

## Let there be chaos

*Miltos Hadjiosif makes the case for autoethnography, in its image, and introduces a set of pieces from his students.*

I never kept a diary – until I decided to take autoethnography seriously. You might think I would have got one earlier, given that I have been advising my students to do so since qualifying as a counselling psychologist. Teen-age random thoughts dawned on me uninvited in times of pensive solitude – thoughts about myself, my friends, the world, or myself and my friends in the world. They were not profound thoughts, but they jolted me out of the mundane enough to merit attention.

Initially, I believed those thoughts were lyrics. Years later I wondered if they were ideas for the novel I was destined to write. I sat my grandparents down, semi-life interviewed them, and elicited tales from Samos and Cyprus, of refugees, war, colonisation, revolution, love at first cigarette; the stories I was born into and absorbed in my early family environment.

I now recognise those thoughts as ordinary and common to most humans.

My clinical experience suggests that some of us experience thoughts as more persecutory than others, and sometimes they are too fragmented to make sense of, but there is nothing extraordinary in a person having thoughts borne out of the things that matter to them. Mainstream psychology, interested as it is in channelling uniqueness into sameness, enjoys enormous visibility by virtue of its claims to nomothetic knowledge about human behaviour. Notice how even I, an idiographic psychologist, couldn't resist such a claim: 'most humans'. Anyhow, autoethnography capitalises on those thoughts, unlike the research traditions that shoehorn, bracket, or fail to even notice them.

I have studied Psychology for 25 years and I have grown tired of letting it chase my thoughts away like butterflies, of not *really* knowing what to do with my feelings. I am done spending precious class time teaching *brands* of qualitative analysis at the expense of truly cultivating foundational research skills such as playfulness, noncertainty (Casement, 2011), affective fluency, trusting intuition, and refusing to treat the published literature as more worthy of attention than the knowledge that lives in art and rituals, our relationships, and our bodies. I sense my students tiring of the dominance of a handful of

approaches, their ‘McDonaldisation’, mega-franchises eclipsing local alternatives, the textbooks – so many textbooks – with their manualised focus on *capturing* others’ experiences and presenting them as ‘analysed data’.

Taking autoethnography seriously offered me a way forward without leaving behind a discipline I love. In this assemblage, we demonstrate how instead of leaving Psychology to pursue autoethnography, it’s time to bring Autoethnography to psychology.

### **What is autoethnography?**

Autoethnography is an ‘autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural’ (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p.739). It is a liminal creature, a shapeshifter. The moment you try to pin it down with a definition, it will morph into another one. It springs up in many, disparate disciplines but belongs to none and is gaining popularity (Adams et al., 2022). It is slowly yet steadily rooting in the repertoire of those who find traditional research methods unsuitable to investigate the complexity of their topics (Muncey, 2005).

Autoethnography uses the researcher’s subjectivity as expressed in their thoughts, recorded observations, dreams, personal and cultural artefacts, art and visual imagery in order to capture ‘intense situations’ and ‘effects that linger: recollections...images, feelings; long after a crucial incident is supposedly finished’ (Bochner, 1984, p.595). Under this paradigm, the researcher’s body is welcomed in the mind’s dwellings (Pelias, 2005) and the self is not treated as a knowable entity that speaks in a coherent voice, just as ‘lived experience’ is not assumed to be transparently straightforward; self and experience are treated as sociohistorically produced and in flux. Autoethnographers undertake research that seeks to affectively and intellectually explore something in an expansive manner that renders the self in context.

As such, autoethnography is profoundly psycho-social and cherishes a single person’s perspective(s) as capable of adding to academic scholarship. It refuses to distil that knowledge into a write-up that conforms to the rules of academic psychology, ‘keep[ing] the complexities of human experience intact, [in order] to place the ache back in scholars’ abstractions’ (Pelias, 2005, p.418).

An earlier distinction between analytical and evocative autoethnography (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008) has given way to multiple strands of autoethnographic research. Most contemporary autoethnographies in the social sciences employ a mixture of creative writing and critical analysis. Sometimes, cultural members are interviewed to help the researcher (re)examine their own observations, an activity that resembles conversations in a holding space rather than an interaction that begins and ends with the *click* of recording equipment. The goal of autoethnography is to honour the process of doing research by recognising that, in the topics we explore, you are rarely able to predetermine what needs to be done. While it is important, for both ethical reasons and the researcher's sanity, to propose a rough outline of intended activities, the whole point of this approach is to enter the unknown, the liminal, the confusing and the contradictory, with humility and access to your process.

Doing autoethnography, then, is like being sent into the woods without a compass (Ellis, 2004). Autoethnographers find their bearings eventually, as they invest energy in clarifying what they are researching and who they are researching it for. This illuminates a unique goal that autoethnographers bring to the table: deep concern for and sophisticated understanding of their audience. Just as filmmakers, photographers, and activists must negotiate wide versus penetrating reach, autoethnographers must figure out who they want to move with their work. No text speaks to everyone, and it is understood amongst us that our work will sometimes fail to evoke/problematised; an acceptable trade-off for the freedom of dwelling in the nomadic spaces that autoethnography has opened up and connected.

### **Doing and reading autoethnography**

Two things are required to do an autoethnography. Firstly, the capacity to consult a large, rhizomatic body of work (which does not always call itself autoethnography) to appreciate nuanced arguments and find your footing enough to begin. The second is what Greeks call *meraki*: attention and love for one's craft no matter how trivial that craft might be. *Meraki* involves idiosyncrasy, patience, and the skill to channel your 'soul' into what you do.

