The Power of Qualitative Research: Cultivating Autoethnography for Personal Awakening, Humanity, and Transformation

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Abstract
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Keywords
autoethnography, COVID-19 pandemic, reflexivity, transformation, qualitative research, writing as a method of inquiry, care for self

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The Power of Qualitative Research: Cultivating Autoethnography for Personal Awakening, Humanity, and Transformation

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This article is an autoethnography of how engaging with my previous autoethnographic article facilitated my recovery and self-growth. I wrote my previous piece (Nguyen-Trung, 2022) while stranded in Australia due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which prevented me from visiting my grandfather one last time before his passing in 2021. If my past autoethnography focused on the themes of death, grief, and loss, the current article’s autoethnography revolves around awakening, healing, and self-transformation. In this current article, I reflexively look back on my autoethnographic journey and reflect on how it impacted me as a grandchild and a human being on the one hand, and a qualitative sociologist and a writer on the other. I tell stories of how, since writing my first autoethnography and sharing it with others, whether at an academic conference, a meeting, a social encounter, or via a social media post, I managed to overcome the darkest time of my life and gradually heal my personal crisis and somehow transform myself. There were three key lessons learned from such a journey: the emergence of self-awareness, the significance of empathy and humanity within research communities, and the therapeutic and transformative potential of writing.

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Introduction

In October 2021, I faced one of the most traumatic experiences of my life: the passing of my grandfather. He was one of the closest family members to me, the one I wanted to make proud. This loss, under the severe impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, turned my life upside down. Yet, this deep crisis forced me to try a new type of qualitative research: autoethnography. I wrote and published my first autoethnography (Nguyen-Trung, 2022) and then presented it at The Qualitative Report’s 14th Annual Conference (Nguyen-Trung, 2023). In this article, I narrate an autoethnography of my healing and self-transformation resulting from writing, presenting, and engaging with my first autoethnography and its readers.

My first autoethnography was about death, grief, and loss, and an attempt to figure out the meaning of impermanence and time-space uncertainty. My current autoethnography is about care, self-healing, and self-evolution that I experienced during the process of writing and disseminating my first autoethnography. The previous autoethnographic narrative was colored with shades of black and grey, mirroring the gloomy inner world I created to mourn my grandfather. The narrative in this article is portrayed in blue and yellow, emblematic of the sky and the sun, exemplifying the strength of professional and academic communities and shared empathy in crisis.
In this article, I hope to shed light on the transformative power of qualitative research in helping us not only to comprehend ourselves amidst adversity but also to undergo profound inner healing and self-transformation. This article could be considered an autoethnography on an autoethnography (Wall, 2006), maintaining "being real" by exposing our hearts in our writings (Ellis, 2002). I will start by describing my story and autoethnographic journey and then focus on showcasing the three lessons I learned during such a process: awakening my consciousness, the valuable role of humanity in professional and academic communities, and the transformative power of autoethnographic writing.

My Story and Autoethnographic Writing

During my third Ph.D. year at Monash University in 2020, my partner and I prepared for the birth of our first child. Fortunately, my mother managed to come from Vietnam to Australia to welcome her and support us during our initial parenting months. However, by March the COVID-19 epidemic turned into a major global health emergency, leading to a swift and severe lockdown in Melbourne. My mother departed Melbourne just a week before the first lockdown commenced, leaving behind worrisome news of my grandfather's health sharply declining after his first stroke in 2019. My grandfather suffered a second stroke in August 2021, and he passed away in October. The pandemic regulations and border closures between Australia and Vietnam prevented me from paying him one final visit.

Prior to and after my grandfather's death, I was immersed in grief and sorrow, further complicating my mental health, which was already low due to being in the final stage of my Ph.D. I experienced many sleepless nights, trying to make sense of my grandfather’s loss and my guilt for not visiting him as I had promised. This mental and emotional exhaustion was beyond my capacity to bear. Seeking consolation, I dragged myself to writing, spiritually conversing with myself and my grandfather, and making sense of my suffering. Writing became the best way to channel my trembling thoughts and emotions. And so did reading. I came across a few studies with accounts of other Ph.D. students navigating difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic (Phan, 2021) as well as scholars demonstrating the therapeutic potential of writing and self-reflection (Trinh et al., 2022). Ellis's evocative autoethnography on her brother's death (Ellis, 1993) and Neville-Jan's account of her disability and chronic pain (Neville-Jan, 2004) gave me a sense that I was not alone in facing this suffering. I was wondering whether I could weave my isolated thoughts into such narratives to create an homage to my grandfather. So, I did just that.

