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Autoethnography and the journalist: an ethical comparison

Abstract:

Autoethnography has undergone numerous critical appraisals based on its specific ways of truth reproduction. This paper looks at autoethnography as method and text from an ethical journalistic perspective, utilising it as a method for the production of written artefacts, and its interpretation and reinterpretation of past events. The research identifies the ethical issues and dilemmas of allowing composite events and reproduction of conversations to enter autoethnography in its work, both as method and as text. Particularly, the paper questions when the message or main tenet of the text overshadows the balance and truth experienced by the author in a corporeal, rather than a metaphysical sense. The paper reviews three autoethnographic texts, comparing current methodologies to journalistic output. It also discusses issues of implementing autoethnography in producing factual reconstructions of events. This research challenges autoethnography's use of composite events and reproductions of dialogue without recorded evidence in order to produce a text more reliant on ideology and meaning. Using a journalistic lens, ethical issues arising from this method are discussed in conjunction with a discussion of balance and truth, paying attention to fictitious accounts of factual events, and adjudicating autoethnography under the principles of journalistic ethics.

Biographical note:

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Introduction

The evaluation of autoethnographic ethics is important in understanding the methodology due to its increasing popularity as a qualitative method and form of text (Muncey 2010; Wall 2014). Looking at autoethnography as method and text from an ethical journalistic perspective, this paper will utilise the alternative methodology for both the production of journalism, and its interpretation and reinterpretation of past events.

In order to assess autoethnography's ethical issues, including its use of composite events and reproductions of conversations without recorded evidence, this paper reviews three autoethnographic texts: Carolyn Ellis' *Final Negotiations: A Story of Love, Loss, and Chronic Illness* (1995), and *The Ethnographic I* (2004)*,* and David Oliver Relin's and Greg Mortenson's *Three Cups of Tea* (2006). Further, this paper compares autoethnography's current methodologies to journalistic output, outlines issues of implementing autoethnography in producing factual reconstructions of events, and questions the validity of allowing an autoethnographer's intention of meaning for the text to dominate the work in favour of balance and *truth* experienced by the autoethnographer in a corporeal sense.

History

Anthropologist David Hayano's 1979 essay, *Auto-Ethnography: Paradigms, Problems, and Prospects*, is the first instance of the use of the terminology in the context it is now generally defined, with Hayano outlining its purpose in an anthropologist's self-observation during ethnographic research (Hayano 1979). Autoethnography became the terminology to describe a contemporary anthropologist's participation as an immersed member of the culture or society which she observes and studies. The swing toward the personal is further underpinned in Hayano's *Poker Faces* (1982) as he studies his personal experience as a poker player in Californian Poker rooms.

The trend toward autoethnography and autoethnographic research has grown since the 1970s, generated by a need for social scientists to scrutinise their own communities, people, and selves first (Hayano 1979). However, it is the 1990s which sees a 'renewed interest in personal narrative, in life history, and in autobiography among anthropologists', with autoethnography fusing postmodern ethnography with postmodern autobiography (Reed-Danahay 1997: 1-2). Almost 30 years later, the definition of autoethnography is continuing to see regular shifts within academia, as researchers utilise the ethnography as both method and text, refining its meaning to suit their individual exploration.

As method and text, autoethnography places the self within a social context (Reed-Danahay 1997), with the self as both author and focus of the story – 'the one who tells and the one who experiences' – taking on the position of the observing and the observed (Carolyn Ellis 2009a: 13). These autoethnographic experiences are focused on events directly experienced by the self, including its tenets of commenting and/or critiquing cultural practices; contributing to existing research; compelling a response

from its audience (Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis 2013: 20), as well as its interventionist principle. As Denzin writes: 'Seeking to give notice to those who may otherwise not be allowed to tell their story or who are denied a voice to speak' (Denzin 2014: 6). In addition to its varying degrees of a succinct definition, are the varying applications of autoethnography, evolving to the point where finding both a particular application and definition a challenge (Carolyn Ellis and Bochner 2000: 739).

