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Autoethnography: Beyond the Gender Binary through Writing Lives[1]

The goal of this contribution is to present autoethnography as a research method which provides an ethnographer with the possibility of combining an essential mix of themes in order to carefully describe the researcher's personal experience. Despite being at the margins of the regular qualitative method of inquiry, autoethnography has a long history in ethnographic research. One of the main advantages of using such a method of inquiry as an important research tool is the high potential of autoethnography to uncover the process of ethnographer's mind in the middle of reflexive analytical process. The author focuses on the potential of the use of autoethnography in engaged and applied research, e.g. in case of social justice related topics. The contribution draws from the author's personal experience from the field of using autoethnography as both the method and a genre when describing the process of gender transition from the non-binary perspective. The author argues that the often "rejected" subjectivity and emotionality of ethnographic narratives have a great potential to uncover, with the proper use of the ethnographer´s reflexivity, the important aspects of the analytical process of the construction of anthropological knowledge.

Key words: autoethnography, writing as a method, transgender, gender binary, non-binary

Аутоетнографија: превазилажење родне бинарности кроз писање живота

Циљ овог прилога је да представи аутоетнографију као истраживачки метод који етнографу омогућава комбиновање основног склопа тема са циљем пажљивог описа личних искустава истраживача. Иако је на маргинама регуларног квалитативног метода испитивања, аутоетнографија има дугачку историју у оквиру етнографских истраживања. Једна од главних предности коришћења оваквога метода као важног истраживачког оруђа јесте знатан потенцијал аутоетнографије у разоткривању тока ума етнографа приликом рефлексивног аналитичког процеса. Аутор се усредсређује на потенцијал коришћења аутоетнографије у ангажованим и примењеним истраживањима, нпр. у случајевима тема повезаних са социјалном правдом. Овај прилог црпи и из ауторових личних искустава коришћења аутоетнографије и као метода, и као жанра, при описивању процеса родне транзиције из небинарне перспективе. Аутор сматра да често „одбијана" субјективност и емоционалност етнографских наратива имају велики потенцијал да, уз истовремену правилну

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рефлексивност етнографа, открију битне аспекте аналитичког процеса конструкције антрополошког знања.

Кључне речи: аутоетнографија, писање као метод, трансродност, родна бинарност, небинарност

> "The making of ethnography is artisanal, tied to the worldly work of writing."
>
> James Clifford (1986, 6)

Writing a new article or an essay is always a challenge. Most of us have found ways how to put our carefully gathered data into a constructive text through experience which might as well, after some time, become a routine. Our proven practice is what we usually tend to carry on with, as we are aware of the fact that a certain genre, style, or way of writing and argumentation is expected of us in the academic circle we are closely involved in. It is not a secret then that despite the complicated history of anthropology with its crisis of representation and literary turn, it is still the analytical way of writing that is most prevalent.

We as ethnographers are led to carefully choose and describe our methodological practice and pay close attention to the validity and reliability of our gathered data. The positivist aspect of qualitative methods of inquiry has already been challenged by many scholars, who, in light of the postmodern turn question the meaning of the method itself (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005, 967-968). However, it is still not easy to depart from the proven methodological standard and analytical way of writing. Especially not for graduate and postgraduate students, whose innovative approach might be often considered to be challenging the status quo of the discipline, departing from the (un)safe boundaries of what the definition of science really is, and placing it closer to the edge of the social science / literary divide.

In 2000, communication scholars Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner came with an interesting and profound argument against the critics of their passion of writing about their own experiences, and to bring their vulnerability as academics, writers and human beings out in the open. They were asking: "Why should we be ashamed if our work has therapeutic or personal value?" (Ellis and Bochner 2000, 746). Their questioning is based on challenging the definition of social inquiry:

> "A text that functions as an agent of self-discovery of self-creation, for the author as well as for those who read and engage the text, is only threatening under a narrow definition of social inquiry, one that eschews a social science with a moral center and a heart. Why should caring and empathy be secondary to controlling and knowing?" (Ellis and Bochner 2000, 746)

Ellis and Bochner further explain that there is an important distinction between the goals of the so-called "representational social science" on one hand and "evocative social science" on the other (2000, 747). They point out the outcomes of the postmodern philosophy and scholars like Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Gadamer,

Derrida or Rorty who strongly challenged the notion of the neutrality and transparency of the language as the means of communication. Based on this reasoning, the very foundations of traditional epistemology have been undermined (Ellis and Bochner 2000, 747). As Laurel Richardson explains in the text about writing as a method of inquiry:

> "The core of postmodernism is the doubt that any method or theory, any discourse or genre, or any tradition or novelty has a universal and general claim as the "right" or privileged form of authoritative knowledge." (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005, 961)

As all of us now do (and write) ethnography in "a postmodernist climate" (Ibid.), what challenge are we facing in regards to the possible redefinition of the concepts of validity and reliability of our data which are text based in the first place? And what about our main analytical writing format?

