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Autoethnography as Applied Communication Research

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In this chapter, we highlight applied communication research in which evocative, critical, and performance autoethnography have been featured. We think of these autoethnographic research stories as a genre of "artful science" (Bochner, 2018a; Brady, 1991; Freeman, 2016) insofar as they apply the imaginative power of literary, dramatic, and poetic forms of expression to create the effect of reality, a convincing likeness to life as it is sensed, felt, and lived by human beings. By concentrating on actual people in dialogue with themselves, their readers, and audiences, this genre of applied communication inquiry breaks away from traditional forms of representational social science, extending the boundaries of communication research beyond the borders of the received and post-positivist views of scientific knowledge.

In his Gerald M. Phillips Award lecture, Goodall (2004) referred to these narrative forms as "a new embodiment of applied communication research," one that aims to re-establish "the centrality of personal experience and identity in the social construction of knowledge" (p. 187) by encouraging the public disclosure and exposition of otherwise unspeakable, private, and clandestine dimensions of our lives. The principle goal of this distinctively applied communication research is to produce "memorable stories—for understanding and improving human lives" (Goodall, 2004, p. 188). Moreover, these autoethnographic research stories coincide with two of the major recommendations of the 1991 Tampa Conference on "Applied Communication in the 21st Century" (Cissna, 1995) insofar as they examine and embody ethical and value issues in an accessible form, and they prioritize problems arising in the practical world (Craig, 1995), the everyday world of lived experience.

Historical Context: Why Autoethnography?

Autoethnography forsakes traditional and conventional ways of thinking, writing, and speaking about communication. Throughout the 20th century, communication research rarely focused on issues such as how to empathize with suffering people, overcoming racial, sexual, and religious persecution, eradicating systems of oppression, contesting and/or preventing global unrest, or expressing and helping people cope with heartbreaks, regrets, abuses, trauma, chronic illnesses, entrapments, and social injustices. Nor was much attention given to making communication not only *what* we study but *how* we study, *express*, and *represent* our research.

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"Why not?" you might ask. The answer is uncomplicated. As heirs of the objectivist tradition of scientific research, many communication researchers simply were unprepared to recognize that prediction and control may not be the only thing we want from communication research. We had been led to believe that the human sciences should look like the natural sciences and conduct research accordingly. As a result, our training in research methodology was largely monolithic, which had the effect of narrowing research to topics that conformed closely to the technologies of objectivist social science.

Consider for a moment how academic socialization works. When you become a member of an academic discipline, you are expected to follow certain rules. Your success depends upon it. You cannot contribute to your discipline if you do not know the rules. For the most part, you learn these rules in graduate school, where you are given concrete, relatively standard exemplars of good research that promote the discipline's shared values, conventional research practices, and taken-for-granted premises. This academic socialization provides your professional initiation as a social scientist. It teaches you the conventions by which you must abide, that is, the constellation of beliefs and research procedures defining the discipline (Bochner, 2014). You learn that the discipline is immersed in and inspired by certain problems, theories, or issues, and these are commonly investigated through the application of a narrow range of legitimate procedures and methods, what Harnett and Engles (2005) called "genre-bound traditions" (p. 1043).

By the time your socialization is completed, you will have internalized the mindset of the discipline represented by these traditions. You will also have learned how to articulate the work to which your field is committed in the vernacular of the vocabulary that governs it (Kuhn, 1970). You will recognize what counts as valid evidence, compelling arguments, and persuasive explanations. You learn—sometimes through hard knocks—that the rewards of publication are likely to be withheld from texts that fail to conform to these standards. To achieve any degree of success, you must not only follow conventions, but also know what is forbidden.

But academic disciplines are never fixed and unchanging, and neither are the research conventions that define them. Instead, they constantly evolve, not so much in the manner of the "scientific revolutions" that Kuhn (1970) described, but rather through more gradual processes of reform and extension, growing larger, stronger, and hopefully more appealing and interesting through the addition of alternatives or new options.

Nevertheless, as Haley (1963) observed in his first law of human relations, the more change is attempted, the more it is resisted. As new goals and practices begin to emerge, researchers identified with older, existing, and once irreproachable goals and traditions—the very ones they were trained to abide by and keep to—may begin to feel as if the discipline's view of the world is being challenged and weakened by the introduction of new methodologies, diverse goals, and novel ways of justifying, depicting, and narrating research. This new "jargon" is unfamiliar, abnormal, and unsettling to them. They worry about what will happen to the discipline if these new objectives, methodologies, and vocabulary take hold. How then will they know what counts as significant work? Will the discipline lose its hard-earned respectability as a science?

Kuhn (1970) described these moments in the history of science as an extraordinary atmosphere of crisis that opens the discipline to a clash between the ruling paradigm (standards) and new contenders for paradigm status. At such a time, those attached to the existing paradigm begin to fear the loss of the kind of intersubjective agreement among practitioners considered essential to a "unified" field and to the capacity to reach agreement about what to believe, that is, what criteria can be applied as a measure of "objectivity" or "truth." They do not know precisely what to make of this moment. From what they can tell, a sudden wave of new possibilities has appeared on the horizon, destabilizing the status quo, transgressing traditional standards, and signaling a strong desire to try new things that may transform, or at least broaden, the constellation of beliefs and values of the field.

Those holding tight to the discipline's orthodoxy begin feeling the kind of vulnerability that arises when one's grip on power is coming undone. They may see no choice other than to react to the idea of new options, different goals, and diverse methodologies as adversarial rivals threatening the vitality, unity, and respectability of the field. Of course, this is neither unusual nor unexpected insofar as communities tend to achieve their identities and sense of self-worth as much by exclusion as by inclusion (Bochner, 2018a; MacIntyre, 1984).

