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# Diving into Autoethnographic Narrative Inquiry: Uncovering Hidden Tensions Below the Surface

Brooke B. Eisenbach

Lesley University, [brooke.eisenbach@gmail.com](mailto:brooke.eisenbach@gmail.com)

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## Diving into Autoethnographic Narrative Inquiry: Uncovering Hidden Tensions Below the Surface

### **Abstract**

As a graduate student, I was awakened to the world of autoethnographic narrative inquiry. It was a world I was eager to traverse as I completed my doctoral coursework, and engaged in my final dissertation research. Yet, I was unaware of my naiveté at inviting others to share in my lived experience. As I engaged in an autoethnographic narrative inquiry of my first year as an online teacher, I found myself entangled in a world of hidden tensions I never expected to uncover. In this article, I share the personal tensions that surfaced as I entered into the world of autoethnographic narrative inquiry.

### **Keywords**

Autoethnographic Narrative Inquiry; Autoethnography; Narrative Inquiry

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## Diving into Autoethnographic Narrative Inquiry: Uncovering Hidden Tensions Below the Surface

Brooke B. Eisenbach

Lesley University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

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*As a graduate student, I was awakened to the world of autoethnographic narrative inquiry. It was a world I was eager to traverse as I completed my doctoral coursework, and engaged in my final dissertation research. Yet, I was unaware of my naiveté at inviting others to share in my lived experience. As I engaged in an autoethnographic narrative inquiry of my first year as an online teacher, I found myself entangled in a world of hidden tensions I never expected to uncover. In this article, I share the personal tensions that surfaced as I entered into the world of autoethnographic narrative inquiry. Keywords: Autoethnographic Narrative Inquiry, Autoethnography, Narrative Inquiry*

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*You pissed me off, my dissertation chair announced to the room of onlookers. I mean, you really pissed me off. When I read that section of your dissertation, I had to put the paper down for a minute. My committee nodded in agreement.*

As I sat confined in a small conference room at my doctoral defense, surrounded by my family, friends, and dissertation committee, I recalled my mother's swimming pool and the many summers spent swimming as a young child. I remembered standing along the edge of the pool, staring at my reflection in the water, eager to swim, but faced with a choice. My first option: a calm, mild step into the shallow end of the pool, beckoned with promise of a gradual acclimation to the cold. I could take things step-by-step, moving forward at a pace that would allow my body to adjust to the sudden change in temperature. The second option taunted the risk-taker in me – that part of myself eager to throw caution to the wind, and jump!

How I suddenly longed to return my feet to the security of the pool deck. But, it was too late. I was engaged in a defense of my study – an autoethnographic narrative inquiry that revealed my innermost thoughts, truths, and vision of self as a teacher, friend, mother, and wife. While my passion and eagerness to enter the world of autoethnographic research was a thoughtful decision, it was now one I found myself second guessing. I began to wonder, *Did I jump too soon?*

### Entering the Pool of Autoethnographic Research

As a doctoral student, one of my professors awakened me to the world of arts-based qualitative research – a world overshadowed in my undergraduate years by a post-positivist notion of objectivity and calculation. I suddenly understood that research did not have to be driven by numbers, statistics, and a search for absolute truth (Bochner, 1997; Bruner, 1990). Rather, research could focus on story and self. Carolyn Ellis's (1995, 2004) texts showed me the power of autoethnography. Arthur Bochner's (1997, 2005, 2012) work moved me through the power of narrative. Together, I found that qualitative research had the power to provide voice to the lived experiences of those around me – voices often too faint to be heard, or silenced by the deafening roar of policy or societal expectations.

And so, I began with a dip of my toe into the pool of narrative inquiry. I became acquainted with the feel of this form of research within my coursework. This particular methodology made complete sense to me. As I learned more about the nature of narrative

inquiry and the ideological views of life as transmitted through story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), I knew my own beliefs aligned with this qualitative approach.

