CONCEPTS, THEORIES, & INTRODUCTIONS

Moments of Silence: Ethics and Harm in Autoethnography

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This paper explores ethical pitfalls and potential harms that arise in autoethnography. I use evocative autoethnographic writing to reflect upon my experiences undertaking a research project on social and natural isolation in Orkney and Svalbard (2001-2002). This project involved a commitment for me to remain silent and not speak for six months. On the basis of these reflections, I discuss problems concerning the impossibility of acquiring free consent and the potential for autoethnography to produce and reproduce harms. I analyse these problems as deriving from the fact that in autoethnography, the researcher and the research subject are the same person. I give suggestions for ways of mitigating harm and conclude by advancing the need for better appreciation of ethical treatment of the autoethnographic subject.

Introduction

Drawing upon my experiences undertaking a research project on social and natural isolation (2001-2002), this paper questions ethical issues and potential harms that arise in autoethnography. I begin by defining autoethnography and presenting my methods. Using a creative and evocative autoethnographic writing style, I then reflect upon this past autoethnographic research project in which I committed to remaining silent and not speaking for six months. Next, I reflect upon problems concerning the acquisition of freely given consent and the potential for autoethnography to produce and reproduce harms in situations in which the researcher and the research subject are the same person. I follow this up by discussing ways of mitigating harm and conclude by advancing the need for better appreciation of ethical treatment of the autoethnographic subject.

Definitions and methods

Ethnography is a well-established research method within human geography, folklore studies, and other disciplines. Definitions vary, but ethnographic practice can be said to focus on gaining understanding of what individuals need to know in order "to behave acceptably" as members of a particular group (van Manen, 2016, p. 43).

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Autoethnography is the study of one's own social practices, involving networks of relations with other human and nonhuman actors. Reed-Danahay (2021, p. 7) defines autoethnography as "a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context," simultaneously serving as a research method and a communicative genre (Hamdan, 2012; Murray, 2023). It is a reflexive endeavour predicated on understanding researchers' embeddedness in the peoples, cultures, and places they study (Spry, 2001). Autoethnographers seek to "produce aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 276) within specific social contexts. Baird N'Diaye (2021) notes within a folklore studies context the usefulness of Adams et al.'s (2014) description of autoethnography as offering an insider's view of the attributes of cultural phenomena. The reflexivity that is so central to autoethnography has become a cornerstone of the research process in both human geography and folklore studies (e.g., Butz & Besio, 2009; Gencarella, 2009; Hufford, 1995; Sircar, 2022).

The present paper is an autoethnographic study of a particular autoethnographic project that I undertook in Orkney (Scotland) and Svalbard (Norway) between September 2001 and February 2002. I have written my autoethnographic reflections in a creative and evocative style (Ellis, 1997) that expresses both the facts and emotions connected with my thoughts today concerning my experiences in the field over twenty years ago. My period spent in Orkney is illustrated through a selection of photographs I took during my study. I have omitted some details regarding precise places and names to protect the privacy of other people who were part of my experiences.

As discussed below, autoethnography is inherently personal. The very premise of autoethnography is that individual experience can provide useful data for understanding social practices. Although it could be argued that studies of autoethnographic practice itself ought to, like more traditional ethnography, account for the experiences of a diverse or representative group of individuals within a group, it seems logical to preserve space for scholarly reflection upon individual projects. In this paper, I autoethnographically reflect upon my own experiences to illustrate certain issues that arise in autoethnography more generally, with reference to work by other autoethnographers.

Reflections upon my autoethnography in Orkney and Svalbard

Toward unknowing

It is September 11, 2001. I am coming to terms with my disconnection from the world. I am 19 years old, in the second year of my BA with a public university in the USA, and this is the first day of my six-month research project titled 'Social and Natural Isolation'.

My sphere of knowledge has shrunk to the immediate surroundings of this rented cottage in Orkney. It will be a full week before I see a newspaper and read about the terrorist attacks that have occurred across the Atlantic in New York and are in the process of reshaping the ways in which people around the world conceive of the world. I am cut off from the news, cut off from everyone I know and am ever likely to know, and often cut off from electricity. For the first time in my life, I feel alone and out of place.

