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Contemplating Reflexivity as a Practice of Authenticity in Autoethnographic Research

Adam Wiesner

Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology Slovak Academy of Sciences, wiesner.ad@gmail.com

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Abstract

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Keywords

Autoethnography, Reflexivity, Authenticity, Vulnerability, Evolutionary Astrology, Non-Binary

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Contemplating Reflexivity as a Practice of Authenticity in Autoethnographic Research

Adam Wiesner

Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology, Slovak Academy of Sciences,
Bratislava, Slovakia

This personal narrative shares a perspective of a non-binary trans qualitative writer who engages in the reflexive practice of evolutionary astrology. The author focuses on vulnerable, healing and therapeutic aspects of autoethnographic writing, and his quest for being authentic while dealing with difficult emotions related to his “misfit feeling” when crossing the boundary lines within Slovak academia. Keywords: Autoethnography, Reflexivity, Authenticity, Vulnerability, Evolutionary Astrology, Non-Binary

Introduction¹

“I have friends who believe in astrology and while it’s not my bag I also have friends who believe in capitalism which seems a lot worse” (Avery Edison, Twitter, May 10, 2018).

This paper is consciously written in order to serve as a vehicle of empowerment, in order to liberate myself from the internalized feeling of not being a sufficient researcher due to not only disrespecting the rules of gender binary, but also for engaging in practices such as evolutionary astrology that might be considered heretic to the clinical eye of a rigorous academic world. My wish is to come out of the closet of hiding my passion for such practices, and reflect openly the ways in which I consider these practices to be beneficial for my well-being, as well as for my ethnographic practice. Nevertheless, part of me also deals with aspects of inadequacy and internalized shame for even mentioning such a concept in my academic writing. As I understand writing to be a method of inquiry and (self-)discovery (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), in this text I apply reflexive writing as a method to deal with this uncomfortable aspect of mine that hinders my academic self-expression.

As a trans non-binary identified person who has been currently dealing with the challenges of applying autoethnography in Slovak academia, I am aware that as the issues of disempowerment and insecurity that established the background that I draw my experience and motive to write from will create an expectation of traces of coloring to be presented in my writing. The need to explain does not serve here as a demonstration of my ethnographic skill, but should be rather reflected upon as an aspect of my acknowledged self-defense that I have learned to use in order to allow myself to consciously depart from a “coolly coherent body of sustained theoretical prose” (Freeman, 2015, p. 918) of the rather conservative Slovak academic circle I hail from. Such an environment is still not comfortable with the application of the first person in academic writing, and has neither the history nor wide audience as yet for genres such as autoethnography or a personal narrative, which is intentionally used with certain marginalized voices. I am therefore writing this paper with an awareness of the constant presence of an inner critic reminding me that an ethnographic endeavor promoting self-

¹ This work was supported by the research grant *Reflexive Writing as a Method of Ethnographic Inquiry* (VEGA No. 2/0088/19).

knowing and self-reflective narration might be regarded as highly suspicious – all the more if one of the topics the text deals with is astrology.

Apart from one of the attempts of autoethnography “to explain one element of self to other” (Averett & Soper, 2011, p. 375), I understand the genre and method of autoethnography and personal narrative to be an opportunity to identify hindering aspects of ourselves by describing and consequently releasing them, once they have been viewed, embraced, and accepted. I follow Richardson, who argues that “[t]he ethnographic life is not separable from the Self” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 965) and sees the potential of personal narratives in using them as “the structures through which [we] make sense of [our] world” (p. 966). Autoethnography or, as Richardson explains, personal narrative “can evoke deeper parts of the self, heal wounds, enhance the sense of self – or even alter one’s sense of identity” (p. 965). Through such a conscious aim of mine, I therefore explicitly value the therapeutic overlap of reflexive autoethnographic writing. I am aware of my own functioning as the prime source of information, mostly in the form of “emotional data” (St. Pierre, 1997). Apart from needing “to tell [my] story to the rest” in order to achieve “an interior liberation” (Levi, as cited in Freeman, 2015, p. 924), I am however still aware of my own inner conflict, which stems from my feelings of insecurity and disempowerment as both issues have been highly prevalent in most of my lived and acknowledged experience in academia. I am continually aware of my own need to employ explanation and analysis together with reflexivity as the main devices of my ethnographic erudition in order to ease the tension that is caused by my inner struggle with using these genres. It is not that I would argue against the possibility of autobiographic ethnographies to convey some truths, however partial they may be. Also, despite me being aware that according to French post-structuralism “there is never anything authentic in the words we read” (Freeman, 2015, p. 925), I understand the need for authenticity to be one of the main drives that actually made me write this text.