I paused to listen to the stories of colleagues – teachers who felt silenced by the current educational system. They shared their stories of fear, resentment, and disdain, along with tales of hope, passion, and sacrifice. They revealed a world of disempowerment, conveyed through tones of frustration, the echo of tears, and shrug of complacency. They wanted their voices heard – their stories told. But, they were fearful to tell it. They worried they might lose their jobs, or worse, they feared no one would listen. Yet, they trusted me to share their stories.

I wrote articles and gave conference presentations sharing their views on scripted curriculums (Eisenbach, 2012), teacher evaluations (Eisenbach, 2014), and unique experiences within the classroom (Eisenbach & Kaywell, 2013). In doing so, I hoped to engage others in discourse. I wanted to expand our current understanding of the teaching experience and allow their stories to resonate in the hearts and experiences of others. I continued to tip-toe around the pool of research. So far, the water felt nice. In fact, refreshing.

I decided to take things a step further and wade in the shallow end of the autoethnographic pool. After all, I enjoyed learning more and sharing the stories of others. Perhaps my own story – my own voice – would lend itself to furthering the conversation. As I continued in my doctoral studies, I was awakened to the struggles of maintaining a home, work, and my program of study. As a wife and mother, I was torn between my commitments to my family and the steps I had to take to further my education and career. I struggled in finding a balance, and I knew I wasn't alone. I wanted to expose my story and, in turn, further conversation regarding motherhood and doctoral studies (Eisenbach, 2013). I wanted to speak of my experience within a greater cultural context (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Why should my story remain hidden? Why not share my reality and, in doing so, provide opportunity to further our discussion and understanding of this shared experience? In response, I published and I presented my findings. I shared my inner truths with the world. After all, why ask others to extend their vulnerability if I am not willing to do so myself (Leavy, 2009)? The water was a bit cooler than I expected, but nothing I couldn't handle. With time, I could acclimate.

Finally, I came to the end of my doctoral coursework. I spent months agonizing over a topic for my final dissertation study. There were so many stories I hoped to share – so many aspects of education I wished to research. During this time, I transitioned from my position as a traditional schoolteacher, to a new role as an online instructor. I found myself in a place where my own ideologies regarding classroom care and communities were at odds with my newfound teaching position. Unfamiliar with the voices of my new colleagues and eager to get at the essence of the lived experience, I elected to conduct an autoethnographic narrative inquiry for my dissertation research. As a teacher who believed in the power of cultivating caring relationships within the classroom, I decided to take a look at my own abilities to care for my new students within the online context. As a secondary online teacher, could I cultivate relational care (Noddings, 1992) with students within the virtual classroom? The wading was over. It was time to dive in!

### **Taking the Dive**

Over the course of my first year as a virtual teacher, I gathered data for my study in the form of personal journals and memos. I relived my experience – the highs and lows, the frustrations and moments of excitement, the tensions and revelations. I reflected, noted memos, and drafted narrative accounts of that first year. I shared my stories with my response community, and verified my interpretations through their eyes, and views of my experience. I sought to expose my narratives to a general audience and cultural understanding. In doing so, I was forced to see a reflection of myself in a way I never anticipated. I re-evaluated my beliefs,

and interpretation of relational care. I began to wonder, *Is this the self I want to expose to the world?* As I gazed at my reflection in the rippling waters, I wasn't so sure I liked what I saw looking back.

### Discovering the Hidden Tensions

Though I had tested the waters, I soon discovered I was ill-prepared for the tensions I would experience upon engaging in the world of autoethnography. I discovered tensions regarding my perceptions of self, others, and experience. Questions emerged regarding the essence of my personal truths. I found conflict in decisions regarding what stories to share and what information to withhold. At times, my varying social and professional identities collided, causing tension within narrative selections and character depictions. Finally, I discovered a greater level of personal vulnerability than I could have ever imagined.

