational skydivers with whom I am currently involved. In each case, the researcher represents what Robert Merton (1988, 18) termed “the ultimate participant in a dual participant-observer role.”

In discussing the CMR, Patricia and Peter Adler (1987, 67-84) make a useful distinction between two types: “opportunistic” and “convert” CMRs. Opportunistic CMRs (by far the more common) may be born into a group, thrown into a group by chance circumstance (e.g., illness), or have acquired intimate familiarity through occupational, recreational, or lifestyle participation. In each case, group membership precedes the decision to conduct research on the group. Robert Murphy’s *The Body Silent* and Clinton Sanders’s *Understanding Dogs* (1999) exemplify opportunistic autoethnography. Convert CMRs, on the other hand, begin with a purely data-oriented research interest in the setting but become converted to complete immersion and membership during the course of the research. Benetta Jules-Rosette’s *African Apostles* (1975) represents a classic example. More recent examples of studies situated in convert CMR status are Jennifer Lois’s *Heroic Efforts* (2003), which documents (among other things) her acculturation to search-and-rescue subculture (including her becoming a core member and eventually marrying a leading member of the group), and Loic Wacquant’s ethnography of boxers at a Chicago boxing club, *Body and Soul* (2003).

Being a complete member typically confers the most compelling kind of “being there” on the ethnographer. In comparison with other researcher

roles, Adler and Adler (1987, 67) observe, “CMRs come closest of all . . . to approximating the emotional stance of the people they study.” Still, being a complete member does not imply a panoptical or nonproblematic positionality.

For one thing, as Marilyn Strathern (1987) pointed out in her discussion of auto-anthropology, the ethnographic researcher differs from the rest of those in the group or subculture under study since she or he is also a member and a participant in the social science community. As a social scientist, the researcher has another cultural identity and goals that lead to a secondary (or from the social science view, primary) orientation to action within the social world shared with other group members. Unlike their peers in the research setting(s), autoethnographers must orient (at least for significant periods of time) to documenting and analyzing action as well as to purposively engaging in it.

While most members are concerned only with participating in setting activities, the autoethnographer (like all participant observers) must also record events and conversations, at times making fieldwork “near[ly] schizophrenic in its frenzied multiple focus” (Adler and Adler 1987, 70). Autoethnographers’ circumstances may facilitate their being in the setting or experience for extended periods of time—in which case there is less pressure to get everything done at once. But even when the temporal vista for observation is expansive, the necessity of mentally and physically documenting one’s activities creates additional tasks and, at times, diverts the researcher’s attention from the embodied phenomenological experience. Hayano (1982, 150), for instance, experienced a tension between fieldwork demands, such as his desire to “keep on friendly terms with most of the players” in the card rooms, on one hand, and his need as an effective poker player to forcefully push relationships with other players to the breaking point in fast, aggressive games. For all the other similarities that the autoethnographic researcher may have with other group members, the researcher’s multiple foci separate them in ways from other participants, who may live more completely in the moment. So, while the plane ride to “jump altitude” is commonly used by skydivers to mentally rehearse planned jump maneuvers, conduct checks of one’s own and others’ gear, and joke with the other jumpers, for me, it is also a time to consciously observe and etch conversations and events deeply enough in my mind that I will be able to recall and record them in detail after the jump. I have accommodated to this problem of multiple foci by alternating simpler jumps (e.g., solo jumps with high openings) when I intend to be particularly attentive to observing other skydivers’ interactions on the plane and more fully jump-focused rides to altitude when attempting more complex group jumps.

