University of Technology, Sydney

Anna Denejkina

Exo-Autoethnography: writing and research on transgenerational transmission of trauma

Abstract:

Since the late 1970s, autoethnographic research and writing has demonstrated that non-fiction creative writing practice can utilise this alternate-ethnographic method as part of its research and narrative, producing rigorous creative work which is palatable both by the academy and the general audience: bringing social science closer to literature. This paper proposes a new autoethnographic method of research and writing I am calling exo-autoethnography: a distinct ethnographic method of qualitative research within non-fiction creative, and autoethnographic writing, that deals with transgenerational transmission of familial trauma. Exo-autoethnography is an approach to research that seeks to analyse individual and private experience as directed by the other's experience or history to better understand: 1. A history that impacted the researcher by proxy; and 2. Personal and community experience as related to that history. Exo-autoethnography is the autoethnographic exploration of a history whose events the researcher (author) did not experience directly, but a history that impacted the researcher through familial, or other personal connections. Placing focus on a history that impacted the self (author) by proxy, the method aims to connect the present with a history of the other through transgenerational transmission of trauma and/or experiences of an upbringing influenced by parental trauma.

Biographical note:

Anna Denejkina is a writer, and PhD Candidate with the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). She is a casual academic at UTS, and has a Master's degree in journalism from the university. Her current research focuses on ethics of autoethnography, and familial relationships pertaining to returned Soviet veterans of the Soviet-Afghan War, 1979 to '89.

Keywords:

Autoethnography – exo-autoethnography – mental health – familial trauma – transgenerational transmission of trauma

Introduction

In 1979, autoethnography became the terminology to define a contemporary anthropologist's participation as an immersed member of the community she observes and studies, shaped by a need for social scientists to scrutinise their own communities, people, and selves first (Hayano 1979). Nearing four decades from the initial use of the terminology in its current context, the definition of autoethnography sees 'regular shifts within academia, as researchers utilise the ethnography as both method and text, refining its meaning to suit their individual exploration … evolving to the point where finding both a particular application and definition a challenge' (Denejkina, 2016, pp. 2–3; also see Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739).

In its evolution as an ethnographic method, autoethnography as method and text has been shaped by ethical considerations, including the introduction of meta-autoethnography in 2009—a practice allowing the researcher to ask questions she did not ask originally. Developed by preeminent autoethnographic scholar, Carolyn Ellis, meta-autoethnography is a reflexive practice, providing an autoethnographic analysis of previous autoethnographic work (Ellis 2009). This sub-niche of autoethnography highlights its consistent and active development within sociology as an alternative ethnography.

As further progression of autoethnography, this paper introduces a new autoethnographic model of research and writing: exo-autoethnography. Rather than placing a sole focus on the individual experience of the researcher (author), exo-autoethnography builds on Ellis et al's definition of autoethnography (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011) by analysing individual and private experience as *directed* by the other's experience or history (exo) to better understand:

1. A history that impacted the researcher by proxy; and

2. Personal and community experience (ethno) as related to that history.

This paper analyses and defines exo-autoethnography as a process of writing about transmission of trauma, and aims to add knowledge and evidence to the study of transgenerational (or intergenerational) transmission of trauma.

On autoethnography

The trend toward autoethnographic research and writing has grown since the 1970s, created from the need for social scientists to examine themselves, their communities, and people first (Hayano 1979). Carolyn Ellis defines autoethnography as 'an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)' (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011).

The first time the terminology was used in its current context was in David Hayano's 1979 essay, *Auto-Ethnography: Paradigms, Problems, and Prospects*. Hayano (an anthropologist) discussed the use of autoethnography for the purpose of self-observation

during an anthropologist's ethnographic research (Hayano 1979), equating 'auto-ethnography with insider studies in which the researcher was a native, or became a full insider, within the community or culture being studied' (Bochner & Ellis 2016, p.47).

The 1990s saw a 'renewed interest in personal narrative, in life history, and in autobiography among anthropologists', as autoethnography fused postmodern ethnography with autobiography (Reed-Danahay 1997, pp.1-2).

Today, autoethnography and its definition is continually refined to suit the researcher's individual exploration, while retaining its main tenet: giving a voice to the voiceless (Denzin 2014, p.6).