This was the condition in which communication scholars identifying as social or behavioral scientists found themselves during the 1980s. Most of these empiricists, including one of the authors of this chapter, had been socialized into the *objectivist* paradigm of "truth through method" in which the goal of scientific inquiry was to identify underlying structures, cultural invariants, and/or biologically determined effects to better *predict and control.* In general, social scientists in the discipline shared a common set of institutionalized criteria for judging whether truth claims were well justified.

In several essays dealing with "Perspectives on Inquiry," however, Bochner (1985, 1994, 2002) described and differentiated three different and legitimate goals that could be pursued in communication research: *prediction and control*; *interpretation and understanding*; and *criticism and social change.* Characterizing each perspective as "a different universe of discourse"—a distinct vocabulary representing different ways of describing and doing things with human beings—Bochner (1985) argued that each perspective may prove *useful* depending on the purposes to which it is *applied.* None should be viewed as the one and only suitable perspective for conducting and representing research on communication.

Bochner's call for multiple perspectives was inspired by the "paradigm debates" of the late 1970s and early 1980s. In these interchanges, communication researchers working both inside and outside the positivist establishment (Cushman, 1977; Miller, 1983; Pearce, 1976; Pearce & Cronen, 1980), and other postmodernist and poststructuralist writers of the time, challenged and deconstructed some of the most venerable notions about scientific knowledge and truth (Foucault, 1970; Lyotard, 1984; Rorty, 1979). The most disapproving of these writers raised doubts about the validity of rigid disciplinary boundaries that separate the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and arts, and denounced uncritical commitment to the rhetoric of rigor and objectivity (Agger, 1989; Gergen, 1982). Concerned about the shady ethics and limited achievements of the "received view" of social science, critics who were themselves trained in these traditions began to speak of a crisis of confidence, legitimation, and representation, calling for radical transformation in the goals and aspirations of social science inquiry (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Coser, 1975; Cronbach, 1975; Elms, 1975; Gergen, 1976, 1978, 1980; Israel & Tajfel, 1972).

One of the most influential of these writers was anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973, 1980), who not only blurred the distinctions between the humanities and social sciences, but also insisted that the observer had no privileged interpretive voice. Researchers do more than observe; they play a part in the whole process of observation and interpretation (Bateson, 1972). Geertz (1973) also urged staying as close as possible to the experience of the people studied, applying "experience-near" concepts. The goal is "interpretation," a thick description of the meanings prompted by close reading of communicative practices. This "interpretive" orientation introduced a new vocabulary into the research vernacular and created abundant and widening opportunities to reform social science and expand the objectives and forms of research on communication. We could now understand research as oriented not only toward facts, but also toward *meanings*; not only under the rules of rigor, but also under the inspiration of the *imagination*; not only to achieve better predictions, but also to *alleviate human suffering*; not only from the position of neutrality and distance, but also from the position of *caring and vulnerability*; not only toward the production of conventional received texts, but also toward the *performance* of creative, artistic, and dialogic modes of representing lived experience (Bochner, 2002).

The Human Sciences as Moral, Political, and Narrative

As the twentieth century drew to a close, a growing community of qualitative researchers who dared to view research as a moral, political, and narrative endeavor had begun to emerge. They were inspired by the practical, pragmatic, and political goals of enlarging and deepening the capacity of human beings *to empathize with suffering people* and *to cope with complicated contingencies of lived experience*. Their project was more about "making" than about "finding," that is, research directed principally toward making a better world populated by freer and more democratic communities (Rorty, 1991). It is one thing to describe the world as it is, but quite another to imagine what the world could become and to seek to bring the imagined into being through inquiry. The dissimilarity between finding and making is not an issue to be resolved but rather a difference to be lived with (Rorty, 1982).

Viewing social science as continuous with rather than distinct from literature, qualitative researchers committed to this project want to artfully arrange depictions of the mysteries and complications of being alive in stories that can help people cope better, feel less alone, and achieve the social justice they deserve (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). The kind of empirical inquiry that we practice is practical and dialogic; its truths are partial, situated, relational, and incomplete. Our work seeks conversation, encounter, and the fullness of an emotional and subjective life shared with others. We seek to empower our readers, not control them, and to wrestle with ambiguities and contradictions, not resolve or exhaust them. We understand the research stories we produce as an instrument for dealing with loss, grief, injustice, trauma, and life-changing epiphanies through performative recreations of lived-through experiences. Uneasy about the obscurity, insularity, and jargon of academic publishing, we seek to reach a larger readership that can benefit from our work. Thus, we think of ourselves not only as researchers, but also as writers and communicators. Communication is not only what we study, but how we represent and express what we study.

Though our discipline is communication studies, we are participants in an international community of thousands of multidisciplinary qualitative researchers—sociologists, communication scholars, psychologists, social workers, psychotherapists, performance artists, music educators, educational researchers, and ethnographers—who have come together each May since 2005 at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI) held at the University of Illinois, with the purpose in common of exploring new methodologies and forms of presentation, and collectively imagining and formulating risky, experimental, and innovative responses to the challenges and crises of global unrest, political polarization, racial, sexual, and religious persecution, personal suffering, trauma, and social injustice. We and our colleagues at ICQI share the goal of resisting and eradicating discrimination in its myriad forms, engaging in ethical work, experimenting with traditional and new technologies of representation, and producing exemplars of effective advocacy and inquiry applicable to making a more just and humane world. Our co-participants at these meetings dare to dream of equity, peace, and a world without violence and discrimination. As a research community, we share a heartfelt commitment to doing work that makes a difference.