Despite the different uses of autoethnography within the social sciences, autoethnography is universally viewed as a method and writing style that connects the personal with the cultural. Unlike other ethnographies, autoethnography begins inside the author, underpinning the move within the social sciences toward the more personal, and less anonymous, 'parallel[ing] the same trend in literature and journalism' (Carolyn Ellis and Bochner 2000: 744) since the rise of the New Journalism in the '60s and '70s. And, like journalism – specifically Gonzo journalism – autoethnography is based on the idea of experiencing epiphanies, which are 'the subject matter of interpretive autoethnography' (Denzin 2014: 3), with emphasis on a moral in the outcome of the text – which in autoethnography may be healing, political, or giving a voice to the voiceless, and within Gonzo tends to lean into social and political messages.

To begin autoethnography within oneself means to critically study the 'I' and the 'I''s experience from the lens of an ethnographer – to see yourself as the subject of study. Ultimately pursuing subject matter that is personal, potentially risqué, confronting, or uncomfortable, the calling of autoethnography – and conducting autoethnography – is in its meaning. It is to open the discussion to an audience: for education, notification, entertainment, research purposes, or, and specifically, for research to give voice to those not afforded with a platform or ability to openly discuss their narrative. As Denzin writes: 'Autoethnographic work must always be interventionist, seeking to give notice to those who may otherwise not be allowed to tell their story or who are denied a voice to speak' (Denzin 2014: 6).

Despite its noble assertions, autoethnography faces numerous criticisms targeting its research practice, research rigour, output, and ethics – the latter of which will be discussed in detail within this paper – as well as its position within academia, posing the question: is autoethnography an authentic and reliable social science method and practice?

Due to the various applications of autoethnography (see Denzin 2014; Ellis and Bochner 2000), there has been a fluctuation in the degree of detail 'placed on the study of others, the researcher's self and interaction with others, traditional analysis, and the interview context, as well as on power relationships' (Carolyn Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2010). This move-away from an objective, or strict tick-a-box process of research and method, has as such invited varying forms of criticisms to autoethnography. To begin, we need to look at autoethnography as an amalgamation of ethnography and autobiography, and the criticisms which come from both ends of the spectrum of these practices, slating that the output is either inadequately

researched and analysed (on the side of ethnography), or inadequate in its literary art (on the side of autobiography) (see Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2010).

Autoethnography's challenge as a merger between art and science seems to not add enough to either the creativity, or to the research, when either the art or the science takes on a primary position in autoethnographic writing. As evidenced by Ellis (see 1995; 2004, 1995, 2009b, 2009a), and underpinned in review by Moro (2006), to write well autoethnographically, the researcher must be a good writer. However, despite the intriguing, personal, and intricate autoethnographic accounts on offer, its ethical stance is problematic; and arguments to counter the criticism fail to address its lack of rigour when it comes to recounting dialogue and event, and the ethical dilemmas created by this lapse in balance.

As autoethnography can be utilised as both a method and a text, the autoethnographic method is employed by journalists, writers, biographers, visual and performance artists, poets, and others in the creative industries, much like literary and Gonzo journalists utilise ethnography within their research (see Thompson 1999; Fedorowicz 2013). Ethical dilemmas within autoethnography are made more complex when combining its method with creative output, an issue which will be discussed below.

Autoethnography: ethical issues (looking at Carolyn Ellis's *Final Negotiations*)

Carolyn Ellis is a leading autoethnographer globally, and a proponent in the alternative ethnography movement – a 'blurred genre of discourse in which investigators are liberated to shape their work in terms of its own necessities rather than according to received ideas about what must be done' (Bochner 2000: 269; also see Geertz 1973). An analysis of this alternative focus lends itself to an unpacking of the autoethnography, after the fact, and it is my contention that there are instances in which its production has been ethically fraught.

Fiction sold as truth:

Concentrating on the importance of the message rather than balance and ethical precision, autoethnography has produced work without ethical rigour by hiding behind the arguments of what is 'truth'; the reiterated importance of autoethnography to begin a conversation, to give voice to the voiceless (Denzin 2014); and 'rather than [have] a preoccupation with accuracy, the goal is to produce analytical, accessible texts that change us and the world we live in for the better' (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2010; also see Holman 2005).