By withdrawing from knowledge of everything else, I am hoping to gain more knowledge about myself. Across two three-month periods in Orkney and in Svalbard, my Individual Learning Contract with the university commits me to the following:

> Separating myself from outside contact and speaking minimal English (. ...) Making daily excursions into the surrounding natural environment, I will keep a descriptive field journal. I will maintain a reflection journal, describing my emotional and intellectual responses to nature, readings, and daily experiences. I will read and analyze a selection of Søren Kierkegaard's writings (...) I will compose an in-depth essay concerning nature, isolation, and spirit. (...) I will communicate with [my faculty sponsor] once a week by mail.

The central requirement of my project is to speak as little as possible.

Some months earlier, halfway through my first year as an undergraduate, I had approached my philosophy professor with a proposal to spend the winter in Longyearbyen, Svalbard, the world's northernmost town. I wished to study the concept of isolation in works of early modern mysticism. (It has been a long time since I have thought about early modern mysticism. All I remember is a desire to read the 14th-Century *Cloude of Unknowyng* somewhere really cold and dark, which I still think sounds pretty cool.)

As I remember it, my professor immediately responded: "No, Adam. That's not isolation. The problem is, you're too social. Isolation is going to Svalbard and not speaking to anyone for six months."

My professor was a notorious advocate for self-discipline at a famously undisciplined hippie college. I recall him standing before the blackboard in our ancient Greek philosophy class Stoics and Epicureans, chewing pieces of chalk while explaining that philosophy is war. I recall how, in my own teenage commitment to the sanctity of truth and logic, I once made a fellow student cry and rush to leave the room—only for my professor to order her to sit back down and accept my philosophical critiques.

I had been flattered that my professor was so confident in my ability as to ask me to undertake such an outrageous philosophical investigation: no talking for six months.

As I would learn over the subsequent decades, I have a serious problem saying 'no' to people.

So, I had said 'yes'.

My first step toward unknowing.

All in decay

On that first day alone in Orkney, I get to work. The sky is grey, the sea is a darker grey, and I am standing on a rock beach, staring at the body of a seal that has recently been alive. I have never seen a seal up close before. It is quite interesting. (Another dead seal washes ashore not long after the start of my project.)

Figure 1. Body of a seal, Orkney, September 2001. © Adam Grydehøj, 2001.

I move on, walking the beach, scrambling over rocks, listening to seabirds, finding living thing trapped in tidepools, proceeding until I come to a ruined church facing the bay. The church is merely a partial wall of rock, lichen, moss, with headstones scattered about—all in decay, like the seal on the beach, like the Chieftain motorhome beside my cottage, lying on its flank and rusting down into the nettles.

I get back onto the road and return to my cottage.

Figure 2. Chieftain motorhome beside my cottage, Orkney, September 2001. © Adam Grydehøj, 2001.

I repeat this trip every day, weather notwithstanding, for three months. In this time, that seal on the beach decomposes—at first rapidly, then slowly, as winter approaches, as temperatures drop, as its best bits are eaten by whatever it is that eats bodies on the beach. There is an intense smell, and the seal's teeth show from beneath what remains of its skin, which eventually turn an awful rusty maroon.

I get to know two seals that live offshore. They sometimes follow me in the sea as I walk that same stretch of habitual coast. Sometimes, I sing to them. (That doesn't count as 'talking', right?) I take photos and record observations in my descriptive field journal, but I know I am not studying Orkney's nature. I am studying myself.

A month and half into my stay in Orkney, I have settled into routine: walks along the beach; efforts to keep the house warm (by November, my well-insulated refrigerator is no longer reliably colder than my kitchen); weekly trips to the supermarket in Kirkwall; looking out at the lights across the bay at night; mild hallucinations; reading Søren Kierkegaard; conversations with seals; making sure not to drink alcohol before 17:00; having increasingly intense dreams.

Two of these dreams, I still remember: In one, waking at night to a noise at my front door, I get out of bed and look out the window. Jesus is standing before the door, haggard, in a dirty white robe, wearing a crown of thorns, with holes for eyes.

In the other, I wake in bed and look out the window. The wind is roaring. The sea has come up over the cliffs, and the fields are all awash, waves beating against the side of the cottage. Dozens of seals raise their bodies from the ocean, singing out in a melancholic way. A cluster of seals approaches the

window. They hold in their flippers a little white thing, which I come to discern as a tiny skeleton, with the skull of a human baby and the bones of a seal pup below the neck.

Funny how this isolation from humans inspires me to novel visions of death. As though human society is life, and death its opposite.

Or maybe it is just the dead seal.

Basically, I am finding it all a bit much.