### Personal Truth or Self-Denial

As researchers, we are asked to trust the data. In doing so, we are trusting our participants. We trust that what they say is *true*. We trust that they provide an honest rendition of events, or an honest response on a survey. This *truth* extends beyond a vision of literal truth and enters into an emotional, collaborative truth (Bochner, 2012). But, what is truth if not an individual's perception of reality at a given moment in time? It is in the re-telling of the event that we truly gain an appreciation and understanding for the event (Ellis & Bochner, 1992; Gilbert, 2002). For instance, the way in which I perceived my parents' divorce at the age of five is not the same way in which I perceive this truth today. Rather, this experience contained an emotional truth at the moment of inception and carries a similar, though unique, truth in recalling the story today.

As I engaged in my study, I discovered greater tensions regarding my personal interpretation of truth and the potential for inadvertent self-denial. For instance, in one narrative account, I shared the story of a parent who was angered over my *incompetence* and *inability* to help her son succeed in my online course. In response to a heated voicemail I received from this mother, I immediately called my colleague to vent my frustrations. I cursed and cried, at the time dismayed that my attempts to care for this child were met with such hostility. How could she not see everything I did to help her son succeed? How could she possibly view his inability to complete the course as my fault? However, upon later reflection and discussion with my professors, I was able to see a tinge of self-denial. Rather than recognize my personal need for validation as an educator, I blamed this mother and child for my shortcomings. I refused to see this event as a moment of selfish egotism. Rather than examine the story through the parent's eyes, I chose to interpret the event through a narrow lens of self.

In addition, I found that my stories were laden with levels of optimism intermingled with pessimistic reflections of self. Though I was committed to dispelling the truth of my experience, I questioned whether I might have sugarcoated the otherwise harsh realities of my new role as an online teacher. Conversations between characters in my final narratives, at times, demonstrated a more peaceful, tranquil tone than what might have been perceived by outside spectators. For example, conversations with my colleagues and family were laden with productive discussion of potential conflicts, and ended with an air of hope. I neglected to include any arguments or disagreements. The evenings filled with arguments and tears because I chose to dedicate time to my work rather than my family somehow escaped the final narrative account. Yet, so did the stories of nights in which I elected to ignore the ring of my phone and plea for help from students in exchange for a game of Goldfish with my daughter. I had to negotiate which stories to tell, and which to leave on the cutting room floor.

In sharing my own story, I inevitably share the stories of others (Wall, 2008). I don't live in a bubble – independent of interaction, evaluation, and examination by and of others. Whether the result of an innate fear of hurting someone's feelings, fear of conflict, or deception regarding the true nature of others, I had a tendency to paint characters with the brush of optimism. In fact, my own dissertation committee questioned my depiction of my husband throughout my composite narratives. He was the voice of reason in moments of frustration. He brought me back to myself when perceived stress threatened to keep me entangled. Did my depictions of him speak to my perceived reality? Did I choose to ignore underlying tensions and frustrations in our relationship within my stories? Or, did he serve as a filter through which I could share my innermost thoughts without fear of professional retribution later – my own thoughts depicted through the voice of another?

I also uncovered conflict within my distinct professional and personal roles. In sharing my struggles with balancing work and family, my entire dissertation committee later noted how I depicted myself as the neglectful wife and mother. Though I love my husband and daughter with all of my heart, my stories demonstrated a woman more focused on her career and in addressing the needs of her students, than spending time with her family. In fact, one such story, a story in which I neglected to pick up my three-year-old daughter on time from school so that I could take a student call for course assistance, really angered my committee. As one of my professors commented in my defense, *This isn't the you we see*. I wondered which *me* I depicted within the text. Was this tension caused by my desire to be perceived as the caring teacher – a need for validation as an online educator? Did I accurately reflect time spent with my child through the selected composite narratives? Or, was I in some way punishing myself for self-perceived shortcomings as a mother? Where is the distinction between perceived truth, and hidden self-deception?

