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Caught With a Fake ID

Ethical Questions About *Slippage* in Autoethnography

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Autoethnographers strive to present *truthful* accounts, the essence of their experience, rather than the Truth or an objective account. There is mindful slippage between Truth and truthful. The author reflects on the emotional consequences of getting “lost” in the slippage of a former partner’s autoethnographic writing and contemplates the ethical questions that should be confronted about slippage when making decisions about what to leave in and/or what to leave out. An ethic of accountability for autoethnographic writing is outlined.

Keywords: *autoethnography; ethics; fake ID*

I know the difference between Truth and truthfulness; I knew about this distinction long before I knew it as “the difference between Truth and truthfulness.” Autoethnographic scholars know that writing the Truth, or the objective account of *reality*, is not possible. Instead, as Goodall (as cited in Pelias, 1999) posited, we experience “multiple *copresent* realities” (p. x). Our goal as autoethnographers then becomes to “extract meaning from experience rather than to depict experience exactly as it was lived” (Bochner, 2000, p. 270). There is slippage between Truth (or our experience of reality) and truthfulness because sometimes it seems appropriate—even necessary—to abbreviate, edit, or otherwise modify our life stories in our writing. Maybe we do not remember the exact words that were spoken or the background details seem irrelevant, or maybe we are honoring someone’s request not to be included in our writing. The difference between what we know (or what we cannot remember) and what we write is *mindful* slippage.

Until recently, I did not read this type of slippage as the basis for a methodological, ethical conundrum. I have been a part of enough conversations about autoethnography to trust that critical self-reflexivity and commitment to ethical representation is part and parcel of autoethnographic writing. I trusted that slippage was *mindful*, an obvious methodological

concern for all autoethnographers, and I assumed that autoethnographers reflected on the potential consequences of what gets purposely lost in the retelling. Besides, I had experience “doing” the mindful slippage between Truth and truthfulness—look no further than my driver’s license.

* * *

“Okay be honest, 125 pounds or 128 pounds?” I displayed myself approximately 10 feet before my mother. She hesitated for a moment, probably gauging how much honesty I actually wanted. “Go with 128.” *Damn! I thought I could pass for 125.*

I was newly 16, and we were about to embark on our trip to the Department of Motor Vehicles for my driving test. If all went well, I would soon be posing for my driver’s license picture.

“Mom, what color are my eyes?” An obvious question for some, but for me it never was. They changed color with each passing year, with each change of clothes, never fitting into the usual brown, blue, green categories.

“Geez, Krissy, I don’t know . . . blue?” Her eyes were blue, and indeed sometimes mine were too. My birth certificate said blue. “Okay, blue,” I repeated, happy to have an answer, even if I was not convinced it was accurate. However, I was less concerned with accuracy and more concerned that I would look stupid in front of the DMV employee if I did not know the color of my own eyes.

I didn’t ask what hair color to put down because my hair had always been blonde; I was the blonde and my sister was the brunette. Well, I used to be the blonde. With each passing year, my hair darkened—as blonde hair often does—until it had become a seasonal thing, coming and going with summer vacation. But that summer I had been lying on the sofa with mono; no sun had touched my hair.

Fresh from passing my driving examination, I confidently responded to the DMV employee’s questions: 128 pounds . . . blue eyes . . . blonde hair. My picture showed a 133 to 135 pound young woman with long brown hair and eyes that bordered on gray/green. Looking carefully at my license, which I often did at that time, I remember thinking that someone would have a hard time finding me if they went by the listed description.

When I went to renew my license for the first time at 21, I changed my eye color to hazel. I didn’t know what color “hazel” was, but I knew that it was probably more accurate than blue; my eyes were definitely *not* blue. “Any other changes?” she asked. “No other changes,” I responded firmly. I still didn’t weigh 128, but thanks to highlights, the blonde part was more accurate at 21 than it had been at 16.

* * *

From the beginning of my autoethnographic journey, I felt very confident in the distinction between Truth and truthfulness and in my ability to mindfully reflect on the slippage. I assumed that other autoethnographers grappled with the same issues, regardless of the specific nature of their writing. Yes, I felt very confident in this distinction, in my position as an autoethnographer in the academy, and in the future of autoethnography as a method of inquiry. That is, I felt very confident until I got lost. Until *I* got lost in the slippage between Truth and truthfulness.

... *four year monogamous relationship* ...