I nevertheless write my descriptive field journal, write my reflection journal, write my philosophical treatise, and send weekly letters to my professor (to which, as arranged, I never receive reply).

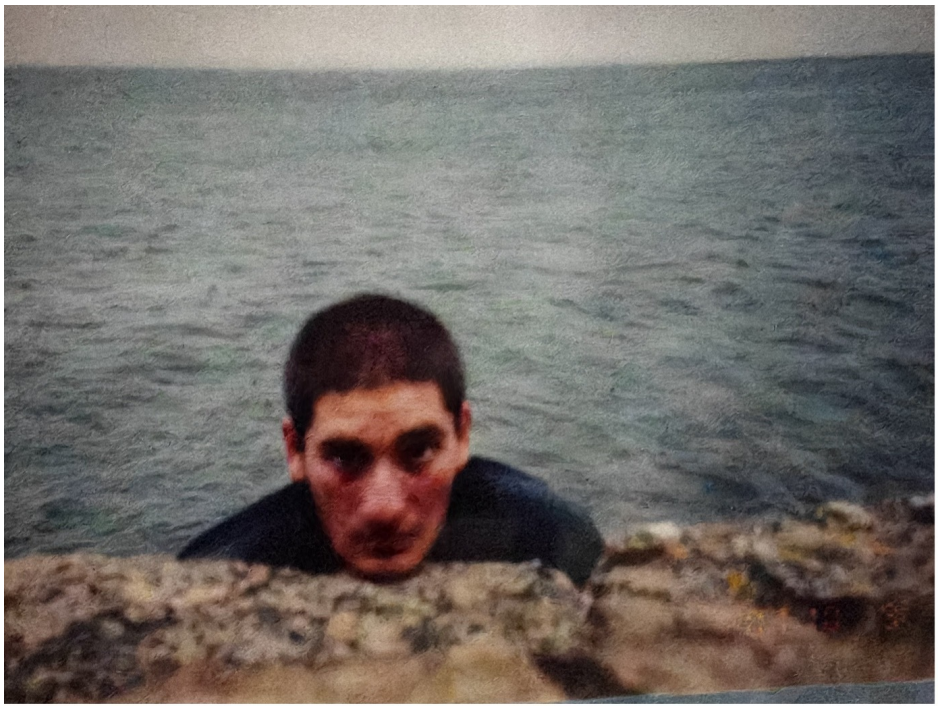

Figure 3. Self-portrait, Orkney, October 2001. © Adam Grydehøj, 2001.

Over time, it gets easier. As November wears on, as Orkney gets darker and my cottage gets colder, I grow accustomed to a life of silence. By the time I leave Orkney to travel to Svalbard for the second half of my project, I have not only read a full six months' worth of Kierkegaard but have also come to see this experiment as too *easy*. Three more months of silence in Svalbard sounds boring, not challenging.

In the absence of two-way communication with my professor, and heading for Svalbard's 24-hour winter darkness, I decide to alter my research approach: I will continue not speaking, but rather than physically isolating myself, I will place myself in social situations. I devise the plan of communicating through written notes.

I create a little notecard that explains I am undertaking a vow of silence. During my time in Svalbard, I will hand this notecard to countless people—in shops, in bars, out in the snow—who tend to take the conditions of my social interaction much more reasonably than they deserve. Although my

project only places limitations on my own speech, and others are welcome to speak to me, this communication imbalance proves difficult to navigate. Many people choose to write back to me. And so, my notebooks accumulate scrawled conversations with all manner of people from all manner of places. In this strange zone of intensely social silence, I meet the Danish woman who becomes my girlfriend and with whom I will eventually move to Denmark. Although I do eventually speak with her in private in Svalbard, I maintain silence with everyone else until shortly before my departure in February 2002.

When I get back to the USA, I receive the bad news: My professor has deemed my semester in Orkney good enough but is disappointed by my semester in Svalbard. Talking and falling in love were *not* part of the plan. For that second semester, I receive incomplete credit for my reading alone; the autoethnographic elements of those three months are judged to be failure.

Not long after, I leave university and am living first in Copenhagen and then in a farmhouse on the island of Ærø. My life has taken a number of turns that I can hardly regret today but that probably, ethically speaking, should never have happened.