As method and text, autoethnography posts the author or researcher within a social context (Reed-Danahay 1997), becoming both author and focus of research and writing: the observing and the observed (Ellis 2009, p.13). Due to these varying applications of autoethnography, finding a consensus on a distinct and singular application and definition has proven to be a challenge (Ellis & Bochner 2000, p.739).

Traditionally, autoethnographic research and writing focuses on events directly experienced by the self (author of the autoethnographic text), and pays attention to the following principles as part of the text: commenting on and critiquing cultural practices; contributing to existing research; compelling a response from its audience (Holman Jones, Adams & Ellis 2013, p.20); and its interventionist principle of giving a voice to the voiceless through this writing and research.

In its development as a form of academic research and writing, two forms of autoethnography are currently in use:

1. Evocative autoethnography:

> Evocative autoethnography can be seen as a traditional, or first, autoethnography. It has been defined as 'an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural' (Ellis & Bochner 2000, p.739).

> Autoethnography as method is a combination of autobiographic and ethnographic characteristics, in which the researcher writes about own experiences (selectively and retrospectively) and analyses these epiphanies (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011).

> Both memoir and autobiography share some characteristics with autoethnography, however, Pace argues that the latter is 'consciously planned, developed and described as research' (Pace 2012, p.5).

> Similarities between the academic autoethnographic method and writing, and creative non-fiction (including memoir and autobiography) have led to criticism of autoethnography when ethnographic and autobiographic criteria are applied to the process. Critics argue that autoethnography, therefore, either lacks scientific rigor (by ethnographic and social science standards), or is inadequate as a literary

art (by autobiographic standards) (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2010).

Anderson (Anderson, 2006) describes evocative autoethnography as a method rejecting generalisation of experience, and representation of *the other*. This rejection of generalisation is important in positioning evocative autoethnography as an alternative ethnographic approach: it directly challenges the traditional processes of social science research and representation of others (and the generalisation of the experiences of others), while treating 'research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act' (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011).

2. Analytic autoethnography:

Analytic autoethnography employs individual experience, and a theoretical analysis of said experience. Analytic autoethnography can be viewed as an autoethnographic method more open to the generalisation of experience of others, engaging the experience and views of outside informants and participants within the research.

Anderson (Anderson 2006, p.375, 378) outlines the following researcher (author) characteristics as essential elements when conducting analytic autoethnography:

1. [The researcher/author is] a full member in the research group or setting;

2. [The researcher/author is] visible as such a member in the researcher's published texts;

3. [The researcher/author is] committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena;

4. [The researcher/author participates in] dialogue with informants beyond the self; and

5. [The researcher/author is] commitment to theoretical analysis.

In addition to these distinct autoethnographic methods or research and writing, autoethnography as methodology involves reflexivity of one's work, both during and post the research and writing process.

Specifically, autoethnography utilises an ethics of care—a process championed within the method by Carolyn Ellis. Ethics of care suggests that the researcher is held to account for the consequences their research has on themselves and others (participants within their work), as well as the reader.

In 2009, Ellis establishes meta-autoethnography, a practice of reflexive autoethnography, defined as an autoethnographic analysis of previous autoethnographic work (Ellis 2009), which provides the researcher an opportunity to ask questions she did not ask originally (2009, p.13).

Both meta-autoethnography and ethics of care are extra elements of the autoethnographic

process which show the methodology's continual progression in developing itself as an ethical, alternative ethnographic method of research and writing.

In all aspects, and unlike other ethnographies, autoethnography begins inside the researcher (author) as the ethnographic exploration of *the I* or *the self*, emphasising a moral in the outcome of the research and text: the bearing and impact of the research and writing on the researcher, participants, and readers of the output. In autoethnography this moral outcome may be political; giving a voice to the voiceless; healing; and powerful advocacy—paralleling the notion of trauma narrative as advocacy: '[I]f the most vulnerable tell their own narratives, in their own way, in their own time and on their own terms, then this can become a form of powerful advocacy' (Joseph 2016, p.211).

Transgenerational Trauma

Danieli states that generational transmission of trauma has always been an 'integral part of human history' (Danieli 1998, p.2). It is conveyed in writing, oral history, body language, and in silence. In one word, it is endemic.

