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# Learning from our Multi-Stage Collaborative Autoethnography

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## Learning from our Multi-Stage Collaborative Autoethnography

### Abstract

This article is a reflection on eight, then seven, now five women's collaborative efforts to explore the development of our own leader identities. While each of us conducts research on women and leadership, we are a diverse group of women: we were born in three different countries (United States, Paraguay, and New Zealand) and currently live in three different countries (United States, Canada, and New Zealand). We are of diverse races, sexual orientations, and generations; we have leadership experiences in a variety of disciplines and industries; and we vary in the priority we place on this study. In this paper, we review our experiences conducting research during the first three plus years of our collaborative autoethnographic study and share what we learned from those experiences. We address previously published considerations for developing collaborative autoethnographies including: the number of participants involved; the extent of involvement of the participants and the level of collaboration during the study; the collaborative approaches used in the study; and the approaches to writing. We add a reflection on our leadership practices throughout the study and on the confidentiality challenges that emerged. We also discuss how our division of the study into multiple life stages and multiple projects within the life stages has influenced our experiences and how the challenges resulting from the long duration of our study have influenced our productivity and are expected to influence our future plans. Our lessons learned should prove useful as other autoethnographic research groups begin their own research processes.

### Keywords

Collaborative Autoethnography, Women and Leadership, Leader Identity Development, Participant Confidentiality

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## Learning from our Multi-Stage Collaborative Autoethnography

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*This article is a reflection on eight, then seven, now five women's collaborative efforts to explore the development of our own leader identities. While each of us conducts research on women and leadership, we are a diverse group of women: we were born in three different countries (United States, Paraguay, and New Zealand) and currently live in three different countries (United States, Canada, and New Zealand). We are of diverse races, sexual orientations, and generations; we have leadership experiences in a variety of disciplines and industries; and we vary in the priority we place on this study. In this paper, we review our experiences conducting research during the first three plus years of our collaborative autoethnographic study and share what we learned from those experiences. We address previously published considerations for developing collaborative autoethnographies including: the number of participants involved; the extent of involvement of the participants and the level of collaboration during the study; the collaborative approaches used in the study; and the approaches to writing. We add a reflection on our leadership practices throughout the study and on the confidentiality challenges that emerged. We also discuss how our division of the study into multiple life stages and multiple projects within the life stages has influenced our experiences and how the challenges resulting from the long duration of our study have influenced our productivity and are expected to influence our future plans. Our lessons learned should prove useful as other autoethnographic research groups begin their own research processes. Keywords: Collaborative Autoethnography, Women and Leadership, Leader Identity Development, Participant Confidentiality*

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We are a group of eight, then seven, now five women researchers who are conducting a collaborative autoethnographic study on the development of our own leader identities. In this paper we share our experiential learning in the process of conducting our study. This includes what we are learning about collaborative autoethnographic research from our experiences conducting a longitudinal, multi-staged, multi-project study when such study means sharing the researchers' sensitive life experiences through stories that can easily be linked to each of

us by other professional colleagues or anyone else in this era of the Internet. We hope future autoethnographic researchers will find our experiences useful and will engage with us as we discuss our experiences, rather than remaining to a degree, disengaged (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Our process provides tools for ourselves and others who are navigating some of the inevitable challenges and pitfalls of this research approach.

Our work together began early in 2014 prior to an academic colloquium convened to further the development of theories related to women and leadership. Our team, initially eight women, was one of three formed to advance the development of theories related to women and leadership identity. In this article, we review how we came to conduct a collaborative autoethnographic study, organized by stages, of our own development of leader identity and our ongoing research in that area. It is worth noting that as a research team we anticipate the synergism we are developing around the autoethnographic process will lead to additional efforts to collaboratively develop grounded theory related to women’s leader identity development from childhood through late adulthood.

The focus in this article is on our research approach, not our research findings, although we share some as examples to illustrate the points we make. We believe our experiences will be instructive to other groups embarking on their own collaborative autoethnographic projects. Our findings to date have been the topic of many conference presentations, a book chapter (Le Ber et al., 2017), and several journal articles in various stages of preparation.

This is the story of our evolving experiences as a research team. In addition to sharing our activities during the first two stages of our study, we include our reflections on what we have learned regarding the challenges and management of a large research team that intends to work together on a longitudinal, multi-stage research project. We also include a discussion of the confidentiality issues that have surfaced and will likely grow in the future, and a brief summary of our anticipated future studies.