An autoethnography of isolation

It is worth stating the obvious already now: Writing in 2024, it is scarcely conceivable that a project of this kind would today be approved by a public university in the USA. Even in 2001, I was later informed, many reasonable people (that is, people who were neither 19-year-olds nor jaded philosophy professors) regarded this Individual Learning Contract as unsafe. I became a figure of fascination and notoriety among academic staff during my absence from campus, as that poor young man who had been sent off to the Arctic with orders not to talk. Only as I grew older did I understand how problematic it is to design a project with the explicit aim of challenging a student's coping abilities.

I did eventually complete my BA and go on to do a PhD in Ethnology and then establish a career, first as a private sector academic and then as university academic. I would later revisit Orkney and Svalbard, the latter many times. I never returned to studying philosophy. My subsequent research, situated within folklore studies and human geography, has been based on the outward-looking approaches of ethnography, distinctly opposed to the extreme inward focus of my BA project on isolation. Only recently have I begun engaging in self-consciously autoethnographic approaches, concerning my own interactions with the sacred in 'the field' (Grydehøj, 2024). This work has prompted me to recall my earlier studies of self.

Back in 2001-2002, I lacked the vocabulary to see my project as autoethnographic. Although my study was personal, it was designed as a study of *me* in isolation: From the start, my professor and I perceived Orkney and Svalbard as non-places. Sure, I was meant to spend some of the time observing 'nature', but even I could see back then that I was intended to see myself reflected in the nature within which I had isolated myself. My

professor and I indulged in the illusion of introspection without situation, in the conceit of transcending the state of being "always already placed" (Trigg, 2017, p. 233).

Yet Orkney and Svalbard were not non-places. Their social and geographical specifics intensely influenced my emotions, experiences, and learnings. My introspective study was conditioned by how I intentionally absented myself from and strategically presented myself within the precise places and societies in which I dwelled. These methods were themselves culturally conditioned, drawing upon long histories of humans using island spaces to gain spiritual or sacred knowledge (Hayward, 2024; Johnson, 2024). I was furthermore constantly affected by and engaged in complex ethnographic relations with nonhuman actants (Gillespie, 2022; Krieg, 2024). Ultimately, the theoretical approaches that I have come to adopt in the intervening decades posit the impossibility of understanding 'being' external to relation (Qin, 2018). Self is constituted through engagements with others, place is at the core of knowing, and we construct emotional geographies everywhere we go.

My isolation study was not autoethnography as part of a wider ethnographic project. It was autoethnography and nothing else, autoethnography with only the works of Søren Kierkegaard for companionship. (To understand how ill-suited the works of Søren Kierkegaard are to this task, one would first need to read them, which post-2001, I can frankly no longer recommend.)

Ethics in autoethnography

Among the voluminous writing on ethics in ethnography in general, relatively little has been written about ethics in autoethnography in particular.

The scholarly literature rarely shows awareness that autoethnography by definition turns the researcher into the research subject. Surprisingly little attention is given to the ethical responsibilities autoethnographers have to themselves, just as ethnographers must consider their responsibilities to other subjects in the field. For example, Yamasaki's study of the role of autoethnography within 'native ethnographies', while seeking "more objective, comprehensive, and fairer anthropology and folkloristics," distinguishes between "self-referential ethnographies of scholars [and] ethnographies written by those who are formally regarded as 'research subjects'" (Yamasaki, 2023, p. 871). Such an approach reifies the gaps in power and position between those who research and those who are researched, limiting the degree to which internal inquiry by certain folk groups is regarded as true scholarship as well as delegitimising collaborative ethnographic methods. In practice though, autoethnography takes the researcher as subject, turns the scholarly gaze inward, and underlines the impossibility (and undesirability) of pure objectification in research. The interstices between researcher-researched, subject-object, study-self are fraught and shifting (Fikfak, 2004).

Roth (2009, p. 5) suggests that "The difficulties self-ascribed auto/ethnographers face in academe" derive from "the frequently unprincipled, egoistical and egotistical, narcissistic preoccupation with and auto-affection of the Self." This evaluation strikes me as unkind, but it also implies that ethical difficulties in autoethnography arise largely out of researchers taking insufficient account of social relations. Yet as Baird N'Diaye (2021) argues, autoethnography can be useful precisely for reflecting upon the very sociality of academia's own intersectional injustices and problematic scholarly claim-making and possession-taking. The insistence that scholarship can never be isolated and objective (Hufford, 1995) requires taking society seriously as well as recognising the positioning of the individual within society. That autoethnography makes some people in society feel uncomfortable may be entirely the point.