Toward a Poetic Science

In this spirit, and with the goal of making the human sciences more human, Freeman (2011, 2016) has issued a clarion call for *a poetic science of human being* that is more historical, cultural, and artful than orthodox social science. It promotes forms of representation that allow the people that social scientists study "'to live on the page,' in their difference, their otherness" (2016, p. 359). As a writing or performance project, poetic science moves from a reliance on argument to dependence on the poetic resonance of evocation (Freeman, 2016). Freeman's

conception of poetic science features forms of expression now well established within qualitative inquiry, including narrative and performance ethnography, and evocative and critical autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Boylorn & Orbe, 2014). Applied communication researchers who have identified with the project of artful science seek to help others understand themselves and the contingencies of living better lives, to cope more effectively with the emotional challenges of disappointments, wounds, humiliations, illnesses, and aggressions one may face in everyday life, and to produce more just societies.

We autoethnographers believe that by going deeply, reflexively, and evocatively into our own struggles, our readers may be able to discern and understand something about their own—that our difficulties and struggles are applicable to theirs. We want our readers to feel stuff in their bones, their guts, and their hearts. We do not mind if our work is considered more visceral than cognitive. We believe that doing this requires an artfulness—the artifice of narrative—and as writers and/or performance artists, we feel a necessary tension between producing something that is lifelike through a form that is story-like (Singer, 2013).

The focus of evocative and critical autoethnography is less about knowing and more about *living*; less about controlling and more about *caring*; less about reaching immutable truths and more about *opening dialogues* among different points of view; less about resolving differences and more about *learning how to live and cope* with them; less about covering life experience with disembodied concepts and more about *finding ways to personify* the "untamed wilderness" of lived experience (Jackson, 1995). These texts and performances aim *to be used by* and *to be useful to* other people and communities and thus are situated unequivocally in the realm of applied communication. If they do not "apply" to other people, if they cannot be used to evoke identification, to make others care, to affect social change, to call people to action, or to make lives better, then they fail to live up to their promise or achieve their principle goals.

Instead of going beyond, searching beneath, or edging behind—as Jackson says (1995, p. 163) "putting reality on the rack until it reveals objective truth"—researchers drawn to this kind of artful, poetic social science want their work to produce "experiences of the experience" (Bochner & Ellis, 1992; Ellis & Bochner, 1992). We want our readers to enter the experience of others, usually as empathic witnesses. By putting themselves in the place of others, readers or listeners are positioned to reflect critically on their own experiences, to expand their social capabilities, and to deepen their commitment to social justice, activism, and caring relationships with others. The goal of this kind of evocative storytelling (Bochner & Ellis, 2016), referred to by Richardson (2000) as "creative analytic practices," is to put meanings into motion, showing how people cope with exceptional, difficult, and transforming crises in their lives, how they invent new ways of speaking when old ways fail them, how they make the absurd sensible and the disastrous manageable, and how they turn calamities into gifts.

The body of communication research to which we are referring offers a distinctive alternative to traditional canons of research practices in the social sciences. These stories (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015; Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Boylorn & Orbe, 2014) seek to activate subjectivity and compel emotional responses from readers; they long to be used rather than analyzed, to be told and retold rather than theorized and settled, to offer lessons for further conversation rather than truths without any rivals, and they promise the companionship of intimate details as a substitute for the loneliness of abstracted facts. Evocative research stories not only breach ordinary and canonical inscriptions about living, they often transgress traditional norms of writing and research, encouraging researchers in the human sciences to reconsider, or at least expand, the goals of research and the conventions of academic writing (Billig, 2013), as well as to question the venerable divisions between Snow's conception (1959) of the two cultures of inquiry that segregate literature from science, the humanities from the social sciences.

Many of the chapter authors in this book think of themselves as social scientists and of the constellation of this body of work as the human sciences. But just how social are the social sciences? And how human can the human sciences claim to be if so much of the work we produce

is “unpopulated writing,” that is, writing that makes little reference to actual people and their lives (Billig, 2013, p. 95)? Indeed, as Billig advises, “we should be suspicious of unpopulated writings which seem to depict social worlds full of things and empty of people” (p. 215).

Origins

In 1992, Ellis and Bochner published, “Telling and Performing Personal Stories: The Constraints of Choice in Abortion,” which used personal narrative to express the emotional complexities, contradictions, and uncertainty of a tense epiphany that had challenged their core values and jeopardized their relationship. Offering their story as an experimental form of narrating personal experience in which researchers treat their experience as primary data, Ellis and Bochner (1992) used a dialogic mode of narration to depict the emotional details of what they had experienced over several weeks of a grueling decision-making process. Their goal was to provide readers with an experiential sense of these “real-world” events and thus come away with a sense of what it must have felt like to have “lived through” what actually happened (Bochner & Ellis, 1992).

This was their first joint venture into what they (and others) would later call “autoethnography” (Adams et al., 2015; Bochner, 2018a; Bochner & Ellis, 2002, 2016; Ellis, 1997, 1998, 2004, 2009; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013). They could have called what they were doing “personal essay” (Krieger, 1991), “socioautobiography” (Zola, 1982), “confessional tale” (Van Maanen, 1988), “ethnographic autobiography” (Brandes, 1982), “self-ethnography” (Caughey, 1982), or “personal ethnography” (Crawford, 1996), but landed instead on “first-person account” and “evocative narrative” as their initial covering terms.

In 1995, Ellis published *Final Negotiation: A Story of Love, Loss, and Illness* in which she conveyed what it felt like to have lived for 9 years concurrently as a caregiver and a lover to a partner who died after a long struggle with emphysema. Writing from “inside” her own experiences, Ellis showed how she and her partner had wrestled against emptiness and isolation, fighting to create meaning and purpose out of the chaos of two lives shattered by loss and saturated with grief. While working on the book, she thought of the story at various times as autoethnography, but opted to use *emotional sociology*, *evocation*, and *autobiographical sociology* as keywords and headings in the index to her book.