Table 1

*Stages, waves, and projects in the development of our collaborative autoethnography*

<b><u>Stage 1</u></b> <b><u>Sharing our leader identity</u></b> <b><u>development stories</u></b>	<b><u>Stage 2</u></b> <b><u>Leader identity development</u></b> <b><u>in childhood and adolescence</u></b>	<b><u>Stage 3</u></b> <b><u>University undergraduate</u></b> <b><u>and first five years after</u></b> <b><u>graduation</u></b>
Data collection Wave 1	Data collection Wave 2	
Advancing Theories of Women and Leadership Colloquium	Project 1 – Themes identified Project 2 – Proposal for Asilomar 2015 Project 3 – ILA San Diego 2014	
	Data collection Wave 3	
	Project 1 – Voice Project 2 – Experiential Learning Project 3 – Resilience	

## Our Research Study

### Stage 1 – Sharing our Leader Identity Development Stories

Contrary to the way most research teams are developed, we did not choose our teammates. Instead, six months ahead of the May 2014 invited colloquium, *Advancing Theories of Women and Leadership* at Utah Valley University in Orem, Utah, we were organized into virtual research groups based on our mutual interest in the topic of leader identity theory. While we shared articles on leader identity development through Moodle prior to meeting, we first engaged in the research effort when we met at the colloquium.

Our process was organic. We did not begin our time together with the objective of conducting a collaborative autoethnography of our own development of leader identities; it “just happened.” After the initial briefing session, which included a call to challenge theories of women in leadership, we were sent off as a group to begin our theorizing efforts.

We began by introducing ourselves and providing short descriptions of our personal backgrounds. As we listened to each other’s introductions, we realized that although we all were involved with studying women and leadership, were teaching related topics at the university level, and self-identified as leaders, our backgrounds and experiences were diverse. We ranged in age from 39 to 68 years; we came from multiple countries; we were of different races and sexual orientations; some were mothers and others were not; some married young, others when older, and others not at all; and we had varied and extensive leadership experiences in the world that went well beyond our university experiences. We also came to leadership research from a variety of disciplines: child developmental psychology, sports psychology, industrial/organizational psychology, nursing, agriculture education, business strategy, organizational behavior, communications, security, and health care. We had different levels of research experience: one of us was a doctoral student, another was a recognized leader in her field of research, and the rest of us were spread across the spectrum between those two points.

We quickly and collaboratively decided to individually document the stories of our own leader identity development by answering two broad questions, “How did I create, develop, and maintain a leader identity?” and “How did I practice leadership as a child? An adolescent? A woman?” We spent the remainder of the day together, each writing a personal narrative of her leader development, beginning with the earliest days of childhood.

We devoted little attention to establishing ground rules beyond informally agreeing to respect the privacy of each other’s stories. While other teams at the colloquium were busy talking and planning, we soon became quiet; we even requested relocation to a quiet spot.

When we reconvened in our group of eight, we shared and discussed our stories, sharing leadership vignettes such as:

- “I was the ringmaster for the circus in my kindergarten class. I came home and organized the neighborhood kids to create our own circus, where, again, I was the ringmaster.”
- “We had horrible old-fashioned, homemade cheerleading uniforms, with skirts that were far too long in my opinion. I convinced everyone we needed to have modern, store-bought uniforms – and led the effort to make that happen.”
- “My girlfriend and I planned, shopped for, cooked, and served 125 youth six meals at a weekend retreat when I was 16.”
- “As a cadet at the Air Force Academy, I held positions of increasing responsibility, culminating in acting as a parachute instructor and jumpmaster, responsible, as a 19-year-old, for the lives of my peers.”

- “As a young adult, I worked with the state legislature to establish a state-level office of child care and seven regional child care resource and referral offices.”

Our definition of leadership emerged from our shared stories and discussions. We see leaders as people who are committed to a purpose or a vision for the future and inspire others to work with them to achieve that future. We define leading as influencing or motivating others to believe they can do things they would never have believed were possible and then, together, bringing the vision, goal, or calling into reality.

