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Charting our Course: A Review of Stephen Andrew's Searching for an Autoethnographic Ethic

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Abstract

This review critiques Stephen Andrew's proposed method for applying ethical guidelines to autoethnographic research. Andrew argues that although extant autoethnographic literature attends to a variety of ethical considerations (i.e., relational ethics, reflexivity in research, tools for ethical writing), explicit analytical guidelines are lacking. Using excerpts from personal autoethnographies, Andrew illustrates his conception for an autoethnographic ethic leaving readers with practical tools and resonant narratives.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Ethics, Associated Others, Reflexivity, Ethical Analysis

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Charting our Course: A Review of Stephen Andrew's *Searching for an Autoethnographic Ethic*

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This review critiques Stephen Andrew's proposed method for applying ethical guidelines to autoethnographic research. Andrew argues that although extant autoethnographic literature attends to a variety of ethical considerations (i.e., relational ethics, reflexivity in research, tools for ethical writing), explicit analytical guidelines are lacking. Using excerpts from personal autoethnographies, Andrew illustrates his conception for an autoethnographic ethic leaving readers with practical tools and resonant narratives. Keywords: Autoethnography, Ethics, Associated Others, Reflexivity, Ethical Analysis

Searching for an Autoethnographic Ethic is exactly what it claims to be: an ethical pursuit. But it is also a journey. Andrew's search for an ethical framework for conducting autoethnography invites the reader to come along for the ride across a winding, uncharted path. On this adventure, we meet the invariable "Who's Who" of autoethnography, get history lessons in autoethnographic and qualitative research, encounter philosophers of intuitionism and arrive at a strategic method for ethical analysis of autoethnography. And while this roadmap scaffolds a structural understanding of the book, it is Andrew's incorporation of his own autoethnographic "working pieces" that are the highlight of this trip. Stephen Andrew weaves vulnerably written, self-narrative prose and poetry into a guided framework for novice and seasoned autoethnographers on ways to methodically approach ethics. This book chronicles a series of personal, and at times unsettling experiences that have shaped his autobiographical journey and his pursuit towards autoethnographic ethics, realizing along the way that these were always, in parts, pieces of the same puzzle.

Andrew argues that, while autoethnographers have devoted significant attention to relational ethics (Ellis, 2007; Pollard, 2015; Richardson, 2007; Simon, 2013), published guidelines and provided tools for ethical consideration in autoethnographic writing (Tolich, 2010; Tullis, 2013), and expanded our notions of reflexivity in ethical practice in constructing autoethnography (Ellis, 2007; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) these approaches lack a grounded analytical method for contending with various ethical topics that arise. He attests that, while the attention to ethics up to now is well-intended and helpful, it "offer(s) little practical guidance as to how to conduct autoethnographic research in a sound manner" (Chapter 1, Section 5, para 1). Ultimately, Andrew provides a philosophically grounded two-prong approach towards autoethnographic ethics, specifically the ethical treatment of others.

Andrew spotlights the ethics of storytelling, drawing again from insights provided by highly regarded autoethnographic scholars. While this discussion digresses briefly into psychoanalytic concepts posited by Acceptance Commitment Theory, Andrew's attention to pain vs. harm is an especially helpful way for autoethnographic scholars to consider the ethical treatment of others in self-narrative.

Andrew proposes a two-grid approach for ethical analysis, comprised of "The Exposure Grid" and "Ideas and Duties Grid." The Exposure Grid emerges from autoethnographic discourse on relational ethics, while the Ideas and Duties Grid is grounded in the philosophical theory of intuitionism. Why intuitionism? Andrew argues "autoethnography and intuitionism share a number of characteristics that suggest a harmonious pairing" (Chapter 2, Section 7,

para 7). These include an innate link between the fundamental principles of intuitionism “epistemologically centered on questioning” (Chapter 2, Section 7, para 1) and using “what we already [intuitively] know to inform our ethical choices” (Chapter 2, Section 7, para 1, as cited in Kaspar, 2012, p. 11, brackets in Andrew citation). The emergent method utilizes “basic human responsibilities” found in intuitionism: fidelity, reparation, gratitude, justice, beneficence, self-improvement, and non-maleficence as a template for analyzing the ethics of implicated others in autoethnographic research (Chapter 2, Section 7, para 3).

While the first half of the book provides a solid theoretical grounding for an ethical analytic framework, the second half enacts said framework, by incorporating “working excerpts” from Andrew’s autoethnographic collection and using the two-grid analysis to attend to ethical concerns within those texts. In this way, Andrew turns his own method upon his own writing. First, using The Exposure Grid following each excerpt, Andrew names those implicated in the text (he provides a method for categorizing this) grappling with ways the text exposes others. He engages reflexively, asking how representations of others may or may not add substance to the story. Next, Andrew applies The Ideas and Duties Grid, charting how each of the aforementioned basic human responsibilities intersect with implicated others in the text. Andrew delineates his process for marking the text in the appendices and provides additional resources for ways to code critical or exposing text that may pose ethical issues around representation.

Andrew chooses autoethnographic excerpts that are moving, vulnerable, teachable pieces as he guides readers through this approach to ethical analysis. His texts bear witness to painful experiences both for him and those closest to him. Examples of this include Andrew’s account of his experiences during the 2009 Australian Bushfires and his survival through a life-threatening motor accident. Andrew captures raw emotional fallout in each of these experiences, bravely committing despair, uncertainty and vulnerability to the page. These stories are so resonant, it is easy to forget that these texts function simultaneously as self-narratives and exemplars for tackling strategic analysis. Andrew’s decision to include these excerpts, whole and unaltered by analysis or coding elicits a flow to the reading and provides the reader with a macro understanding of ways the events, themes and researcher positionality intersect within the text. Andrew responsibly prefaces his autoethnographic excerpts with an autobiographical piece that situates the researcher within the writing and supplements each excerpt with an examination of the text through both ethical grids. Pedagogically speaking, this exemplifies how text can provide a show vs. tell approach to new methods.

Andrew grapples, both personally and methodologically (he aptly entangles these concepts) with the ethical treatment of implicated others who are unreachable to check the accuracy of their representation in the text. In reflections upon his autoethnographic excerpt “An Epistemology of Love” Andrew wrestles with ethical representations of his ex-partner, arguing that their estrangement prevents member checking; conversely, he notes, “I imagined what ‘An Epistemology of Love’ would feel like without mention of a marriage that lasted over two decades, and concluded that to expunge this relationship from my narrative would condemn my writing to farcical fantasy” (Chapter 4, para 11). Andrew ultimately decides to leave his ex-partner unnamed in the text and proceeds with a “carefully crafted” account. While Andrew notes the ways that such treatment of others in the text protect his ex-partner and children, “honouring the principal of non-maleficence” (Chapter 4, para 14), his reflexivity lacks further examination in how, consequently this carefully crafted piece of self-narrative also inadvertently shields himself from potential criticism or judgment.

The book concludes with an invitation for others to join the journey, suggesting the utility of this ethical approach outside autoethnography—for teachers, journalists, biographers and memoirists. Andrew’s approach to ethics could benefit anyone conducting social science research and has practical applications for novice and seasoned researchers. As a novice

qualitative researcher, I appreciate a text devoted to the “how to” of autoethnographic ethics...although this book is much more than that, as most pursuits usually are.

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