Around the same time, Ellis and Bochner (1996) decided to put together a collection of original essays, studies, and stories that would extend and explore the use of the first-person voice, the appropriation of literary modes of writing for utilitarian ends, and the complications of being positioned within the events and experiences one is studying. They settled on the terms *autoethnography*, *sociopoetics*, and *reflexivity* as subheadings to represent these three goals in the edited collection that became *Composing Ethnography* (Ellis & Bochner, 1996), the first text in their book series, *Ethnographic Alternatives*. The book series was conceived as a project that would emphasize subjectivity, self-reflexivity, emotionality, and the goal of connecting social sciences to humanities through first-person, ethnographic storytelling. They wanted readers of these books to find themselves immersed in the concrete world—particular people in particular places facing particular, often difficult, circumstances of lived experience (Conquergood, 1991). The following year, they collaborated with Lisa Tillmann-Healy on a book chapter that endorsed the use of first-person accounts in research on personal relationships (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997); Ellis published her first book chapter on evocative autoethnography (Ellis, 1997) and another on the use of autoethnography to explore loss (Ellis, 1998); and Deborah Reed-Danahay’s (1997) collection of essays, *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social*, was published.

In 1997, Norman Denzin published *Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century* in which he praised efforts to make social science texts “a means for the reader’s own moral experience” (p. 202), and called special attention to *narratives of the self* that “show

us how to feel the sufferings of others" (p. 201), privilege emotions and emotionality, and "humanize the ethnographic disciplines" (p. 215). Although the term *autoethnography* appeared only once in Denzin's text, as a footnote to Ellis's chapter on evocative autoethnography, he must have intuited the enormous potential of autoethnography; he invited Ellis and Bochner to author the first handbook chapter that would explicitly highlight autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), a chapter that 14 years later received the National Communication Association's Charles Woolbert Award for scholarship that stood the test of time.

Autoethnography and Applied Communication Research

Ellis and Bochner (2000) define autoethnography as "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth, autoethnographers gaze, first, through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond recognition" (p. 739). Usually written in the first-person voice, autoethnographic texts take a variety of forms—short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, documentaries, photographic essays, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose. In these texts, concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness are featured in relational, family, institutional, and community stories affected by history, social structure, and culture, which themselves are revealed through action, feeling, thought, and language (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). In short, autoethnography bends the customary "rigorous" ways of doing social science research—neutral tone, fact-based exposition, third-person voice—toward a fresh approach to "re-presenting" realities of lived experience in storied forms (Bochner & Ellis, 2016).

We want to emphasize four points related to this definition:

1. We depict autoethnography as an orientation (a mindset as well as a set of practices) and call attention to the use of ordinary, non-technical language (and/or performing) as central to the autoethnographic perspective.
2. We emphasize both the ethnographic, outward lens (toward culture) and the autobiographic, inward scrutiny (toward the self) of a vulnerable observer (Behar, 1996).
3. We normalize, but qualify, the first-person voice as usual but not imperative, emphasizing the variety of forms autoethnography can take, as well as the numerous and diverse stylistic features by which concrete action is expressed.
4. We underscore the necessity of representing multiple layers of consciousness, self-consciousness, and reflection that embody autoethnography's desire to cope with dilemmas and contradictions of being alive and to deal with blows of fate and epiphanies of circumstance.

Autoethnography inhabits a space between science and art; between epistemology and ontology; between facts and meanings; between experience and language; between the highly stylized conventions of fact-based reporting and the unfixed alternatives of literary, poetic, and dramatic exposition; between a cold and rational objectivity and a hot and visceral emotionality; between a commitment to document the reality of what actually happened and a desire to produce narratives than can make readers feel the truth of the story coursing through their blood and guts. Many autoethnographies deal with the pain, suffering, and tragedy of human existence, but happiness is at stake in every autoethnographic story of suffering (Bochner, 2012a). Indeed, the possibility of happiness in the presence of suffering is central to

the whole project of autoethnography. The autoethnographer attempts "to thread the unsteady needle of tragedy with the emancipating grace of consciousness" (Bochner, 2017, p. 72).

Autoethnography promotes several of the deep-seated values and objectives of applied communication research. First, *the appeal and mission of autoethnography is usefulness.* Autoethnography values *praxis.* Autoethnographers advocate for and engage in "practical, reflective, pragmatic actions" aimed at coping with or solving "problems in the world" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 27). Conquergood (1995) insists that the "scholarly commitment of the engaged intellectual is to praxis, not detachment," which he defines as a "combination of analytical rigor, participatory practice, critical reflection, and political struggle" (p. 85). The engagement inherent in autoethnographic praxis thus requires taking a stand (Conquergood, 1995). You must position yourself ethically, politically, and conceptually, refusing to mask the ideals for which you are working. You do not take cover behind neutrality. Autoethnographies that embody praxis foreground personal, relational, or social problems, engage in critical reflection, and refuse to withhold the values and beliefs of the authors. Recent examples include those expressing concern about and mourning the election of Donald Trump in the United States (Bochner, 2018b; Ellis & Rawicki, 2018; Pelias, 2018); reacting to the Pulse Nightclub massacre in Orlando, Florida (Adams, 2018; Alexander & Weems, 2017); and troubling media representations of race, ethnicity, and class (Alexander, 2015; Dunn, 2019).

Second, *autoethnography appeals to the conscience of the human sciences, offering an ethical design for an artful science of meanings, sensemaking, social justice, and bodily experience.* Autoethnographers often focus on stories that have been shrouded in secrecy—hidden or silenced stories that may shame others into acknowledging truths few people dare to tell. Autoethnographic representations encourage researchers and readers alike. Autoethnography assumes that the human sciences should play a significant role in the betterment of human life and the achievement of social justice.