As we listened to our stories, some consistent themes emerged. We were excited to learn that many of us had seen ourselves as leaders, whether or not we had used the term, as young children. On the other hand, several of us did not see ourselves as leaders until well into high school or even college but eventually also discovered our potential to lead others. We realized that we each had had gifts, opportunities, and support systems that encouraged us to lead. We had not always been successful as leaders; most of us shared stories of being knocked down and of questioning our leadership potential at points in our lives. Significantly, we all recovered from these setbacks to lead again. Listening to others' stories brought reminders of additional formative moments in our own leadership.

Collaboratively, we analyzed our stories and identified three initial themes: leadership inclination in childhood (for most), divergence in adolescence, and the twisting trail of adulthood as we moved into and out of leadership experiences. We developed a graphic of our leader identity development, which we thought resembled the children's game Chutes and Ladders (Snakes and Ladders to those from the Commonwealth), and designed a model of our leader identity development. One of our group noted she thought what we were doing was collaborative autoethnography, and she introduced us to the method.

We knew we were zeroing in on some of the important early variables of leader development and, thereby, grounded theory; we did not yet recognize we were at the beginning of an exciting collaborative autoethnographic study of the development of our own leader identities. As we reflected on our personal narratives, some of us used our computers while others used paper. Some of us wrote essays while others outlined or listed bulleted talking points. We shared our stories verbally and recorded the themes after each story on easel paper.

While some of the original narratives are now in our research group files, we did not formally collect and save them at the end of the colloquium and the easel papers were lost. Fortunately, we were expected to report back to the other groups at the end of the colloquium, so we have the two graphics we produced and a permanent record of the themes we discovered in our stories!

While at the colloquium, we committed to continue working together. We had completed what we are now calling Stage I of our study (referred to as Wave 1 of data collection in our early presentations and publication). We then created a list of questions we thought we each should answer in a written narrative about ourselves. Beyond intending to answer the list of questions we had collaboratively created, we shared an interest in developing a proposal for a chapter (Le Ber et al., 2017) in an upcoming book on theory development related to women and leadership and a general commitment to developing grounded theory. We did not, however, have a defined plan on how to do so.

## **Between Stage 1 and Stage 2**

Between Stages 1 and 2, we lost our first team member for personal reasons. We also realized we needed to learn about collaborative autoethnography, so we identified and shared methodology readings. We determined conducting a collaborative autoethnography was appropriate as we had stories worth sharing (Denzin, 2014), stories that might make a

difference in the world, if even a small difference, by helping other women develop their leader identity and, we later realized, by helping other scholars collaborate despite differences in discipline and location.

Additionally, we found the original auto-biographic questions needed to be reworked to something more manageable and concrete. We collaborated to refine our research question: **How do women create, develop, and sustain a leader identity?** We also recognized our life stories were too long and rich to study as an entity and so decided to focus our initial efforts on childhood through high school years. In the service of group efficiency, we recognized we needed leadership roles, or at least a project manager, if we were going to move forward.

We learned groups need to assign tasks early on in their work together in order to further develop group commitment and maximize individual interests and skills. For example, we all became intrigued by the collaborative autoethnographic method, and one of us painstakingly developed an annotated bibliography of books and articles related to collaborative autoethnography that she shared with the others. It was important to establish group level knowledge, another lesson learned, so many of us read some or all of the articles, and many of us purchased one of the leading books in the field on developing collaborative autoethnography: Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez's (2013) *Collaborative Autoethnography*. Chang et al. (2013) defined collaborative autoethnography as involving a group of researchers who collaboratively share stories of their individual lived experiences and who analyze those experiences; this aligned with the approach we were taking. The Chang et al. (2013) framework for discussing collaborative autoethnographic processes included the number of collaborators, the extent of collaboration, the mode of collaboration, and the writing approach; it provided important guidance for the early days of our work and is used throughout this article to discuss each of our projects.

The lessons we learned from reviewing the collected articles were useful and extensive. As we reviewed other collaborative autoethnographies found in the literature, we saw a resemblance between our experiences and the experiences of others. One such study was done by a class, Communication Studies 298 (1999), at California State University, Sacramento. The students were in the midst of studying others' shopping experiences when they realized reflecting on their own shopping experiences would be very rich, much as we had realized our own experiences were rich and would enhance our study of women developing their leader identities.