Am I (not) Trans Enough?

When I was considering the way how to proceed with my dissertation thesis with the topic of transgender activism in Slovakia, I was challenged by a similar situation. It was due to the fact that basically at the end of my fieldwork which took nearly three years, I decided - after a long period of hesitation - to undergo hormonal treatment as a non-binary identified transgender person.

When I realized that I might wish to undergo physical transition, it was a new self-discovery to me, a shift in my desires. It was a step that I perceived as an outcome of a deep transformative process and an effect of the field which I had been immersed in for more than ten years as a transgender theorist and activist. Before that time I never really thought of hormonal treatment as being an option for me. Why?

Within the Slovak medical system of psychiatrists / sexologists, who are responsible for the supervision of a transgender client, gender is traditionally understood in a cisnormative sense: as an extension of biological sex upon which gender is ascribed at birth. Transgender phenomenon is therefore explained through the "being born in the wrong body" narrative. Claiming and living this narrative is also expected of a transgender client who applies for hormonal treatment, which is granted only upon receiving the F 64.0 diagnosis.

For many years I was aware that my non-binary gender status goes beyond the stereotypical narrative and that I run the risk of being denied the hormonal treatment if I am too open about my (no)gender identity when being diagnosed. Of course, I never really wished to be diagnosed as I do not feel mentally disordered at all. Going through the diagnostic process is simply a must when one desires to legally undergo hormonal therapy in Slovakia.

Moreover, the client literally has to prove that their view of themselves as a transgender person matches the expectation of the responsible doctors of what being transgender means and how it can or cannot be evaluated and diagnosed. In this

way biological sex is confused with or extended to an expected fixed gender role and related gender stereotypes which are reflected in the doctor's expectation of the expression of client's preferences (clothing, hair, style of speech, pronoun usage, personal interests, sexual orientation, etc.). Through such a limited view of what gender is, any departure from the stereotypical narrative might be evaluated as not being convincing or "transgender" enough, according to the doctor's expectations.

When I realized that my desire to undergo hormonal treatment would mean going through obligatory diagnostic process, I was full of doubts.

The situation for me changed drastically as within a few months my status changed from a researcher to a client. Throughout the year that followed, I went through similar diagnostic process as some of my partners in research. I was put through similar medical examination. This time however not as a scientist in the field but as a client of medical care, or more so as a patient, whose gender conformity was being diagnosed.

Suddenly I happened to be in the hands of the medical system and a circle of psychiatrists, who, based on their "proven" medical practice (which does not really follow the law)[2], had the monopoly to decide whether I, as a self-identified transgender person, was "trans enough" according to their notion of gender, in order to be allowed to undergo the hormonal treatment that I applied for.

As is the case of medical gender transition process in Slovakia, receiving the psychiatric diagnosis is necessary, otherwise the hormonal treatment is not allowed by a responsible psychiatrist / sexologist. Transgender phenomenon is therefore still treated as a mental disorder, despite the recommendation of the latest DSM-5 manual[3] which reflects a shift in perspective on gender identity and focuses on the related distress rather than identity issues (APA, 2013). The whole diagnostic process is however, based on a very vague understanding of what gender / sex is and is utterly in the hands of psychiatrists / sexologists and their understanding of what being "trans" means. If these medical experts lack the understanding of the concept of gender being separate from the concept of sex, they run the risk of ascribing gender stereotypes and accept gender as being a fixed identity or a role we are born into.

In this case the diagnosis could be extremely stressful and can lead to the wrong interpretation of one's gender expression[4]. In the worst case, the client is denied the possibility of hormonal treatment for not fulfilling the expected criteria for

[2] The only condition for legal gender change prescribed by the Slovak law is the need to submit a medical assessment. It does not however specify any further steps. What is considered as "gender change" is therefore the result of a proven medical usage and is exclusively in the hands of supervising psychiatrists.

[3] Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition edited by American Psychiatric Association

[4] Gender expression does not necessarily have to be related to one's gender identity. Unlike the gender expression, which can be observable by the environment, gender identity is internal, a core part of the self.

receiving the F 64.0 diagnosis, or for being diagnosed with another mental disorder or dysphoria.