After a lengthy period of struggling with my pain through writing, I submitted my manuscript to The Qualitative Report in March 2022, then incorporated valuable feedback from the editors and reviewers, and saw it finally published in October 2022. After that, I had the courage to share my work with my peers, and their overwhelming empathy encouraged me to present my work at The Qualitative Report’s 14th Annual Conference in February 2023 and to adapt my presentation (Nguyen-Trung, 2023) into this article.

Since then, I have experienced gradual inner healing and transformation. This personal development inspired me to share my humble story in the hope of bringing inspiration to others facing comparable challenges. As a qualitative researcher, I am a firm believer in the transformative power of exposing one's heart to others and growing through shared experiences.

Rationales for Writing This Article

Prior to my initial attempt at autoethnography in 2022, my engagement with qualitative research followed a different approach. I characterize this previous approach as “other-
qualitative” research, setting it apart from the “self-qualitative” research central to autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). In the context of “other-qualitative” research that began in June 2008, when I was in my third year of my bachelor’s degree, my work generally involved building rapport with diverse communities and social groups, gathering data, and crafting their stories. It was a process of internalizing external narratives and making sense of them through my personal and sociological lens, constructing someone else’s reality as I perceived it.

Getting into self-inquiry in my 2022 article (Nguyen-Trung, 2022) was a novel experience for me and, admittedly, not a pleasant one. It happened during my darkest time when I lost my grandfather while being stranded in Australia because of the COVID-19 pandemic. It took me another year to be able to visit his tomb. In this situation, writing was the only way that I had to cope with my sleepless nights. Writing helped me give voice to my emotional experiences (Ellis, 1993), allowing my inner self to grieve for my grandfather. When I exposed my deepest emotions, I knew I risked showing my vulnerabilities. As Ellis noted in her autoethnography, the vulnerable feelings deep inside our heads are not something we would want to share with others (Ellis, 1999). Sharing it requires bravery and honesty. As such, in this article, I want to retell how I overcame my fear to write and share my first autoethnography.

Crafting an evocative autoethnography article for the first time was far from effortless. Each time I turned my thoughts and feelings into text, it felt as though an unseen force was wrenching my heart. Each time I wrote a sentence, I felt myself dragged further into deep distress, grieving the loss of my grandfather. But despite this struggle, the writing process gradually felt liberating. As my pain was so intense, I meandered across academic boundaries, allowing my imagination to steer my journey. As I described in my previous article, I saw myself crossing the borders, running from Foucault’s concepts of “care for the self” (1986; 1997b) to Bourdieu’s theory of “habitus” (1977, 1990), from Harvey’s “time-space compression” (1989) to Zinn’s “new normal” (2020) and Bissell’s “time-space extension” during the pandemic (2021), from Ellis’ self-narrative and healing (1993, 2002) to Thích Nhất Hạnh’s ideas of impermanence and “the now and here” (2011, 2012).

Perhaps in a normal situation where my scholarly and rational thinking is in charge, I should have been more aware of the boundaries among those scholars/writers, since each of them had different philosophical foundations, worldviews, and application, and integrating their concepts into one space could lead to conflicts. Yet, when writing my evocative autoethnographic article, I was enveloped in a painful haze so that those boundaries faded, distinctions blurred, and thus all isolated ideas connected, all dots converging towards my narrative of grief. The breaking fading of boundaries is what I like about autoethnography because writing this genre gives me the freedom to go beyond seemingly isolated research camps, and weave my emotions, physical states, and experiences of loss and grief into a unifying narrative that helps make sense of my own crisis.

In the process of submitting, reviewing, and presenting my article, and through responding to the feedback from editors, reviewers, and colleagues, I laid bare my own pain but encountered their empathy and understanding. This outcome enabled me to explore further using autoethnography as a means of self-recovery and self-growth beyond my initial autoethnographic article (Nguyen-Trung, 2022), prompting deeper reflection on the power of this qualitative research genre in this article.