Reflexivity as a Practice of Authenticity

“I want to write about my experience as an astrologer”, I hear myself talking to a friend.

“Man, this is crazy.”, he says and then he stops and stares at me.

“I am serious.”, I reply, “I just need to be authentic. It is my daily inspiration, it is what I do, it is where I search for answers and then I put it into my research practice. This is the real me. How can I not write about it?”

“But it is not science!”

Through my experiences in my ethnographic practice, I learned how to use reflexivity as the most important tool. In my effort to be as neutral, true, and authentic in the field as possible – however partial or inconsistent the outcomes of such effort may be seen from the post-structuralist perspective – I have developed a habit of reflecting on everything I do. I understand reflexivity, as in when “the author consistently questions himself[er]self] as a both a participant and a researcher” (Cline, 2012, p. 4), to be a crucial tool when applying the ethical perspective to *what* we say/write and *how* we say/write it. As Richardson elaborates:

Our task [as qualitative writers] is to find concrete practices through which we can construct ourselves as ethical subjects engaged in ethical ethnography – inspiring to read and to write. Some of these practices include [...] engaging in self-reflexivity, giving in to synchronicity, asking for what one wants, not flinching from where the writing takes one emotionally or spiritually, and

honouring the embodiedness and spatiality of one's labour. (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 965)

Through my experience in evolutionary astrology, I have seen how my practice is tightly intertwined with reflexivity. In fact, if there is one factor I should single out that my astrology practice has taught me, it is the endless training in reflexivity.

Evolutionary astrology is a unique paradigm with metaphysical and transpersonal aims. According to the founder of the school of evolutionary astrology, Jeffrey Wolf Green (1998), studying and reading charts through “this approach will help identify the past evolutionary context of any individual, why he or she had the past, and how that past has conditioned the individual to the present state of conditions in his or her life” (p. xxiv). As explained by Green, evolutionary astrology “does answer the underlying questions that are so deep in the heart of many: why am I here, and what are my lessons” (Green, 2012, p. viii). In my personal reflexive practice, studying my own birth chart through the lens of evolutionary astrology and coming back to it in challenging moments of my life often helps me enter the deeper layers of my individual conscious and unconscious selves. As I am aware of internalized guilt, shame, and self-doubt being one of the main obstacles in expressing myself and applying senses to interpret what we call “our reality”, using evolutionary astrology as a reflexive tool allows me to “focus on the nature of the belief systems that have had the effect of making [me] feel guilty, with the consequent need to either atone for this guilt, or be angry because of it” (Green, 2009, p. 237). Through the conscious act of contemplation over the chart in the moments of struggle with intense emotions, it allows me to be inspired, receive intuitive guidance, or move toward a more self-acceptance and self-compassionate state of mind. As Green describes it, evolutionary astrology provides a perspective that enables one “to make a necessary and critical adjustment from patriarchal beliefs that promote the guilt/atonement or anger dynamic to beliefs that emanate from [universal] laws that promote compassion and self-acceptance” (p. 237).

