

11-1-2021

Informing without Conforming: Applying Two Frameworks to Enrich Autoethnography

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Recommended APA Citation

Dull, A. (2021). Informing without Conforming: Applying Two Frameworks to Enrich Autoethnography. *The Qualitative Report*, 26(11), 3307-3317. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2021.5030>

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Abstract

This article explores my experiences using two frameworks to guide the design, implementation and reporting of an autoethnography. I used Hughes, Pennington, and Makris' (2012) framework for translating autoethnography to the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Standards for reporting empirical research to inform the structure, design, and process for the autoethnography, and Milner's (2007) framework for researchers to examine seen, unseen, and unforeseen dangers to guide my reflection, support reflexivity, and examine the development of a dynamic positionality. In this article, I illustrate how using these frameworks enhanced the rigor and reflexivity of my autoethnographic research.

Keywords

autoethnography, reflexivity, qualitative research, process

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Informing without Conforming: Applying Two Frameworks to Enrich Autoethnography

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This article explores my experiences using two frameworks to guide the design, implementation and reporting of an autoethnography. I used Hughes, Pennington, and Makris' (2012) framework for translating autoethnography to the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Standards for reporting empirical research to inform the structure, design, and process for the autoethnography, and Milner's (2007) framework for researchers to examine seen, unseen, and unforeseen dangers to guide my reflection, support reflexivity, and examine the development of a dynamic positionality. In this article, I illustrate how using these frameworks enhanced the rigor and reflexivity of my autoethnographic research.

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Introduction

If you enjoy watching a heated debate, grab your popcorn and ask a room full of researchers their thoughts on the validity of autoethnography as empirical research. Entering the search terms “autoethnography AND method” into any academic search engine yields hundreds of results ranging from articles fervently arguing its validity (Adams, 2017; Ellis, et al., 2011; Farrell et al., 2015; Hughes & Pennington, 2017) to those fervently dismissing it (Delamont, 2009; Holman Jones et al., 2013). As I prepared to engage in a study to examine my developing positionality within a community research project, I was curious about autoethnography and its possibilities for my research. Since this was a new method to me, I proceeded to investigate it, uncovering a myriad of articles and examples of autoethnography. In the literature, I read as advocates cheered loudly about its possibilities and contributions to cultural learnings (Bochner, 2017; Diversi & Moreira, 2017), critics bellowed lines of reproach (Delamont, 2009), and researchers shared warnings they received about engaging in the method at the risk of harming of their academic careers or reputations (Eisenbach, 2016). Reading these tensions (Ellis et al., 2011; Hughes & Pennington, 2017) heightened my own concerns about doing an autoethnography for the first time, yet the methodology aligned to the work I wanted to do in studying myself as a researcher in the context of a school community with which I had be engaging.

My role in this school community project (Dull, 2021a) was complex and I was concerned various aspects of my identity could have unintended effects on the research (Dull, 2021b) and on the community itself. First, I was an outsider to the school community (Milner, 2007; Philips & Schweisfurth, 2014) who would be working with the principal, Dr. Rose (pseudonym) to develop a year-long needs-based professional learning plan and studying the process and its effects. I would also serve as a facilitator of the professional learning at various points throughout the year. I held a leadership position in the district, yet my work with the school was not being done in any official capacity. I was also personal friends with Dr. Rose, and it was she who asked me to collaborate with them on designing this professional learning.

Because all these aspects of my identity bring with them a perception, and in some cases historical positions of power (Milner, 2007), I felt it was necessary to explicitly explore my positionality and myself as a researcher in this school community. As a feminist researcher, I aim to engage in work that is emancipatory, beneficial to, and respectful of the community in which it takes place (Lather, 1992), and I wanted to ensure that my position in this project was that of a collaborator (Nencel, 2014). This is how I arrived at the autoethnography: it would serve as a venue for me to address the relational ethics dilemma I identified (Hughes & Pennington, 2017) with the school community, while recognizing their influence on my own identity and development (Ellis et al., 2011).