Hernández, Sancho, Creus, and Montané, (2010) recognized the value of identifying the biases reflected in researchers' own experience prior to studying the experiences of others. They conducted a collaborative autoethnography of the researchers' experiences becoming university scholars before they began their study of the experiences of others becoming university scholars. Our long-term goal is to develop or contribute to the development of grounded theory on women's leader identity development; therefore, documenting our personal development of a leader identity is a necessary first step. As Glaser and Strauss (1967) recognized in their classic work, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, since the observer is the root source of all significant theorizing, examining personal experiences prior to conducting the research can be a crucial source of these insights (p. 251–252). We saw that our efforts to accomplish our long-term research objective, which was to develop grounded theory related to the developing and sustaining of women's leader identities, would be richer if we understood our own experiences first. This realization helped to ground our pursuit of collaborative autoethnography and reinforced for us the scientific merits of this method.

We now recognize our early understanding of collaborative autoethnography would have been richer if we had been better versed in the rich experiences of autoethnographers. While we work as a group, we collectively reflect on our individual experiences of developing

a leader identity. Thus, we have encountered the challenges of both individual autoethnographers and collaborative autoethnographers as we describe below.

We experienced a lack of movement for almost three months over the summer following Stage 1. Upcoming projects such as the book chapter proposal and multiple conference deadlines gave us the push we needed to begin working together again. A buzz of emails and individual phone calls led us to move to Stage 2 and to begin to use conference calls, scheduling tools, and a shared online file hosting service. We learned the importance of follow-up processes, so our minutes from each group meeting (conference call) included individual assignments with short-term and long-term deadlines. Progress reports on assignments came at the beginning of the agenda for the next meeting, thus furthering a sense of accountability and urgency for meeting deadlines.

## **Stage 2 – Leader Identity Development in Childhood and Adolescence**

Stage 2 began in August 2014 and is still ongoing as we write this article. Stage 2 encompasses the study of our leader identities during childhood and adolescence. Seven members of the original team were involved at the beginning of Stage 2. Stage 2 has been broken into two waves of data collection, Wave 2 and Wave 3, and within each wave there have been multiple projects as described below.

**Wave 2.** The term Wave 2 is used to describe the data collection, analysis, and interpretation of the findings associated with our first round of autobiographic questions focusing on the development of our leader identities during our childhood years and adolescence (see Table 1). In addition to identifying themes, the data analysis from this wave informed two conference submissions. Seven of us participated in this wave.

**Project 1 – Themes identified.** As noted previously, the questions used in this wave were focused on developing our individual leader identity during childhood and adolescence and had been developed collaboratively during Stage 1 while we were at the colloquium. For Project 1 in this wave, we each individually answered the questions. We encouraged all members to read the submissions of the other team members and to add personal stories brought to mind while reading the stories of other team members; thus, our data gathering was concurrent and sequential because we completed our responses independently and were also influenced by the stories of other team members. This was consistent with earlier observations that as researchers share their stories, the stories remind others of their own stories, which in turn trigger the recognition of new meanings and deeper understandings (Denzin, 2014; Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010). For example, one researcher realized she had focused on only positive childhood experiences and the negative experiences of others brought back memories of other forgotten events in her own life.

Two team members collaborated to develop the coding scheme initially used to code each individual's responses to the questions. They used an approach similar to the one recommended by Smith and Osborn (2003); they each began by focusing on several individual narratives, first noting items she found most interesting within each individual account and then looking for common topics across the accounts. The topics were then merged, prioritized, and tested against additional individual accounts to identify the most relevant codes, which became the coding scheme. Each team member coded two other members' responses using the coding scheme. The original responses and the coded responses were all posted in the team's online storage. These activities took place during August and September of 2014.

We were not satisfied with our initial coding efforts because we felt we had focused so much on individual words that holistic insights were lost. However, the work we had done on the coding and our familiarity with the stories allowed us to develop themes from our data during a team conference call at the end of September 2014. Six team members participated



in the call. In both coding efforts we were seeking to do what Ellis (2004) referred to as analysis of narrative or analysis about a story.

The four themes we identified for our formative years in childhood and adolescence were: finding our own voice, learning experientially, developing resilience, and using giftedness. While they were different from the themes we had identified at the colloquium during our initial discussions of our lifetime experiences, they were consistent with the model we had initially developed at the colloquium, and did not conflict with our earlier observations.