Producing Different Knowledge[5]

My own experience strongly challenged my perspective regarding the topic of my research and the standard ways of doing it. I was aware that the boundaries between my academic and field statuses of an activist as well as a patient became blurred. I was becoming my own research subject.

The internal dilemma I was dealing with was the fact that I was trying to keep the distance as much as I desired to engage myself fully in the process. My core doubts and fears of the unknown were holding me back though. I was asking myself: What am I heading towards? Am I going to survive this? Part of me wanted to immerse myself fully in the living experience of my transition and still, another part of me wanted to be able to observe what was happening to me, detached, as if from above, to be able to understand the situation and find some new meaning of it.

The biggest doubt I was dealing with as an ethnographer was the fact that I was questioning, whether the data I was interested in were truly the data I could work with. I was provoked by the fact that I was becoming my main tool of inquiry. I was aware that the proven analytical way of writing and standard methods of inquiry would not be very useful here. I watched my focus change the direction from external, observable data to subjective, non-verifiable realm of emotions and insights related to a complicated embodied process of my own (no)gender discovery. I started to write about my daily experience and conflicting emotions with the faith that I might gain more understanding of my personal situation through writing itself.

In the afterword of her book *Last Writes: A Daybook for a Dying Friend* Laurel Richardson describes how she dealt with her own

> "stress, fears, and anxieties, shaping them and coming to understand them through writing" after she had learnt that her best friend's "disease had reached the stage where she had at best a few months to live" (Richardson 2007, 169).

She started to write a Daybook to help herself "get through the final nine months of [her best friend's] life knowing that writing gave her "a space to vent [her] emotions", it was simply "therapeutic" (Richardson 2007, 170).

In the text named *Writing: A method of Inquiry* Richardson concludes that as "qualitative work carries its meaning in its entire text … qualitative research has to be read … its meaning is in the reading." (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005, 960) St. Pierre further explains that a "great part of [the] inquiry is accomplished in the writing because … writing *is* thinking, writing *is* analysis, writing *is* indeed a seductive and tangled *method* of discovery" (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005, 967) She

[5] St. Pierre (1997, 175).

further questions the "limits we have imposed on the concept [of] method" and "its possibilities in knowledge production" (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005, 967) and mentions the "postmodern critique of interpretivism (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005, 969) reflected in the conventional qualitative methodology, which she believes "is generally both positivist and interpretive" (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005, 970). What writing as a method of inquiry offers is a possibility for "producing different knowledge and producing knowledge differently" (St. Pierre 1997, 175). When we write, what happens is that we gain understanding *through* writing, "thought happen[s] in the writing":

> "As I wrote, I watched word after word appear on the computer screen – ideas, theories, I had not thought before I wrote them. Sometimes I wrote something so marvelous it startled me. *I doubt I could have thought such a thought by thinking alone.*" (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005, 970).

Producing knowledge differently[6]

Each time we as ethnographers start writing an essay, we have to make a choice of a writing format according to the research topic and our collected data. There are however, other important questions to be answered before we start writing, such as: Who is the audience? Who is the author as well as "[w]here is the author"? (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005, 973) Where do we place ourselves as authors in the text? (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005, 973) What voices do we decide to include in the writing and on the other hand, what voices do we decide to exclude? (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005, 973)

When I was dealing with my own doctoral thesis and my personal situation described above, answering those questions was crucial to the further development of the way of analysis I eventually decided to carry on with. I was struggling with the idea that should I take myself out of the research data and choose the traditional analytical style, most of the experience that I myself have gone through would either become unnoticed, hidden, or they would have to be searched for and constructed through other voice giving. I was slowly coming to the conclusion that despite my deep concerns, this time I wished to do it differently.

I wanted to use my own personal experience, reflect it thoroughly, and through a deep self-reflective practice I desired to show how my anthropological knowledge that I base my narrative upon has been constructed. By means of continual journaling about my experience of becoming a patient, I was dealing with my conflicting emotions regarding my blurred statuses, trying to gain understanding of the situation through writing. I was beginning to realize that the quest remained in entering the unknown territory and staying in the "neutral zone" (Bridges 2009, 5), without the immediate effort to understand the consequences of my doing, just experiencing it, feeling it, observing it from within. Having faith that the clarity I de-

[6] St. Pierre (1997, 175).

sired might come much later, I intuitively emerged myself in my writing, using it "as a method of inquiry" as well as "discovery" (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005).