The plethora and intensity of the criticisms I found during my exploration of autoethnography heightened my concern regarding how my research would be received, and it also made me question the form itself. But I enjoy a good challenge, so rather than abandon autoethnography, I ventured to find structure where many critics said there was none and explicate my methods and data where others might have avoided doing so. As I searched for resources, approaches, or tools, I was careful not to select anything that would lead to a prescriptive or formulaic autoethnography. Instead, I hoped to find guidance that would support me in identifying and gathering the different pieces that needed to be included yet allow me the freedom to put them together in a way that made sense for my study.

Throughout my weeks of reading and journaling, I kept returning to Milner's (2007) framework for researchers to work through seen, unseen, and unforeseen dangers that positionality can evoke throughout the research process. After much reflection, I decided it was an appropriate tool to use to support reflexivity, especially since it aligned to the purpose of my study. I still sought guidance on conducting the research itself, and when I mentioned this to my mentor, she recommended I read Hughes, Pennington, and Makris' (2012) framework to align autoethnography to the American Educational Research Association's (AERA)'s standards for empirical social science research. As I read it, I found myself spontaneously outlining a research plan and immediately saw the potential for application to my work. I re-read Milner's (2007) framework alongside Hughes, Pennington, and Makris's (2012) and found that the two complemented each other, and together, could be the guidance I was looking for. After examining the two frameworks together, I decided to use them both: Hughes, Pennington, and Makris' (2012) framework for designing, conducting, and reporting on the study, and Milner's (2007) framework to guide my reflection on positionality and engagement with the research participants. Hughes, Pennington, and Makris' framework (2012) offered structures for the research design, investigation, and reporting, while Milner's (2007) framework supported the reflexivity and reflection process, particularly around positionality and interaction with the research participants, which aligned to the purpose of my study.

So, I engaged in autoethnographic research, focusing on my developing positionality as I prepared to engage in the community research project (Dull, 2021a). Using the two frameworks together provided me with the right balance of structure and flexibility I was looking for, so much so that their usefulness became a finding in my autoethnography (Dull, 2021b). It was that finding which compelled me to share my process and experiences in using these frameworks in hopes that they might be useful to those who might be new or hesitant to engage in autoethnography.

Therefore, I share the process and my experiences in this article, where I ask the following: (1) What are my experiences using Hughes, Pennington, and Makris' (2012) and Milner's (2007) frameworks to guide my autoethnographic study? (2) What were the benefits and challenges of using the frameworks throughout all phases of the research process?

The Trouble with Autoethnography

Controversy still surrounds autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2011; Holman Jones et al., 2013; Hughes & Pennington, 2017). There are even accounts of those who were chastised for their choice to engage in autoethnography (e.g., Eisenbach, 2016) and those who warn researchers, especially female ones, to avoid the method for fear of being perceived as narcissistic and emotional (e.g., Katila & Meriläinen, 1999). Caroline Ellis (2009) even channeled common critiques into various “rants” from modern post-structuralist, aesthetic, and social science researchers to make a case for “fighting back or moving on” from autoethnography, citing lack of understanding about the practice as one of its biggest challenges to readers, researchers, and critics alike.

While autoethnography enjoys a design in which flexibility of form is intentional to appropriately convey the experience and voice of the researcher (Farrell et al., 2015), that flexibility is often what is problematized (Ellis, 2009), especially when the authors are not explicit about their methods and purpose (Adams, 2017). The consensus amongst proponents and scholars of autoethnography lies with the purpose of the autoethnographic form: autoethnography allows researchers who are immersed in a culture, group, or event to examine and analyze those experiences in context of a larger epistemological, axiological, critical, or cultural lens (Adams, 2017; Ellis, 2009; Ellis et al., 2011; Farrell et al., 2015; Hughes et al., 2012; Hughes & Pennington, 2017). Further, as a methodology, autoethnography gives space and access for those outside of traditional positivist social science research to share their theories, truth, and experiences, often illuminating topics and problems that have otherwise been hidden, suppressed, or ignored (Denzin, 2004; Ellis et al., 2011; Hughes et al., 2012; Hughes & Pennington, 2017).