### **To Tell or Not To Tell**

Another hidden tension that bubbled to the surface in my decision to engage in autoethnographic narrative inquiry was my choice in how I might approach the crafting and telling of my story within the narratives of my study. We deliberately choose which moments we share within our texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Should I dive headfirst without consideration of what awaits below the surface? Was I willing to share the intimate details of my home, family, friends, colleagues, students, and self in an attempt to delve deeply into the greater understanding of this cultural phenomenon? Do I neglect my desire to give consideration to the feelings and sanctity of others' personal truths and experiences, in favor of sharing the raw essence of my experience? After all, I want my narratives to ring true to the reader, and speak to the lives they portray (Clough, 2002). I want to get at the very essence of my experience. But, do I dare engage in such revelations without consideration of what might come as a result of my openness?

For example, in sharing my narratives, I engaged in dialogue concerning the lives of students, colleagues, and family. The final narratives of my study sought to blend together multiple identities, situations, and experiences into a single story through the use of fiction. I crafted amalgams, or composite characters, of the *others* involved in the telling of my experience (Clough, 2002). In this way, I was able to protect the identities and stories of those involved. I maintained the essence of each personality and experience from my journal and head notes, but in such a way that they were not identifiable as a particular individual. I combined experiences that shared a common theme into a single account. By fictionalizing the accounts in this way, I was able to provide *protection anonymity to the research participants without stripping away the rawness of real happening* (Clough, 2002, p. 8).

Although I utilized elements of fiction as a means of maintaining the anonymity of others and combined piecemeal narratives into distinct stories, I still faced decisions regarding the way in which to develop each character while remaining true to the essence of my experience. In one story, I shared a conversation with a colleague regarding our newly developed co-teach schedule and effort to find a work/life balance that would benefit both parties. We were working together as co-teachers and, as such, we openly discussed current situations involving parents and students. As I developed this particular narrative, I sought to stay true to the moment, but also hesitated to record feelings or statements that might paint her in a negative light or expose too much of her personal, familial experience. I believe she is a wonderful, hard-working, caring teacher and mother. Did I depict her in such a way that my own lens was exposed? The two of us engaged in conversations almost daily. We spoke of more than work. We discussed our children and demands at home. She shared stories of her ex-husband and personal difficulties with her mother. We grew to be more than colleagues – we became friends. What of our conversation should I chose to infuse into my narrative? What stories do I dismiss as punitive or irrelevant? What stories lend themselves to depicting the essence of her many identities? This was truly a tension that plagued me throughout the composition of my study. In the end, I chose to utilize my response community, a group of three individuals who reviewed my narratives in an attempt to help me expose hidden truths and maintain the integrity of my experiences, as a key means of deciphering which text to maintain and which to set aside.

### Personal Vulnerability

Autoethnography carries potential for personal and social risk to the researcher (Ellis, 1999). While I was vaguely aware of this truth in making the decision to write an autoethnographic study, I now see that I entered into my work with a significant level of naivety. As a writer of autoethnographic research, I must be willing to be vulnerable. The moment my stories break the surface – the moment my jump is complete – these tales of personal triumph and failure, moments of frustration and trepidation, demonstration of raw emotion and humanity, are no longer mine (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). They now belong to the world. Whether I am ready to become naked or not, to expose my true vulnerability, it is done (Ellis, 1999).

This tension was never more apparent than over the course of my dissertation defense. I spoke of my struggles in balancing work and family throughout my dissertation narratives. In one such narrative, I shared a particular moment in which I chose work over the needs of my daughter.

As I walked through the lobby, I found myself rushing to Adalyn's classroom. Upon opening the door, I heard the sound of my daughter crying.

*Adalyn? What's wrong, baby?*

*Adalyn! Your mommy is here! exclaimed her teacher. Sorry! She's been standing at the door and crying, 'Where is Mommy?' for at least the past half hour,"* laughed her teacher.

*Shit...* (Eisenbach, 2015).

What I thought would be a discussion of methods, findings and revelations, became instead a discourse regarding my need for validation as a teacher, and my identity as a mother. I felt as though the self I thought I knew was ripped apart, and my hidden fears were put on display for all to see. Although the intention of my study was an examination of my attempts

to infuse care in the virtual setting, it seemed my personal self was suddenly exposed to the world. I felt like a caged animal on display at the local zoo. What had I done?