In terms of analysis, ethnographers have long recognized the Schutzian distinction (Schutz 1962) between members' practically oriented, first-order constructs or interpretations and the more abstract, transcontextual, second-order constructs of social science analysis. While this is a problem for ethnographers in general, it is a particularly interesting dilemma for autoethnographers, who, as both members and researchers, are expected to be fluent in both first- and second-order constructs. In my own experience, the biggest difficulty in this regard lies in the interpretive variation in first-order constructs within social groups. Group members seldom exhibit a uniform set of beliefs, values, and levels of commitment. As a result, even complete membership confers only a partial vantage point for observation of the social world under study. Frequently, members' orientations and interpretations are significantly influenced by role expectations related to specific member roles. So, for instance, Gerardo Marti's (2005) research with a multiethnic religious congregation involved autoethnographic participation as a lay pastor in the congregation. This role was invaluable for understanding certain aspects of the congregation. However, the role created tension and role conflict between his proselytizing responsibilities as a pastor and his researcher role. Even more significantly for this discussion, his pastoral role gave him direct access to some values, beliefs, and experiences (those of the convert) but limited his access to others (such as those of the marginally committed congregation members).

Furthermore, significant variation may exist even among members in similar positions. As Hayano (1979, 102) has pointed out, "Cultural 'realities' and interpretations of events among individuals in the same group are often highly variable, changing, or contradictory." Recreational skydivers with very similar levels of experience, for instance, vary along a continuum in regard to the degree of risk that they advocate in the sport and that they themselves are willing to take at any given point in time—a variation that reflects issues of significant debate and tension within the broader skydiving culture. Indeed, documentation and analysis of variation among group members is a common focus of ethnographic description, calling into question simplistic notions of understanding a phenomenon by "becoming the phenomenon" (Mehan and Wood 1975, 227).

In some ways, the language of access to first-order constructs itself is limiting, insofar as it is often taken as implying relatively clear, constant, and coherent patterns of interpretation in the social world under study. The autoethnographer, as a CMR, is expected to grasp these constructs. A better heuristic image is probably that of a member as someone who is considered a legitimate participant in the group's conversations (and activities) through which (potentially multiple and contradictory) first-order constructs are

developed, contested, and sustained. If this is the case, then the autoethnographer is someone who helps to form and reform the constructs that she or he studies. The autoethnographer is a more analytic and self-conscious participant in the conversation than is the typical group member, who may seldom take a particularly abstract or introspective orientation to the conversation and activities. But the autoethnographer's understandings, both as a member and as a researcher, emerge not from detached discovery but from engaged dialogue. This leads to the second feature of analytic autoethnography.

### **Analytic Reflexivity**

Ethnographic reflexivity has been variously defined, and its implications have been widely discussed in interpretive sociology and cultural anthropology over the past fifteen years. "In its most transparent guise," Charlotte Davies (1999, 7) has written in her review of the concept, "reflexivity expresses researchers' awareness of their necessary connection to the research situation and hence their effects upon it." At a deeper level, reflexivity involves an awareness of reciprocal influence between ethnographers and their settings and informants. It entails self-conscious introspection guided by a desire to better understand both self and others through examining one's actions and perceptions in reference to and dialogue with those of others.

While ethnographers have long recognized the importance of understanding relationships between researchers and their data, most traditional ethnography has not focused on this issue in a particularly sustained reflexive manner. Instead, ethnographers have focused outward, on understanding and making understandable to others a social world beyond themselves. Furthermore, when they have discussed reflexivity in significant detail, it has most often been in "confessional tales" (Van Maanen 1988) published separately from more substantive analyses. With autoethnography (whether evocative or analytic), this changes. As Atkinson, Coffey, and Delamont (2003, 62) observe,

[Auto]ethnographers-as-authors frame their accounts with personal reflexive views of the self. Their ethnographic data are situated within their personal experience and sense making. They themselves form part of the representational processes in which they are engaging and are part of the story they are telling.

Not only do they “form part of the representational processes,” but they are in part formed by those processes as the cultural meanings they cocreate are constituted in conversation, action, and text. While it can be argued that all “ethnographers use their experience among and knowledge of others to expand their knowledge of self” (Davies 1999, 180), this is likely to be much more the case for autoethnography by virtue of the ethnographer’s unique positioning as a member of the group under study. There is a shift to more obvious and potentially deeper informative reciprocity between the researcher and other group members. As a CMR (in contrast to a more detached participant observer), one has more of a stake in the beliefs, values, and actions of other setting members. Indeed, the autoethnographic interrogation of self and other may transform the researcher’s own beliefs, actions, and sense of self.