Epigenetic, or acquired, transmission of trauma hypothesises that individuals absorb the trauma of their parents. In his research pertaining to the transmission of Holocaust trauma on the children of survivors, Kellerman suggests that children of other parents with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder may be vulnerable. This includes offspring of war veterans; survivors of war-related trauma; survivors of sexual abuse during childhood; refugees; victims of torture, and others (Kellerman, 2013, p. 33).

This process is known as transgenerational transmission of trauma, or TTT (applied to the transmission of trauma from first generation survivors of trauma to the second and additional generations), can be applied to intergenerational transmission of trauma (a term used specifically to include the third generation offspring), and is distinct from the hypothesis of epigenetic transmission of trauma. It was first observed in 1966 (Danieli 1998), and has since been academically researched and described for more than half a century (Kellermann 2009). Kellerman notes that this process is connected with heredity: 'the transmission of characteristics from parents to their offspring' (2013, p. 33).

Presently, however, research has not been able to explain how—and the mechanisms by which (Dekel & Goldblatt 2008, p.284)—PTSD trauma of a parent can be transmitted, *genetically*, to a child.

Kellerman questions the epigenetic hypothesis, saying that it eludes logical explanation:

> How can a repressed memory be passed on from one person to another? Can a child really "inherit" the unconscious mind of a parent? Is it possible for a child to remember what the parent has forgotten? Will we ever be able to produce "hard" neurobiological evidence of such far-fetched and preposterous assumptions and perhaps see traces of the unconscious trauma of a PTSD parent in a blood specimen or an MRI scan of the child? Probably not (Kellermann 2013, p.1).

In 2010, Franklin et al. publishes results of a study hypothesising that traumatic experience in early life persist through adulthood and can be transmitted across generations. The experiment exposed mice to chronic and unpredictable maternal separation, finding that this experience (or trauma) 'induces depressive-like behaviors … in the separated animals when adult' (Franklin et al. 2010, p.408) by altering the profile of DNA methylation (an epigenetic mechanism). Importantly, comparable changes in DNA methylation were *also* present in the offspring of the separated mice (Franklin et al. 2010, p.413). Similar empirical evidence in people is presently insufficient, (for a summary of examples, see Kellermann, 2013).

Despite this, research does support the idea that transgenerational trauma is transmitted via the familial environment, suggesting that results of traumatic events affect others in the environment of the person(s) directly exposed to the event (Dekel & Goldblatt 2008). This transmission of trauma is currently, in the initial development of the method, the focus of exo-autoethnographic research and writing.

Theoretical approaches to understanding transgenerational transmission of trauma take into account heredity, and include: sociocultural and socialisation models (Danieli 1998); psychodynamic relational models (Dekel & Goldblatt 2008); and family systems and familial communication (Kellermann 2009).

In 1993, Harkness found that the effects of PTSD may have a larger influence on transmission of trauma than the condition itself, concluding that family violence resulting from a parent's combat-related PTSD projected greater distress in children than did the PTSD (Harkness 1993). In addition, it has been found that combat-related PTSD hinders the veteran's ability to parent a child, and may directly 'interrupt the development of a positive parent-child relationship' (Galovski & Lyons 2004, p.486–487).

This is further supported by the 2008 literature review on intergenerational transmission of PTSD from Dekel and Goldblatt, asking the question: what is transmitted from father to child (Dekel & Goldblatt 2008)? Pertaining to family functioning, the review found that numbing symptoms of PTSD impacted on the parent-child relationship, suggesting that 'emotional numbing, detachment, and avoidance may directly impact on the veteran's parenting ability' (p. 284).

The review outlined three mechanisms pertaining to indirect transmission of trauma, these are: functioning and involvement within the familial unit; familial atmosphere; and patterns of communication (pp. 284–285).

On Exo-Autoethnography

As a distinct method, exo-autoethnography aims to add knowledge and evidence to the study of transgenerational and intergenerational transmission of trauma, through evocative narrative and analytic research. Its purpose is to understand and expose the personal and cultural experience of children of parent(s) with PTSD. In its initial development, the method is specifically focusing on combat-related PTSD.

To build on Ellis et al.'s definition of autoethnography (2010): exo-autoethnography is an approach to research that seeks to analyse (graphy) individual and private experience (auto) as directed by the other's experience or history (exo) to better understand:

1. A history that impacted the researcher by proxy; and

2. Personal and community experience (ethno) as related to that history.

Exo-autoethnography comprises of all that is autoethnography, including its tenets of commenting and/or critiquing cultural practices; contributing to existing research; compelling a response from its audience (Holman Jones, Adams & Ellis 2013), as well as its interventionist principle: 'seeking to give notice to those who may otherwise not be allowed to tell their story or who are denied a voice to speak' (Denzin 2014, p.6).