A **WHAT????!!! Are you kidding me?!** Only one paragraph into reading the latest draft of an autoethnographic essay coauthored by two colleagues, and I didn't know whether to laugh or cry, scream or throw up. I knew whose voice was whose—a reader who knows both authors tends to know—and I knew without a doubt that *monogamous*, defined by *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (n.d.) as “the condition or practice of having a single mate during a period of time,” was no way to describe that particular author's relationship.

Oh the irony. ... In the stack of papers at my side was the latest draft of the autoethnographic piece I am working on, an essay that details, in part, my *brief relationship with Mr. Monogamous, who had described his now-termed “monogamous” relationship as an “on again, off again thing” that was “off again.”* Our relationship was brief but intense; it seemed brimming with possibility. Because *we were colleagues*, we easily determined that being discreet about our relationship was the best approach. I viewed our discreetness as temporary, something that would no longer be necessary if and when we determined that we had “staying power.” When our relationship ended abruptly before that time, I was relieved that we had not “gone public”; dealing with emotional hardship in the midst of the rumor mill would not have made things any easier.

So, no one knew about our relationship when it was happening and no one knows now, but *we did happen*, and as I read *monogamous* in his writing, the *discrepancy between our definitions of discreet* becomes apparent. If he had been monogamous with someone else during our relationship, then our discretion reads more like an *indiscretion*, a clandestine affair, a hush-hush-if-no-one-finds-out-it-didn't-happen sort of thing. *I am lost in monogamous* and I am lonely in this slippage, speaking only for myself. I am not loud, not proud. *I am diminished, silenced, erased.*

I know from many discussions about autoethnographic writing that *multiple perspectives of a series of events are not only possible but expected in the retelling because each author writes from his or her subjective position.*

But this is ridiculous. . . . I read and reread the first paragraph, but I keep coming back to *four year monogamous relationship*. I am lost in the slip-page of *monogamous*; I disappear. I determine that I need to talk to him, let him know that I read the draft, and ask him to remove that word and erase my erasure. I would be fine if he wrote that he was in a *relationship*—a “relationship” could have an on again, off again nature—but a “four year monogamous relationship” excludes the possibility that occasionally you’ve been “off again” and dated other people. He denied me, denied *us*, on paper, but he couldn’t deny us face-to-face, *right*? I contemplated how difficult the conversation would be and how much I dreaded initiating a conversation when I had become so adept at avoiding them. I practiced how it would go. *You don’t have to write about us, just don’t deny us. I’m not asking you to revise the whole paper; just take out that one word. He has no right to claim that identity, but other than me who would know? Who would challenge?*

* * *

I was 19 and a junior in college when I got my fake ID. Because I would not turn 21 until after I graduated, the common underage desire to find a “good fake” was exacerbated for me, given that all of my friends were able to go to the “21 and up” bars. The fake IDs that were actually made to look real were a bad idea, we all knew that; those could get you in *real* trouble. However, if you were caught using someone else’s ID, they might take it from you, but usually that was it. One friend had been scouting around to find someone who looked like me for at least a year when she reported that she found “the one.” “Her name is Emily and she has big eyes like you do.” I never thought I had big eyes but, oh well, I didn’t care. As “Emily” I could go straight to the bar without stopping off at the bathroom to scrub the stupid stamp off my hand. I knew that was risky every time I did it, and I was growing tired of feeling so paranoid when I went out.

I loved being Emily, and I was good at it. I knew everything about Emily: her height, weight, address, social security number, horoscope sign (a trick question bouncer’s often asked when checking IDs). No one doubted my Emily performance. Well . . . that’s not entirely true. Some bouncers doubted—it was obvious in their skeptical expressions—but they did not *question* my performance. With a wink and a smile they would let me in anyway because a busy bar is a profitable bar. I “retired” Emily’s ID on my 21st birthday with an unquestioned record.

Being Emily offered me access that I did not have when I was *being* myself. Of course, I knew it was illegal, but I felt that I had ample validation for using Emily’s ID. Plus, I didn’t know anyone close to me who had gotten

into trouble for using one; it seemed safe. *I'm as mature as my 21-year-old friends, as responsible (or irresponsible) as my 21-year-old friends. . . . I'm even the same year in school as my 21-year-old friends, for heaven's sake. I deserve to drink like my 21-year-old friends.* But, of course, I was not 21. Regardless of how well I played Emily or how justified I thought I was in that performance, no judge would agree that I had ample validation for using her ID. Drinking underage was, and is, illegal.