This impact of autoethnography on the researcher’s self is captured well by Murphy (1987, 126), who writes that

research among the motor-handicapped and participation in their organizations forced me to see myself in their lives, and this left me feeling that my own status was insecure and threatened. . . . I had learned a valuable lesson about the relationship of social standing to disability. I had also learned a great deal about myself.

Similarly, Michael Schwalbe (1996a, 58), whose fieldwork in the men’s movement verged at times on autoethnography, observes that

reflecting on my reactions to their activities, in light of my own biography, also helped me to understand what the men were seeking and why. Every insight was both a doorway and a mirror—a way to see into their experience and a way to look back at mine.

This mutual informativity is one of the most appealing features of autoethnographic work. However, it is not enough for the researcher to engage in reflexive social analysis and self-analysis. Autoethnography requires that the researcher be visible, active, and reflexively engaged in the text.

### **Visible and Active Researcher in the Text**

One common criticism made by “crisis in representation” critics of conventional ethnography (e.g., Clifford and Marcus 1986) has been that the traditional ethnographer is often largely invisible—a hidden and yet seemingly omniscient presence in ethnographic texts. This invisible omniscient ethnog-

rapher may have been a more common literary construction among classical cultural anthropologists (the direct focus of Clifford and Marcus's critique) than among Chicago School sociologists. Certainly, many Chicago School ethnographies, including such classics as William Foote Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1943), Elliot Liebow's *Tally's Corner* (1967), and Ruth Horowitz's *Honor and the American Dream* (1983), significantly include the researcher in the ethnographic story. But not all traditional ethnographic research involves significant self-reflection during the research process or visible presence of the researcher (especially as more than a detached observer) in ethnographic texts. A central feature of autoethnography is that the researcher is a highly visible social actor within the written text. The researcher's own feelings and experiences are incorporated into the story and considered as vital data for understanding the social world being observed.

Interestingly, Atkinson, Coffey, and Delamont (2003, 60) observe, "The personal has never been subordinate in the private world of fieldnotes." Support for this assertion can be found in the first edition of *Analyzing Social Settings* (1971) where—nearly thirty-five years ago—John Lofland advised that field notes should include a record of the researcher's feelings and reactions. As he succinctly put it, "Field notes are not only for recording the setting; they are for 'recording' the observer as well" (p. 106). Nonetheless, for a variety of reasons, including perhaps most prominently their emphasis on others rather than self, field-workers have often dramatically reduced their visibility in their published ethnographic texts in comparison with their field notes.

By virtue of the autoethnographer's dual role as a member in the social world under study and as a researcher of that world, autoethnography demands enhanced textual visibility of the researcher's self. Such visibility demonstrates the researcher's personal engagement in the social world under study. Autoethnographers should illustrate analytic insights through recounting their own experiences and thoughts as well as those of others. Furthermore, they should openly discuss changes in their beliefs and relationships over the course of fieldwork, thus vividly revealing themselves as people grappling with issues relevant to membership and participation in fluid rather than static social worlds.

Autoethnographers should expect to be involved in the construction of meaning and values in the social worlds they investigate. As full-fledged members, they cannot always sit observantly on the sidelines. They should not necessarily shy away from participating in potentially divisive issues, although it seems to me that they have no more responsibility to vocalize or act upon unpopular positions than they do in other aspects of their lives. But whether they seek to persuade others to change (as did Schwalbe [1996b] in

publicly challenging the teachers at a men's movement gathering) or whether they accede to group pressures (as I have done at times when dangerously "jumping through clouds" with other skydivers), they must textually acknowledge and reflexively assess the ways in which their participation reproduces and/or transforms social understandings and relations.