As I sifted through the different pieces of literature on autoethnography, I saw what many proponents of it point out: there is no singular structure or approach for engaging in autoethnographic research (Adams, 2017; Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013). In fact, there are several, and the method adjusts slightly depending on the purpose. Even among autoethnographers themselves, there lies debate about why we do autoethnography, adding to the fracture of its identity as a form of writing and research (Adams, 2017). This is problematic as Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) point out, and most criticisms of autoethnography result from fallacious claims that attempt to place autoethnography within the same context and purpose as other forms of research, including narrative and qualitative research. A common critique is that autoethnography is self-indulgent or narcissistic (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2009; Haylor, 2011), with some criticisms as harsh as: “Autoethnography is, whatever else it may or may not be, about things that matter a great deal to the autoethnographer” (Delamont, 2009, p. 57) or, “autoethnographic self-obsession...have [has] *no* analytic mileage, and tell the readers *nothing* about fieldwork...or embodiment or habitus or anything of social scientific, pedagogic, or educational interest” (p. 58). Autoethnographies are also often compared to autobiographic writing, and linked to artful, aesthetic writing and are inappropriately held to those standards (Ellis et al., 2011), which is also an inaccurate or incomplete category by which to judge it.

Autoethnography is not intended to be the same as other forms of research or other types of writing. As such, it seems that a lack of understanding (or even desire to understand) the purpose of autoethnography is what creates these incongruous, and frankly, unfair comparisons. The more I investigated autoethnography, the more tensions I identified. However, I also saw a lot of promise in its form in terms of my own research and committed myself to finding a way to do it in a way that not only honored the spirit of the form but also addressed the criticisms around potential for larger implications and analysis of culture.

Arriving at a Framework-Based Structure

In his journals, Henry David Thoreau (1992) wrote: “There is no such thing as pure objective observation. Your observation, to be interesting, i.e., to be significant, must be subjective.” Similarly, Gloria Ladson-Billings (2000) writes how one’s epistemology is linked to their worldview, and that their worldview is “shaped” by a person’s identity as well as the “conditions under which they live” (p. 258). This stance also assumes that our “ways of knowing are inherently culture-bound and perspectival” (Lather, 1992) and that knowledge is constructed by our experiences and how we interact with the world: it is “our” knowledge that we possess, not “the” knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Lather, 1992). It is this epistemological stance that led to my autoethnographic study and ultimately informed the framework-based structure I adopted.

While I was planning the larger research project (Dull, 2021a), rather than just note my wish or desire to develop a positionality that was reflexive, collaborative, and dynamic (Creswell, 2012; Heineman-Pieper et al., 2002; Heineman-Pieper, 1989; Mills & Gay, 2019), as mentioned earlier in this article, I wanted to find a way to codify my process hoping it would help legitimize the work and counter the narrative that autoethnography is self-indulgent, narcissistic, and not of interest to social science, pedagogy, or education (Chang, 2008; Delamont, 2009; Ellis, 2009; Haylor, 2011). More importantly, I wanted to hold myself accountable to the deep and challenging work of reflecting on power and privilege and how it impacts the research process (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Lather, 1992; McIntosh, 1988; Milner, 2007). In addition, feminist research demands “self-reflexivity and growing awareness of how research values permeate inquiry” (Lather, 1992, p. 2), and autoethnography is an appropriate methodology for examining this, for “in practice, autoethnography is not so much a methodology as a way of life” (Bochner, 2013, p. 53). The autoethnographer is immersed in the experience and culture that they are examining, requiring them to reflect on not only their own actions and thinking but also on their interactions with other participants or “informants” involved (Farrell et al., 2015). This level of self-reflexivity and reflection can offer revelations about how the researcher is guided by social norms, aspects of identity, and historical perceptions and structures of power (Nencel, 2014). While the researcher is the subject of the study, the other participants’ contributions are equally, if not more important to the findings (Ellis et al., 2011) as they contribute to the co-construction of the researcher’s knowledge (Panhwar et al., 2017).