Third, *autoethnographies seek to move their audiences in the direction of the good and the just.* Autoethnographic stories often show people living through conditions of trauma, pain, and suffering. Readers are encouraged to live in the reality of the story and to allow the story to analyze them. Private troubles are thereby transformed into public plights. The reader often is confronted with hidden dimensions of the structures of power within everyday life and can gain awareness of how these structures penetrate and shape even the micro-interactions of everyday communication (Conquergood, 1995). By exposing these dynamics, autoethnography urges readers not only to understand the workings of power but to do something about them by engaging in activism that can correct and/or transform social injustices.

Fourth, *autoethnographies promote a relational ethics of caring and community, an engaged and passionate human science that requires researchers and readers to develop caring relationships with others instead of standing apart from them in the name of rigor and objectivity.* Autoethnographic stories often highlight the need for compassion, empathy, and a more caring, loving world. Readers are asked to open their hearts as well as their heads and listen attentively to stories that feel raw, cut deep, and resist distance and abstraction.

Fifth, autoethnography is a unique form of academic storytelling that seeks to capture the emotional and subjective truths of the interactional situations it depicts, a storytelling art that, like all memory work, merges the real and the imaginary, the factual and the fictional, with the goal of producing stories that breathe, move, and arouse. As researchers, autoethnographers observe, document, interview, reflect, conceptualize, and theorize in a similar way to other applied communication researchers. As writers, autoethnographers struggle through their awareness of the fissures between experience and words, between living through and narrating about, between the chaos and fragmentation of living a life and the smoothing orderliness we tend to bring to lived experience when we write as do most writers of nonfiction and fiction. Remaining conscientiously faithful to what they remember happening, autoethnographers can take a more relaxed attitude toward literal accuracy as they seek to connect with readers in ways that will make the

readers identify with them, feeling and understanding what they themselves felt and understood. Their goal is to produce a story with poetic resonance, one that maintains fidelity with the experiences they are narrating (Freeman, 2016). Recognizing that autoethnography is a composition, autoethnographers do not so much seek to transmit facts but rather *to move meanings* (Bochner, 2012c) by gaining the reader's belief that they are digging for truth, honestly trying to get to the bottom of things (Gornick, 2008). Autoethnography thus fuses ethnography with literary art in an effort to transfer feeling from one person's heart to another's (Shields, 2013).

Sixth, *autoethnography is a communicative practice that grounds dense and abstract communication theory in concrete and practical circumstances.* Communication theories are a means of making sense of experience, understanding patterned responses, and making predictions about what might occur in or after a particular interactional experience. From an applied perspective—one that advocates practicality and the improvement of living conditions—autoethnography embodies communication theories, concepts, and philosophies in a storied form that shows (rather than tells) how people use communication to live through, with, and sometimes beyond difficult situations (Goodall, 2004). Further, autoethnographic stories offer insight into and explanations of epiphanies, teach moral lessons, and perform identity work. By bending conventions of academic expression, autoethnographies often reveal a harmonious connection between theory and story (Bochner, 1994; Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Bochner, 1995). Examples of researchers who have explicitly engaged with and embedded communication theory in autoethnographic stories include Herrmann (2007), who used relational dialectics in an autoethnographic story as a way to understand the ending of a romantic relationship, and Adams (2006, 2012), who used a relational systems perspective in an autoethnographic story in which he struggles to make sense of the relationship between his father and himself. Contributors to *Critical Autoethnography* (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014) also merge autoethnography with theories principally associated with communication, such as symbolic interaction, standpoint theory, relational dialectics, cultural theory, sensemaking, and the coordinated management of meaning.

Seventh, *autoethnography provides access to hard-to-observe communication contexts and issues such as microaggressions in face-to-face communication and experiences of extensive loss and grief over time.* Members of groups that have been historically subjected to discrimination and oppression commonly experience microaggressions. These experiences are difficult to reproduce or study experimentally because of the ethical conundrums they pose, as are longitudinal experiences of grief, loss, and psychological trauma associated with chronic illness, disability, and sexual assault. Researchers have used autoethnography to examine these normally inaccessible microaggressions directed at women, racial minorities, indigenous persons, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons, persons with disabilities, and immigrants. As Sue (2017, p. 172) observed, "Microaggressions are about experiential reality and about listening to the voices of those most oppressed, ignored, and silenced. Those voices tell stories of the many hurts, humiliations, and lost opportunities" they come up against in a harsh and unwelcoming environment. Autoethnographers studying microaggressions use vulnerable observations of their own experiences to document intentional or unintentional verbal and nonverbal slights or insults that communicate hostility, insensitivity, derogation, and other negative messages. These microaggressions invalidate, demean, intimidate, and dehumanize group identities of individuals, yet are not universally acknowledged as discriminatory. For example, Adams (2011) and Boylorn (2011) have described microaggressions related to sexual identity and race that occurred while grocery shopping.

The intimate and emotional experiences of grief, loss, oppression, and end of life encounters have been relatively neglected in empirical research on communication because traditional research methodologies promote distance and detachment, making such deep, private, and guarded experiences difficult and uncomfortable for third-party researchers to access. But autoethnography, as a technology of personal witnessing, is ideally suited to produce believable first-person accounts of living, suffering, and dying against which readers can measure their own

experiences. For example, Brommel (2017) treated his own experience in a dialysis clinic as data to invite readers into the intrapersonal and interpersonal communication of a person suffering from chronic kidney failure; Collins (2017) and Jago (2002, 2011) provided evocative accounts of their own experiences of living with and through depression; Bochner (2014) composed an evocative account of his partner's bipolar illness; Ellis (2019) and Paxton (2018) published evocative narratives about coping with grief, loss, and death; Berry (2016) recounted multiple narratives—including his own experience as an adolescent—focusing on how adolescents experienced and agonized over bullying; and Boylorn (2017), Dunn (2019), and Lensmire (2017) conveyed stories of resilience in the face of adversity in situations of class, race, and ethnic inequity and prejudice.