As heretic as it may sound, autoethnography and evolutionary astrology viewed from the methodological perspective has many things in common; from a certain point of view, they are defined by the same reflexive practice. As Ellis describes:

[Autoethnography] asks that we not only examine our lives but also consider how and why we think, act, and feel as we do. Autoethnography requires that we observe ourselves observing, that we interrogate what we think and believe, and that we challenge our own assumptions, asking over and over if we have penetrated as many layers of our own defenses, fears, and insecurities as our project requires. (Ellis, 2016, p. 10)

For me, both practices first mean my deep personal engagement. As Custer (2014) eloquently termed it, “Autoethnography by its very nature is engagement. It is reaching deep down into the soul and pulling up trash and scum” (p. 4). The applied “meaning-making processes such as framing and narration” (Shim, 2018, p. 1) that are highlighted when defining autoethnography in relation to the issues of self-realization and identity construction could also be applied in other self-reflexive practices. From the transpersonal perspective of the evolutionary astrology paradigm, our life is a journey of becoming with change – evolution – as the only constant. When studying a birth chart or a chart of the transiting planets in motion, looking as if from above into the past or the future, it is a moment of timeless *now*. As Custer (2014) explains, the same way autoethnography can be applied as a “projection through ‘space-time dimensions’” (p. 3) that enables a changing perspective on what happened to us. It is a journey, “a personal adventure into my subconscious in an effort to understand” myself (p. 1). Both practices can, therefore, lead to advancing the skill of non-attachment from events (frozen

in time) that were at the root of our deep-seated unresolved emotional blocks. A transpersonal approach in astrology – read as a symbolic language, a code with many ways of interpretation – when applied through the lens of reflexivity, is a useful device that enables a holistic perspective on events that have already happened or are happening in our life. Without properly applied reflexivity, events or situations may tend to be framed from a perspective that is too personal and, therefore, too narrow. Such personal attachment, if deep-seated emotions are triggered, gives way to establishing and activating “secret programs” (*Geheime Programme*, Röhr, 2013). These programs are destructive mental beliefs, usually in the form of stories we construct that are based upon our traumatic or intense emotional experience; this way, they continue to condition our behavior and hinder our freedom of choice in future acting.

To avoid any misunderstanding, I am not promoting evolutionary astrology as a valid ethnographic method. It is also not my intention to offer a “how to” article on the process how this practice is applied. The same way a piece of art can speak to audience without necessarily any explanation as to the way in which it was produced, I write my text from the stance that we do not always need to understand the details of a particular art technique to be able to contemplate the final artwork. In this text I am simply contemplating the ways reflexivity could be used in autoethnographic research through offering my personal experience, which – from the methodological perspective – could be viewed as unorthodox. I follow St. Pierre who emphasizes the importance of interrogating “whatever limits we have imposed on the concept method lest we diminish its possibilities in knowledge production” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 967). I use her quote here to express that personally “for me, writing [or any reflexive practice] *is* thinking, writing [or any reflexive practice] *is* analysis, writing [or any reflexive practice] *is* indeed a seductive and tangled *method of discovery*” (p. 967). In this paper, I encourage myself to shine the light on practices that many of us – ethnographers – do, apart from doing what is considered to be established science, but despite their benefit for our inductive research process we remain silent about them. These practices might have a strong self-reflective, self-therapeutic, metaphysical, emotional, or spiritual component, be it meditation, art, tarot, dream journaling, or anything that enables reflexive approach. They often have the same effect described by Lyle (2009) in connection with the reflexive narrative approach: they help create space for us “to engage in critical thought that may result in wakefulness to alternative approaches to knowing ourselves as practitioners” (p. 294).

Autoethnography: Becoming Vulnerable Again

A conversation starts:

“So, what do you like doing?”

“I like reading.”

“What do you read?”

“Uhm... charts.”

The conversation stops.

As Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) explain, writing as a method of inquiry is “a viable way in which to learn about [ourselves] and [our] research topic” (p. 959). Writing, therefore, is a complex process that is both creative and analytical: “*Thought happen[s] in the writing*” (p. 970). When I started experimenting with writing as a self-reflexive practice, it soon became my tool of empowerment, but my words were never meant to be published. Was I fearing rejection from others for showing the raw insides of my ever-present sense of not belonging? Of course. Writing autoethnography means first and foremost that we must be able to become vulnerable when we share our most intimate aspects of our life with others. As Ellis explains:

[H]onest autoethnographic exploration generates a lot of fears and doubts – and emotional pain. Just when you can't stand the pain anymore, well, that's when the real work has only begun. Then there's the vulnerability of revealing yourself, not being able to take back what you've written or having any control over how readers interpret it. (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 738)