As a form, autoethnography also enables the researcher to reflect on and explicitly address subjectivity while focusing on how different aspects of positionality and identify affect the entire research process, including the reporting and the findings. To provide a guiding structure to support me throughout the entire research process and to address “challenges of legitimacy” (Hughes et al., 2012) still faced by autoethnographers, I opted to use Hughes, Pennington, and Makris’ (2012) framework to align autoethnography to AERA’s standards for empirical social science research and Milner’s (2007) framework for researchers to work through seen, unseen, and unforeseen dangers positionality can evoke throughout the research process. Hughes, Pennington, and Makris’ (2012) framework identifies four structural or process-related focus areas to which autoethnographers need to attend to translate autoethnography as empirical research in alignment with each of AERA’s standards (Duran et al., 2006):

1. How autoethnography formulates social scientific problems
2. How autoethnography facilitates critical, careful, and thoughtful discussion of methodological choices and claims

3. How Autoethnography Offers Multiple Levels of Critical Analysis, Including Self-Critique, Naming Privilege and Penalty, and Selecting Classification Schemes and Units of Analysis While Being Critically Self-Reflexive About the Selection Criteria
4. How Autoethnography Provides Opportunities for Credible Analysis and Interpretation of Evidence from Narratives and Connects Them to Researching the Self Via Triangulation, Member-Checks, and Related Ethical Issues

In addition, the framework offers a rubric for evaluating the autoethnography for researchers to use while they are writing the report or prepare to present their research.

To support my reflection and investigation of the different layers of culture in the school community, I employed Milner's (2007) framework. Since my investigation focused on different aspects of my identity, including myself as researcher, I found this framework to be appropriate, as Milner "rejects practices in which researchers detach themselves from the research process, particularly when they reject their racialized and cultural positionality in the research process" (p. 388). He argues that it is important for researchers to reflect on their identity and positionality, especially when engaging in research in communities where they are an outsider, and when there are racial and cultural differences that impact power and privilege. Once they can identify them, researchers can then address them with the goal of preventing them from negatively impacting the community. To support this, Milner (2007) segments his framework into four parts, for which he provides sample guiding questions and suggestions for ways to focus those reflections:

- researching the self
- researching the self in relation to others
- engaged reflection and representation
- and shifting from self to system

While much of the reflection is done individually by the researcher, researching the self in relation to others and engaged reflection and representation require meaningful interactions and discussions with the community members or research participants.

While both frameworks were published in earlier decades, I found their relevance had not diminished. Hughes, Pennington, and Makris' (2012) framework aligns to the 2006 AERA Standards for reporting on empirical social science research in AERA publications (Duran et al., 2006), but I was unable to find any more recent tools or standards that specifically address researcher conduct, particularly in the social sciences. Even though a key part of the framework refers to the 2007 AERA standards, the authors' discussion about how autoethnography can be "translated" to empirical research was equally important to my work. In addition, Milner's framework (2007) has not been updated since its publication, but I was unable to find a framework that offered the level of reflection I sought, particularly one that focused on researcher positionality within a community. Like Hughes, Pennington, and Makris' (2012) framework, Milner's framework (2007) discusses issues around researcher positionality that transcend a particular decade or trend in research and compel researchers to reflect on themselves and their work in context of the time and spaces they are engaging in research. Therefore, I argue that the themes and values presented in the frameworks maintain their relevance roughly a decade or so later and only enriched and supported my research experience.

Applying the Two Frameworks: A Process for Autoethnography

The following details how both frameworks were utilized in my autoethnography. First, I used Hughes, Pennington, and Makris' (2012) framework throughout the autoethnography process from planning to preparation for publication. After a first read of the article to deepen my understanding of the approach, I adapted the rubric the authors developed and used it to plan and design the study. This included: developing a timeline, a checklist of topics to address, creating a data collection plan, and determining participant-informants, and theoretical and conceptual frameworks. While engaged in the study, I returned to the rubric and the plan to ensure that I read sufficient literature to frame my analysis, collected sufficient data, and adhered to rigorous data collection and analysis protocols including maintaining journals, composing written reflective memos after discussions with anyone involved in the research project, and including member checks. Once I concluded data collection and analysis, I returned to the rubric again and used it to develop an outline of what to include in the report.