The goal of reflexive ethnography (and autoethnography) according to Davies (1999, 5) is to "seek to develop forms of research that fully acknowledge and utilize subjective experience as an intrinsic part of research." The major challenge with visibly incorporating subjective experience into ethnographic work, she notes, is that it can lead to self-absorption in what Geertz (1988) has disparagingly referred to as "author saturated texts." Autoethnography loses its sociological promise when it devolves into self-absorption. As Ruth Behar (1996, 14) argues, "The exposure of the self who is also a spectator has to take us somewhere we couldn't otherwise go to. It has to be essential to the argument, not a decorative flourish, not exposure for its own sake." There are a number of places beyond "decorative flourish" that self-narrative can take us. It can take us to the depths of personal feeling, leading us to be emotionally moved and sympathetically understanding. This—the preeminent goal of evocative autoethnography—is shared by various other kinds of first-person writing: fiction, autobiography, poetry, and a significant amount of traditional ethnography. The self-narrative of autoethnography can also be used persuasively to encourage readers to commit to certain lines of action—as demonstrated in some forms of autoethnographic participatory action research, (e.g., Naples 1996). There are probably plenty of other places that self-narrative can take us as well.

The self-narrative of analytic autoethnography is used, in part, to develop and refine generalized theoretical understandings of social processes (as I will discuss below). Given this nomothetic commitment, analytic ethnographers must avoid self-absorbed digression. They are also constrained from self-absorption by the ethnographic imperative of dialogic engagement with others in the social worlds they seek to understand.

## **Dialogue With Informants Beyond the Self**

In the preceding sections, I have argued that analytic autoethnography involves complete membership, sustained reflexive attention to one's position in the web of field discourse and relations, and textual visibility of the self in ethnographic narratives. Given that the researcher is confronted with self-related issues at every turn, the potential for self-absorption can loom large. Renato Rosaldo (1993, 7) has observed, "If classic ethnography's vice was the slippage from the ideal of detachment to actual indifference, that of

present-day reflexivity is the tendency for the self-absorbed Self to lose sight altogether of the culturally different Other.” As Rosaldo’s comment suggests, solipsism and author saturation in autoethnographic texts are symptoms rather than the underlying problem. They stem from failure to adequately engage with others in the field. No ethnographic work—not even autoethnography—is a warrant to generalize from an “*N* of one.” “We must not,” Atkinson, Coffey, and Delamont (2003, 57) note, “lose sight of the ethnographic imperative that we are seeking to understand and make sense of complex social worlds of which we are only part (but a part nevertheless).”

The ethnographic imperative calls for dialogue with “data” or “others.” Even ethnographic reflexivity, which has been treated at times (e.g., Gergen and Gergen 1991) as a purely subjective phenomenon, is more appropriately understood as a relational activity. As Davies (1999, 184) writes, it should be seen “not in terms of self-absorption, but rather [in terms of] interrelationships between researcher and other to inform and change social knowledge.” Unlike evocative autoethnography, which seeks narrative fidelity only to the researcher’s subjective experience, analytic autoethnography is grounded in self-experience but reaches beyond it as well. David Karp (1996, 204), for instance, writes that while each line of analysis in *Speaking of Sadness* was initially guided by personal introspections, it was “always disciplined by the data collected” in in-depth interviews. In *Understanding Dogs* (1999), Clinton Sanders incorporated rich autoethnographic observation on his interactions with his own canine companions but also interviewed nearly thirty other dog owners as well as veterinarians and guide dog trainers and spent time in a veterinary hospital and in two dog training programs. Similarly, while engaged in complete member research on truckers, Lawrence Ouellet avoided working for long-distance trucking firms because of the scant opportunities such employment provided for social contact with other truckers. “To avoid writing an autobiography,” he writes, “I needed frequent contact with my workmates. . . . By hauling locally . . . I knew that I would see a good deal of my fellow drivers . . . at a variety of locations” (Ouellet 1994, 13). Even Robert Murphy, whose growing paralysis made travel increasingly difficult, reached out to other motor-handicapped individuals and participated in disability organizations, despite the physical—and social—discomfort of such encounters.