Those around me began to openly discuss their view of my role as a mother, wife, friend, colleague, and teacher. To be honest, I didn't feel this was fair. I always expected my final defense would be my opportunity to defend my research methods, findings, and discussion. I never anticipated I would find myself sitting at a conference table, surrounded by my committee, family, and friends; defending my identity, choices, and lived experience. While my professors' knowledge and experiences with me played a significant role in the manner in which they encountered my text, I couldn't help but consider how my narrative might have altered their perspective of me. *What did they think of me now?* As my family and friends sat nearby, listening to the conversation, I wondered what they would think. In addition, how might others – those I have never met – come to view my experience and my self? How might their interpretations affect the way in which I am perceived in the world of education?

My vulnerability was more apparent than I ever expected. I suddenly realized just how much my decision to conduct an autoethnography would open me up to speculation, assumption, and criticism. The sudden potential sting of my fall met my consciousness and could not be ignored; yet, I remained silent, allowing their interpretations of my experience to unfold before me. Whether it was fear that I would be held back from completing my defense and earning my doctorate, concern for how my response might be received by those around me, my utter shock at the turn in which my defense had taken, or simply an openness to accepting others' interpretations of my truth, I spent more time listening and reflecting on what was said than in defending my stories. Oh, how I suddenly longed to turn back.

### **It's Time to Swim**

As my defense concluded, a wave of relief intermingled with fear suddenly swept over me. I had taken the leap. My first real jump into autoethnographic research was a risky venture. It's no secret we strive to present our ideal selves upon initial encounters with others. Whether we find ourselves engaged in a first date, or sitting down for an important job interview, we want others to perceive us as we wish we could be – free of flaws, conflict, and idiosyncrasies. In choosing to share my personal experience through an autoethnographic narrative inquiry, I stripped myself of the ideal. Would this hold me back in terms of achieving my goals in higher education? Would my study be enough to gain adequate footing in the world of arts-based research? Would I live to regret my decision to expose the raw nerve of personal vulnerability?

Thankfully, I have not yet found that my decision to engage in this study of self has held me back from the world of academia, as I recently found a position at an institution of higher education. Though, in speaking with colleagues within my department, they have been fearful of engaging in autoethnography, as they are concerned with the potential risks of exposing too much *self* within their research. It seems the tensions I exposed in conducting my own study are similar to concerns raised by others within the field of educational research. In this way, I have been able to further conversation regarding the nature, risks, and benefits of such research within the field of education.

Despite my success in finding a position within the professoriate, I often think back to my decision to engage in an autoethnography, and surface with mixed feelings. On one hand, I learned so much through this process. I step away with a greater understanding of the tensions and risks that others take in sharing their experience with me. In this way, I believe this experience has helped me become a better researcher and writer. While I was always grateful to those who choose to participate in my research studies, I now have greater respect for the immense vulnerability to which they are exposed in sharing their stories with me. This is something I will never take for granted.



At the same time, I can never take it back. My experience is forever exposed to the world, and people will take from it what they will. I have opened myself up to potential criticism. In sharing my experience as an educator, I have exposed my identity as a friend, wife, and mother. These personal selves are no longer personal.

This experience has taught me so much, and at the same time, led me to so many more questions regarding arts-based research, as well as questions pertaining to my identities and personal psyche. I wish I could say I have an answer for everything that has emerged from my reflection of this experience. However, I am only just learning how to navigate the waters of qualitative research. In questioning, I am learning to stay afloat. In continuing my efforts to learn more, and my willingness to engage further in this potentially hazardous realm of research, I hope to kick my feet and remember to swim.

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#### **Author Note**

Brooke B. Eisenbach is Assistant Professor of Secondary Education at Lesley University, Cambridge, MA. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: [brooke.eisenbach@gmail.com](mailto:brooke.eisenbach@gmail.com).

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