Eighth, *autoethnography merges painstaking conceptual and empirical work (ethnography) with taxing artistic labor (aesthetics)*. Autoethnographers must recount what they remember, retelling events and experiences usually in the form of a written, spoken, or performed story. When this occurs, autoethnography becomes a storytelling art that merges the real and the imaginary, the factual and the fictional. The goal is to produce writing that lives—stories that breathe, move, and arouse. As researchers, we observe, document, interview, reflect, conceptualize, and/or theorize. As writers, we shape, structure, organize, stylize, and/or dramatize. Our allegiance is to real events as we understand them, but our focus now shifts to the work of making a story of these incidents. We have to decide how we are going to stage the "facts" (happenings), how we are going to color and shade them. We become artists fashioning an emotional experience for the reader. In transforming the experiences we've lived through into language, we are confronted with the fissures between experience and words. The truths we try to capture are usually emotional truths. We are ethically bound to remain conscientiously faithful to the story, but we want readers to identify with us, to feel and understand what we felt and understood. In short, we try to produce a story with poetic resonance, one that maintains fidelity with the experiences we lived through.

Ninth, *autoethnographies often serve a critical function, identifying, resisting, and proposing alternatives to canonical narratives that promote unjust, discriminatory, or questionable cultural values and practices.* Critical autoethnography identifies instances of power and privilege, and oppressions associated with beliefs and practices that produce inequities and disadvantages for particular groups and identities. The goal is to produce *counterstories* as a means of resistance and repair for people suffering the diminished moral agency associated with oppressive canonical identities (Nelson, 2001).

"Oppression often infiltrates a person's consciousness, so that she comes to operate, from her own point of view, as her oppressors want her to, rating herself as they rate her" (Nelson, 2001, p. 7). When this happens, a person's identity is damaged. To become a moral agent in one's own right, agency must be freed from the grips of oppressive master narratives. An identity damaged by oppressive master narratives must be repaired. *Critical autoethnography* becomes a means of resistance and repair for people suffering the diminished moral agency associated with oppressive canonical identities. The autoethnographic counterstory is a purposeful attempt to shift the meaning of a person's or community's social identity by dislodging the oppressive qualities of a master narrative and opening opportunities for alternatives that promote personal agency. Master narratives that construct images and identities of the elderly, gender, race, sexuality, class, and disability can be neutralized by counterstories that directly contest the narratives they resist and repudiate, offering the potential for wide circulation. For example, Berry and Adams (2016) critique the idea of families as "involuntary" relationships and assumptions that family members are tied together without choice, whereas friend relationships are merely "voluntary." Pensoneau-Conway (2017) illustrates issues of "adultism" and how roles of "adult" and "children" can be rigid, oppressive, and deny the agency of children. Faulkner (2014) offers critical observations and commentary about parenting—feelings that should be more widely shared and celebrated, yet are often shrouded in secrecy and shame. Crouse-Dick (2013) writes about the pressure she

felt in her religious community for being unable to conceive a child. Zibricky (2014) admits being caught between conflicting assumptions about who a "good" mother is or should be. These critical autoethnographies seek more humane and just relationships between partners and among family members, using personal experience to offer alternative ways to think about and live in close relationships.

Tenth, *autoethnography produces moral discourse that focuses on the fullness of living with others over time in relationships immersed in difficult choices, ambiguities, contradictions, and uncertainties.* They do what other work in the human sciences cannot do, or chooses not to do, to provide a means for the reader's own moral experience and show us how to feel the sufferings of others (Bochner, 2017). Autoethnographic storytellers expect readers to interact *with* their stories, to plunge in, using all the senses available to them, feeling the stories' tensions, experiencing the dilemmas or contradictions, and living in storied realities for a time. When readers engage with a story this way, they allow themselves to consider the ways in which the story relates to their lives and to find in this connection some truth about themselves (Frank, 1995). This makes autoethnography practically indistinguishable from the broad mission of applied communication. Picking from the ripened fruit of their lived experience, autoethnographers often interrogate various ways of dealing with life in the here and now by reflecting on a particular there and then, putting their consciousness on the page, and thereby showing how a person might endure life's injustice, pain, and suffering, or escape it, or cope with it—going deeper and deeper into the darkness of what Paget (1993) called "a complex sorrow."

In the final sections of this chapter, we provide a selective summary of autoethnographic literature applicable to applied communication research. We conclude with exemplars in which autoethnography has been applied to the study of microaggressions and academic practices in universities.

A Synopsis of Autoethnographic Literature

At the time of this writing, we found more than 43,000 entries for "autoethnography" on Google Scholar, more than half of them since 2014. Space limitations rule out any serious attempt we could make to synthesize this entire literature. Instead, we have produced a *representative* summary of autoethnographic research projects that focus on the following topics (see Table 39.1): (a) researchers who have used, or argued for, autoethnography in applied communication research; (b) autoethnographies about key communication contexts; (c) autoethnographies about identities; (d) autoethnographies that foreground experiences with grief and loss, illness, or trauma; (e) autoethnographies that promote compassion, empathy, healing, and/or forgiveness; (f) autoethnographies about academic politics, practices, and socialization; and (g) autoethnographies that foreground politics and social justice.

Exemplar I: Microaggressions (Tony)

Much of my autoethnographic research has aligned with the goals of applied communication research. I have used autoethnography to identify contestable cultural values, practices, and assumptions related to sexuality, and I have advocated for "practical, reflective, pragmatic action—directed toward solving the problems in the world" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 27). I focus on issues of "marginalization" and "justice" (Frey, 1998, p. 157), and I write to make a difference, improve relationships, and promote compassion, empathy, and healing.