Carolyn Ellis is praised for her reflexivity, building her work on a foundation of an ethics of care (Pelias 2008; see also Noddings 1984; Gilligan 1982). Ethics of care entails that researchers account for the repercussions and consequence of their work on themselves, the people within their stories, and even the readership. Ellis establishes what is called meta-autoethnography, a reflexive practice of creating an autoethnography of previous autoethnographic work, allowing the researcher to ask questions she did not ask originally (2009a: 13). Commonly, autoethnography, and Ellis particularly, discuss the importance of reflexivity in one's work, also encouraging other researchers and students to reflect on ethical implications of their

research and writing prior to proceeding with their study (Ellis 2004; Ellis 2009a; Ellis and Bochner 2000). However, despite the push for review of the self in research, ethical implications in autoethnography begin with the original text, its collation and its writing. Simply put, I believe that suggesting a review of ethics *after-the-fact* as rigorous ethical practice, despite producing potentially unethical work, is unscrupulous.

In her process of writing about her former partner Gene Weinstein in *Final Negotiations: A Story of Love, Loss, and Chronic Illness* (1995), Ellis notes the reconstruction of conversations she *may* have had with Weinstein (Ellis 2009a: 106) unrecorded, and relying on memory for authenticity. Reconstructions of conversations is a common occurrence in creative writing and autobiography, however this technique becomes problematic in two ways:

1. When the author distinctly notes that these conversations only *may* have occurred (Ellis 2009a: 106), and particularly notes this fact in other works only − in the reflexive or reviewing works − not in the original publication in which these reconstructed conversations were written. The overall problematic position of this is that the conversations in question may not have happened at all, or may not have happened with Weinstein, and may be complete constructs within the author's mind;
2. When the reconstructed conversations are not noted as reconstructed conversations (Ellis and Bochner 2000) within the work, leaving the responsibility of deciphering if this is a true account, or a reconstructed account to the reader; shifting the onus of authentication onto the audience, rather than the autoethnographer.

Composite events, and splitting characters:

The second issue in the ethics of autoethnography is its position in utilising composite events in its writing. As Ellis writes: 'You might collapse events to write a more engaging story, which might be more truthful in a narrative sense, though not a historical one' (Ellis and Bochner 2000: 753). Despite autoethnography's stance on the idea − as suggested by Denzin (2014) that all writing is fictional at its core − autoethnographers are content with making an argument for a truth when arguing for their position in utilising composite events within their autoethnographies.

As autoethnographic method and writing is borrowed within the practice of memoir, autobiography, and biographic texts, ethically these texts are bound to use disclaimers notifying the readership of any conflation, compression, creation of composite events, or other anomalies, such as recreation of dialogue. As the amalgamation of memoir, autobiography, biography, and ethnography, autoethnography must value the ethics of these practices in its research and output.

Famously, Australian journalist and writer, Helen Garner, faced criticism for fictionalising a component of what was published as a non-fictional account of female students facing sexual harassment at the hands of a master at Ormond College, University of Melbourne, in 1992. Within the book, titled *The First Stone* (Garner 1995), Garner allegedly split one of the characters in up to nine separate individuals

(Halligan 1998). Following the backlash, within the reprints of the first, and following editions of *The First Stone*, Garner utilised a disclaimer noting:

> …I soon encountered obstacles to my research which forced me, ultimately to write a broader, less 'objective', more personal book. They also obliged me to raise the story on to a level where, instead of its being just an incident specific to one institution at one historical moment, its archetypal features have become visible. This is why I have felt free to invent names for all the characters (Garner 1995: III Author's Note).

Garner's case study underlines the incongruity of holding a non-fictional account to a scrutiny which autoethnographic work would not face despite its own anomalies.

As we are currently looking at the creative tenet of autoethnography, the argument leans toward the stipulation that autoethnographers must, like writers producing autoethnographic biographies, memoir, and non-fiction writing, utilise disclaimers (Current 1986: 77, 82; for examples, see Holden 2006; Garner 1995 [1st edition reprint]). However, this must be looked at from two points-of-view:

1. As autoethnographic method and writing is a social science, it should not find itself in a place requiring the need of any disclaimers, or author's notes, as no conflations, compressions, creations of composite events, or other anomalies, such as the recreation of dialogue, should be made;
2. Academics who work in the field of autoethnography, however also produce memoirs, such as Ellis' *Final Negotiations*, absolutely must employ disclaimers within their work to outline directly that conflations, compressions, creations of composite events, or other anomalies, such as the recreation of dialogue, have been made within the creative text – much like what is expected from biographers, and autobiographers.