Despite this, even sympathetic discussions of ethics in autoethnography similarly tend to focus on the wider social relations in which autoethnography is embedded, for instance on other people who might get caught up in the autoethnographic gaze (e.g., Andrew & Le Rossignol, 2017), without attending to the vulnerabilities of the researcher. The dual role of autoethnographic researcher and autoethnographic subject nevertheless introduces a number of ethical difficulties, two of which I discuss here in an introductory manner: (1) lack of free consent and (2) production and reproduction of harm.

Lack of free consent

One problem is the difficulty in securing freely given consent. Within traditional ethnography, including in folklore studies and human geography, researchers will ideally commit to honestly appraising and communicating research findings. This responsibility is not necessarily shared with research subjects. As ethnographers, we expect subjects to seek to protect themselves when their own interests contradict those of the research, for example by concealing or omitting information in interviews, by avoiding certain activities in the presence of the researcher, or by not consenting to the use of certain information. Subjects have no duty to share the entirety of their experiential world with the researcher. The research project is, after all, just a part (often a very small part) of the subjects' lives, and it is usually hoped that the research project will not drastically deconstruct, reconstruct, or rearrange (*cf.* Tamas, 2014) the subjects' emotional geographies. Subjects' lives need to continue to make sense after the project is over and the researcher has moved on.

In autoethnography, the researcher is omnipresent, and the subject has nowhere to hide. My isolation project took this to extremes. Every one of my thoughts, impulses, and actions was open to study: when I drank alcohol, how I felt when I saw a dead seal, the dreams I had, the dreams I did not have, the friends whose absences I felt. As an autoethnographic researcher, I could choose not to report certain data, but as an autoethnographic subject, I could

not choose to withhold information from the researcher. Such a situation makes it impossible for the autoethnographic subject to maintain privacy or freely give consent.

Production and reproduction of harm

The impossibility of free consent is particularly worrisome because autoethnography is often utilised to grapple with sensitive and painful topics. Referring to an "ethic of the self" in autoethnography, Edwards highlights the tension between authentically researching one's own experience and the risk of that it will "be painful to recall difficult past events" and that professional or social "harm can be caused by in-depth personal revelation" (p. 4). As Dahal and Luitel (2022) note, risk of harm in this manner may be unavoidable: "Being vulnerable in autoethnography is always an ethical challenge to self. Inherently, vulnerability is a basic tenet of autoethnography to connect the heart and soul of the self and others" (p. 2677). Stahlke Wall (2016), who advocates for a "moderate autoethnography," expresses concern that "the trend toward evocative autoethnography increases this risk to self as autoethnographers share stories that are intended to be emotive, detailed, and confessional" (p. 7).

Autoethnography has developed as a method and expressive mode because of its ability to capture certain kinds of—often difficult—experiences that more conventional ethnography struggles to incorporate. Yet as the case of my isolation project illustrates, this association between autoethnography and that which is otherwise difficult to express presents its own dangers. Stahlke Wall's (2016) rhetorical question "Does autoethnography have to be painful?" (p. 4) prompts in me disquiet when I consider how my professor deemed my own project to have failed when its results proved insufficiently difficult and painful. The fact that I received only partial credit for my time in Svalbard (getting credit for my reading and nothing else) indicated that my professor saw my work as ceasing to be relevant as scholarship once my personal experiences had caused me to alter my practice away from the strict isolation of the study design. More than most research methods, autoethnography aspires to change how researchers live their lives. Indeed, Horner (2014) uses autoethnography to reflect upon experiences of uncertainty, noting that such research "has taught me that my beliefs and values are only partial and likely to deconstruct" (p. 13)—an experience that Horner has come to see as positive but that also underlines the potentially serious personal impacts of autoethnography, with no guarantee that the subject will be grateful in retrospect.

Setting aside that I now regard my isolation project as having been ethically compromised from its inception, it provides a good illustration of how difficulties concerning freely given consent and painful situations may interact to produce harm. My ongoing accumulation of findings in Orkney and Svalbard caused me to continually adapt my methods, sometimes more consciously and sometimes less so, but the sequence of events that led to me speaking to my girlfriend in Svalbard cannot be separated from the

autoethnographic research and writing process in which I was engaged for six months. Arguably, occupying the role of the autoethnographic subject, I could have denied the autoethnographic researcher consent to use data on my breaking the vow of silence, thereby causing it to be omitted from the reported study findings and analysis. This, however, would clearly have resulted in the autoethnographic researcher supplying his professor with project reports that were factually incorrect in ways that greatly affected data analysis.

