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# Fighting Back or Moving On

## An Autoethnographic Response to Critics

Carolyn Ellis

**Abstract** The author lays out critiques of autoethnography from social science, post-structuralist, and aesthetic perspectives. She responds to these critiques emotionally as well as rationally, through stories that show as well as prose that tries to convince. She takes a stance yet remains open to what she can learn from others' responses. In the end, she tells a story about significant moments in her life in which her work has seemed especially meaningful to her and opens up the possibility that we are all in this together, trying to live life well and do research that matters.

### Scene One: Dozing through the Criticism

*(An autoethnographer sits in her dank, dark, smelly and windowless office in the Social Science Building. She busily reads critical responses to the kind of work she does. As she closes her eyes, she hears the cacophony of ranting and colliding voices. As she drifts in and out, three voices take center stage.)*

Sir Social Science Rants: *Autoethnography isn't sufficiently realist or scientific; it's too aesthetic and literary.* Your data aren't real data. Your approach is not rigorous. You provide no systematic analysis. Where's the theory? The literature review? The hypotheses? Science shouldn't be literary, aesthetic, emotional, or therapeutic. Autoethnography isn't legitimate social science. Besides, the kind of reflexivity you embrace is already part and parcel of realist ethnography. "Auto" has no place in social science, except as data to be mined. Let's face it, you autoethnographers are naval-gazing, self-absorbed narcissists who don't fulfill your scholarly obligation to hypothesize, analyze, contextualize, and theorize.

Madam Post-Structuralist Rants: *Autoethnography is too realist and linear.* You autoethnographers are naïve realists who think you can reveal the secret self. The self is an illusion; it's unknowable. You need to problematize and destabilize the idea of the "real" self, make it performative, show how the self is a social con-

struction. Be more critical! The realists are right to condemn you as atheoretical and devoid of analysis; but they miss the point. You don't need more and "better" data; you need to engage with more texts that will interrupt the linearity of your personal stories and turn them into more useful, unresolved, untidy, skeptical, and fragmented narratives. Your model should be the abstract, theoretical texts of the French feminists and poststructuralists. Let's face it, you autoethnographers have been unwittingly conditioned by the "trauma culture" of therapeutic discourses and reality T. V. Get over it and start doing serious, critical social science.

Ms. Aesthetic Rants: *Autoethnography isn't sufficiently aesthetic and literary and it is too concerned with being science.* You don't write well enough to carry off the aesthetic and literary goals of autoethnography. You're second-rate writers and poets confused about your project. It's not the sociological imagination that counts; it's the literary imagination. As long as you are concerned about achieving legitimacy as social scientists, you won't ever be able to write aesthetically, even if you have writing talent, and most of you don't. The poststructuralists are right—what you do is naïve realism, plain and simple. You need to connect with more texts, but not the abstract theoretical texts advocated by poststructuralists or the ethnographic, data-driven texts advocated by social scientists. You need to connect to literary texts; it might help if you read some fiction. Where are your citations to great literature? Let's face it, you autoethnographers are literary poseurs who write transparent realism and care little, if at all, about the complexities and nuances of the literary imagination.<sup>1</sup>

### Scene Two: Responding to Critics

*(Waking up out of a nightmare, the autoethnographer begins pounding on her computer keyboard. Soon, she deletes the rant she has composed in response to the critics. She starts over, trying to make her points without taking on the absolutist, critical, or defensive demeanor she often finds in a critical posture.)*

I resist the impulse to take a defensive or attacking posture against all these criticisms. I continue to believe that the "attack and defend" style of communicating differences in perspectives on inquiry, while perhaps necessary and useful for some purposes, has rarely changed anyone's mind. I doubt it has opened anyone's heart. How much is to be gained by speaking to critiques that are contradictory and cancel out each other, that speak primarily to what autoethnographers do not do rather than assessing

what we do, or that seem to ask us to work from the same perspective and toward the same goal as that of the critic? Given the number, variety, and contradictory nature of some of the critiques, I have a sense that we must be doing something right and that we should continue doing what we are doing.

Critiques from those hostile to autoethnography show that scholars with different goals, objectives, and perspectives find something of interest to push back against or something so irritating to them that they can't help but respond. Autoethnography is not being ignored; it has gained enough of a following that critics feel it is important to challenge it in order to hold onto the hegemony of their way of doing research. Some of these critiques are the "same-old, same-old" responses from people who don't share the goals of autoethnography and bring little in the way of news to the autoethnography table. As Bochner (1985, p. 52) says, "Unless we can agree on a goal, we cannot agree on the terms by which we can judge how to achieve it" and thus, as Rorty (1982, p. 197) says, we have to find some way to live with these differences rather than resolve them.