Two things allow meaningful readings of autoethnography. The first and most important is attention. This approach demands to speak to the combined affective/intellectual

energies of the reader, to interact with you. You have not read an autoethnography if you've skimmed the abstract, got the gist from tweets, or played Candy Crush while reading it. The second is rudimentary appreciation that the things you were taught in mainstream psychology research methods classes are not 'true', but methods of attaining truth. If the doors of research heaven are guarded by reliability and generalisability, then autoethnography will likely never gain entry or absolution. But if those stern guards faltered in their self-assured duality for a second, then validity might show up, dancing and whispering: *have you measured what you think you measured? Have your participants told you truths or what you wanted to hear?* It would then lock arms with autoethnography and together they would slide into heaven, chatting about the dangers of a single story (Adichie, 2009). To be clear, if there is a heaven, I hope there's no research in it.

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*I take a break from writing. The weight of responsibility is crushing; what if I misrepresent autoethnography? What will readers make of the irreverent critiques of psychology? I open a browser and I'm baited by breaking news: Annie Ernaux wins the 2022 Nobel prize in literature. She is described as a French author whose 'work is so rooted in fact that some English-speaking critics... have been tempted to categorise it as memoir. Ernaux herself has always been adamant that she writes fiction, however' (Knight & Shaffi, 2022). The thought occurs to me that perhaps autoethnography is riding a wave of renewed interest in personal testimony. A wave dissatisfied with simplistic (re)tellings of 'your story' as it moves around it like water does: in the gaps, absorbing its power and frothing insights that connect with something bigger than biography.*

*I am struck by my inner editor's permission to allow precious words to be wasted on a randomness; this piece will never end if I document every deviation. However, this deviation illustrates something autoethnographic: once you're on the path of inquiry then the next step reveals itself. It's magnet-like, that force that autoethnography fosters, attracting new and old insights alike, assembling them without conscious effort. A skill that takes enormous investment to refine, to get right. I am not suggesting I have. Meraki is not static and if anyone reading this attempts to measure it, we gonna have words.*

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### **What a load of rubbish**

Still with me? 'What a load of rubbish' was my reaction to the first autoethnography I read, circa 2010. It did not leave a good impression. Perhaps it was the paper, maybe it was me, likely it was both.

My trajectory as a researcher started with statistics and smoothly transitioned to qualitative inquiry. Discovering post-qualitative epistemologies (Mazzei, 2010; Lather & St. Pierre, 2013), Robin Boylorn (2013) and Sophie Tamas (2011) were a-ha moments, as I had grown tired of stale talk of ‘picking your epistemological position’. It reminded me of being in the supermarket trying to decide between washing powder that keeps my clothes soft or is kind to the blackness of my grungy T-shirts. I rebelled against the dogma of qualitative methods (Hadjiosif, 2023), and stopped searching for that IPA paper that will show me how one brackets their assumptions under the full glory of the ‘double hermeneutic’.

I started reading things that interested me. Psychologists who have turned to autoethnography do exist, and I endeavoured to read all of them (Carless & Douglas, 2016; Parker, 2020; Fixsen, 2021; Singleton, 2021). I respect them for being nomads, uncomfortable with psychology’s public declarations of ‘scientific excellence’ and do-goodery that erase our discipline’s stupidity and proximity to commercial interests. Good autoethnographic writing helped me find a home: a home built with *meraki*, covered in Bristolian graffiti: ‘Psycho-logy sux!’

Psychologists do many things well, but writing is not one of them. That is not because we are inherently bad writers. It is because the rules on how to write (Billig, 2013) have been devised by people and conditions that did not value writing as anything other than a vehicle transporting an important passenger: facts. But writing does more than signify; it constructs. It builds. It demarcates, privileges, and excludes. If we permit it, it *does* (Wyatt, 2018).

Imagine academic psychology from the perspective of our undergraduate students as they enter it. A vast modernist city packed with buildings. Tall and proud, old and new; some more polished than others, well signposted or collapsing. The kind of writing/scholarship that autoethnography needs to summon lives in basements and dark alleys, out of favour if not entirely out of sight. That’s part of the allure for me – to walk the ‘alternative’ path and become comfortable in those spaces. When I collide with the mainstream conforming citizen of Psych-city I sometimes refuse to treat them with deference. It’s called reaction formation in psychoanalysis, the distortion of an unbearable affect (submission/subjugation) into its opposite (defiance). Want a peek into my thoughts? *‘I’ve taught statistics. Two degrees and one career before my doctorate. I used discourse analysis*

*in my thesis; TA was breakfast. Want to talk William James or face perception? I studied under the late great Bob Morris and Professor Vicki Bruce, who gave me an award... bring it'.* Trauma slumbers under the bravado. A terrified, isolated boy, bullied in the schoolyard. A Psychology student walking the streets of Edinburgh, seized upon by two young Scots shouting 'foreign faggot' as they kicked my face. "Don't take my phone, my mom is in hospital" I pleaded, and they listened. I still thank them in my thoughts.