* * *

When I reread the essay with less anger in my eyes, I am able to absorb more of the overall argument. I think of my impending request for him to take out the word *monogamous* and I ponder. . . . Good autoethnographic writers don't throw around details haphazardly. Good autoethnographers are ethical, critical, reflexive, and thoughtful when making decisions in their writing. Is he a "good" autoethnographer? How does this detail function in his narrative? How does positioning himself as a monogamous partner help him? In what way does this identity function as a "fake ID" into the argument he wishes to make? When he contemplates issues of fluid sexuality from his position within a monogamous relationship, he juxtaposes the dynamic with the static. This is a crucial tension in his narrative, even if it is not the central tension. If he cannot use this tension—if he claims a fluid sexual identity *and* a fluid approach to partners—is his contribution less credible, less compelling, and possibly, less necessary in a coauthored piece? Monogamy enables him, even if it does not become him.

I imagine his self-reflexivity as he typed the word that erased me and the time we spent together. I imagine him considering the slippage like a good autoethnographic writer should. Did he think, *We're not together anymore and I'm monogamous now, so what does it matter?* Or maybe he believed that the size of this slippage, just one person wide, made it "more OK." Maybe he thought that if we were his only exception to monogamy—an answer I do not know—it was insignificant on the whole. Or maybe he sincerely weighed the consequences and came down on the side of protecting her instead of me because he is committed to her now and bringing up our past could compromise their future.

Maybe he just figured I would not read the essay. Although the draft had fallen into my lap by chance, eventually it would likely be published. So although I got an earlier read than I might have otherwise, I would have had the opportunity to read it at some point given that I am in the academic

environment, which begs the issue of *access*. I am actually privy to my erasure, but so many of the people about whom we write in our autoethnographies are uninformed. Our brothers and sisters, our partners and friends, many will not have the opportunity to read our work unless we facilitate that process, because we often publish in academic journals and texts. Yes, the essay makes me feel erased, but I do have a voice here.

As I consider the politics and consequences of autoethnographic writing, I must also contemplate how his narrative of erasure and denial affects my ability to continue writing about my experience of being in a relationship that meant something to me, even if it was brief. Although our respective essays have far different goals, there is slippage. Few will know the nature of this slippage—some may not care—but for me it is a vast discrepancy. In the slippage between our writing there are competing narratives, not multiple perspectives or copresent realities; *monogamous* is not equivocal.

The conversation about editing I had planned to initiate with him now seems more complicated because the issue is not as simple as the removal of one word, although that would help; the issue is really about ethics and choices, and the rationale by which we justify those choices. If I did approach him, would he explain that he cannot take out *monogamous* at that late stage in the draft process without “outing” us? Or maybe he would be spiteful and say that if he could do it over again he would have been monogamous because being with me did not really change anything anyway? These words would bring up old hurt, but they would not change the reality that he *was* with me, which means he had *not* been a long-term monogamous partner to someone else. If I do not question this slippage, knowing that dishonesty is being used to further an argument, how am I complicit in my own erasure and oppression? Am I merely winking and nodding him by with his fake ID, even as it diminishes my selfhood, just because I want to encourage more autoethnographic writing?

The ways in which women and other marginalized groups are complicit in their own domination are well documented in feminist theories and scholarship. Women and other marginalized groups are expected to subordinate their own needs to those of the dominant group. Terming this the *ideology of domination*, hooks (as cited in Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 2002) explained that domination is maintained by the oppressors as well as “all the rest of us who internalize and enforce the values of this regime” (p. 271). The hesitancy with which I began this article testifies to the ways that I have come to intimately know this oppression. Pushing down my feelings of denial and

erasure, I forced myself to consider the greater readership that my former partner's essay may reach if I say nothing. Could someone who is *not* lost in the slippage read the essay, which will likely be presented and/or published, and be moved in a powerful, important way? Could it still have the power to speak beyond itself and further an important conversation about sexual identity? And if it could provide some benefit to "the whole," does that provide adequate justification for my erasure? My feminist politics resist my initial attempt to favor "the whole" at the expense of my selfhood. At 19, when I *felt* like a 21-year-old and I had the ID of a 21-year-old, was it *OK* for me to use that ID to get into bars? No, it was illegal, no matter how justified I thought I was. If only the "laws"—the rights and the wrongs—of the autoethnographic method were so clear.