The process of writing the current article follows in the footsteps of my initial autoethnographic piece. However, instead of focusing on grief and loss, this narrative centers on healing and transformation. This time, rather than attempting to comprehend my pain and seek inner peace, I intend to share what I have learned from writing, presenting, and engaging with my first evocative autoethnography article and, hopefully, empower others who have endured a similar experience to do the same. I documented all the experiences I had during and
after the publication of my article in 2022. In the process of writing, I wove them together to create a story of my personal growth and transformation in a community of care and empathy. I was the character of the story. My main method for writing the narrative was "narrative analysis" (thinking with a story; Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Bochner & Riggs, 2014). This process enabled me to tell the story and share it with readers via this article and possibly some follow-up presentations. In addition, I analyzed the narrative itself, going beyond the story (narrative-under-analysis; Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Bochner & Riggs, 2014) by comparing and discussing my lessons learnt presented below with existing literature such as studies on reflexivity and autoethnography.

Lesson 1: Writing To Awaken Awareness

The first lesson I learned from my autoethnographic journey was about stopping and being conscious of the life around me. In a constantly moving existence, the toughest thing is to stay still rather than being dragged to this pace. It is like kayaking on a fast river; the challenge is to come to a complete halt on the river rather than following its flow. I was often occupied by a lot of responsibilities in life (e.g., to work on my Ph.D. project, to take my children to school and pick up them, to apply for jobs), and hardly had time to be still. This idea is related to Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" (1977). This concept can be explained by a metaphor in which we are like fish who are so accustomed to the water around them that they do not notice the weight of the water until it changes. In my case, the "changes" in my “water” were the global COVID-19 pandemic and the death of my beloved grandfather. These events significantly altered my reality.

The process of reflecting on those events and turning my emotional experiences into my evocative autoethnography (Nguyen-Trung, 2022) served to significantly awaken my awareness of the values that I had ignored. The more I delved into my writing, the more mindful I became, becoming increasingly conscious of the lived truths that surrounded me. Echoing the words of the Zen Master, Thích Nhất Hạnh (2011), “in three hundred years from now, [all our lives will be] dust” (pp. 83-85), I came to acknowledge the harsh truth that life is transitory and ephemeral. This rediscovered awareness resonates with the sentiments of the song “Like I’m Gonna Lose You,” (Trainor & Legend, 2015), which acknowledges the truth that we are “not promised tomorrow” and that it is likely that “we’ll run out of time” at some point in the future.

Recognizing this truth forced me to confront the hard reality that I had often managed to bury beneath my daily routines and struggles: that my grandfather’s life, like mine, was fleeting. I had often lived with unconscious assumptions, or with cold ignorance, that my grandparents were “there,” seemingly “risk-free,” and just a phone call or a short journey away. Before my grandfather’s passing, every time I visited him and my grandmother, I felt like I could go back to the past to “live” my childhood again. To “live” here means beyond memory recalls; it means to physically present in those moments with them, to bodily hug them tightly, to emotionally experience the old stories, and to feel the happiness through laughs and talks. So, spending time with them brought me back to the moments I had shared with them, the excitement I had got when they gave me a biscuit, told me a good story, or when I dined with them after each home visit. With their presence, I took for granted that my childhood was there, accessible whenever I could spend time with them. And then, when my grandfather passed away, I felt he took away a large part of my childhood and a large part of my soul. I came to realize that accessibility to my childhood is also fleeting, that although I could recall them, I cannot “live” them again without my grandfather’s physical presence; and that I had to grow up and be an adult, completely.

My writing served as a reflective mirror, illuminating my observations and responses to the transformative, albeit unnoticed and gradual, changes around me. It heightened my
consciousness of the transient nature of what Harvey (1989) termed "time-space compression," a transition in which, as the pace of life accelerates, distances once thought to be vast now appear much closer, as though we all reside in a tiny global village. Innovations such as the internet, social media, smartphones, and air travel have shrunk our world, making far-off connections seem readily accessible (Nguyen-Trung, 2015).