### **Space for autoethnography**

Sometimes the 'rubbish book' or 'outstanding film' were not those adjectives in and of themselves. The conditions you met them were. Rubbishness lies neither with autoethnography nor with psychology, but with something that surrounds them both. As I search for words, familiar iterations of 'the enemy' awaken: patriarchy, neo-liberalism, colonialism, the human propensity to exploit nature. Certainty.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Thematic Analysis (TA) dominate and entrench norms and expectations of what can be done in the name of qualitative research in Psychology. They get published, funded, trainees are instructed in defending why they used one and not the other in their vivas. Thus, implicitly, they rest on certainty, imprisoning some in states of mind that detest 'fuzziness' and methodological imprecision. While both of these approaches have evolved over time (Braun & Clarke, 2021; 2022; Smith & Fieldsend, 2021), their enormous visibility and volume of outputs elide autoethnography's conceptual space.

Autoethnography calls for disruption of linear thinking and the self/other binary, sometimes expressed as the 'insider/outsider' positioning of the researcher. It appreciates the uncanny and the possibilities that lie in the interzone. And our field of counselling psychology holds enormous possibilities for autoethnography as it echoes from tectonic shifts in relational psychotherapy, social justice movements, and the abuses of mainstream mental health discourse, which can be cumulatively described as a 'now moment' (Asheri, 2019). This moment paves the way for research that has caught up with the fact that human communication below conscious level poses challenges to psychology's claims. We know as relational psychotherapists that deep change occurs when we move through and are moved by the people we work with; an insight supported by developmental science

(Boston Change Process Study Group, 2018). We also know that a ‘good enough’ therapist is not forged by the acquisition of competencies but by their capacity to be awake, responsive, and uncertain. As Jay Watts (2019) argues, this therapist is not too preoccupied or protocol driven. It is someone who can listen to the underbellies of speech. Someone who has a shape but is also malleable. Someone who can bear the collision of two subjectivities, or more simply who can bear to be in a room with another. So, I ask fellow counselling psychologists: are we content with being told how qualitative research should be done, or do we have thoughts as to how therapeutic and research sensibilities can align under the umbrella of autoethnography?

I know what my students want: space for autoethnography in Psych-city. A sliver, a corner, a third-class seat. We are comfy in those spaces. We are not suggesting autoethnography should replace other psychological research methods. We are simply arguing for it to exist legitimately among them. We are not in a position to say what makes a good or a bad autoethnography. To do so entails speaking from the centre of a circle that we want to break, to make fluid. In any case, autoethnography is a tool and like all tools, the skill of the wielder correlates with its usefulness and potential for harm.

What we *can* offer is a challenge. Don’t expect to learn autoethnography by reading this article alone. Do the work. Push back against the assertion that fiction is fake and therefore inconsequential. Fiction entails learning through imagination, and if somebody imagined it, then it happened, and it is real. Draw inspiration from Sophie Tamas (2022; p. 278) on how to tackle the ‘squeamish reluctance to believe in the value of [our] own tiny, peculiar, creative impulse’. She asks, what chaos would be let loose if we encouraged each other? Let’s find out, we say.

## **Segue**

I often fail to get my point across because my academic persona has been shaped in opposition and defiance; I need the dominant other to define myself and rail against. Who am I if not a counselling and community psychologist who finds quantitative and qualitative research equally unsatisfactory? I am a fool that succumbs to fixations and sabotage my own growth. But the writers who follow aren’t. While they have me as a supervisory common denominator, they are lit by gentler fire. They are wise priestesses

and naive followers but the path they follow is theirs alone. Paisley, Jen, Amelia and Charlene hold autoethnography skilfully and aim deconstructive arrows at systems not individuals, like 'good enough' practitioners who know how and when to play (Winnicott, 1989). They are counselling psychologists in training at different stages of their research journey. So please pay attention, open your heart, and take their pieces in.

p.s. Get a diary...



## **A conversation with my inner editor**

**Charlene** Thomson

I've always found my inner editor helpful, a long-term partner, ally and facilitator of academic achievement. My inner editor was tremendously cooperative during my Masters' research, where I explored experiences of 'maladaptive daydreaming' in relation to developmental trauma. As I had personal experience of the topic, and a flurry of papers were published around the same time on 'maladaptive daydreaming' (e.g. Somer et al., 2016), I decided to engage in some research myself. During that time, my inner editor proved to be a sturdy and effective dam; demarcating my own experiences of developmental trauma, of immersive daydreaming, and the thoughts and feelings that emerged throughout the research process, from the focus of the research.

By the time I started a Doctorate in Counselling Psychology, I had become increasingly uncomfortable with how research on maladaptive daydreaming may pathologise creative ways of surviving and adapting to childhood trauma and adversity. During my first research supervision meeting, I was invited to consider using autoethnography.

I was initially somewhat guarded against the idea. Alright, I suppose I felt a little terrified. My experiences of developmental trauma and immersive daydreaming felt like deeply personal and sensitive topics that still evoked a sense of shame. Was Autoethnography a methodology that might threaten to burst the dam my editor had so carefully constructed? I pondered my decision carefully. Why would anyone do research on their subjective experience of trauma and fantasy and risk stigma and further shame? I silently resigned myself to continue as I was, keeping my immersive daydreaming experiences mostly to myself and within dedicated online communities.

I soon changed my mind. Maladaptive daydreaming research continued to suggest that it was a new psychiatric condition (e.g. Soffer-Dudek & Somer, 2022). As a prospective trainee counselling psychologist and self-identified immersive daydreamer, I had anxiously read each new maladaptive daydreaming paper since the original publications, tracking the growing media attention.