I applied Milner's framework (2007) in three distinct ways. The first was including it in the rationale for the autoethnography itself, and as a lens through which I created my research questions. Second, I responded to each of the guiding questions in the four components of the framework, providing as much detail as I could, and in some cases, expanding beyond those questions to address other connected issues I felt were relevant to my developing positionality. Finally, Milner's "researching the self in relation to others" and "engaged reflection and representation" led me to seek Dr. Rose's input into my developing positionality. Therefore, I used guiding questions from Milner's framework to focus the reflections I wrote based on each of our planning discussions, and to inform an interview with Dr. Rose (Dull, 2021b). Essentially, I used his framework as check for myself to ensure I meaningfully attended to researching myself in relation to Dr. Rose and the school community and to ensure engaged reflection and of her and the school community representation throughout. The table below outlines the process I used to engage in the autoethnography using the two frameworks (Hughes et al., 2012; Milner, 2007).

Table 1
Phase Map for Autoethnographic Research

Phase	Resources & Action	Guiding Questions	Product/Result
Discovery	Read and reflect on Milner (2007).	What can I learn from this community? Why is it important to reflect on my positionality?	Vision and goal for autoethnography
Planning	Apply Hughes, Pennington, and Makris' framework (2012) to develop an outline and checklist of the research process.	Who are the participants/gatekeepers? What data will I collect? How will I analyze the data? What are my conceptual and theoretical frameworks?	Research plan/outline
Researching	(1) Reflect Using Milner's Framework: <input type="checkbox"/> Researching the self: Respond to the guiding questions in Milner's (2007) <input type="checkbox"/> Researching the self in relation to others: engage in discussion	What are the seen, unseen, and unforeseen challenges with regard to my positionality and my research? (Milner, 2007) What aspects of my identity might affect my research? What can I do to mitigate their effect on the community?	Data set

	<p>with relevant participants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Engaged reflection and representation: engage in discussion with relevant participants <input type="checkbox"/> Shifting from self to system: reflection and discussion with relevant participants <p>(2) Data collection using checklist (developed from Hughes et al., 2012): e.g., meeting artifacts, reflective memos, available community information and data, interviews, etc.</p>	<p>What data can I collect to illustrate this?</p>	
Analysis	<p>Analyze data, referring to Hughes, Pennington, and Makris' (2012) rubric to ensure adherence to AERA standards for empirical social science research.</p>	<p>What does the data show? What formal process(es) will I use to analyze the data set? Have I accounted for my subjectivity? How can I use member checks to confirm/challenge what I know or think I know?</p>	<p>Analytic memos, code books, etc.</p>
Reporting	<p>(1) Draft a report of the findings, using the checklist to inform content. (2) Reflect on the report, using Hughes, Pennington, and Makris' (2012) rubric to evaluate.</p>	<p>Have I addressed all aspects of empirical social science research as detailed in Hughes, Pennington, and Makris' (2012)? Have I accounted for my subjectivity? How can I use member checks to confirm/challenge my findings? What are the appropriate avenues/venues to share my findings?</p>	<p>Report of Autoethnography</p>

Reflection on Applying the Frameworks

At the most superficial level, applying these two frameworks provided clear guidance and structure for me, a novice autoethnographer, on how to engage in the process. Once I decided to do an autoethnography, I was overwhelmed not only by its many possibilities but also by all the different avenues for failure. I wanted to engage in a meaningful examination of my positionality, yet I did not want to fall into the narcissistic and self-indulgent categories of which critics had warned. After weeks of stalling the research for fear of starting off incorrectly, once I sat down and developed a research plan using an adapted version of Hughes, Pennington, and Makris' (2012) framework, I felt organized and prepared to move ahead. Once I got started, having a clear checklist of ideas to attend to and areas of inquiry to address helped me focus

less on the mechanics of doing an autoethnography and instead on engaging in the actual work itself.

I read Milner's (2007) framework a number of times prior to engaging in this study; in fact, it was his framework that inspired me to examine and reflect on my positionality via an autoethnographic study. I initially returned to his guiding questions to prepare for planning discussions with Dr. Rose; however, I quickly noticed that stopping there would only yield a cursory examination and not one that reflected the level of work I wanted to do. I decided to use Milner's questions as the basis for a reflective journal and responded to each question in writing (Dull, 2021a). If I felt the need to expand on a specific thought inspired by his framework, I did so and included it with a notation in the journal. I also noted any new questions that emerged relevant to my research (e.g., How can I do this counter-narrative effectively? How did working through this approach affect my research process?).