It is also necessary to consider how autoethnographic research and writing can sometimes not only riskily delve into and express but also produce and reproduce difficult, painful, and uncomfortable emotions. In my isolation project, autoethnographic writing was not something that occurred after the fact but was a continual and iterative process. My time in Orkney and to a lesser extent Svalbard was significantly structured around reading, nature walks, writing, eating, drinking, and sleeping. My writing not only helped me make sense of my experiences but also poetically created my field sites as emotionally charged landscapes and seascapes as well as (artificially distanced) societies. Would I have acquired such a morbid fascination with the dead seals on the beach had I not been writing about them every day in a descriptive field journal? Would I have interpreted those lights across the bay as quite so remote and alienated from my existence had I not been tasked with reflecting upon my reflections in a reflections journal? Would I (definitely not a Christian) have dreamed of an eyeless Jesus at the door had I not been living alone for months out in a field with no people to talk to but seals and cows? My task of continual self-reflection demanded cyclical processes of emotional and geographical deconstruction, a continual reworlding instigated by the research itself.

My emotional focus during the months in Orkney served to intensify my impressions and set me into habitual modes of thinking and doing. In Orkney, this contributed to my consuming significant amounts of alcohol on a daily basis and exhibiting signs of mental distress (hallucinations, strange dreams, preoccupation with morbidity). My physical and social isolation also made me vulnerable to unwanted sexual attention and touching by someone upon whom I relied for acquiring basic life necessities.

My attempt at honest reporting and analysis of findings resulted in what could be interpreted as research failure. But if this is the case, if carrying out the project absolutely necessitated that I not engage in interpersonal relations with people who were not subjects (me), it raises the question of what it is reasonable to expect from autoethnographers. Is there a point to the pain besides the publication? When and how does 'therapy' become 'research' (Stahlke Wall, 2016)?

Tellingly, I did *not* report to my professor my experience of unwanted sexual attention and touching by the person upon whom I relied. That is, I omitted from the findings the one harm that was contributed to by my autoethnographic process but that did not spring directly from my mental

state. Is this because the autoethnographic researcher (me) did not feel it relevant to report, or (more likely) because the autoethnographic subject (also me) felt ashamed of a harm to which the autoethnographic researcher exposed them? Who did *this* silence benefit?

Mitigating harm

The advantages of autoethnography—its ability to provide exceptionally direct access to emotional geographies and to evocatively express the researcher's/subject's involvement in meaningmaking within the social, cultural, and geographical system (Murray, 2023)—necessarily entail that the researcher uses their own emotional responses as the evidence from which they undertake their analyses and draw their conclusions. Autoethnography can neither secure free consent by separating the researcher from the subject nor remove emotion and personalisation from its expressive and communicative form without compromising its method and losing access to the data on which it operates. That is, there are no clean solutions for avoiding the ethical pitfalls in autoethnography.

Autoethnography is far from unique in this. Ethnography more widely grapples with ethical issues. To anonymise or not to anonymise (Jerolmack & Murphy, 2019)? To treat subjects as collaborators or to keep them at a distance (Nimführ, 2022)? To widely disseminate or to obscure research communications (Shklovski & Vertesi, 2013)? The special difficulty when it comes to autoethnography may simply be that, although—or possibly because—critically inclined ethnographers are accustomed to checking and interrogating their own power relative to external subjects, it proves difficult to enunciate the vulnerability of the autoethnographic subject. For Pérez and Montoya (2018), research concerning researcher precarity and insecurity is difficult in part because "we scholars tend to think that this situation is transitory, not what we deserve, and that with our skills and merit it can well change" (p. A10). In other words, because researchers feel they should not be vulnerable, they often avoid dwelling upon and sticking with their vulnerability.

Lessons can be drawn from other ways in which scholars contemplate and express professional vulnerability. Hong's (2023) autoethnographic exploration of years working in island studies foregrounds how problems of marginalisation and precarity may influence what and how scholars choose to research. The professional nature of research is too often overlooked, with individuals who are employed or study as researchers often indulging in the illusion that their work can be viewed in isolation from the social, economic, and political conditions of their employment or studentship. 'Self-exploitative practices' are at once a reaction and a sacrifice to neoliberal academia (Ferreira, 2022). If, as Baird N'Diaye (2021) and others (e.g., Chandrashekar, 2018; García-Fernández, 2020; Tilley-Lubbs, 2018) argue, autoethnography is especially valuable as a method for overcoming intersectional disadvantage and exclusion, then serious consideration must

be given to ways in which academia pushes those who already lack power into opening themselves up to even greater potential harms in order to (potentially) achieve professional progress.