Autoethnography: Writing Stories, Writing Lives

Despite being at the margins of the regular qualitative method of inquiry, autoethnography has a long history in ethnographic research. It has become more popular in recent years and increasingly common in a wide range of disciplines (Lapadat 2017, 589). When trying to give a name to the method and genre I was engaging in, I realized I might be doing autoethnography, however, without really knowing precisely how to. A few questions were continuously occurring in my mind throughout my writing-as-a-method-of-inquiry experience: why are there no seminars on creative writing for ethnographers? And if there are, why does it feel that if I depart from the standard way of interpretation and analytical writing format, I might be risking rejection for challenging the status quo of our discipline, unless I carefully justify my decision and prove my right to do so? Why does it feel as if my approach seems pioneering when in fact the literary turn in anthropology had already happened a long time ago? As James Clifford pointed out in 1986:

> "It has long been asserted that scientific anthropology is also an "art," that ethnographies have literary qualities." (Clifford 1986, 4)

Based on my new ways of writing and collecting different kind of "emotional data" (St. Pierre 1997), I was becoming aware of the fact that we as social scientists are expected to write a certain way, mostly without being precisely taught how to do it. During a workshop on evocative autoethnography, Art Bochner gives a question to the participants whether they knew how to do that, once they were asked to 'write up' [their] research study:

> "Lacking formal instruction, what did you do? I assume you did what most of us did. You read the research articles, monographs, and books of other researchers in your field. Perhaps you detected similarities among them and tried to model or copy the pattern. … Witnessing this uniformity, you may have reasoned that your written document should conform to this structure: *'If I deviate from this pattern, I'll be risking the scorn of my advisors or rejection from journal referees. I better master and follow the conventions*'. *"* (Bochner and Ellis 2016, 77)

It is true that autoethnography is commonly considered to be "an alternative method and form of writing" (Neville-Jan 2003, 89) and due to its intentional departure from the classic "realistic" (Van Maanen 2011) or analytical way of writing it is often understood as a bridge "between anthropology and literary studies" (Denshire 2013, 1). This aspect of autoethnography makes it "a blurred genre" (Geertz, cited in Holman Jones 2005, 765), which consequently places it at the margins of what is considered to be social science inquiry. According to Reed-Danahay:

> "The concept of autoethnography … synthesizes both a postmodern ethnography, in which the realist conventions and objective observer position of standard ethnography have been called into question, and a

> postmodern autobiography, in which the notion of the coherent, individual self has been similarly called into question. The term has a double sense – referring either to the ethnography of one's own group or to autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest." (Reed-Danahay 1997, 2).

The autobiographical aspect of autoethnography has often been the target of criticism within the social science academic circle. However, as Denshire puts it:

> "While autoethnography contains elements of autobiography, it goes beyond the writing of selves." (Denshire 2013, 2)

The difference in relationship to a writer's personal story versus the relationship to the wider social and cultural world is further reflected in the classification of two distinctive approaches within the autoethnography field: "evocative" and "analytical" autoethnography. (Denshire 2013, 3)

As autoethnography includes doing (how) as well as writing (what), it is considered to be "both process and product" (Ellis et al. 2011, 273), method and genre. One of the main advantages of using such a method of inquiry as an important research tool is the high potential of autoethnography to uncover the process of the ethnographer's mind in the middle of a reflexive analytical process: the use of reflexivity when e.g. figuring out which way to follow; solving the ethical dilemma of the everyday field; or experiencing the in-between state of transitioning times without seeing a concrete outcome when going through a deeply transformative experience.

This is the aspect of evocative autoethnography that I have found most useful in capturing my own lived and experienced reality. As I was aware of the fact that memory and related experience are "open to contradictory interpretations" (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005, 961-962), I also knew that the way I see my experience at the time of writing it would inadvertently somehow shift in the future. As being in the transition, my situation was dynamic, changeable from its very definition. I therefore felt the need to write about everything I was experiencing *at the moment* I was experiencing it, as I knew that when I would reread my notes some day in the future, I might discover important emotional data that I was not aware of at the very moment of writing (deep fears, anxieties or doubts that may dissipate after my lived experience has got more stable). Omitting this important data and relying on my memory or the factual information only, would project the described experience in a completely different light. As Richardson further explains:

> "The individual is both the site and subject of … discoursive struggles for identity and for remaking memory. Because the individual is subject to multiple and competing discourses …, one's subjectivity is shifting and contradictory – not stable, fixed, and rigid. (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005, 962)

My personal narrative became the way through which I was able to "make sense of my world" (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005, 966) and what was happening to it, as I was slowly watching it collapse. I knew there was no going back but the

future seemed unknown as I was undergoing a deep transformation of the self and its expression in the outer world. My transitional story thus gave way to a story of "becoming", where I was discovering my disappearing and newly born "self" through writing everything down, rereading my notes and reflecting on them throughout the diagnostic process period.