**Project 2 - Proposal for Asilomar 2015.** The second project in Stage 2, Wave 2, which was focused on our childhood and adolescent years, was the development of a proposal for the International Leadership Association's (ILA) Women and Leadership Conference held at Asilomar in 2015 (it was later accepted). One of us volunteered to lead this project. We proposed to share our methodology, our stories, and our progress up to the time of the presentation, and noted our long-term goal of developing grounded theory describing women's leader identity development. Work on this project was both concurrent and sequential. We concurrently contributed input to the proposal and edited or agreed to the proposal, but planning and writing the proposal was essentially the work of the project leader; the other team members' input and reviews were sequential as they related to the leader's edits.

**Project 3 - ILA San Diego 2014.** The third project using the initial round of data collected on childhood and adolescence was an update on our work to date. We planned to present at the ILA preconference workshop in San Diego devoted to theorizing about women and leadership. We were beginning to recognize the challenges of having a geographically diverse team, including the need to designate roles and responsibilities. We agreed to rotate leadership by project in order to share the workload and authorship equitably. There was a formal change of project leadership between Project 1 and Project 2, with a discussion of what was expected of all team members. We agreed that specific individual task assignments and a process to follow-up on those task assignments were needed to coordinate team activities.

Five of us attended the preconference, the five members who have remained on the team, and we all intended to participate in the presentation. In order to prepare for our presentation, we had a conference call and arrived early to allow us to meet the night before the preconference. This event, quite early in the life of our research team, was the first time we had been colocated since the colloquium. The relationship aspects of our team began to change at this point; we later referred to this as our shift to become a collaboratory. We plan to discuss the relational aspects of our collaboratory in a future article and presented our story at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Biennial International Leadership Association's Women and Leadership Conference in 2017.

Work on the presentation sections had been done collaboratively to plan the presentation, concurrently yet independently to create the pieces of the presentation, and sequentially to ensure a consistent presentation. Although we had planned a presentation involving all team members, at the last minute during the workshop, we learned we would only have a third of our originally allotted time to present, so the project leader decided what to include and presented an abbreviated version of our presentation. We did not change the presentation slides and they remain in our archives. The lesson learned here is that sometimes spur-of-the-moment decisions need to be made and the group should be comfortable enough with its project leadership to allow these decisions to be made.

**Wave 3.** In Wave 3 of Stage 2, our study of developing leader identity during childhood and adolescence, we focused on the further expansion of the four themes developed during Wave 2. During this wave we focused on the individual themes separately, asking follow-up questions of ourselves and thus collecting additional data as needed and relating our findings to the relevant literature. The projects in this wave have resulted in focused conference presentations and journal articles. Five team members are participating in Wave 3.

The wave has also included several integrating efforts. A chapter referenced above was written during Wave 3 and reflected all work completed to date on each of the themes. The book is called *Theorizing Women & Leadership - New Insights & Contributions from Multiple Perspectives* (2017) and our chapter is titled, "Tracing the Developmental Precursors of Leadership during Childhood and Adolescence: A Collaborative Autoethnographic Study of Women's Leader Identity Development." In this chapter we introduced a new model, a major update to the one originally developed at the colloquium during Stage 1.

Project leadership changed during the book chapter project when the initial leader and primary author of the chapter's first draft became ill. A second member of the team assumed the lead author role for later drafts and two other teammates were quite involved. We have learned many times during the two years working together that life is not always predictable and flexibility is required to continue to make progress.

**Project 1 – Voice.** The first project within Wave 3 was focused on increasing our understanding of a theme we identified in our analysis of our Wave 2 data, developing a leader's voice during childhood and adolescence. After a review of the voice literature, we generated new prompts that resulted in gathering an additional round of data collection. Although five of us provided data, the project leader has been the major contributor to this effort, doing both the analysis and the writing.

The voice project was marked by the reduction of our team from seven to five members and thus was a critical time in our team's journey. It had become evident that team members had differing levels of commitment and two researchers left the team, albeit for different reasons. Although we were disappointed to lose the diversity and richness that came from their perspectives, we realized that attrition is a recognized challenge in research. We obtained permission from those leaving to continue to work with the data they had already provided.

This was the first time we experienced what we felt were negative consequences of our varying levels of commitment to our research effort; we learned that expectations and performance standards should be clearly delineated at the beginning of a research project. We learned that not accomplishing our assigned tasks and not contributing our data in a timely manner negatively affects each other and makes it difficult to meet submission deadlines. Therefore, we had several conversations conveying our levels of commitment and one member created a draft contract that delineated expectations, performance standards, and data ownership.