Sharing myself with the world is the thing I have always feared. I learned early in my life that acceptance is hard to be won and, therefore, sharing my writing, where I eventually disclose who I really allow myself to be when facing my own internalized shame – it sounded like the craziest idea. When I first started to think about writing autoethnographically, it was because I realized that writing gave me something verbalizing never could. I started to write because I was not able to speak about the things I penned. I started to write about them because it was the only possible way how to acknowledge my shadow. However, I was not ready to share my prose with the world yet. There were still things that I could never imagine sharing, due to the ever-present fear of rejection. Allowing fear to rule our life has serious consequences. As Averett and Soper (2011) explain from the perspective of (female) vulnerability as an ongoing social discourse:

[The] experience of fear is often debilitating and demoralizing, limiting [our] choices and freedoms in both body and mind. [...] As a result of fear [we] make choices and live lives that are based on conscious and unconscious attempts to “be safe”. Fear has the potential to limit and to lessen the ability to participate fully in one's life. If fear is left unchecked, the resulting dependency can result in irrationality and the loss of autonomy. Fear can also cause the loss of relationships and connections through the isolation that fear-based decisions often create. (pp. 358-359)

Writing autoethnography is not an easy endeavor, “It is a dirty job” (Custer, 2014, p. 4) and, as with all creative acts, it needs time, inspiration, intuition, motivation, and drive. It can sometimes be scary and very often painful. When you finally decide to become vulnerable and share your most intimate doubts and fears with the world, you must first find the courage to face them. Facing such fears sometimes means to go over such deeply buried feelings again, as one way of dealing with past traumas is to open ourselves and accept them as a part of our lived experience. For me, giving sense to what I experience through reflexive writing is like giving birth to a new life: it takes time, nourishment, and is very often painful, stressful, and in the end messy before I can feel the joy of the labor.

Ever since I was a kid, I learned to have secrets I could not share with the world. However, as Cline explains (citing Goodall), not being authentic and “not speaking the truth” about my feelings and lived experience “established ‘within my narrative identity a hidden and very much clandestine self’” (as cited in Cline, 2012, p. 3). My decision to undergo gender transition as a non-binary identified person was, therefore, the first step in paying respects to my innermost desires and giving myself the right to be happy again. After the long decades of self-destructive behavior and self-hate, it was an act of self-love that I vitally needed to be able to live my life fully for the first time. Writing autoethnographically about this was an act of self-acknowledgment of who I have become. When the world could not give it to me, I needed to give it to myself. As autoethnography can be understood as “qualitative research that typically involves [...] an analysis of being different or an outsider; [...] an opportunity to explain differences from the inside; [...] an explanation of how one is ‘othered’” (Averret & Soper, 2011, p. 375), it helped me find a way to accept some of the lost pieces of myself that I was able to “re-search” (Cline, 2012, p. 5) through reflexive writing. It allowed me to see who

I was becoming *at the moment* of the process of becoming, and to experience what it feels like *not needing* to apologize for being different. It allowed me to cross the abyss: to disclose my most intimate experience and embrace it, together with my sense of a researcher's identity.

My experience with the evolutionary astrology perspective applied on my life experience is very similar to the one with reflexive autoethnographic writing: by coming back to reading my chart over and over again in times of personal confusion, emotional turmoil, pain-body experience, or when I happen to be at a crossroad in my life, I am given a detailed roadmap of the contemporary context of my present moment. Looking at the chart as if from above helps me create a safe space in a timeless perspective. It allows me to become vulnerable again, or to detach from what is happening to me, and to search for some inner balance in order to make sense of my life. Until today I have kept my passionate interest in reading charts as a secret because it too was the target of rejection in the culturally conditioned academic environment I come from. Many times, I have sensed that I am being second-guessed for sharing my belief in past lives, as if it was something I should not speak about publicly; as if it was a dark stain on my academic skin. My interest in astrology has also been a target for others to project stereotypes on my gender expression and reject my trans masculinity as not being "real" for my having "feminine hobbies". Why do I feel the need to disclose my passion for evolutionary astrology now, after ten years of almost daily practice? As Lyle (2009) explains, "It is through this engagement of intertextual dialogue that I come to new understandings of myself, my experiences, and my attempt to disseminate my conclusions" (p. 296). As autoethnography or personal reflexive narrative "allows the reader (and the writer) to experience something new – to feel, to learn, to discover, to co-create" (Ricci, 2003, p. 594), I feel the need to share this revoked experience, because I "honour both my telling and another's hearing of the story" (Lyle, 2009, p. 296). I am writing this paper "because I [can] no longer not write" about it (Goodall as cited in Cline, 2012, p. 1). It is a deep and important part of me, and I have kept it secret for far too long for the fear of being judged and becoming an outsider. As Shim (2018) further explains, following Becker:

In the researcher's society, academia always has dominant power. If his or her language is labeled untruthful not because of the research itself, but because it deviates from social norms and challenges academic tradition, such a researcher may lose his/her position in the group. Regarding the concept of deviance, it asserts that deviance and conformity are not the result of what we necessarily do, but how others respond to what we do. (p. 6)

As someone who has always been viewed as too Uranian – uniquely different, deviating from the norm, unpredictable, and hard to control – and always (unintentionally) crossed boundary lines, I am accustomed to being "othered" and feeling guilty about it. I am used to being reminded that I am too much of this and not enough of that. When undergoing my transition, I was reminded by the supervising doctor that I am not trans enough according to what she believed the concept of gender was. Concerning academia, when trying to publish my article about the research I was doing in collaboration with the community of trans activists, I was reminded by the peer reviewer in between the lines that it was too radical for the Slovak academic audience. With my interest in collaborative ethnography and therapy, I was reminded by a European ethnologist that I am maneuvering at the margins of qualitative sociology. To overcome my constant fear of rejection in life, I needed to learn how to detach myself from the internalized shame to be able to experience that "[t]he same 'me' receives different reactions depending on the location in which I am positioning myself" (Shim, 2018, p. 2). When dealing with identity issues, it is beneficial to bear in mind that our "feelings of insiderness or outsidersness" are context-dependent (p. 2). As Shim further explains:

[M]y misfit feelings help me to realize that something that one culture considers ordinary can be turned into something valuable, rare, unpredictable, and precious when placed in a different culture. The crises of position as an insider and outsider is a virtue of research that scholars must acknowledge, as we are always located in between the two realms. (p. 7)

The Need for Undivided Self

Through the application of reflexivity in everything I experience, I am aware that I am in the process of constant becoming: “the subject who writes today is never and can never be the same subject who acted yesterday” (Freeman, 2015, p. 926). My knowledge is, therefore, a complex part of me. As Shim (2018) explains, following Mead: “An identity is never settled or fixed but is constantly moving and changing” (p. 2). My identity of a Czech trans non-binary researcher living in Slovakia, evolutionary astrologer and metaphysical seeker is somehow embedded in me and “I” *become* a complex mixture of all those aspects of mine. Everything I have learned in my evolutionary astrology practice is *somehow* of use in my daily life. I cannot separate this part of me and put it on a shelf each morning when I go to work as a researcher. The same way, as the final product of reflexive writing cannot be separated from the writing process itself or the writer (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). In her text *Autoethnography on Learning Autoethnography*, Wall (2006) shares her own experience with personal transformation: “I was confronted, challenged, moved, and changed by what I learned” (p. 146). As Freeman (2015) points out, “The writing thus changes the writer as much perhaps or even more than the reader” (pp. 922-923).

I share Lyle’s (2009) position, who follows Grumet in believing that a reflexive “narrative has the power to illuminate for me how my personal history shapes who I become” as a researcher (p. 294). It is not my duty to deny the layers of my complex identity that some authorities might have issues with. It would on the contrary be a very unhealthy and disempowering endeavor, one that I know all too well already. It *is*, however, my responsibility – from the perspective of the reflexive tradition – to carefully reflect *all* my implicit beliefs and apply reflexivity in every aspect of my (ethnographic) praxis, and “to revisit moments from my past that may have informed praxis development” (Lyle, 2009, p. 296). As Palmer further explains: “[G]ood teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher ... good teachers join self, subject, and students in the fabric of life because they teach from an integral and undivided self” (Palmer, as cited in Lyle, 2009, p. 295).