After decades of engaging in immersive daydreaming, copious journaling and fictional writing, my reflexive pursuits suggested that I needed a methodology that aligned with

my social justice values. Something flexible, expansive, and creative. Most importantly, it needed to feel safe – allowing space to respond to my feelings and wellbeing. This excluded any overly prescriptive research approaches, which of course advocate safety, but don't consider pathways of achieving it as integral to the research output.

As I began to use autoethnographic writing as a form of inquiry (Richardson, 2000), exploring my own subjectivity within context, it soon felt like an invitation to engage with a methodology that demands the whole of me – not only in the classical sense of researcher/participant. It seemed that I could offer depth and personal insights that wouldn't necessarily be obtainable from interviewing others in a time-limited manner.

I remember being particularly curious when I read that autoethnography entails embarking on a journey of self-discovery that could lead to personal transformation (Raab, 2013). Now, with hindsight, I really hadn't anticipated that I would be so deeply impacted by the process of doing autoethnographic research. In turn, I hope that sharing my research journey via accessible autoethnographic stories may also move others in some way. For me, the potential of Autoethnographic research to move and transform both author and reader, is a key strength of this approach.

What follows is an excerpt from a creative experiment I undertook at the beginning of my research journey: a conversation with my inner editor. The impetus for this dramatised self-dialogue came from conflicts and struggles I experienced with writing during the initial phases of the research.

Me: I need to speak to you.

Editor: I'm always here!

Me: I'd like to discuss what's going on between us, I'm finding the writing process quite frustrating.

Editor: You want to shine the spotlight on me?

Me: I guess. I suppose I want to see if we can work something out.

Editor: You want to talk to me? I thought you usually tried to avoid me.

Me: Well, yes, sometimes...

Editor: You always tell others how you try to write when I'm not around.

Me: Yes, it can help sometimes. But I always invite you in later.

Editor: Not always.

Me: No, I suppose I don't need to when I'm only journaling.

Editor: Because...

Me: I guess I mainly need you when others are going to read my work.

Editor: Hmm, yes. And that time is now! You're writing for an audience, right?

Me: Yes, but this time the writing process is a bit different.

Editor: That's fine, I'm always here, ready to work!

Me: I know, but that's just it – I'm not sure we're working well together right now.

Editor: Say more.

Me: It's just, I'm doing something called Autoethnography.

Editor: Hmm... It involves writing though?

Me: Yes.

Editor: So, here I am, ready to work!

Me: Yes, but...

Editor: You write, I'll edit!

Me: Well, that's just it. I try to write, and it feels like you are kind of preventing me from doing just that!

Editor: Not preventing – editing! You don't need an editor now?

Me: I do need an editor, but not in the same way. Sometimes it feels that it's hard for me to write freely with you around. It kind of stifles the creative process.

Editor: Stifles? So what – you just want to write anything now? Anything goes?

Me: No, but...well, maybe, yes – a little bit...I need that freedom for a while at least. I will need your support later as usual.

Editor: Oh, okay. See, I thought you were submitting some academic writing.

Me: I am.

Editor: Then here I am, ready to work!

Me: Yes – but it doesn't really need editing in the usual way right now.

Editor: So you're going to submit some academic writing, but you don't want me to edit it in the usual way?

Me: Yes, and it will be okay.

Editor: How would showing someone else work I haven't thoroughly edited be okay?

Me: Because it's different – I'm trying to capture my creative side a bit more.

Editor: You can capture your creative side without exposing it entirely!

Me: Would that be such a bad thing?

Editor: You want me to answer that? Don't you care what the reader thinks?

Me: Of course, but I think it's okay to write a bit more creatively and openly too. There's no right or wrong here: no formula.

Editor: No right or wrong? No formula?

Me: Yeh, I didn't think you'd appreciate that...

Editor: You think nothing you can write is wrong? That you don't need my help?

Me: Maybe. I suppose it would just be great if we could work something out together.

Editor: But we've written thousands of words for your academic studies. We always pass. Surely, we've got the winning formula?

Me: I'm wondering if maybe that isn't the most important thing anymore. I know I can pass an assignment; I know I can write, edit, and meet academic standards.

Editor: Yes – that's how I edit your work and guide what you want to say. We follow the academic criteria.

Me: But I want to write more freely now about experiences that are important to me. Epiphanies and insights that feel relevant to my research. Maybe I just need to wander for a while without a guide?

Editor: Wander without a guide. What if you get lost?

Me: I really don't know. I suppose I'll have to learn to navigate differently for a while. Be receptive to my feelings. Rely on my body and intuition to find my bearings.

Editor: Does anyone even want to read about all that?

Me: I can't speak for others.

Editor: So, who will help you avoid some of those giant potholes?

Me: I could explore any potholes if I come across them – as part of the journey, and part of the writing process.

Editor: Yes, but if the journey threatens to take you somewhere you don't want to go, I usually step in to help...

Me: I appreciate that, but it's a little restrictive. My aim is to explore freely.

Editor: Did you read that in an academic paper?

Me: Well, yes but... it also feels very liberating!

Editor: Do you have permission to do this?

Me: Yes! Like I said, it's called Autoethnography.

Editor: Maybe I should explain the dangers of working without me...

Me: Like?

Editor: Festering wounds lurking around – I usually help you avoid them.

Me: Yes, okay, but we've visited those places before...

Editor: What if the writing is foolish? Even worse – it might be rubbish!

Me: What's 'foolish' or 'rubbish'? Maybe it's okay, part of the process...

Editor: And what about shame?

Me: Well, that can be challenging. But I'm not sure I want to avoid it either. If it comes up, I can deal with it then.