I have used autoethnography to identify microaggressions—common, mundane instances of disconfirmation and discrimination—regarding sexuality, such as heteronormative assumptions about marriage and reproduction, supposed consequences of homosexuality and ascriptions of

Table 39.1 Autoethnography and applied communication.

Conceptualizing and legitimizing autoethnography in applied communication research	Adelman and Frey (2001), Ashcraft and Tretheway (2004), Berry and Patti (2015), Ellingson (2009), Goodall (2004), Kramer (2018), Miller (2002), Tillmann (2009a, 2009b)
Autoethnographies focusing on particular communication contexts, for example, interpersonal, family, organizational, performance, health, media and popular culture	Interpersonal: Adams (2010), Berry (2016), Marvasti (2005); family: Berry and Adams (2016), Bochner (2012b), Boylorn (2017), Goodall (2006), Holman Jones (2005), Pensoneau-Conway (2017), Poulos (2009), Wyatt and Adams (2014); organizational: Herrmann (2017), Sambrook and Herrmann (2018); performance: Denzin (2018), Spry (2011, 2016), Pelias (2018); health: Brommel (2017), Ellis (2014a), Hodges (2015); media and popular culture: Dunn (2019), Manning and Adams (2015)
Autoethnographies focusing on identities and identity work, for example, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, ability, aging	Adams (2011), Alexander (2014), Boylorn (2017), Berry (2016), Boylorn and Orbe (2014), Chawla and Atay (2018), Diversi and Moreira (2018), Dunn (2019), Eguchi (2015), Ellis (2014a), Faulkner (2018), Hodges (2015), Luckett (2017), Peters (2018), Scott (2015), Tillmann (2015)
Autoethnographies that foreground experiences with grief and loss, illness, or trauma	Anderson (2017), Berry (2014, 2016), Collins (2017), Crouse-Dick (2013), Defenbaugh (2011), Doshi (2014), Ellis (2011, 2014b, 2019), Ellis et al. (2018), Ivey (2015), Jago (2002, 2011), McGreehan (2017), Paxton (2018), Ronai (1995, 1996), Speedy (2016), Tamas (2011), Tillmann (2009b), Wyatt (2008)
Autoethnographies that promote compassion, empathy, healing, and/or forgiveness	Adams (in press), Berry and Patti (2015), Bochner (2012a, 2012b, 2012c), Ellis and Patti (2014), Ellis and Rawicki (2013, 2017), Holman Jones and Adams (2014), Myers (2012), Rosario-Ramos (2018)
Autoethnographies about academic politics, practices, and socialization	Alexander (2015), Bochner (2014), Calafell (2007, 2017), Ellis et al. (2011, 2017), Faulkner and Adams (forthcoming), Foster (2017), Frentz (2008), Herrmann (2012), Pelias (2000), Pillay, Naicker, and Pithouse-Morgan (2016), Rambo (2016), Richardson (1997), Robinson and Clardy (2010), Rushing (2006)
Autoethnographies that foreground politics and social justice	Alexander (2014), Alexander and Weems (2017), Boylorn and Orbe (2014), Ceisel and Salvo (2018), Diversi and Moreira (2018), Gutierrez-Perez (2017), Holman Jones (2018), Spry (2016), Tillmann (2015), Toyosaki and Pensoneau-Conway (2013)

sexual abnormality, and moments when others deny the existence and prevalence of heterosexism and homophobia (Nadal, 2013). In addition to identifying microaggressions, I describe why others, if they care about lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer persons, should recognize and challenge microaggressions when they occur and acknowledge and celebrate the humanity of non-heterosexual others.

Research that identifies and documents microaggressions can help people recognize microaggressions and how they may harm others. We also need more research about living with others who have committed, and may continue to commit, microaggressions. This is the task of my recent work (Adams, 2017; in press). Particularly, I ask: How do we live with others who have harmed, and continue to harm, others in terms of sexuality? How do we relate to others who have committed significant, even severe, heterosexist and homophobic slights? Do—should—we make space for them in our lives?

I assume that we all commit offenses, sometimes severe, sometimes unconscious or unintentional, and we must often interact with others who have committed slights against us. We might say or do the wrong thing, deny or dismiss the significance of a slight, and fail to realize that a

trivial act for us might be significant to others. Communicative strategies for image repair such as "corrective action" and "minimization" can help address such harms (Benoit, 1997), yet these concepts do not explain how victims might live with offenders across the life span of months and years after an offense has occurred. I thus turn to other concepts, such as apology, reconciliation, and forgiveness, to consider how a victim may (or may refuse to) overcome resentment and contempt toward an offender.

Although my recent research focuses on issues of sexuality, I intend for my examples and analysis to be applicable to other situations constituted by harm, such as sexual assaults and harassments identified by the #MeToo movement, brutal acts and the need for #BlackLivesMatter, and mass murders grounded in discrimination such as those at the Pulse Nightclub or the Tree of Life Synagogue. Particularly, I wonder: How do we live with others who have committed such crimes? How do we live with those who praise, ignore, or dismiss the significance of these events? Like Cissna (2000), I write "not only to understand the world, but also to change it, in some respect, with luck, in a positive direction" (pp. 170–171).