Critiques from those who share the goals of interpretive social science--some of whom have engaged in forms of autoethnographic writing-- are more problematic. I am hopeful that those formulating these critiques ultimately have the goal of improving autoethnography and that these responses signal a maturation of this approach and a readiness to expand our horizons. If that is true, their critical responses should serve to make autoethnography more nuanced, evocative, and complex.

Though I try not to be overly-concerned about responding to critiques, I tell myself to be open to what can be learned from them. Two responses that I have found helpful as my work has progressed include the recommendation to make our personal stories more fluid and the advice to engage more with social criticism and change. The *raison d'être* of my book, *Revision: Autoethnographic Reflections on Life and Work*, was to show selves as in motion and meaning as changing in the stories I tell. I also included a section in the book on "Doing Autoethnography as a Social Project," which showed how autoethnography is about the community and the political, and argued for exploring the role of feeling and "turning inward" in social movements and social change. Thus, these particular reactions have helped me think more deeply and clearly about autoethnography, and they have contributed to making my work more applicable to the social construction of selves and to activist studies of social problems.

Mostly I direct my words to more melodious voices, outside the lash of the critic's tongue, that clamor for my attention--the voices of those we study, our collaborators in community agencies, those risking writing their stories for the first time, students and young professors who want to do autoethnography but face roadblocks, and to

those who seek out autoethnography to better understand themselves and the world they live in and who desire to change it for the better. My purpose is to open hearts and minds, and I try to do that through stories. That's what I find meaningful and what I find meaningful is what inspires me to go on.<sup>2</sup>

### Scene Three: Telling Moments in an Autoethnographer's Life

*(After hearing and responding to critics, the autoethnographer feels pulled to muse about the significant moments in her life in which her work has seemed especially meaningful.)*

On July 14, 1984, at age 34, I picked up a pen and wrote my first word of personal narrative. I wrote about the pain I felt for my dying partner who was having a particularly bad day. That acute pain was coupled with the long term pain of losing my brother two years before in an airplane crash, a loss I could not cope with and certainly could not "get over," a loss I felt every day. That pain was coupled with finding out the day before that I needed knee surgery, signaling for the first time that my body was mortal, and that I too would deteriorate and die. My life felt like clashing cymbals. The notes I wrote provided the only possibility of muffling the clamor. I have continued doing autoethnography since that day—writing notes, telling my own stories, encouraging others to tell theirs reflexively, listening closely to peoples' tales of pain, loss, and renewal, and writing about how we might do this well and ethically.

At first, because of the critiques I received, I worried about whether my work would be seen as sociology. I soon came to concentrate on whether what I did was sociologically interesting. Then I questioned whether what I was doing was research. I soon came to care only that what I did was meaningful to me, my students, and my readers. Later, I wondered if what I was doing was just therapy. I soon came to believe that everything I wrote should be therapeutically useful, capable of helping and changing people, providing companionship and healing. I worried that my stories were seen as being only about me. I soon came to understand that the self and other are intertwined and that you can't know one without the other. I worried whether what I wrote was representative; I soon came to care more about whether what I wrote evoked recognition, stories, and responses from others. Did it stimulate us to keep talking? Later, I worried that my work did not address social injustice and social change. I soon came to believe that social change involves emotionality and can occur one person at a time, as one thing leads to another. Finally, I would be concerned that what I wrote would be seen as fixed, as choking out the movement of stories and interpretation; I would soon

come to write revised and revisioned stories that called forth other stories and showed the self and stories in motion, refusing to be finalized.