### **Commitment to an Analytic Agenda**

The final characteristic of analytic autoethnography is its commitment to an analytic agenda. The purpose of analytic ethnography is not simply to document personal experience, to provide an “insider’s perspective,” or to

evoke emotional resonance with the reader. Rather, the defining characteristic of analytic social science is to use empirical data to gain insight into some broader set of social phenomena than those provided by the data themselves. This data-transcending goal has been a central warrant for traditional social science research. While traditional symbolic interactionist ethnography has been uneven in its focus on sustained theoretical development (see, for instance, the critiques by Lofland [1970, 1995] and by Snow, Morrill, and Anderson [2003]), such a goal continues to be called for by a range of interpretive and critical sociologists—from Carl Couch (1989) and Robert Prus (1996) to Michael Burawoy (1998) and Dorothy Smith (2000). Whatever their differences, all of these scholars call for using empirical evidence to formulate and refine theoretical understandings of social processes. I am aware that this definition of *analysis* is narrower than some scholars would use. Indeed, in looking over an early draft of this article, one accomplished ethnographer commented, “Every piece of writing is analytic to the extent that writers choose to highlight certain parts of a story.” While that may be true, it turns analysis into such a broad category that it covers everything from social science articles to diaries and grocery lists. My use of the term is much more precise and based on the observation that not all ethnographic writing is explicitly or self-consciously analytic or committed to addressing general theoretical issues. Consistent with Lofland (1970, 1995), as well as with Snow, Morrill, and Anderson (2003), I use the term *analytic* to point to a broad set of data-transcending practices that are directed toward theoretical development, refinement, and extension.

Analytic ethnographers are not content with accomplishing the representational task of capturing “what is going on” in an individual life or social environment. This distinguishes analytic ethnography from evocative ethnography and similar first-person narratives, such as the autobiographical “creative non-fiction” that is highly popular today in creative writing programs around the United States. It is the difference between such powerful first-person illness narratives as Tom Andrews’s *Codeine Diary* (1998) and Robert Murphy’s analytic autoethnography *The Body Silent*. Consistent with the subjectivist sensitivities of evocative autoethnographers like Ellis and Bochner, Andrews explicitly rejects the possibility of seeking to generalize from his experiences. Murphy, in contrast, uses his experience, as Davies (1999, 185) has summarized,

as a way of understanding the social world of people with disabilities and analysing how their experiences also reveal much about broader social structures and processes. From this he is able to address numerous areas of theoretical interest such as the social nature of health and illness, the social world of hospi-

tals and the feedback mechanisms operating to produce and affirm stigmatized identities.

The definitive feature of analytic autoethnography is this value-added quality of not only truthfully rendering the social world under investigation but also transcending that world through broader generalization. Like Murphy, David Karp (1996) captures this value-added dimension of ethnography. *Speaking of Sadness*, Karp writes, provides a much-needed “subjective, experiential, or person-centered approach to depression.” But, he continues,

Valuable sociology, however, requires more than an important topic and the goal of informative description. That’s a good start, but the value and vitality of a piece of research depend on its providing *theoretical* illumination of the topic under investigation. (Karp 1996, 14)

In the course of his book, Karp provides powerfully evocative descriptions of his and other informants’ personal experiences with depression and an analysis of depressive illness trajectories and the interpretive processes that emerge in relation to the taking of antidepressant medications.

The theoretical illumination provided by analytic autoethnography is not meant to produce what Ellis and Bochner (2000, 744) have referred to in their critique as “undebatable conclusions.” From the early pragmatist foundations of symbolic interaction such as Dewey’s *The Quest for Certainty* (1929) to Blumer’s (1969) emphasis on “sensitizing concepts” to the present, the symbolic interactionist tradition has explicitly rejected such positivistic goals. But analytic autoethnography does contribute to a spiraling refinement, elaboration, extension, and revision of theoretical understanding.

### **The Virtues and Limitations of Analytic Autoethnography**

The future trajectory of analytic autoethnography will depend primarily on the assessment of its merits by analytically oriented qualitative researchers. Much of the enthusiasm for evocative autoethnography among its practitioners stems from the fact that it has been articulated in a way that places it near the heart of their scholarly orientation. In contrast, analytic autoethnography, as I have sketched it here, is simply a specialized subgenre of analytic ethnography. My claims for the virtues of analytic autoethnography are far less revolutionary than those claimed for evocative autoethnography. But the modesty of these virtues notwithstanding, I do believe that analytic autoethnography represents a special and appealing type

of ethnographic inquiry that can be very valuable to analytic ethnographers when their circumstances warrant using it. However, as a specialized subgenre of ethnography, analytic autoethnography is also limited in its practical utility. An assessment of the potential promise of analytic autoethnography, then, must address both its particular merits and its limitations.