Exemplar II: Academic Practices (Arthur)

In 2007, I attempted to facilitate a critical self-examination of institutional practices within the discipline of communication and the effect of the corporatization of universities on our teaching and research. In *Spectra*, the official National Communication Association (NCA) newsletter, I composed a series of op-ed columns, inviting feedback on several institutional practices that rarely get discussed openly. In "Things That Boggle My Mind," I lamented the degradation of standards of civility in the classroom due largely to the rapid development of technologies of distance and the absence of rules for their use. In "Resisting Institutional Depression," I pondered the causes of burnout and sadness etched on the faces of so many mid-life academics, and the demoralization and demonization that arise as a result of the divide between administration and faculty. "The Case Against the Anonymous Culture of Peer Review" was my attempt to show that the double-blind system of peer review in academic journals is a socially constructed idea that does not necessarily achieve its intent of quality control due to reviewer fatigue, possible corruptions and delays in process, and the ironic absence of empirical validation of its practices.

I never imagined that I would touch a nerve in so many readers. These autoethnographic accounts produced dozens of responses over email, and many requests to be reprinted in college and university newspapers. Several readers asked for permission to include various segments in memos to Deans and other academic administrators. Apparently, the fruit of academic self-examination was ripe for the picking.

Encouraged by these affirming responses, I decided to trust my perception that I had tapped into feelings that have been deeply submerged in the lived experiences of academics. I saw an urgent need for reflexive self-criticism of the organizational and pedagogical practices in the discipline of communication and of the life we call "academic." In *Coming to Narrative: A Personal History of Paradigm Change in the Human Sciences* (Bochner, 2014), I used my experiences of nearly 50 years in the classroom and in the discipline of communication to raise vexing questions with which I had been struggling over the entire course of my academic life. I wanted to write a book that could be used by graduate students during a formative period of their introduction to the discipline, when they are building an identity but also fearful of losing their security. "By what rules should one live one's academic life?" I asked. Should it be by obligation or inspiration? I wanted readers to see how difficult it can be to overcome the resistance built into the stories we inherit about what constitutes legitimate research, and how easily a person can become bound through the mentoring process to something they may not really want and did not choose for themselves.

My current autoethnographic work focuses on the ways in which universities are failing their faculties, and the faculties of many departments are failing each other. As Tompkins (1996) observed, our universities (and many departments) are not nurturing environments; they pay little or no attention to how faculty feel, or to the reality of their private lives and the skills they need to negotiate the connections between academic and personal life. In many cases, faculty do not apply the practices and skills they teach to their undergraduate and graduate students. Consider, for example, my own department of communication. When faced with a divisive and potentially catastrophic conflict, nine faculty members declined an invitation to meet face-to-face with the dean of the college and chair of the department to discuss ongoing conflicts in the department because, in their words, they were "suffering from exhaustion." Imagine that, a communication department in which a significant number of faculty members refuse to communicate with each other openly. I am reminded of Gornick's (1996) explanation of the consequences of such inaction: "Here at the university, the pain lingers. I cannot clear out. It is hard to heal. Because it is hard to heal I must defend myself: close off, grow scar tissue, thicken my hide. Speech becomes guarded. I give up expressiveness" (p. 135).

Though we academics are taught to be critical and analytical, we rarely turn our critical acumen on ourselves and our institutional practices. Unless we are able and willing to talk about how we talk with each other in profoundly self-critical ways, we will continue to find ourselves immersed in disturbing, ironic, and self-defeating structures of communication that deflate, demoralize, and/or depress us. If we cannot or choose not to apply our own knowledge of best communication practices to our own institutional and personal lives, what good is that knowledge? We believe that is the foundational question of applied communication research.

Conclusion

Autoethnography is grounded on the premise that there is more than one legitimate goal to which inquiry in the human sciences can be directed. Indeed, autoethnographers see the human sciences as ripe with possibilities and alternatives. In practice, autoethnography is not so much a methodology as it is a way of life that acknowledges contingency, finitude, openness to otherness, dedication to justice, ethics, moral imagination, and a desire to keep conversation going. Autoethnography is directed toward an appreciation of the fullness of life and, accordingly, autoethnographers want to ask, how can we make life better? Thus, ours is a moral and practical discourse. The shape of autoethnography is not the exclamation point (!) but the question mark (?)—not order, predictability, and control, but ambiguity, contingency, and chance (Bochner, 2017). Other genres of empirical inquiry show an insatiable appetite for abstractions, facts, and rigor; autoethnographers hunger after details, meanings, and peace of mind. These are not issues to be resolved, only differences to be lived with (Rorty, 1982).

The meteoric rise of autoethnography was stirred by the ways in which it touched people where they live. For seasoned scholars, autoethnography satisfied a longing for forms of expressing lived experiences in which they wouldn't have to suppress their subjectivity, where they could become more attuned to the subjectively felt experiences of others, and where they would be freed to reflect on the consequences of their work, not only for others but also for themselves, and where all parts of themselves—emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and moral— could be voiced and integrated into their work, as it is in their lives. For students, autoethnographic stories provided texts that are a pleasure to read and can provoke a sense of connection, something felt deep in their hearts and guts. Autoethnographic research requires readers to plunge in, using all the senses available to them, feeling the story's tensions, experiencing its dilemmas, and living in its reality for a time. When readers engage with an autoethnographic story this way, they gain access to some truth about themselves. Indeed, they use the story to analyze themselves.

The truths of autoethnography are thus pragmatic truths. They move meanings from storytellers to story listeners in an effort to make a difference. The question to ask about autoethnographic stories is, what do they do? What consequences do they have? To what uses can they be put?

Autoethnography has a wide appeal to people, especially for those who have too often been silenced, objectified, left out, or oppressed by "value-free," disembodied social science. As Holman Jones (2018) observed, "the academy is a place of deeply felt exclusions, one in which many of us never felt quite comfortable…." (p. 2). Autoethnography may, in this respect, serve a "de-domesticating" function, encouraging us to think through our privileges, our positions, and our lives in forms that can "feed the minds and hearts of people the institution has kept out or left to fend for themselves" (p. 3).

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