More moments now come into focus: Staring at the TV hoping to see my brother among the survivors floundering in the icy Potomac River; breathing with my partner Gene as he takes his last breath; hearing my sister-in-law say into the phone, "Your father has died." "Are you sure?" I ask. Reading Norman's review of my article on introspection and being unable to read beyond the word schizophrenic that he uses to describe what I am proposing. Noticing Art for the first time, his brash questions intriguing me; taking in Art's critique about my defensiveness: "Let the story do its work," he says. Then, our first kiss, ahhh my lips barely touch his cheek. We are standing in front of my house at his car. We have just had a "business" meeting. Then later his holding me as I cry because a sociologist, who read *Final Negotiations*, claims I took Gene's death from his children. I realize then for the first time how risky autoethnography can be. Through it all, hearing Laurel's encouragement—and Art's—to submit "There Are Survivors" to a journal; getting the letter, Norman again, saying that "Survivors" is accepted for publication; celebrating then with unbridled joy; thinking I can write anything about anything; then euthanizing three of our dogs in nine months and not being able to write about the pain, so deep and present. "You can write anything you want," says my mother, "anything," and with that I feel I have her permission to write about my relationship with her, her illness, but then not her death, not then anyway. And all along the way, writing, writing, whenever I can, whenever it seems right, sharing stories, hearing others, comparing, feeling companionship, giving companionship, writing to care, love, be with, change the community of qualitative methods, academia, the larger world even. Then turning to ethics as relational; how to think that way, yet not deny injustice; to write of racism even when it might hurt those I write about; because it is the right thing to do and that is what matters more. To re-envisioning the stories I have told, after listening to readers, critics, some of them anyway. And now to write the stories of others' lives, Holocaust survivors, hopefully with the same empathy and compassion with which I have written my own stories, knowing that my stories are entangled in theirs, and need to be, in order to have hope that future generations will not forget those who suffered and died, and so that we/I will not stand back while another Holocaust takes place.

#### Scene Four: We're All in This Together

*(The autoethnographer is startled awake by the fluttering of the Yellow Finches and the whirling of the Hummingbirds coming for their evening*

*snack. She is surprised that all that has come before has been part of her dream world. She is not in her old sociology office in Tampa; she is not battling with critics; she is not doing a life review. She is sitting on the porch of her log cabin in the middle of the mountains in North Carolina, admiring the colors of the fading light on the mountainside. She thinks about her dreams and wonders what they mean for her life now.)*

As she grows older, she longs to spend more time looking out over the mountains, returning to where she has come from, and she does, feeling spiritually connected with those she loves and the work that inspires her to go on, writing, caring, hoping to revision and transform herself first, and positively impact others and the world she lives in. "Is what I do research?" she asks herself. "Sociology? Representative? Apolitical? Egotistical? Just therapy?"

"What absolutely meaningless, useless, irrelevant questions," the impatient yet happy woman shouts out from her covered porch and then listens to the echoes reverberating from the wooded hillsides. She cups her ear and thinks she hears the clouds, sun, sky, and mountains holding a discussion. "The meaning is in the experience, the experience, the experience," the mountain groans. "There's nothing quite like walking through the woods." No, the meaning is the story," says the cloud, its billowing wisps of white sounding out the words. "Without a story to tell, what is the meaning of hearing a thunder clap, for example?" "No, no, the meaning comes in writing the story about the experience," says the sun, dancing across the horizon. "It's the process, the revision that is important. I should know. I reinvent myself anew every morning." "You're all right," says the big blue sky. "Don't you know, we're all in this together?"

The aging woman smiles at the chatter, takes a sip of her favorite New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc, and lets it roll sensually around her mouth. What a wonderful luxury to have the time to think these thoughts and the opportunity to do this work. She grabs her pen and writes this sentence as she speaks it out loud, "Writing the story is part of the experience of living the story time and time again." "What did you say?" asks her partner Art, who is in the kitchen cooking. "Carry onnnnnnnn," the sky, cloud, sun, and mountain respond in harmony. And she does.

## Acknowledgment

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## Notes

1. Examples of the recent critiques of autoethnography abound. See Anderson, 2006, Atkinson, 2006, Charmaz, 2006; Delamont, 2009; Goode, 2006 for critiques from a social science perspective; Clough, 2000a and b, Gannon, 2006, Jackson, & Mazzei, 2008, for critiques



from a poststructuralist perspective; Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005, Moro, 2006, for critiques from an aesthetic/literary perspective. In addition, see also Buzard, 2003, for a claim that autoethnography is undertheorized; Coffey, 1999 and Madison, 2006, for claims that autoethnography is self indulgent and naval gazing; Tierney, 2002, for a claim that autoethnography is a move away from praxis and engaged social criticism and from trying to understand the other.

2. Portions of this section are adaptations of Ellis, 2009, pp. 231-233.

## About the Author

Carolyn Ellis is professor of communication and sociology at the University of South Florida. She has published four books—*Fisher Folk: Two Communities on Chesapeake Bay*; *Final Negotiations: A Story of Love, Loss, and Chronic Illness*; *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*, and *Revision: Autoethnographic Reflections on Life and Work*—four edited collections, and numerous articles, chapters, and personal stories. Her work is situated in interpretive representations of qualitative research. Her current research focuses on interactive interviews with Holocaust survivors.