Editor: I suppose you're going to be compassionate to yourself?

Me: That can help!

Editor: How about the secrets you might give away unintentionally through your words?

Me: Who decides what is a secret?

## Researching with Weltschmerz

Amelia Ince

### Weltschmerz (world-pain)

noun

a feeling of melancholy and world-weariness

One of the first things I do in the morning is look at my phone, and this morning was no different. Within seconds I am bombarded with notifications from news outlets. BBC News: 'Many skip work over hygiene poverty shame'; The Guardian: 'UN find no credible pathway to 1.5C in place'; Sky News: 'Covid pandemic caused changes to global mortality not seen in 70 years'; The Times: 'Russian exit from Kherson 'an illusion' as Ukraine prepares for heaviest of battles'. Overwhelmed, tired and grouchy, I retreat under my duvet for just five more minutes. Somewhere between the pull of dreamland and the whirling headlines, a small voice: '*world pain is bad – but numbness to world pain would be worse*' (Burkeman, 2015). Is that so? It is not even 7am and I've had zero cups of coffee and three cups of Weltschmerz.

I decided to research Weltschmerz despite, or maybe because of, the fact there doesn't appear to be an English word that captures the sense of pain, despondency, and anger evoked from existing in the world. I fear falling foul of appropriating language, yet the evolution of language involves cultural cross-pollination, particularly English. I am a white, young(ish), able-bodied British woman who does not speak German. Does any of this change, for you, the legitimacy of what I am about to say?

Autoethnography encourages me to interrogate myself using this question. It calls for in-depth reflection and fosters meticulous exploration of complex social phenomena (Adams et al., 2014), whilst recognising that personal experience is enmeshed with cultural and political norms. This makes it possible to explore how Weltschmerz may be 'becoming' (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004) at the place where self meets culture. A psycho-social space that is not captured by either word; only signalled tantalisingly by the hyphen in between. A space that psychology has mistaken for a carefully controlled laboratory or something that can be measured on a questionnaire. I presented my research at the last conference

of the British Psychological Society's Division of Counselling Psychology (Hadjiosif et al., 2022), an experience that became another source of inspiration that would inform further analysis, a snippet of which follows below. Writing from the perspective of Thomas, a fictional Counselling Psychologist who I imagined attended my talk, I attempt to capture what it might be like to encounter the term *Weltschmerz* for the first time:

*Stood outside the archaic Grade I listed building, often considered 'a modernist masterpiece' by the architecture industry, the Royal College of Physicians loomed in all its 1960s concrete glory. On entry, I am greeted warmly, registered, and handed a conference goodie bag. I start thumbing the pages of the abstract booklet and notice a symposium; 'Autoethnography: Let there be Chaos'. Well, colour me intrigued. A memory springs to mind: didn't my colleague Maxine mention autoethnography and how well it fits with our discipline's principles? I was dubious but I'm keen to learn more, about autoethnography and now also Weltschmerz. What a strange word. I Google it. Interesting.*

*A few hours later...*

*The air-con in the Wolfson theatre is a pleasant relief from the sweltering temperatures of the London heatwave. Three sprightly looking folk go on stage – they must be trainees – I look at their abstract and notice that 'Weltschmerz' has been misspelled and 'autobiography' has replaced 'autoethnography'. Does autoethnography mean autobiography?*

*The Weltschmerz talk is positioned to respond to the question; 'what chaos would be unleashed if we free ourselves from the constraints of traditional qualitative research?' What could that mean for the topics we study; which pathologising notions of mental health could we shake to the core?*

Was the misprint a telling thing, a Freudian typo so to speak, belying the current landscape of professional psychology practice? The medical model of mental health still dominates, underpinned by moral judgements which use 'mental illnesses' as a societal mechanism for controlling undesirable behaviour (Foucault, 1971). 'Mental health' has been constructed within a neo-liberal take on individualism, with the help of psy-professions subservient to capitalism (Parker et al, 1995). To step outside of this model is hard. It goes against what we are often taught via representations of mental health that are organised in structures of power as practices, such as the DSM/ICD diagnoses or government-led

public health initiatives. Just like the largely uncontested diagnostic category ‘depression’ has facilitated the medicalisation of sadness (Moncrieff, 2011), and normalised the idea that given the right concoction of pills and thought challenging techniques our depression can be ‘fixed’, I am wary of essentialising Weltschmerz or feeding the ‘McDonaldization of psychotherapy’ (Goodman, 2015). As psychologists we are brokers of concepts that can reify personal distress that has roots in the relational.

Autoethnography provides a vessel that can navigate these turbulent waters by enabling me to research a mental health related concept without plummeting into the whirlpool of standardisation. I can float on a liferaft made of common culture, mutual experience, and my psychotherapeutic training. Thomas is sinking deeper...