Yet, being surrounded by this web of technologies and social media makes me extremely alert to events and trends. A mere click or a “ting” sound from my personal, glued-to-my-body smartphone, I could be quickly drawn into the latest hot or trendy topics happening in the outside world. The heightened state of alertness is not entirely beneficial, as it leaves my mind in a perpetual state of desire for the latest, enjoyable, and brief updates, compensating for my busy and depressed life. Platforms such as Facebook or Twitter can be likened to a virtual “McDonalds,” offering a relentless cycle of “fast food for thought” – satisfying my immediate craving or stress yet potentially detrimental in the long term. This “fast food for thought” caters to my desire for entertaining and straightforward subjects yet leads me to ignore connections with my family in my real life and decreases my capacity to engage reflexively with myself.

In this era of digital and technological dependence, it seems that some people have had to change the way they care for themselves, neglecting to cultivate their own self, or their “soul” garden in opposition to their bodies, and somehow losing a little bit of their spiritual side (Foucault, 1997a; Nguyen-Trung, 2020). In this regard, the COVID-19 pandemic, despite its devastating impacts, has one good side: it told me to stop, to stay away from those digital devices, to stop my connections with virtual news, and to come back inside to talk with myself and to water my soul, which had been deserted. Under the COVID-19 pandemic, it appeared that time and space had expanded to such an extent that many individuals were disconnected from the people and locations they used to connect with and as a result, they now live in what could metaphorically be described as different temporal-spatial dimensions (Bissell, 2021). In my case, due to the pandemic’s mobility restrictions, I had never felt so far removed from my homeland, Vietnam, a feeling that persisted until we finally returned to Vietnam in December 2022. The sheer relief and disbelief that we were finally able to return home after four long years was overwhelming. It felt like waking from a long dream.

Lesson 2: The Value of Humanity in the Research Community

As a young scholar from the Global South, most criticisms I received centered on my failure to accurately apply prevalent Western theories or adhere to specific research methodologies, or the inadequacy of my English, which reviewers suggested required professional proofreading or editing services. On one occasion, a reviewer criticized my use of the first-person pronoun in my qualitative article, commenting that it did not meet the academic standard of rigor and objectivity.

In fairness, the reviewers and editors were merely performing their roles, and much of their feedback seemed reasonable to me. As such, I do not share these experiences to deflect criticism or claim that my past manuscripts merited more praise. Instead, my intention is to highlight the difficulties encountered by students like me from the Global South. Born in a small town in the Ha Tinh province of Central Vietnam, I was later fortunate enough to be accepted into Vietnam National University in Hanoi, the country's capital. During my university years from 2005 to 2009, all our textbooks were written in Vietnamese, and my English proficiency was at a beginner's level. More significantly, we students lacked the privilege of access to English books or peer-reviewed journals, unlike many students at Western universities who benefit from their institution’s subscriptions. Our universities then (and many still do) could not afford subscriptions to publishers, thereby limiting our access to original theories or methodologies.
The academic sources we used were often second-hand, translated by our lecturers, and the teaching of social theories was heavily driven by superficial understanding of Marxist and Leninist theories and macro theories (e.g., Talcott Parson and his social action theory), which were not particularly helpful when it came to publishing a refereed article in Western-based journals. We struggled to apply “standard,” middle-range, and micro theories, along with appropriate and rigorous research methodologies, to make sense of our data and turn our idea into a peer-reviewed journal article.

I was more fortunate than many Vietnamese students in that I secured an Australia Development Award to study a Master of Arts at Flinders University in South Australia from 2012 to 2014 and later received a Ph.D. scholarship to study at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, from 2017 to 2021. Studying at these institutions allowed me to immerse myself in the state of the art of Western theories and research methodologies to meet course requirements. But my journey towards my first English-referred publication was not smooth. When I first submitted an article from my master’s thesis (Nguyen, 2014) to an international peer-reviewed journal in 2014, my manuscript was swiftly rejected, with the editor directly stating that my qualitative sample (20 interviews) lacked generalizability. This cold response left me feeling demotivated, leading to a two-year hiatus before I found the energy to re-engage with the article. I realized that I may have diverged somewhat from the main topic, but my point is to highlight the profound significance of editors’ and reviewers’ feedback for the students learning to publish as well as early-career researchers like me. Their feedback not only decides the fate of our publications but also may have a lasting impact on our career motivation and development.