An Ethic of Accountability

The issue of slippage in autoethnographic work, how we justify the slippage and how we justify ourselves and our decisions, would be a much easier issue for me to engage if I did not plan to spend my academic career doing autoethnographic scholarship. It would be easy to chalk this up to the *dangers* of autoethnographic work. But I do indeed plan to engage in autoethnographic work because I love autoethnographic writing. No other form of academic writing affects me so deeply or causes me to think so critically. Yet my love for autoethnographic writing does not prevent me from taking it to task; it is not a blind love.

Pelias (1999) noted that autoethnographic, or *poetic*, writing differs in nature from more traditional social science research because "the latter . . . marks that an event occurred; the former tells of its character" (p. x). What happens when authors purposefully alter/omit a relevant experience because the story that would be told about their character is not desirable? When writing autoethnographically, we are forced to hold a critical mirror to our lives, and sometimes looking in that mirror by candlelight is more flattering than looking into the mirror in broad daylight. In a discussion about autoethnography, Green (Flemons & Green, 2002) noted that it is an *outing process*. Green stated, "You have to decide if you're ready to be outed or to put yourself out in that way" (p. 93) and cautioned writers to consider the potential impact on personal identity and relationships.

Although we must certainly consider the ramifications of "outing" ourselves, what about those consequences that may come from "outing" others?

This issue is not confined to scholarly writing, as Sedaris (2004), a popular essayist, explained:

[My sister is] afraid to tell me anything important, knowing I'll only turn around and write about it. In my mind, I'm like a friendly junkman, building things from the little pieces of scrap I find here and there, but my family's started to see things differently. Their personal lives are the so-called pieces of scrap I so casually pick up, and they're sick of it. More and more often their stories begin with the line "You have to swear you will never repeat this." I always promise, but it's generally understood that my word means nothing. (p. 147)

Because Sedaris has experienced such wide acclaim with his books, which have appeared on *The New York Times* bestseller list, the consequences he experiences when "outing" his family are concrete. Unlike scholarly writers, Sedaris has no veil of assumed confidentiality with the readers about his subjects, because his readers, in the case of his family, are often his subjects.

But in the academic realm, where our subjects do not often have easy access to our work, do we still foreground accountability? Sedaris has experienced confrontations with disapproving family members because they know that they often appear in his wildly popular books; in contrast, I doubt my mother would seek out a subscription to *Qualitative Inquiry* on her own. Do we, as scholarly writers, approach our work differently because we write for outlets that do not have such wide and varied audiences? Would we be willing to write the exact same stories if we were expected to disclose the information to our subjects and confront their reactions, positive or not? I remember my mom telling me in junior high, when passing notes between classes was common, that I should not write anything in a note that I would not want on the front page of the newspaper. It did not take more than a few notes intercepted by teachers before I learned the lesson of accountability.

Upon contemplation, some authors determine that the consequences—to self and others—of being outed are too great, but the decision to write, or not to write, about certain experiences is a personal one. Some authors feel entitled to rhetorically alter their experience to reduce accountability. Although past actions and relationships cannot be erased in our lived experience, they can be easily erased electronically. In doing this, the autoethnographic method, where experience begets argument, is twisted

into revisionist history where argument begets—or at least revises—experience.

Criteria for how to evaluate autoethnographic writing are available, although they are not always consistent (see Bochner, 2000; Clough, 2000; Denzin, 2000; Ellis, 2000; Richardson, 2000a, 2000b). My concern here is not with the criteria by which we evaluate the end product but rather, the criteria by which we evaluate ourselves *as we write*. Polkinghorne (1991) stated, “We are not the authors of our self-stories, having the power to alter or neglect those life events of which we are ashamed about or about which we are guilty” (p. 146). However, in a very literal sense, the autoethnographic method allows us to do just that—to be the authors of our self-stories with the ability to alter life events. I wish to consider the methodological, ethical questions about writing and doing *mindful* slippage—the details we purposefully include and/or exclude—recognizing that some slippage happens automatically in the retelling. What ethical standard can we ascribe to when “telling the Truth” is not applicable? How carefully do we contemplate the potential consequences of mindful slippage?