The virtues I see in analytic autoethnography fall broadly into methodological and analytic categories. The methodological advantages relate to the ways in which being a CMR facilitates the availability of data. One obvious advantage in this regard is that the autoethnographer has multiple reasons to participate in the social world under study, and thus, multiple incentives to spend time in the field. Sometimes (as in the case of Murphy's disability), researchers may simply not have the freedom to withdraw from the setting or experience (although one can still withdraw from studying it). In many other cases, autoethnographic researchers have been able to meld research goals with a variety interests, including making a living (e.g., Ouellet 1994), achieving personal leisure identities (e.g., Mitchell),<sup>3</sup> or pursuing personal spiritual goals (e.g., Marti 2005). Given the critical importance of immersing oneself in the field, ethnographers who are able to meet other needs or interests while engaging in research have a unique opportunity to use life's precious time efficiently. But such multitasking also creates potential pitfalls, exacerbating certain problems endemic to field research. Most obviously, the researcher must exercise extreme caution not to let his or her research focus fade out of awareness in the face of other pressing and enticing engagements in the field. Furthermore, the autoethnographer must not allow herself or himself to be drawn into participating heavily in activities in the field at the expense of writing field notes.

A second advantage of autoethnography involves the access that it provides to "insider meanings." However, given the previously discussed variable nature of member values and beliefs, autoethnographers must assiduously pursue other insiders' interpretations, attitudes, and feelings as well as their own.

Perhaps a greater methodological advantage of being personally identified and involved in the social world under study is that it gives the researcher an added vantage point for accessing certain kinds of data. Again, from my own research, I have had many skydiving dreams that have captured interesting—if sometimes a bit bizarre—aspects of my fascination with the sport. At odd and unscheduled moments, I have found myself musing: wrestling with misgivings about potential risks while taking a shower, fantasizing about the thrill of freefall while looking out the window during a department chair's meeting, and worrying about unmet familial commitments while driving to

the dropzone on a Saturday morning. These experiences have, at times, raised issues for me that I would have been unlikely to see had it not been for my personal obsession.

In terms of analytic advantages, autoethnography offers distinctively grounded opportunities to pursue the connections between biography and social structure that are central to C. Wright Mills's conception of the sociological imagination. Although few of us spend much time exploring the connections between our personal lives and our scholarly interests and activities, many of us are aware that such connections exist and could likely trace some of them if called upon to do so—as demonstrated in the autobiographical reflections of sociologists in such books as Bennett Berger's *Authors of Their Own Lives* (1990) and Matilda White Riley's *Sociological Lives* (1988). But autoethnography provides an opportunity to explore some aspects of our social lives in a deeper and more sustained manner. The resulting analysis recursively draws upon our personal experiences and perceptions to inform our broader social understandings and upon our broader social understandings to enrich our self-understandings. Autoethnography is somewhat unique in research in that it is particularly likely to be warranted by the quest for self-understanding. Some scholars bristle when I say that: it sounds too Freudian to them. But self-understanding does not need to be Freudian, or Rogerian, or new-age mystical. The kind of self-understanding I am talking about lies at the intersection of biography and society: self-knowledge that comes from understanding our personal lives, identities, and feelings as deeply connected to and in large part constituted by—and in turn helping to constitute—the sociocultural contexts in which we live.

Such virtues notwithstanding, analytic autoethnography has clear limitations. Most of us, most of the time, do not find our research interests as deeply intertwined with our personal lives as autoethnography requires. The bulk of analytic ethnography will always be based in some variation of the “professional stranger” role elaborated by Michael Agar (1980) and others. Sociological inquiry must not be solely directed toward our own biographical involvements. Many important qualitative studies, including recent work such as Kathleen Blee's (2002) study of women in the racist hate movement and Richard Mitchell's (2001) research with Aryan survivalists, would be virtually impossible from an autoethnographic vantage point.