*How can I know if I have ever felt Weltschmerz before? Goose bumps raise up both my arms; perhaps that is just the air con. Images flash through my mind so quickly they begin to blur together. Images of war, natural disasters, police brutality and the person sleeping rough I walked past last night on my way home to a comfortable bed. Where are these coming from? The goose bumps reach the nape of my neck. Someone should really turn down that air con! This is uncomfortable. Oh shit. My client, the Iraqi guy I see first thing on Mondays. I wonder if he has Weltschmerz?! Fatigue washes over me. It all suddenly feels too much. ‘Weariness’ is fitting as I am trying to find a term that names something I am not used to naming. A word I didn’t know I was missing... I am getting a kebab after this conference. As I start salivating, my phone buzzes. It’s the blonde from Tinder with the piercing eyes. I hope they’re free tonight.*

Autoethnographers suggest that ‘what is made possible, or not, is not always welcome or easy. Surprise can be uncomfortable’ (Wyatt, 2018, p.64). In relinquishing many of the binds of traditional qualitative research we may allow chaos and seek discomfort. I am inspired by Barbara Jago (2022) who didn’t simply research depression, she researched with depression. Thus, my research isn’t simply on this topic, it is in and through it. My thesis documents a profound (for me at least) and relational exploration of my Weltschmerz, capturing the process of vulnerably baring/bearing my experience, and clothing it with critical literature, connecting me to culture, in the hope that someone reading might be inspired to examine their own connections to Weltschmerz.



I agree that what autoethnography makes possible is uncomfortable, but numbness to these possibilities would be worse.

## What is therapeutic about drag?

Jen Martin

I am not a drag performer. However, I belong in the community as an avid fan, queer person, and audience member. I play witness (and bearer) to the benefits this art form has to offer. One rainy Autumn afternoon in a coffee shop, I prepare to meet Miltos, and I scrawl at the top of my notes ‘*What is therapeutic about drag?*’ The pandemic had incapacitated my recruitment strategy, with drag performers and appreciators unable to inhabit the spaces they once did; much like therapists and their own special spaces. Miltos wanted to discuss alternatives. He began by telling me about autoethnography, a type of research that uses ‘the self’ and places its ‘experiences’ within the culture that I not only study, but reside in.

... (flashback sound)

*Once when I was little, my parents took my brother and I to Florida on holiday. At the time, NASA was launching a shuttle into space. The launch was to happen in the early hours of the morning, whilst it was still dark. It was so exciting to get to stay up late, I honestly didn’t care about the shuttle launch. We pulled into a parking lot; a large lake separated us from the launching pad opposite. As the night drew on and our parents bought us hot chocolate from the local gas station, more and more people arrived. Particularly memorable was the large number of hippies who showed up, not to demonstrate the use of fossil fuel, but as an excuse to gather and serenade the shuttle on its journey. There were drums banging, sighs like the ones emitted on bonfire night, and the rumbling of the shuttle as it lifts to the sky. I hear none of these in my memory. Only silence and an image so clear as if I am watching a recording. Like watching the sun rise in fast forward. A bright ball of fire and light ascending, turning the night-sky to day and then... gone. Gone in vision, burned in memory.*

That moment in the coffee shop evoked an essential quality of the spaceship memory. A bright burning ball that blinked into existence and lit up not only the room, but also my mind. I decided there and then that I needed to change my method. I chose

autoethnography after one conversation, but as Ellis says (2004, p.26): ‘you do not choose autoethnography... it chooses you’.

Epiphanies are ‘remembered moments perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of a person’s life... times of existential crisis that forced a person to attend and analyse lived experiences... and events after which life does not seem quite the same’ (Ellis et al., 2011; p.6). Discovering autoethnography may not seem like a monumental epiphany; however, I would argue that it sent me down a particular path that led me to the place I am now. Adopting this method has not only changed the way I write or do research, but also how I engage therapeutically with clients. It has bestowed me with ‘voice’, a voice that allows truer expression of how theory and practice meet in the psychosocial settings in which we are intimately entangled (Giffney, 2021). I ask you to consider the small choices we make, on a daily basis, and the ways in which these choices shape the experiences we have and the people that we become.

Autoethnography allowed me to engage with the research question in two ways that violate/depart from how most psychologists do qualitative research. Firstly, it embraces and theoretically scaffolds subjectivity and process as it rejects the convention of reporting ‘themes’ through analysing other people’s words. Adams and Holman Jones (2011) view autoethnography as a queer adjacent, fluid endeavor that sketches subjectivities through multiple forms of knowledge and representations. They question our desire to name and claim stories and to embrace the gifts and challenges of open texts, as they write to leave things unfinished and unanswered (Holman Jones & Adams, 2010).

Secondly, while I did speak to other people about my topic in an intentional way, I did not treat these people as ‘participants’ who were ‘recruited’ for my research, nor did I subject them to a predetermined professional interview that positioned myself as the ‘researcher’ and them as the ‘researched’. Instead, I asked them to help me reflect on something that was of significance to us (drag) in whatever way suited their busy schedules and quirky sensibilities. In some instances, they asked me far more questions than I asked them; like an ordinary conversation that concluded when there was nothing more to say, they or I had to leave, or something unexpected came up. Some conversations started from drag and quickly veered off into completely unrelated topics. My thesis will not report the range of time I spent with these people (what would be the point?), nor will it summarise their

demographics. These people couldn't be further away from what is called a 'homogenous sample'; they were simply drag fans and performers who spoke English and were not experiencing significant emotional distress or other constraints at the time of our meeting. While we shared intimate details about our lives and how drag has helped us; none of those details will be revealed in my thesis.

Now comes the chaotic part: just how do you *do* autoethnography? The biggest challenge was carving out my way of understanding this orientation and translating its rich insights into practices. Like other qualitative methods, this is not an 'anything goes' approach, but comes with such flexibility, or room to play, that it *appears* like anything can go. It is odd to say that the next part was about losing myself. Ellis (2004) talks about 'being lost without a compass'; but what then do you use to guide you? With no external invention to rely on, you turn inwards. You learn to trust instinct, reverie, and feelings and return to the 'soft animal of your body' (Oliver, 1986) as you fully appreciate that excellent research does not always need participants. It needs you, though; who better than a researcher consumed by wanting to figure it all out (Ellis, 1991)?