In this respect, it is interesting to note Kligyte's (2023) reflections upon the unequal burdens of 'collegiality': Although collegiality is seen as a product and process of scholarly and professional cohesion, it is those in the most vulnerable or marginal positions who are often under special pressure to 'attune' to collegial norms. Building awareness may be the first step toward constructing remedies for often-overlooked exclusions. We cannot find solutions before acknowledging problems.

In this, it is crucial to emphasise that the solution is not to seek to 'defang' autoethnography, to remove autoethnography's potential to cause harm. Autoethnography derives power from its openness, and some problems, inequalities, and harmful situations *should* be enunciated and expressed, lest they be allowed to flourish in silence. Autoethnography's expressive evocativeness, giving personal voice to calls for justice, is valuable, and scholars ought to have the academic freedom to decide to make certain sacrifices and take on certain risks in order to produce research that they believe is necessary and right. It would be unhelpful if ethics review boards were to begin more strenuously preventing researchers from studying themselves—with the result that existing problematic power systems received yet more institutional buttressing.

Nevertheless, awareness, recognition, and discussion of the ethical pitfalls connected with autoethnography can help researchers protect themselves. For autoethnographic projects that are planned out in advance (such as my social and natural isolation project in 2001-2002), one solution could be for the research design and the formulation of research protocols stage to include explicit planning for mitigation of harms. Are there ways in which the autoethnographic researcher could structure the study in order to minimise the chances of the autoethnographic subject experiencing harm? Researchers could determine in advance how to proceed in the event that they experience negative outcomes: Could these negative outcomes legitimately be omitted from the results or from the reporting of the results? Are there conditions in which the autoethnographic researcher should request that the autoethnographic subject halt activities that produce harm?

Such planning is best performed prior to the start of research. Autoethnography, however, is often undertaken in retrospect, reflecting upon experiences to which the researcher never intended to apply autoethnographic methods. In such cases, the autoethnographic researcher can weigh the advantages and disadvantages of reporting certain results. In the case of the present paper, which includes autoethnographic consideration of a previous autoethnographic project, the harms of autoethnographic openness are mitigated by the manner in which my own circumstances have changed in the more than two decades that have elapsed since the original project: I am no longer a teenage undergraduate student but am instead a professor, in a

position of relative financial, professional, and personal security. Even today, communicating my experiences autoethnographically does present personal and professional risks, but it also presents personal and professional benefits that it would not have done in the past. The balance of harms versus benefits has been altered by the passage of time. This underlines, of course, the ways in which researcher marginality and vulnerability are compounded, but it also points to the potential for researchers to use autoethnography in different ways at different points in their lives and careers. Institutions, having built greater awareness of these issues, can create means of supporting the wellbeing of scholars who engage in autoethnography and ideally offering greater pathways toward professional advancement that do not require already vulnerable researchers to enhance their vulnerability.

Conclusion

Although autoethnography has potential for revealing and communicating insights in profound ways, only limited attention has been given to the ethical concerns involving protection of the autoethnographic subject. In this paper, I have briefly discussed here two general categories of ethical concern (difficulty obtaining free given consent and production and reproduction of harms), which are relevant to both folklore studies and human geography. Although the case of my isolation project is in many respects extreme, it illustrates a number of ethical complexities.

In the analysis, I have shown how these ethical concerns are in some respects inherent to autoethnography. Autoethnography is by nature edgy, rather than safe. However, I have also suggested some potential means of mitigating harm from autoethnography. Individual scholars have the ability to arrive at diverse solutions for dealing with autoethnography's ethical concerns, and some institutions will be more supportive than others. The first step is to acknowledge the ethical pitfalls of autoethnography. This need not preclude embracing autoethnography's unique advantages.

The present study is limited by its autoethnographic focus on a single autoethnographic research project. Different kinds autoethnography present different risks and ethical challenges, and different researchers respond to difficult situations in different ways. More thinking is necessary about how autoethnography can be pursued in a manner that safeguards the researcher, including thinking about the apparent proclivity for autoethnographic processes to make certain kinds of ethical concerns and harms more likely to arise.

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