Public interest test:

The third issue in autoethnography's ethics is its reproduction of events or dialogue, which do not meet the public interest test. Within the Fourth Estate, the public interest test is implemented when weighing the factors in favour of disclosing information against the public interest factors against disclosure of information. This test is an ethical step implemented to ensure that information disclosed has a specific reason for its disclosure: without this fact, the story is not complete for the public, or readership; a public may be interested in something, however this does not suggest that the information is in the public interest.

Ellis' *Final Negotiations: A Story of Love, Loss, and Chronic Illness*, is a text which intersects narrative with autobiography 'bringing social science closer to literature' (Ellis 1995: 3–4). The intersection of journalism and literature as genre is overt in creative non-fiction and literary journalism, with its roots firmly in the New Journalism; this blend professes that autoethnographic writing should be bound by the same ethical principles as all non-fiction literature.

Ellis omits the public interest test within her 1995 work by presenting what I see as a gratuitous account of Gene Weinstein (sociologist and Ellis' partner) and his battle with emphysema, from which he died in 1985. She writes:

> One night in a campground a pill lodges in his lungs when he swallows. For hours, Gene crouches on his hands and knees in the camper trying to cough it up. When he defecates from the efforts, I calmly collect his faeces in a paper bag (Ellis 1995: 32).

This unwarranted recount of events is problematic as it reveals an intimate detail of a personal experience within the private life of Weinstein following his passing in 1985. He has no input into the ethic of including this intimate personal detail – he cannot give consent.

The above passage is succeeded by content that, it may be argued, can only make sense with the gratuity of the previous passage:

> Is this real? I am numb, but give him encouragement, and then suggest going to hospital…I am immersed in a bathtub of whipped cream, but it is turning to liquid, as it eventually must, and I will drown (Ellis 1995: 32).

However, this quote underlines a dilemma in stating that the aforementioned anecdote was either gratuitous, or not for Ellis to write, as it begs the questions if this is *her* story, or *Weinstein's* story. Eakin's work argues that we are all relational beings, and as such the other's story is our story, and our story is the other's story (Eakin 1998).

On writing about vulnerable subjects Couser notes: 'Life writing is far too complex and variable to be subjected to a set of abstract, unvarying, and presumably universal principles' (Couser 2004: 33). Different cases may require revision, or invocation of the ethics of care – which is proposed normally within autoethnography. And in this instance, it is important to re-underline that *Final Negotiations* is marketed as a memoir, not an academic text, however also a text that intersects narrative with autobiography 'bringing social science closer to literature' (Ellis 1995: 3–4).

To reiterate, the above is an ethical dilemma which leaves the writer with a decision for or against inclusion of content:

1. If the text is looked at from the perspective of academic writing, in Ellis' case, her autoethnography supports the latter of the choices. The recount results in being unwarranted due to Ellis conclusively outlining the hardship and trauma of Weinstein's experience with emphysema in great detail throughout the 1995 text – the first three chapters, and the book's introduction 'Part 1, Beginning', include mentions of Weinstein's illness in more than 33 separate pages.[1] Ellis' commitment to description and detail within her writing, as such, has made unnecessary the recounting of the aforementioned private moment: it does not provide any new or important information to the reader; it is not in the public's interest. Furthermore, this recount of events places Ellis in a precarious position as she never affords, and was not able to afford, Weinstein an opportunity to consent to these inclusions. This is important as Ellis has previously written of the crucial nature of 'relational concerns' (Ellis 2007; Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2010) when conducting autoethnographic writing, and the obligation of:

   > …autoethnographers to show their work to others implicated in or by their texts, allowing these others to respond, and/or acknowledging how these others feel about what is being written about them and allowing them to talk back to how they have been represented in the text (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2010).

2. If the text is analysed as memoir only, the question of whom this story belongs to arises, and it is overtly *also* Ellis' story, and the anecdote is important in order to strongly outline her emotions during this portion of her life experience:

> "Is this real? I am numb, but give him encouragement, and then suggest going to hospital…I am immersed in a bathtub of whipped cream, but it is turning to liquid, as it eventually must, and I will drown" (Ellis 1995: 32).