As mentioned earlier in this article, one of my fears in applying any framework was that they would be restrictive in terms of writing the report and would take away from the spirit of autoethnographic research. I love writing and have enjoyed an ease with doing it for years; I was excited at the opportunity to challenge myself with a new form and did not want the bellowing voices of the critics to scare me off. Instead of being restricted by the frameworks, I found the approach to be freeing – freeing from the tensions I felt when embarking on this process, from the anxiety of engaging in a new research methodology, and from the fears of being stuck in reflection and not being able to transform it to research. Simply, the frameworks provided guidance for what to include in my autoethnography which freed me to focus on how I would gather the data, analyze it, and report on it. In my experience, the frameworks provided no limitations or formulaic approaches to how those things should be done, leaving me, the autoethnographer, the freedom to design, implement, and report on a study in a way that honors the voice, uniqueness, and context of the researcher, the community, and the experiences. Because I was so structured in my planning and implementation of the study, I felt empowered to make decisions about the study that may not have been traditional such as engaging Dr. Rose in an interview to discuss my positionality in context of the school community (e.g., using an interview with Dr. Rose as data).

Throughout my autoethnographic study, I was transparent with Dr. Rose about what I was doing and even shared Milner's framework (2007). In addition to how useful his questions were to guide my reflection, the use of the framework itself gave me a way to discuss my positionality and helped me explain my intentions in examining it. While I collected other data that helped uncover findings about my positionality (e.g., correspondence, reflective memos, artifacts from planning), it was through Milner's focus of looking for seen, unseen, and unforeseen dangers that I uncovered my fear of overburdening or imposing on Dr. Rose that led to the development of a heuristic for how we would continue to work together. Finally, while I was cognizant not to rely on demographic data to speak for the school community, Milner's framework provided specific insight for how to engage the community in reflection and representation, which I have included in the plan for my continued work with the school community.

Conclusion

As a novice autoethnographer, spending time to explore autoethnography prior to engaging in one allowed me to enter the dialogue that was already ongoing in the literature. While the tensions and criticisms I read seeped into my own thinking, they pushed me to find ways to prevent them from disrupting my own practice. They also challenged me to carve out an approach for autoethnography that made sense for my own practice – one that struck that balance of informing structure but not being prescriptive or formulaic. Applying these

frameworks provided guidance and structures that helped me navigate the process, yet they were not stifling or limiting in any way. In fact, the only challenge I saw in using them was the amount of time required to do them thoughtfully; however, that yielded richer reflection, provided a space and platform for deeper analysis, and helped me design an effective plan that ultimately saved time when conducting the study. In fact, I often wondered if I would have lost several weeks due to procrastination if I had decided to apply Hughes, Pennington, and Makris' (2012) framework earlier.

As a female researcher, I took to heart many of warnings about the perceptions of autoethnography. As one who embraces the ideals of feminist research, the last thing I want is to be perceived as a self-indulgent narcissist, especially when engaging in research with a community where there is a history of systemic racism and cultural bias. In addition, exploring power and privilege is important work, and the reason I engage in that work is not to share or talk about my feelings or my revelations: it is to ensure my work is in service of those communities that welcome me. Milner's framework (2007) gives a space and structure for researchers to do that. While my autoethnography is about my positionality, the reflection in which I engaged put the community – and not myself – at the center, in the research and in the discussion of it.

Farrell et al. (2015) argue that autoethnography “allows the researcher to go beyond the mere autobiography of teaching and learning efforts by combining autobiographical narrative details with a cultural analysis and interpretation. The result is the generation of new knowledge” (975). They allow “researchers to identify their vulnerabilities and “embrace them with a purpose” (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2015, p. 22), by offering a critique and analysis of the experiences. I found that autoethnography is a very personal process, yet not necessarily a selfish, or self-indulgent one as I had been warned. I was hesitant to engage in autoethnography in any meaningful way for fear of exposing my vulnerabilities; however, I believe that applying these two frameworks enabled me to examine my experiences and feelings in a larger social context – they helped me bridge that initial emotional space into an analytical and researcher mindset, resulting in what was an insightful and impactful learning experience.

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Article Citation

Dull, A. (2021). Informing without conforming: Applying two frameworks to enrich autoethnography. *The Qualitative Report*, 26(11), 3307-3317. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2021.5030>