The voice project has also provided our first experiences with having any of our team efforts rejected. Although disappointing, we utilized this time to maximize our learning from the rejections. We were ambitious when we determined where to submit our work and we expect we will continue to challenge ourselves to meet the most rigorous academic standards. However, as we are from many disciplines, we recognize we either need to emphasize the interdisciplinary nature of our work or focus our selection of theories for discussion based on the team member taking the lead and the intended target audience.

**Project 2 – Experiential Learning.** The second project within Wave 3 was focused on expanding our understanding of a theme, learning leadership experientially, that emerged in our initial model. We did not see the need for another round of questions regarding experiential learning as the stories we had already gathered regarding experiential learning during childhood and adolescence were very rich. Four of us were heavily involved in all phases of this project, which culminated in a presentation at the 2015 ILA conference in Barcelona. The fifth remaining member did not participate due to illness.

**Project 3 - Resilience.** The third project in Wave 3 was the further development of the resilience theme, the third of our four initial themes. Project leadership again rotated, and the new leader oversaw the development of our submission to the 2016 ILA global conference in Barcelona. While the proposal was accepted and the conference experience was rich, we

anticipate waiting for Stage 3, the study of our undergraduate years and our first five years after graduation, to develop additional resilience articles because we know from our early stories in Stage 1 that resilience was important during this stage of our lives.

**Other Stage 2 projects.** We ultimately decided not to develop our fourth Stage 2 theme, giftedness. We are continuing to work in Stage 2, gathering additional waves of data and using new lenses, to explore the influence of our family narratives as shared in childhood and adolescence on the development of our leader identities.

### **Stage 3 – University Undergraduate and First Five Years after Graduation**

We are formulating the plans for the next stage in our collaborative autoethnography. One of our team members has coordinating responsibility for developing the plan for this phase, which will include studying the development of our leader identities during our university years and our first five years after completing our undergraduate degrees. We have now gathered the first round of data. As we work through this next stage, the lessons we have learned from Stage 1 and 2 will guide us.

### **Reflections and Lessons Learned**

More than three years and several projects later and with other projects in the planning stage, there are several topics that appear worthy of reflection and many lessons learned. Reflecting on our experiences has been valuable to us and we anticipate these reflections will be valuable to others planning collaborative autoethnographic studies, particularly those planning to use large teams involved in multiple projects over an extended time period. We extended the framework of Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez (2013) by adding two additional topics, leadership and confidentiality, to their original framework.

#### **Leadership**

As we initially discovered between Stage 1 and Stage 2 in our life as a team, multiple projects involving large research teams require an inspiring shared vision, member commitment, and project management to move forward. We have individually lead and managed large projects and organizations; this should not have been a big surprise! We needed to develop shared visions and we needed to coordinate to make things happen, such as managing the more mundane activities of scheduling discussions, planning conference submissions, coordinating who would review and code whose narratives, reserving rooms for conferences, making reservations for dinners, etc. Our most senior researcher had been the de facto leader of our group when the team was established, but she preferred not to be our project manager. She continues to play a critical role in guiding our thoughts and visions, but we now share all of the opportunities and responsibilities of leadership. We have found it works well to identify a leader among us for each new project.

Our team of women leaders has found sharing leadership and authorship amazingly easy. Sometimes it is obvious that a team member has the most relevant experience or the greatest interest in a project. To date we have not experienced any conflict when making decisions concerned with project leadership roles. The description of the project leader's role seems to vary among projects, based perhaps on both the leadership style of the leader and the topic or project. However, the role consistently includes responsibility for the guiding vision, the planning, and the final editing and submitting of the distinct project.

Leadership styles have varied across projects, with some projects having a strong, individual leader who carried most of the workload while other projects have had co-leaders

and in still other projects members contributed almost equally. Although there are some tasks, such as the more mundane tasks, that no one prefers, we have found that our members have been committed enough to the research to step in and assume responsibility for the tasks that need to be done.

## **Confidentiality**

Confidentiality is a challenge that continues to elude us. This challenge continues to grow due to our expanding body of research. When we began sharing our personal identity development stories, as experienced researchers but unfamiliar with autoethnography, we knew we would need to trust each other regarding confidentiality and we believed we would need to use pseudonyms. Although we are aware that pseudonyms are not used in autoethnography as, by definition, the narratives are the stories of the authors, because we come from a variety of disciplines most of us were so uncomfortable with the transparency of autoethnography that we would not have participated in the research without pseudonyms. Therefore, we adopted this practice.