On memory, and hiding behind the 'truth' argument

It is important to understand autoethnography's arguments on memory and the idea of truth. Bochner writes: 'There is no fixed truth of the past to which we can gain access; everything we say and mean and make of the past is a form of revision' (A. P. Bochner 2007, 206). As Ellis' work underlines the crucial importance of revision in our work (see Ellis 2009a: 354), this notion plays directly and fairly with the idea of no absolute truth. Therefore, for an autoethnographer working with dialogue from the past (if said dialogue is not memorialised in verbatim field notes or transcripts or recordings) – specifically if acknowledging that conversations only *may* have occurred – it is then right to point to the notion that, in fact, these conversations cannot be published without clarification to the reader and to academia as being reconstructed, and potentially not occurring at all. If the latter, it begs the question of how an academic can ethically include fictional conversation in their research for the purpose of making their case or thesis stronger, or more relevant.

One way autoethnographers rebut their critics is by utilising the argument of 'truth', and particularly the overall absence of a true 'truth' in lives, and in research. Overall experience is 'discursively constructed' (Denzin 2014: 2) and for us 'to argue for a factually correct picture of a 'real' person is to ignore how persons are created in performances' (Denzin 2014: 13). Furthermore, we come across the roadblock of language as unable to reconstruct the past, and thus only 'create representations of experience' (Denzin 2014: 37).

Denzin's clear narrative underlines the realities of sourcing a true 'truth'. However, autoethnography's use of this argument devalues it, as the promoted ethical responsibilities of the likes of Ellis' (composite events, and use of conversations which may have not occurred) miss the idea of fleeting memory and truth, as they obviously know, and choose to leave this undisclosed in the original text. This particularly underlines autoethnography's obsession with the 'message' or main tenet of the text, and lets it overshadow the balance and 'truth' experienced by the author in a corporeal, rather than a metaphysical sense.

Autoethnography from an ethical journalistic perspective

Autoethnography needs a shift within its ethical approach. Despite autoethnography's insistence on reflexivity, or meta-autoethnography, following the production of an autoethnographic work, autoethnographers must produce ethical work consistently, and not wholly rely on personal reflection following publication. This is inclusive of

the truth argument, hence, if truth is not possible, we must *at least* strive for accuracy (Ettema and Glasser 1998: 156), and the ethical codes and guidelines, which stringently underline this, are those of social science, *and* journalism. As such, creative non-fiction writers who do utilise autoethnographic methods must apply a journalistic code of practice to their writing and research, which is more rigorous than the model (or lack thereof) presented by autoethnography.

Autoethnographic journalism can be synonymous with some literary journalism, and if journalism adopts the practice of autoethnography within its methods, it must continually use the ethical guidelines of journalistic practice.[2] Practicing journalists who have utilised autoethnographic practice within their work (see Joseph 2013; Didion 2005) apply a professional practice code to guide their work. Therefore, this poses the question of how autoethnographers can produce content which would be seen as unethical in another literary practice, outside academia.

As noted above, Ellis*' Final Negotiations: A Story of Love, Loss, and Chronic Illness*, is a work which omits the public interest test, if looking at the work from an ethical journalistic perspective, or from an academic perspective, by presenting what I am calling a gratuitous account of Gene Weinstein and his battle with emphysema. In the two arguments noted previously, it is again important to reiterate the notion of relational selves, and that Weinstein's story is, in fact, also part of Ellis' story. However, I propose that autoethnography follows an additional level of ethical guidance – that being the journalistic guidelines and ethics, in which 'only substantial advancement of the public interest or risk of substantial harm to people allows any [ethical] standard to be overridden' (Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance 1999). In this case, no substantial progress in public interest is presented if looking at the story from the perspective of Weinstein, however a substantial progress is created when acknowledging the importance of this anecdote in terms of better understanding Ellis' own experience.

If autoethnography maintains its current ethical practice of allowing composite events; reproducing dialogue from memory without providing a disclaimer to this fact from the beginning of the piece; producing conversations which the author is not sure really happened; producing work which places others in precarious positions without need, and without producing any advancement of the public interest or knowledge, it places the practice in a niche without rigour. Furthermore, this presents the field of autoethnography as one which does not need to justify itself and its actions based on any ethical guidelines, despite the European Commission's Basic Principles of Research Ethics stating that ethnographic and anthropological research guidelines are underlined by ethical principles including 'protecting [the] dignity of all research participants…Nor should [the researcher] knowingly misrepresent (i.e., fabricate evidence, falsify, plagiarize)' (Iphofen 2013).[3]

If staying with the current practices of autoethnography, the room for fictionalising and omission of fact places a hole in the practice so wide that writers of literary non-fiction disciplines who face criticism, as will be discussed below, can simply state that they approach their work with an autoethnographic lens. Presently, autoethnographic standard leaves too much room for fictional, and unethical content. All ethnographic

research provides a main tenet, or meaning – much like journalistic work. However to indirectly argue for lapses in ethical practice – as is the case in producing work with collapsed events for the purpose of manufacturing more engaging content, albeit content which is not truthful in a historical sense (Carolyn Ellis and Bochner 2000: 753) – is problematic. This is due to the supposition that the 'truth', as it occurred, does not produce the meaning or purpose or theory which the researcher is aiming to establish, and therefore modifies the autoethnographic story to produce the desired meaning. This is a move that goes against the purpose of research, entirely.