As such, my general experiences with the academic reviewing process before the first autoethnography at The Qualitative Report (Nguyen-Trung, 2022) had “not always” been pleasant. The academic part of my identity acknowledges that reviewer reports need to be objective for the sake of maintaining the quality of manuscripts prior to publication, but my human part often questions whether the reviewers’ feedback needs to be that cold, impersonal, and mechanistic. In my opinion, providing reviewing feedback in such a way seems to resonate with what Ellis described (2002, p. 400) as “aggressive academic argumentation” seeking to “defeat the oppositional voice.” Although there were instances when reviewers and editors were supportive, reading their comments was frequently stressful, especially for me, a student back then, and an early-career researcher striving to publish my novice work.

Given my somewhat bumpy journey towards publication, I had never anticipated the kind and empathetic feedback I received from editors and reviewers for my first article using evocative autoethnography. Their feedback was filled with understanding and support, which warmed my heart. They acknowledged my vulnerability and honesty, recognizing the impact they had on the work. Rather than using “quality standards” to criticize my admittedly naive autoethnography, they leveraged their encouraging and caring words to uplift me. One reviewer acknowledged my courage in exposing my vulnerability, stating: “Your article includes a lot of highly personal and vulnerable accounts of your own personal journey of loss and grief, and we commend you for your candor and willingness to explore such intimate topics.” Another reviewer added, “Thank you for submitting your autoethnography to our journal! It is a very compelling document; I appreciated it very much.”

Their comments concentrated on the strengths of my manuscript rather than its weaknesses. For example, one reviewer emphasized the impact of my vulnerability on the readers: “Your vulnerability is palpable - Thank you for sharing so much with readers, who will certainly sense the powerfulness of your emotions.”

Simultaneously, their comments offered constructive suggestions for enhancing my manuscript. They recommended reading more works from Bochner and Riggs (2014) and Bochner and Ellis (2016) to develop an “evocative autoethnography” approach—a term I was
not familiar with at that time. Following their advice led to improvements in my story. The more I read, the more convinced I became that their suggestions were valid.

The empathetic feedback from editors and reviewers highlighted the powerful effect of shared vulnerability and openness in fostering understanding and compassion. Their sincere comments demonstrated a resonance with my narrative and an appreciation for the honesty and bravery exhibited in addressing my experiences of grief and loss. At that moment, I did not feel a distinct separation between the author and reviewers, but rather saw them as empathetic friends or colleagues who genuinely related to my pain.

What I learned from this engagement with editors and reviewers reminded me of a fundamental guideline for qualitative researchers in building rapport with participants: it is important to show respect and encouragement and maintain an openness to learn from our participants. This experience has also raised a question for me, and perhaps for other qualitative research reviewers as well: If we are prepared to be open, respectful, and ready to learn from our research participants, should we not also approach our colleagues, who may be in their growth phase but still have insights to share, with the same attitude? To echo Ellis (2002, p. 400):

Critical exchange is an important part of academic conversation and for some people criticism is manna from heaven - usually giving, not getting it, that is. But criticism is not the only way (or necessarily the best way) to increase understanding, produce knowledge, or convince people to work for social change and civic renewal. What works better for me - in teaching, research, and daily living - is to listen to another’s perspective - to try to really listen - and then add to what they’re saying rather than challenge it. The “yes and” rather than the “yes but” response.

Critique plays a vital role in academic research and reviewing. It upholds the shared expectations and standards that ensure academic practices and knowledge production are ethical, responsible, credible, and trustworthy. Yet, my point here is that critique could be delivered in a manner that incorporates more of the “human element,” focusing on “nurturing” rather than “destroying” our colleagues. In this sense, I think the “yes and” approach could be helpful, as I have seen its power to enhance not only my growth as a researcher but also as a human being. By infusing this attitude into the review process, I believe we can produce not only high-quality publications but also nurture the personal and professional growth of researchers, thereby fostering a resilient and vibrant scholarly community.

**Lesson 3: Writing and Sharing as a Means of Healing and Transforming**

My autoethnographic journey revealed to me the power of writing to heal and transform. As I poured out my struggles with depression and grief onto my previous autoethnography article (Nguyen-Trung, 2022), the act of writing became a form of self-healing. It allowed me to slow down, reflect, and find meaning amidst the chaos. In today’s fast-paced and unpredictable world, I have learned the importance of being mindful of the fleeting nature of life and prioritizing my inner well-being and the people I love. In this sense, writing served as a tool to halt time, enabling me to distance myself from the external world to mindfully look inward and heal.