We also realized we needed to protect the identities of the other individuals involved in our stories, as we believed that protecting their privacy was important (Geist-Martin et al., 2010) and recognized that our memories of prior experiences might not match the memories of the others who were participants in our stories (Hernandez et al., 2010). What we had not considered was how totally inadequate pseudonyms are for concealing our individual identities, and thus the identities of the other individuals we discussed.

When we first presented the results of Wave 2, the first round of the study of our identity development during our childhood and adolescence, we began with rich introductions – what we saw as support for our credibility as women with strong leader identities. Similar information could be found for each of us using a simple Internet search. Thus, the audience knew something about each of us when the presenters supported the team's research results by telling portions of our leader identity development stories using our pseudonyms.

We quickly realized our pseudonyms were not effective in protecting our individual identities. Although the presenters used our pseudonyms as they shared supporting examples, the members of the audience seemed to know which researcher the story was about. To our surprise, the members of the audience turned their attention to the researcher whose story was being shared as the speakers presented. This should not have been surprising. The childhood stories took place in different decades, to young girls who lived in different places and had different backgrounds. It was not difficult to connect the pseudonyms to the individual researchers as we had just shared a portion of our autobiographies in the introduction.

Similar issues face us in our publications. Our articles include our actual names as the authors. The study is based on our personal stories, an obvious requirement in a collaborative autoethnography. When we began with seven researchers, it seemed possible to relay experiences anonymously, but we have found it is often very easy for those who know us to match our stories to the storyteller and even to identify the other participants in our stories. As we are all active women leaders, the storytellers can also be identified by others who wish to do so using social media or search capabilities on the Internet. We are recognizing that we often are not able to protect our own privacy and identification nor those of the people involved in our stories (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015).

We know we will continue to grapple with maintaining the value and credibility of our research while protecting the privacy of those on the team and the people in our stories. For now, the practice of using pseudonyms places at least one step between our names and our statements, which is comfortable for us at this time. The topic of relational ethics has been

addressed extensively by autoethnographers and the issues are covered quite thoroughly by Ellis (2007).

Although we were initially only minimally aware of the guidance in the literature relating to these privacy and confidentiality issues, we independently reached many of the same conclusions. For example, we have not disclosed the most sensitive stories from childhood and adolescence to illustrate our findings in presentations and publications because some of our childhood stories were considered inappropriate to share in written form; some to the extent we have not stored them in our private shared data storage area. And we realize that some of our stories from our adulthood will be even more difficult to share than the stories from our childhood, presenting ourselves and others in a negative light. It is expected we will continue to follow the approach we used in childhood, this time more intentionally. We will seek to share all of our stories with each other to ensure rich data, noting when we consider a story particularly private, so that the stories can contribute to our analysis and interpretation. We recognize some will only be shared verbally.

We will continue to not use the more private stories to illustrate our findings. The literature advises there are some stories we just cannot share even with each other (Klinker & Todd, 2007) because they are too painful personally or because we are concerned for the reputation of others involved or fear libel, but to what extent will this distort the validity of our research? Perhaps at some point we will find we need to combine stories or characters as Ellis (2004) and Bochner and Ellis (2016) do when they use novels to share their experiences. We have recognized that publicly revealing our stories should be done for a purpose that could not have been accomplished another way, not merely to share our stories (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015).

We had initially agreed to share even our most sensitive stories. Will we find that appropriate? We do not yet know.

### Summary

We are now more than three years into a long-term collaborative autoethnography with five team members. We are more aware of the challenges associated with conducting a long-term collaboration with diverse and distantly located collaborators, but we are also more aware of the amazing satisfaction that comes from working with such a wonderful group of women. We are learning when full participation is critical and when it is a luxury. We are currently reflecting on what we have learned thus far about working together, and discussing how we can further improve the experience in the future.

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Other participants in Stage 1 and Stage 2 of this study were Dr. Lorri L. Sulpizio, University of San Diego; and Dr. Marianne Tremaine, Massey University. The additional participant in Stage 1 was Dr. Anastasia Metros, University of Phoenix.

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