The arguments against the need for accuracy within autoethnographic research are that autoethnography's goal is to produce texts which are accessible and analytical, and positively modify us and the world we live in (Holman 2005: 764; Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2010). Following this proposal, autoethnography becomes more literature than social science. Further, it underlines Yang's claim that autoethnography is sentimental, not scientific, when he asserts that he prefers to be called a scientist, not a sentimentalist (Yang 1972; Hayano 1979).

How to abuse autoethnography

This section outlines how the uncertainty and rigour in definition and practice of autoethnography, and its oversight of ethical guidelines, can allow unethical writing to brand itself as autoethnography for the purpose of credibility.

Background:

In 2006, Penguin published *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace...One School at a Time* – original title: *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Fight Terrorism and Build Nations...One School at a Time* – a text co-authored by David Oliver Relin and Greg Mortenson. Published as a non fiction, biographical work of Mortenson's philanthropy, the account is written in third person and utilises autoethnography in its writing,[4] including the unethical practice of creating composite events, a method previously utilised within autoethnography, as discussed earlier.

Marshall describes *Three Cups of Tea* as 'a riveting account of how a failed K2 attempt serendipitously sparked a remarkably successful program building schools for girls in Pakistan and Afghanistan's most desolate regions' (Marshall 2006), and following its release, the text remained on the *New York Times'* nonfiction bestsellers list for four consecutive years. However author and investigative journalist, Jon Krakauer, told a CBS *60 Minutes* investigation that *Three Cups of Tea* is 'a beautiful story, and it's a lie'.[5]

The investigation argued that numerous claims made in *Three Cups of Tea*, and within its sequel – also a *New York Times'* bestseller – *Stones into Schools: Promoting Peace with Books, Not Bombs, in Afghanistan and Pakistan,[6]* are not true. The disputes, both in *60 Minutes*, and through Krakauer's investigative journalism in *Three Cups of Deceit: How Greg Mortenson, Humanitarian Hero, Lost His Way* (Krakauer 2011)*,[7]* include Mortenson's claim that he became lost near K2, Pakistan, the world's second highest mountain, stumbling into Korphe village where locals took him into their community; in 1996 Mortenson was captured by the Taliban (Moreau

and Yousafzai 2011) outlines Mortenson's use of Central Asia Institute funds for personal expenses, including in the promotion of Mortenson's books, and places doubt on the number of school facilities built and maintained by the Central Asia Institute, an international non-profit organisation co-founded by Greg Mortenson.

Following *60 Minutes* and Krakauer incriminating Mortenson for both misusing CAI donations for personal benefit and fabricating parts of his story, Mortenson's co-author, then 49-year-old David Oliver Relin, committed suicide.[8]

In 2014, Mortenson admitted to compressing and omitting content of his story (Sieff 2014). Specifically, Mortenson conceded to the *composite* event created out of his stay in Korphe village – an event to which he has devoted almost one third of the book (Krakauer 2011: 6) – in which he suggested that the village locals took him into their community, where he settled into a routine, alluding to a protracted stay of recuperation within the village:

> From his base in Haji Ali's home, Mortenson settled into a routine. Each morning and afternoon he would walk briefly about Korphe, accompanied, always, by children tugging at his hands (Mortenson and Relin 2006: 29).

In an interview with *The Washington Post's* Kevin Sieff, Mortenson admitted to an initial stay in Korphe of only a few hours, noting that 'his relationships with the villagers…developed in subsequent visits. It was obviously a lie…I stand by the story, but there were compressions and omissions' (Sieff 2014).