But it is not particularly damning to acknowledge that analytic autoethnography has limitations. All methodological approaches have their limitations. And all competent researchers must acquire not only the ability to use various research skills but also the acumen to judge when some kinds of research are likely to prove more productive than others.

## Conclusion

Social science research methods are characterized by flux and innovation. At times, new forms of observation or new techniques of data analysis are incorporated into previously existing paradigms, while at other times, methodological innovation occurs in tandem with a rupture from earlier “normal science.” Yet relatively little attention has been paid to how methods of inquiry are socially constructed and appropriated to one paradigm or another. We seem to believe that the trajectory of methodological innovation (toward incorporation or rupture) lies inherently in the epistemological commensurability of new methods with broader methodological paradigms. This article belies that assumption by arguing that autoethnographic inquiry, which has been advocated primarily in recent years as a radically nontraditional, poststructuralist form of research, actually fits well with traditional symbolic interactionist ethnography.

If this is the case, then why is autoethnography less visible in analytic ethnography? The answer is undoubtedly multifaceted, and a complete answer is beyond the scope of this article. But one important reason is that analytic ethnographers have not focused any sustained attention on autoethnography. As a result, they have tacitly ceded autoethnography to their evocative counterparts.

In a recent article on linking ethnographic research with theoretical development, David Snow, Calvin Morrill, and I observed the following:

It has long been understood that theories are historically embedded, even if it has not been as well understood how particular opportunities or constraints for developing theory are linked to these conditions. But whatever the linkage, it is clear that social research and theory are facilitated and guided by the available language and discourse within the social science disciplines. (Snow, Morrill, and Anderson 2003, 195)

Specific methods of data collection and analysis, we argue, “flourish in part because of the absence of other well-articulated models” (p. 195). Autoethnography provides a case in point. Evocative autoethnographers have done a good job of explaining and publicizing their theoretical rationale, providing exemplars of their research, and training students. As long as they are the only scholars explicitly engaged in and advocating for autoethnography, this genre of research will tend to be limited primarily to that arena. But, as I have documented, some of the most important early efforts in autoethnography were undertaken by scholars with clearly analytic goals. Furthermore, a small but significant body of work is accumulating that

exemplifies, albeit unevenly, a vision of autoethnography that is consistent with the enduring practice of realist ethnography. My goal in this article has been to sketch the contours of this vision in the hope that other scholars will join with me in reclaiming and refining autoethnography as a part of the analytic ethnographic tradition.

## Notes

1. I use Denzin and Lincoln's term advisedly here to point to the recent and current periods of ethnographic innovation and debate. Many scholars have disagreed with Denzin and Lincoln's historical construction of the "moments" in qualitative research. For such critiques, see, particularly, Atkinson, Coffey, and Delamont (1999); Delamont, Coffey, and Atkinson (2000); and Snow and Morrill (1995).

2. For some key statements of paradigmatic differences, see "Review Symposium: Crisis in Representation" (2002); Gubrium and Holstein (1997); and Atkinson, Coffey, and Delamont (2003).

3. As I noted in the discussion of key features of analytic autoethnography, the examples I draw upon are useful in illustrating various features of this genre of research, but most of them represent only partial approximations to it. Richard Mitchell's *Mountain Experience* (1983), for instance, is based on over a decade of personal climbing experience but is similar to the qualitative studies of the Second Chicago School (e.g., Turner 1947; Roth 1963) in minimizing the presence of the researcher in the published text. In contrast, Mitchell's more recent book *Dancing at Armageddon* (2002), while not exemplifying "complete member researcher" ethnography, documents a far more present researcher actively and visibly engaged in participation and analysis. For a fuller discussion of this issue, see Mitchell and Charmaz (1996) and Charmaz and Mitchell (1997).

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**Leon Anderson** is a professor of sociology at Ohio University. He has published primarily in the fields of homelessness, deviance, and qualitative methods. He is the coauthor with David Snow of *Down on Their Luck* (1993) and with John Lofland, David Snow, and Lyn Lofland of the fourth edition of *Analyzing Social Settings* (2005). Having recently finished a five-year term as department chair, he is now avidly pursuing his interests in recreational skydiving.