At 16, I assumed that letting a few pounds get lost in translation between the Truth and truthfulness of my driver’s license would not hurt anyone. It seemed that way at the time, but I did not contemplate the potential consequences. I did not think about how I was setting myself up to perpetually consider “my ideal weight” to be 128 pounds, even though my body has not rested at that weight since I was 14. I did not think about how my actions reified a culture of thinness, which sanctions lying about one’s weight at the expense of learning to develop self-esteem about one’s actual size. I did not think of the long-term consequences I have waged against my self-esteem because I was too preoccupied thinking of the immediate consequences that might come from admitting my *real* weight publicly. *People will think I weigh too much—other girls my age surely weigh less . . . I should be thinner.*

Monogamous. I wonder what consequences—long and short term—he contemplated when he chose to portray a long-term monogamous identity. Did he consider the lasting effect on a former partner who is caused to feel shameful and guilty about a relationship that did not feel shameful or guilt inducing, even though it was not public? Our decision to be discreet was mutual; his decision to deny was not. Did he realize “that to disappear can disable, can render oneself empty, paralyzed” (Pelias, 1999, p. xi)? Did he consider how this rhetorical act would cause me to feel implicated in a “cover-up”? I doubt these consequences factored into his reflective process.

Like me as a self-conscious 16-year-old at the DMV, he probably did not attempt to see beyond the potential for immediate consequences: What would his partner say? His coauthor? Would his contribution still be relevant in the essay? I cannot help but wonder if/how he might have altered his narrative if he had assumed that I would be one of the first readers.

Sedaris (2004) provided insight about the measurement of accountability when he described taking his sister to a public reading of his work:

After finishing our coffees, Lisa and I drove to Greensboro, where I delivered my scheduled lecture. That is to say, I read stories about my family. After the reading, I answered questions about them, thinking all the while how odd it was that these strangers seemed to know so much about my brother and sisters. In order to sleep at night, I have to remove myself from the equation, pretending that the people I love expressly choose to expose themselves. . . . I'm not the conduit, but just a poor typist stuck in the middle. It's a delusion much harder to maintain when a family member is actually *in* the audience. (p. 150)

Although Sedaris detailed a situation that many—if not most—of us will not experience, I believe he revealed the **primary ethical standard to which we should ascribe: write as if our subjects are/will be in our audience. As we write, we should imagine our subjects sitting in the front row at our conference panels, reading our journal articles like newspapers on their morning commutes, or pouring over the pages of our academic texts before they go to bed at night. We should write as if our writing was accessible to all.**

If we shed the comforting veil of confidentiality that scholarly journals at times allow, we are forced to consider the possible consequences of our writing in a way that reflects a higher level of integrity toward our subjects—both named and unnamed—who are often made unknowingly vulnerable in our work. If we write with the real or imagined expectation of confrontation with our subjects, we can no longer “remove [ourselves] from the equation” so that we can rest easier or write more freely. As Sedaris (2004) indicated, these situations could be uncomfortable. Our subjects might disagree with our representation of shared experiences or they might question our decision to write about an experience in the first place, but we should be willing to confront these issues, even when avoiding them by quietly publishing our work in academic journals/texts is a viable alternative. We must hold ourselves to a high ethical standard so that we are fully accountable, not just responsible, for our writing.

In my quest to illuminate the sometimes problematic nature of mindful slippage and propose an ethic of accountability, I have posed more questions than answers because, quite simply, I do not know all the answers. Instead, I attempt to ask the questions of slippage, in writing and in doing, that have to this point in my experience gone unasked. Although the situation that brought this issue to the forefront for me was hurtful, I am grateful for the insight it allowed me and I know that my writing will benefit as a result. I am also grateful for the opportunity to respond to an academic issue—albeit a personal one—through an academic medium, because I imagine that many who are in my position (if they even know they are) do not have the same opportunity.

I write from a place of hurt, a place where I feel small, daunted by the work that I do and questioning the work that I want to do in the future. I write under the assumption that my former partner, my mother, and the others I have named or implied in this article are in my audience, and I ask critical questions of myself and the slippage that is surely going to be present in this work that I cannot see. And I continue to contemplate the consequences, both immediate and long term, that may come from making my questions and my position known. Yet I write *autoethnographically* from this place, hoping that this *confessional moment*, as hooks's (1994, p. 210) termed it, has the power to draw attention to the way we talk and think about the politics and ethics of slippage in our autoethnographies.

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