The criticism fairly aimed at *Three Cups of Tea* for its unethical, and fabricated depictions, including composite structures, highlights the dichotomy of criticising one autoethnographic text for these anomalies (due to its publication as a non-fiction text), while not criticising an autoethnographic text produced as research. This issue is visible in Ellis' *The Ethnographic I* (Carolyn Ellis 2004), a methodological text about autoethnography, and a text which openly created composite characters (Ellis 2004: xiii), despite being a text of social science:

> From the very first page, she pulls readers into her fictional graduate classroom of diverse students who are mostly composite characters with attributes similar to students she has taught (Maguire 2006).

Ellis conveys to the reader that some of the scenes within *The Ethnographic I* are fabricated, and that some characters are composite creations, something Goode dubs as an informal pact with the reader: 'If the author fictionalizes some of it, he or she has an obligation to tip off the reader to that fact' (Goode 2006: 263). Goode fairly notes that 'not all writers (memoirists, for instance) have been as considerate' (Goode 2006: 262) in notifying their readerships of fictionalisation, or fabrication within their work, however as a work of social science, Ellis' *The Ethnographic I* must be judged in terms of the standards of social science. Furthermore, if works such as *Three Cups of Tea* faces fair criticism for its fabrications, albeit deceptive ones, how can an ethnographic, methodological text employ fiction within its writing.

In her 2007 journal article, *Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives: Relational Ethics in Research With Intimate Others* (Ellis 2007), Ellis focuses on relational ethics concerning research conducted with intimate others (Ellis 2007: 3). In her work with

students, she tells them to always 'seek the good' (Ellis 2007: 23) in terms of the ethical decisions they make in their research, 'to think of the greater good of their research' (ibid p.24), while also warning them 'that they should be cautious that their definition of *greater good* isn't one created for their own good' (Ellis 2007: 24). Ellis then goes on to justify the creation of composite characters, and fictionalising plot, in order to write ethical research:

> Then, I warn: Now you must deal with the ethics of what to tell. Don't worry. We'll figure out how to write this ethically. There are strategies to try. You might *omit* things, use pseudonyms or *composite* characters, *alter* the plot or scene, position your story within the stories of others, *occasionally decide to write fiction*. Sometimes it may be appropriate to write and not publish (Ellis 2007: 24, emphases added).

The American Sociological Association's (ASA) Code of Ethics, a document that sets out the underlying principles and ethical standards for sociologists' professional responsibilities and conduct, outlines that 'sociologists conduct their affairs in ways that inspire trust and confidence; they *do not knowingly make statements that are false, misleading, or deceptive,*' ('ASA Code of Ethics' 1999, emphasis added). Furthermore, section *13.04 Reporting on Research* states that:

> (b) Sociologists do not fabricate data or falsify results in their publications or presentations.

> (c) In presenting their work, sociologists report their findings fully and do not omit relevant data. They report results whether they support or contradict the expected outcomes (American Sociological Association 1999: 17).

Ellis' justification seems to forgo these ethics for the purpose of creating ethical autoethnographic writing and research that is conducted with intimate others: trading ethics for ethics. This explanation echoes Ellis' stance that collapsing events in order to write a 'more engaging story, which might be more truthful in a narrative sense, though not a historical one' (Ellis and Bochner 2000: 753) is justifiable within autoethnography. While not *deceptive*, altering a plot or scene, or creating composite characters or events, places this information into a false light, removing trust and confidence in the information.

In her paper on confidentiality in qualitative research (Kaiser 2009), Kaiser notes that Hopkins creates wholly new characters and scenes from composites of people and events (Hopkins 1993), albeit unlike the use of pseudonyms in order to deliver confidentiality to participants:

> …[C]hanging additional details to render data unidentifiable can alter or destroy the original meaning of the data. For example, in a study of work-family policies, removing or altering details of employer size, industry, policies, and family structure might protect individual and employer identities, but these changes make the data useless for addressing the research questions at hand (McKeel, Mauthner, and Maclean 2000; Parry and Mauthner 2004).

Accordingly, Kaiser writes:

> Readers are typically unaware of how data has been altered and therefore unable to consider the significance of changes for their interpretations of the data or for the validity of the data (Kaiser 2009: 1636).

Kaiser's note on the reader's unawareness of how the data has been altered is important, as the passage may suggest and potentially allow for changes in data to occur *if* the reader is notified of such an anomaly by the researcher.