After accepting that getting lost is an essential part of process, I tried the following (not in this order): I free-wrote creative pieces; attended a drag king workshop; listened to podcasts about drag, therapy, and community psychology; attended countless drag nights ('it's for research', I told my partner/friends/father/self); watched RuPaul's Drag Race, spoke with friends and drag community members about my work and asked my burning question countless times: *what is therapeutic about drag?*

When I spoke to others as part of my inquiry (at various points in the research process), I saw the differences with research interviewing as legitimising my choice of method. None of those conversations were recorded – the purpose is not to capture others' experiences but to reflect more systematically on my own, to root out the questions I am not asking of myself. Each conversation followed an organic pattern, depending on who I was talking to, how much time we had available, and that day's mood. I still applied for ethics through my university and prepared debriefing forms, which seemed to puzzle more than clarify as they introduced a formal quality to the encounter. On reflection, I wouldn't change this... I consider it both good research practice and a ritual of traditional research that helped me

navigate how to disengage. Even something as concrete as a debriefing form can have a symbolic function that autoethnographers might reflect on and make decisions around.

After these conversations, with no transcript to check or others' meaning to meaning-make, I did the things people do when they want to reflect on and digest relational content. '*How does this sit with what I know?*' and '*What does this mean in a wider context?*' were questions I asked frequently. The answers were, of course, not straightforward, but came in the form of self or supervisory-led suggestions: Write a play. Go back to the literature. Revisit the method. Take a two-month break. Read more. Take a longer break. There came points when I couldn't absorb any more information about drag and so I switched off, walked in the woods and allowed myself to feel lost and saturated, and for all this to permeate (me) and to change (me).

And now, a few months before I submit my thesis, stuffed with reflection and knowledge; what now? The insights in my analysis are alive and shifting; like magma rolling, boiling, seething. I agonise trying to shape the thesis. I despair when it does not come together in a way that feels stable. This reminds me of how we formulate with clients in therapy, only to be surprised by an enactment. I am trying to give shape to something that is already shaped and shadowed. To make this more explicit, concrete, or stable risks sacrificing the fundamental qualities and purpose of my research. If I fill in the gaps, then there will be less room for autoethnography's relational engagement with the reader. You see, my thesis is not trying to tell you what is therapeutic about drag. It invites you into my experiences. It welcomes your irreverent curiosity and your enactments alike. Maybe you'll have your own epiphanies to savour alongside my own. And that's what is therapeutic about drag.

## Exercising my right to roam

**Paisley** McManus

### October 2022

*Me:* It's a jumble Mum, I'm so lost. I don't know what I am doing – I'm afraid of getting it wrong...

*Mum:* That's a lot of self-doubt.

*Me:* That's it... it's self-doubt. It's like the movie *Inception* – a dream within a dream. I'm feeling so confused as I'm asked to capture autoethnography from a beginner's perspective; as a beginner I'm unsure!

*Mum:* To me it sounds as if you will be showing autoethnography from a beginner's view then. You've always done things by the book. Now you're without instruction.

*Me:* You're right, it's so different. In the conference the theme was 'Right to Roam' – they said I could go where I want and see where the next steps take me. You've just roamed with me, maybe I can even use this conversation! (*shared warm laughter*).

My story of autoethnography through a beginner's eyes begins when I am an undergraduate, moving through time to my current position as a new trainee counselling psychologist. In my first attempt to write autoethnographically, I invite you, the reader, to become part of my roaming.

### September 2019

*I am sat in a lecture theatre, quietly taking in my favourite module 'Principles of Counselling and Psychotherapy'. The lecturer's introduction to the 'wounded healer' strikes me. A classmate derisively remarks that he could not relate to this: 'Why would any of us need to have therapy as part of training?'. Yet here I am, silently stunned and changed by this revelation. I cannot yet allow myself to believe that my own wounds could be beneficial to others in any way, shape, or form.*

### November 2019

*Frantic note-taking; I'm attending a seminar on writing qualitative dissertations. Each section is neatly mapped out and I feel anxiously preoccupied with getting this 'right'. I've always been that student who memorises the marking criteria perfectly, following the steps precisely. Typically, I get the top grade; I am sure this must be because I do things as asked without deviation.*

Reflecting on these memories, I feel fortunate to know all that I do now. Every psychologist I had met up until that point appeared perfect and without troubles, past or

present. Perhaps that was my perception and not the reality? To divulge your real troubles was not the done thing, it seemed forbidden. I am reassured to know that Farber (2017) celebrates the ‘Wounded Healer psychotherapist’. She tells us that difficult early experiences often drive therapists towards alleviating suffering, meanwhile rarely acknowledging suffering in themselves. I detect similarities between autoethnography and papers on the wounded healer; both bring me hope that the messiness of life can be channelled for good. Edwards (2021) aptly recognises this ‘mess’, suggesting that topics chosen in autoethnography happen in our daily, ongoing lives, as experiences in body, mind, and real time. The opportunity to unearth these moments is knock knock knocking on attention’s door – it pulls me in.