Two years later, when I was preparing an edited version of my thesis to be published (Wiesner 2017), I realized that most of the notes I wrote uncover my deep sense of disempowerment, which was probably apparent to the reader but not to me, the writer. As I gave voice to myself, it served me as a process of self-discovery later on when I could reflect upon the lived experience recalled from my memory, and compare it with the written journal which captured some emotional data that I was not dealing with anymore at present.

Beyond the gender binary

> "Will this chapter end with this query, or will it constitute a beginning, an opening into a conversation about where we have been and how far we have come – in being willing and able to say that we are in a moment when the point of creating autoethnographic texts is to change the world?"
>
> Stacy Holman Jones (2005, 785)

When dealing with my own conflicting emotions about the whole procedure I was going through and my blurred status after I became my main research tool, I realized that reflecting my personal experience is important for several reasons.

It was essential from the perspective of a researcher as it brought me a profound embodied experience that I directly continued to refer to in the construction of my lived knowledge. A continuous effort to use reflexivity as the main tool was therefore necessary for me to be able to trace my complicated positionality in the field.

As for the perspective of an activist and a non-binary identified transgender person, it helped me deal with my conscious going against the expected narrative. Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis define autoethnography as a method which not only "uses deep and careful self-reflection" but also "strives for social justice and to make life better" (Adams et al 2015, 2). Engaging in evocative autoethnography and a process of self-discovery through writing has also the potential to "disrupt taboos, break silences, and reclaim lost and disregarded voices." (Adams et al 2015, 36)

My experience as a non-binary person who challenges the fixed notion of gender identity as something invisible, fluid or beyond the gender binary in a way undermines the whole diagnostic process that I and my partners in research had to go through. It clearly uncovers a hidden truth, that the traditionally gender binary is

a limited scope of thinking which inevitably leads to violent practices, if it is used as an unchallenged way of diagnoses within the power of the medical system.

Using autoethnography as a method as well as creative writing format therefore gives way to "critique … existing research and theory" and to embracing "vulnerability as a way to understand emotions and social life" (Adams et al. 2015, 36):

> "Unlike more traditional research, autoethnography refuses and disrupts canonical narratives, writes against hegemonic beliefs and practices, and describes cultural experience as it is particularly – rather than generally lived. Further, in breaking the silence around understudied, hidden, and sensitive topics, autoethnographers create a textual space for talking back to neglected cultural experiences and, simultaneously, offer accounts that allow others to "bear witness" to these experiences." (Adams et al. 2015, 41)

The traditional definition of gender as a binary continuum of two ends only leads to understanding, that if one's gender identity does not match their ascribed biological sex, they must have been born in the wrong body. This narrative is however, extremely narrow, misleading and illusory for many of us. Such a view of gender as a binary invisibilizes any other (no)gender identity, subjectivity or expression apart from male or female / man or woman.

Such a limited view of what the concepts of man and woman mean not only creates a bias within the whole process of gender transition and the required diagnostic procedure, it also marginalizes and excludes people who exist beyond the gender binary system – in the fields of gender diversity, nonconformity, fluidity, from the perspective of the "Revised Gender System" (Monro 2005, 38). This revised "theoretical strategy" conceptualizes "gender as plural, and as a spectrum" (Monro 2005, 37) that "calls for new and self-conscious affirmations of different gender taxonomies" (Halberstam, cited in Monro 2005, 38).

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With respect to alternative methodological approach and writing formats I would like to conclude by stressing the unquestionable effect we ethnographers have on our field of study. We are aware that our texts were not written by our partners in research, it was *we* who wrote them. Our products simply "cannot be separated from the producer, the mode of production, or the method of knowing" (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005, 962). As Richardson further explains in relation to language as a centerpiece of poststructuralism which is "a particular part of postmodernist thinking":

> "Language does not "reflect" social reality but rather produces meaning and creates social reality … Understanding language as competing discourses – competing ways of giving meaning and of organizing the world – makes language a site of exploration and struggle." (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005, 961)

It is exactly in this sense that writing itself serves as a particular "method of inquiry" [which helps the ethnographers] to learn about themselves and their research topic" (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005, 959). Our role in the selection of the data and the process of representation is therefore undeniable, "our selves are always present [in the text] no matter how hard we try to suppress them" (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005,962). Thus:

> "[If we cannot] eliminate the influence of the observer on the observed, then no theories or findings could ever be completely free of human values. The investigator would always be implicated in the product. So why not observe the observer, focus on turning our observations back on ourselves? And why not write more directly, from the source of your own experience?" (Ellis and Bochner 2000, 747)

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