Three Cups of Tea, an autoethnography:

This section builds on the evidence that 'increasingly, ethnography is autobiographical and autobiography reflects cultural and social frames of reference' (Reed-Danahay 1997: 9). Additionally, this underlines the characterisation of autoethnography as a text merging ethnography and autobiography (Denzin 1989), and one that intersects autobiography with narrative, in order to slot the book *Three Cups of Tea* into the niche of autoethnographic text.

In 1995, John Van Maanen proposes four types of alternatives to ethnographic realism, including:

1. Confessional ethnography, in which the attention is placed on the writer/author/ethnographer, rather than on the native;
2. Dramatic ethnography;
3. Critical ethnography; and
4. Self/autoethnography, in which the writer, or author, is the native within the ethnography (Van Maanen 1995; Reed-Danahay 1997).

In *Three Cups of Tea*, both alternatives, the confessional ethnography, and the autoethnography (points 1 and 4, above) are employed, in which Mortenson is the native (autoethnography), with attention placed on the writer (confessional ethnography). Further highlighting *Three Cups of Tea* as autoethnography, and Mortenson as autoethnographer, is Hayano's description of a second major type of autoethnography. This is a type of autoethnography which occurs when the individuals become socialised 'after indoctrination, into a specific group or role-type with some specialised knowledge or way of life'; it is an autoethnography 'written by researchers who have acquired an intimate familiarity with certain subcultural, recreational, or occupational groups' (Hayano 1979: 100).

Despite Mortenson's transgressions within his literary works, he does have a long history of philanthropy and work within Pakistan and Afghanistan, one that spans more than two decades. Additionally, with Mortenson's expertise and familiarity of Afghanistan, the US military and its commanders seek his knowledge in dealing with Afghan elders (Bumiller 2010). Through this, Mortenson becomes a researcher who possesses 'the qualities of often permanent self-identification with a group and full internal membership, as recognized both by themselves and the people of whom they are part' (Hayano 1979: 100). Creating further basis for Mortenson as autoethnographer is the assertion that autoethnography does not need to be conducted by a social scientist, or researcher, as pointed out by Reed-Danahay (Reed-Danahay 1997), and can be explored by an anthropologist, a non-anthropologist, an

ethnographer, and an 'autobiographer who places the story of his or her life within the story of the social context in which it occurs' (Reed-Danahay 1997: 9).

Mortenson's work in *Three Cups of Tea* is clearly a representation of unethical writing practices, some of which, however, are accepted as ethical by autoethnographers. Therefore, despite the backlash toward his fabrications and compressions, if Mortenson's work is to be classified as autoethnographic research and output, this same work is acceptable in the eyes of autoethnographers. This is particularly problematic when researchers and thus the academe accept work that is otherwise unethical to the eyes outside of the academy, as strong and succinct research practice.

Conclusion

This paper set out to critically evaluate autoethnography's specific ways of truth reproduction by looking at the alternative ethnography both as method and text from an ethical journalistic perspective.

This review challenged autoethnography's ethical positioning, including its use of composite events, and its reproductions of conversations which aim to produce a text more reliant on meaning rather than accuracy, as such undermining balanced or accurate reproductions of historical occurrences. Through a journalistic lens, autoethnography's ethical issues are discussed in conjunction with a dialogue on balance and truth, paying attention to fictitious accounts of factual events, and adjudicating autoethnography under the principles of journalistic ethics.

Autoethnography presents instances of a lapse in ethics, which may be seen to undermine the practice of autoethnography itself. Ethics must be stringent, and strive toward a universal application where applicable. If not, then the definition of autoethnography and autoethnographer may become too uncertain and too complicated as a branch of social science, moving it further away from research, and closer into a creative, literary practice.

Endnotes

[1] For examples, see Ellis 1995, pp.3, 8, 10, 16, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 29, 30, 31, 32, 36, 38, 45, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65

[2] For US ethical code, see 'Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics' 2014; for Australian ethical code, see 'Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance - Journalists' Code of Ethics' 1999.

[3] For primary guides for ethnographers see 'Principles of Professional Responsibility' 2012 (American Anthropological Association 2012); 'Statement of Ethics and Professional Responsibilities' (Society for Applied Anthropology).

[4] For examples of autoethnographic voices, see Joseph 2013; Joseph 2009.

[5] April 17th, 2011 interview with Steve Kroft.

[6] Memoir published by Viking Press in 2009.

[7] Published by Anchor Books.

[8] On November 15th, 2012.

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