Nonetheless, the model student is still fused to me. I’m grappling with two conflicting personas, the compliant student that closely follows the steps from A to B, cherishing pre-packaged steps and the procedural pedantry that autoethnography cautions against (Hadjiosif, 2022), and the curious, invested, feeling, human being that is drawn to freedom and chaos with no ‘participants’ or ‘data’ to ‘analyse’. I look to Jen, who describes enjoying autoethnography’s lack of compass – can I embrace my lostness too?

Unlike qualitative teaching in my undergraduate years, autoethnography has no manuals or holy texts. This is something the community of autoethnographers celebrates, with some taking a critical stance towards mainstream qualitative research. Parker (2020) for example, goes as far as critiquing the discipline of Psychology via autoethnography, illuminating how Psychology courses are ordered to be informative, entertaining, with adequate content, whilst doing enough to receive positive reviews. He comments that qualitative research provides a soft appealing side to quantitative studies, yet ultimately gives a humanising pretence to an institution that exploits.

I feel torn as I read this – I love psychology and do not feel as disillusioned with common qualitative methods as my AEG peers. I hear classmates discuss their theses using TA or IPA; these feel reassuring, familiar, and I envy the safety in numbers of both staff and students employing such methods. Yet, I’m growing, expanding, transforming – the chance to tap into my authentic, unexamined reality overrides the old me who would have relished a manual with straightforward steps. Maybe I’m not growing, maybe I’m regressing. Going back to the stage when all humans want is to play.

### July 2022

*It's one of those early starts when the world feels still. I'm about to attend the International Conference of Autoethnography ('Write/Right to Roam'). The doctorate begins in September, and I have proposed using autoethnography for my thesis – maybe today things will become a little less fuzzy?*

*By 5pm, exhaustion washes over me. The conference has been incredible: evocative, inspiring but tiring. I felt struck by Suzuki's (2022) account of 'becoming we with another', and Beattie's (2022) stimulating method of 'datawalking'. I wondered, 'am I capable of doing powerful things like these people?' as I tried to remain anchored by David Carless' affirmation that feeling unconfident is the core of AEG.*

*The presenters give hints of what I already anticipated may come: roaming as healing, roaming as compelling, roaming as fire. I feel in awe of their vulnerability and boy am I committed now. I decide that this is what feels most important, the being real, vulnerable, messy, human. I'm tenderly reminded of the moment I discovered the wounded healer; in autoethnography these parts of us are summoned not bracketed.*

*Uncertainty hasn't left me. What if I roam in the wrong direction? What if I don't get it? Are my experiences worth writing about? How will others respond to my vulnerability?*

Unsurprisingly, to question your 'self' in AEG is common and perhaps never ceases, even with the most skilled autoethnographers. Tamas' (2022) chapter on failing autoethnography moved me and I would encourage any beginner to read it. She viscerally describes how her incompetence might leak out, like blood or sweat; she feels she has tricked the reader. This anxiety underlined my conversation with Mum. Handing this work to the accomplished team before me and putting it into the world – I am on tenterhooks waiting for the moment you figure out I am not up to scratch.

Despite my doubt I continue; propelled by the urge and urgency to give voice to unheard meanings (Muncey, 2005). Uncertainty might ail me, yet I persist. I think of the unsatisfying alternatives. I know, from experience, that an hour's interview, some focus groups, constructing themes, just won't be enough. With autoethnography I can embrace fragmentation, contradiction, instability, and step into the entanglement between researcher-data-participants-theory-analysis (Mazzei, 2013; de-Freitas & Patton, 2008). Possibility pulls me forward.

### October 2022

*I'm about to start my thesis. I feel a chaotic mix of hopefulness, tension, excitement, anxiety. The wounded healer in me is ready to roam.*



*My topic feels important, vital even, and I don't see a way back now. I'm writing about my experiences as daughter, 'carer', practitioner, navigating intersecting and previously mutually exclusive roles as I support my mum with her mental health journey whilst training as a counselling psychologist.*

*Me: I don't know what word feels right Mum. I don't like the word 'Carer', but I try to be there for you, and you're here for me too.*

*Mum: Some of it is just our relationship isn't it? You've got multiple paths: daughter, supporter, psychologist, and these entwine. Let's work it out together.*

## Outro

We meet in person altogether for the first time at the Watershed, a Bristolian staple in the heart of the city. The river just below us reflects the faint sunlight, flowing out to sea as it carries our message and our anxieties. November is a good month for a group meeting; the crisp cold air sharpens our arrows as we sit around an imaginary campfire. The following conversation did not happen exactly as we script it. Or maybe it did.

*Amelia:* So, here we all are. Did you just call us *priestesses*? Nice one Miltos, this will really help dispel the perception that we are a cult...

*Jen:* Who cares about the title Dr if *priestess* is up for grabs?

*Charlene:* We're going to capture this, aren't we?

*Miltos:* (*grins widely*) Only if you keep saying crazy things.

*Amelia:* I don't think we'll have trouble with that.

*Paisley:* (*nervous laughter*) Can I say something? I don't feel super confident about what I've written so maybe capture whatever we say after we've had another look?

*Jen:* Welcome to the cult, Paisley.

*Miltos:* Can we please talk about the time Jen pushed me down the stairs and I threw dirty socks in her face?

*Amelia:* No!

*Jen:* (*casually puts two sad looking fries in her mouth*) Yes.

*Charlene:* So, what else do we want to say? Maybe we shouldn't say anything, let the pieces speak for themselves? It's a lot to take in.

*Paisley:* Just say that it's worth it. The getting lost while roaming is worth it. I hope.

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**Key sources [We've asterisked 8 key sources]**

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