Writing became a mirror reflecting my physical exhaustion and emotional crises, aiding me in making sense of my painful experience. It felt as if I was turning my heart inside out, exposing the fear, guilt, and grief, and in doing so, beginning to understand them better. When I was able to expose these inner weaknesses, I felt that I could confront my sorrow.
More importantly, the act of sharing my writing either in the form of a published article or a presentation amplified its transformative power. As a traditional qualitative researcher, I was trained to write narratives from others' lives. However, crafting my own narrative and unveiling my vulnerabilities was an entirely new experience. Through this process, I found that sharing my deepest feelings was not a one-way street, but a “reciprocal” process; in sharing, I also received. In sharing, my pain resonated with others, eliciting a wave of support, empathy, and shared experiences. The transformational journey unfolded when I found the courage to share my work with friends and colleagues. Their empathetic reactions exceeded my expectations. One colleague wrote:

...this piece is so beautifully written and theoretically rich. I really like the nuanced way you wove Thích Nhất Hạnh, Ellis, and Foucault into the writing filled with emotions and logic - of writing as healing and empowering. Well done! Congratulations and thanks very much for sharing.

Others offered comforting words, recognizing my article as a beautiful tribute to my late grandfather. A respected colleague of mine confided that he could not hold back his tears as he read my article in his backyard one afternoon.

Their responses were not simply sympathetic; they also shared their personal struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, at a conference where I presented this article, a participant asked, “Could you tell me more about how you transformed yourself during this process?” After hearing my story, she commented: “It's wonderful that you were receiving good feedback and that your story inspired and resonated with others. You made a great contribution.”

But what I appreciated most from them was that they also shared their stories, which resonated deeply with mine:

Your story really touched me. I love the lessons you highlight. As an international scholar, I returned to visit my family in Taiwan after almost three years while dealing with the pandemic and my change of immigration status in the USA. I could relate to some of the emotional struggles you experienced. Thank you for sharing.

Reading her feedback, I realized that everyone carries their own stories of suffering and perseverance, whether they choose to publish these narratives like me or keep them within. I also realized that behind every pandemic-related statistic reported on the news are people with personal narratives of struggle, pain, and resilience. Their stories ranged from isolation from one’s social relationships, to the devastating loss of loved ones during the lockdown, to various health struggles amid the pandemic. A colleague shared with me her own battle with loneliness and homesickness, being stranded in Australia and unable to return home. Another recounted the saddest experience of losing both her grandparents within a few months during the lockdown. It was not until her return to her home country in the post-lockdown period, where she could visit her grandparents' graves, that her grief began to subside.

This mutual sharing reminded me that the grieving process is unique for each person. Some may navigate through it swiftly, while others might carry their grief indefinitely. A friend shared her ongoing struggle with the loss of her grandfather nine years ago. Her story emphasized the idea that grief has no “universal” timeline or formula for resolution. Those stories underscore the importance of empathy, support, and shared experiences during challenging times. By actively reaching out, listening, and showing empathy, we can provide comfort and validation to those grappling with loss and grief. The act of sharing, as I have
experienced, is indeed reciprocal - as we open our lives to others, we also open ourselves to their empathy, understanding, and shared experiences.

Throughout this transformative journey, I recognized that amidst the transient nature of life, it is essential to uphold the value of humanity and kindness. Being humble and kind to those around us can greatly enrich our lives. Ultimately, this lesson might be one of the positive takeaways from the unprecedented experience of the pandemic.

**Final Remarks**

The autoethnographic journey I embarked on following my grandfather's passing was unpleasant and tough, yet it eventually led to my personal enlightenment and transformation. As echoed by many autoethnographic researchers (Akehurst & Scott, 2023; Wall, 2008), I initially did not envision myself undertaking this journey, given that this self-reflective research genre often necessitates the dredging up of personal sorrow. In writing the autoethnography, I felt submerged in depression, endlessly conversing with my late grandfather in my mind's theater. There were countless instances when I attempted to escape this overwhelming writing process, but strangely, the writing itself seemed to have its own spirit, its own relentless desire to continue growing and ascending. Writing in this case represents my own inner self's voice.