However, instead of solely focusing on events experienced directly by the self, exo-autoethnography also places focus on a history that impacted the self (author) by proxy. It connects the present with a history never directly experienced, through transgenerational or interngenerational transmission of trauma and/or experiences of an upbringing influenced by parental trauma.

Not to be confused with postmemory—'the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right' (Hirsch 2008, p.103)—exo-autoethnography aims to analyse parental trauma which impacted on the self through the familial unit resulting in the transmission of trauma, directly and/or indirectly.

In a 2004 literature review, Galovski and Lyons found that combat-related PTSD affects familial relationships and psychological adjustments of family members through direct and indirect transmission of PTSD, differentiating between the two models as:

1. PTSD symptoms (such as anxiety and dissociation) transmitted to the child, in *direct* transmission; and

2. PTSD symptoms impacting or affecting the child's distress, in *indirect* transmission (Galovski & Lyons 2004; Dekel & Goldblatt 2008).

The exo-autoethnographic account sees the story's focus as the self, as well as the history that has created the self, i.e. what was inherited by the researcher (author) directly and/or indirectly, and is thus impacting and forming who the researcher (author) is today.

The roots of exo-autoethnography can begin generations prior to the birth of the researcher (author). However, the event that influences the researcher (author), in this case looking through the frame of trauma, has ultimately *shaped* and *directed* the life of the researcher (author).

Like the ethnographic method of immersion, exo-autoethnography returns to the place of the traumatic event, to try to connect the past with the present. This can be a physical return (geographically), and/or a theoretical/emotive return (through journal entries, oral

history, interviews, and photographs).

Exo-autoethnography exposes the issues of a traumatic past and its ability to influence generations in the future. It is about connecting a past never experienced in first-person to the self's present and own history. By creating an exo-autoethnographic account, the researcher (author) understands the historical context of their life, and the how and why of what they have inherited through a familial history.

Exo-autoethnographic research and writing aims to narrate and analyse the impact of trauma on children of a traumatised parent(s) through family functioning and transgenerational or intergenerational transmission of trauma, by exploring the historical events of the trauma, and the personal experience of having a traumatised parent(s).

Epilogue

I began this research as part of my PhD candidature in 2015. We're raised as an individual part of a whole, raised with the idea of autonomy, of independence, of choosing our own and finding our own. But, despite thinking that I made the self-directed choice to begin this research project, and no other research project, perhaps it actually found me.

It started in 1985. His first deployment into Afghanistan.

He was 23; today, I am 26.

As he stepped off the military plane into Kabul's sun and heat and dust, he carried a cake in one hand, smiled, and his mind continued to amass memories. But the one thing I am certain did not enter his mind in that precise moment was that a daughter he had yet to meet, or even consider (she would come five years later), would be writing about his first step onto Afghan soil some 30-years into the future: writing about that first step he took into the Afghan-Soviet war, the same first step that set off a contagion that impacted our family for three decades.

Thirty years—for thirty years my Father let the events that led to his PTSD sit on the inside, buried somewhere in the crevices of his mind. The war we had read about, but *really k*new nothing about followed my family for two generations, and as a third one began through my sister's children, my Father finally began to speak of the events that led to this moment: he began to tell me about the war, what he saw and what he did, and what he smelt and felt and could never forget. We're now at the beginning of trying to understand how that day in 1985 led to a family taunted by violence, and hate, and silence.

> War is romantic. But that romance fades away when you've seen your first two or three dead bodies. And whatever is left turns into hatred when you see bodies as torn, ripped apart, as masses of flesh (Father, interview conducted 2016).

Growing up I had a Mother and a Monster. I didn't know what had happened to him, and

because I didn't know, I couldn't understand. And because I didn't understand, I could hate—and I did hate.

But he didn't know, either. The war took his humanity, like it did and does to millions of others. And we need to understand just what happens when the battle stops, pauses, and reignites behind wooden doors, metal doors, reinforced doors, doors in Asia, in Europe, Eurasia, Africa, North America, South America, Australia: in the minds, and in the families.

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