Since teaching and disseminating knowledge is inseparable from doing research, I find the word *teacher* to be interchangeable with the word *researcher*. I believe and value such a belief that all of us can thrive from doing what we love and employ ourselves in the path of “heart – the place where intellect, and emotion, and spirit, and will converge in the human self” (Palmer, as cited in Lyle, 2009, p. 295). My experience with autoethnography and reflexive writing gave me a voice and the power to keep my integrity as a researcher, trans non-binary person, and a human being. My practice in evolutionary astrology has given me a means to understand the context of my endless osmosis – my journey of constant becoming in this world. I understand both to be “a journey of re-searching” (Cline, 2012, p. 5). With the tool of reflexivity always applied in the quest for being authentic in my writing, both are excellent devices for me that enable the uncovering of various patterns and perspectives as to how to look at particular life experiences and events, as well as how to empower myself through the use of language and the processes of framing and narration when making sense of my lived experience for either myself or when in conversation with others.

Conclusion

As being an autoethnographer means that I am becoming my own subject of inquiry with reflexive writing as the main method, I have integrated all my intuitive gifts and practical skills into a personal toolbox that I carry with me into the field and back. I carefully pick the tools I use, and I am aware of their sharpness, thickness, or color of their ink. In “confessional tales” (Van Maanen, 2011) – the methodology chapters of ethnographic monographs – ethnographers often explain their practices and eventually open the toolboxes they carry for others to see the route to their interpretations and findings. Today I decided to share my tools with the world. I, as an ethnographer, practice my most important tool of reflexivity through various approaches to life: besides from being drawn to explore the realms of transpersonal and Buddhist psychology, therapy, yoga, meditation of insight, or tarot, I also cultivate a deep passion for evolutionary astrology. Since all of these aspects are part of my complex lived embodied experience, I wish to unlock this revoked part of me in an effort to embrace my “otherness” through this reflexive narrative and, hence, empower my integrity as a researcher who is also a metaphysical seeker.

Writing this, I am aware that I might run the risk of being judged as too “esoteric” and insufficiently scientific. I have learned that doing autoethnography is a risky endeavor, since the potential rejection is double: first, we risk being rejected as researchers, and second, we risk being rejected in our effort to be our *true* selves. Concerning the difficult topic of authenticity and truth, I agree with Anderson (2001) that “What’s true today interpretively is not necessarily so tomorrow” (p. 6). As Freeman (2015) states, “truth is indeed an impossible prey to catch” and “our own part-truths are easier to believe than those of other people” (p. 919). My aim, therefore, is not to prove certain objective aspects of my own lived experience. I understand the constant effort to be authentic and true to myself – in the sense of owning my truth as well as my vulnerability – as an important personal value of mine that I must respect, as I believe that such an effort belongs to the ethical practice of reflexivity in my qualitative writing. I share Custer’s (2014) position that:

Our willingness to own and engage with our own vulnerability determines the depth of our courage and the clarity of our prose; the level to which we protect ourselves from being vulnerable is a measure of our fear and disconnection. (p. 4)

In the end, “[w]ithout language and truth, how do you effectively communicate? You cannot.” (Cline, 2012, p. 5). And if we cannot be true to ourselves in the first place, why should we even attempt doing any research at all?

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Author Note

Mgr. Adam Wiesner, PhD. is a post-doctoral research fellow at the Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology, Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava, and a collaborative and queer affirmative counselor and therapist. His research interests include Queer, Mad and Monster studies, postmodern therapeutic approaches, autoethnography and reflexive writing. In 2017 he published a monograph (*Jediná jistota je zmeňa: Autoetnografie na transgender téma*), where he deals with the challenging aspects of gender transition through autoethnography from the perspective of a researcher and a non-binary identified person. Correspondence can be addressed directly to: adam.wiesner@savba.sk.

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