At the outset, this transformative process was barely perceptible, but as I journeyed on, I could capture its essence, interestingly, through writing itself. This experience encouraged me to share my lessons learnt with others, a decision that bore unexpected but wonderful fruits. Sharing my story did not just relieve my burden, but also catalyze my growth as a human being and a researcher. My first attempt at this genre of writing was not aimed at personal growth or revelations. Yet, the process awakened a new awareness within me, helping me recognize the invaluable role of humanity and empathy within the academic community. Crucially, the reciprocal nature of sharing and receiving unfolded a path for my healing and transformation. During this exploration, I identified three critical elements foundational to autoethnography.

Firstly, honesty in writing is important. It involves an authentic dialogue with oneself, but equally important is the authenticity in transferring these dialogues onto the article and sharing them with others. I believe that the honesty and authenticity in my first autoethnographic piece is what touched and resonated with many of its readers. However, this honesty requires courage (Akehurst & Scott, 2023), the courage to step beyond the fear of judgment, and the audacity to expose one's vulnerabilities. Hailing from Vietnamese culture, where 'face saving' is highly valued (Nguyen, 2015), revealing weaknesses often lead to a perceived loss of face. This social stigma held even more true for me, being celebrated as the second person in my extended family to earn a PhD abroad. The label of “success” cast a veil over my moments of fear and self-doubt. Such a symbolic status made it hard for other people to accept my vulnerabilities. Embracing the autoethnographic writing approach enabled me to shed these stigmas and simply write.

Secondly, reflexivity is crucial. As Berger (2015, p. 1) outlines, three distinct positions exist wherein qualitative researchers engage in reflexivity:

1. Reflexivity when the researcher shares the experience of study participants,
2. Reflexivity when the researcher transitions from the position of an outsider to that of an insider during the course of the study, and
3. Reflexivity when the researcher lacks personal familiarity or experience with what is being studied.

Building upon the discussion of reflexivity in autoethnography by Koopman et al. (2020), I posit a fourth position: in conducting autoethnography, we simultaneously inhabit the roles of insiders and outsiders of our experience.
As insiders, we form the central characters in the narrative we tell. Conversely, we act as outsiders in the sense that during the writing process, we create a certain distance from ourselves to facilitate a dialogue with our inner selves. In this creative endeavor, our lives become an “object of knowledge and a field of action” (Foucault, 1986, p. 42) or “the object of the quest of concern for the self” (Foucault, 1997b, p. 231).

This transition leads us to the third crucial element: care. Here, care signifies not just self-care in the Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 1986) but also the care for others. It requires the cultivation of two-way communication with others, the intent not only to share our narratives but also to receive theirs and help where needed. Through listening sincerely to and supporting others, we foster our own growth and transformation.

My story offers a humble perspective on the intersection of qualitative research, embodied in autoethnography, and personal experiences, underscoring the potential of this method for self-exploration, self-care, self-growth, and emotional healing. The true power of qualitative research is its capacity to unravel the transformative potential inherent in human experience. The process of crafting my autoethnography reinforced the idea that writing extends far beyond a simple record of events. Instead, it emerges as a powerful medium for delving into our emotions, watering our soul, comprehending our life experiences, and ultimately, healing and transforming ourselves.

Reunion with My Grandmother: A Long-Awaited Embrace

I crossed the threshold of my grandparents’ house after four long years, my heart yearning for my grandmother. As I embraced her close, memories of my dear grandfather surged within me, almost overwhelming in their intensity. This long-awaited reunion with my grandmother exceeded all my expectations. It brought back memories of the precious moments we had shared, filling me with a profound sense of gratitude for this beautiful, timeless moment.

So, let this article be a heartfelt tribute to my grandfather and first teacher, a celebration of his wonderful life, and a tribute to everything he represented for me. Let these words bear witness to vulnerability's transformative power, to the metamorphosis that can occur when we have the courage to share our stories. And let them serve as a poignant reminder that even when we find ourselves in the deepest crisis, there is always the possibility of emerging once more into the warm embrace of the sun.

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