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# Exo-Autoethnography: An Introduction

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**Key words**: autoethnography; exo-autoethnography; posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD); familial trauma; trauma transmission; transgenerational transmission of trauma

**Abstract**: Exo-autoethnography is the autoethnographic exploration of a history whose events the researcher does not experience directly, but a history that impacts the researcher through familial, or other personal connections, by proxy. It is an approach to research and autoethnographic writing that seeks to analyze individual and private experience, as directed by the other's experience or history, to better understand: a history that affects the researcher indirectly; and personal and community experience as it relates to that history.

The method of exo-autoethnographic research and writing has been developed for the qualitative study into transgenerational transmission of trauma, moving beyond the personal experience of the researcher. In this first and preliminary conception, the method aims to connect the present with a history of the other through transgenerational transmission of trauma and/or experiences of an upbringing influenced by parental trauma.

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## 1. Introduction

In this article, I introduce a new autoethnographic method: exo-autoethnography. This method aims to shed light on, and add knowledge to the study of transgenerational trauma transmission (TTT). Exo-autoethnography connects the present with a history of the other through the impact of TTT and/or experiences of an upbringing influenced by parental trauma. The paper examines and defines the exo-autoethnographic method as a process of research into and writing about transgenerational transmission of trauma. [1]

Rather than placing sole focus on the individual experience of the researcher or author, exo-autoethnography builds on ELLIS, ADAMS, and BOCHNER's (2011)

definition of autoethnography by analyzing individual and private experience as *directed* by the other's experience or history (exo) to better understand:

1. a history that impacted the researcher by proxy; and
2. personal and community experience (ethno) as related to that history (DENEJKINA, 2017). [2]

Exo-autoethnography was developed as part of my research into transgenerational transmission of combat-related trauma from parent to child. Soviet journalist BOROVIK writes: "Afghanistan became part of each person who fought there. And each of the half million soldiers who went through this war became part of Afghanistan" (1990, p.1). My research asks: did Afghanistan become part of even more than the people who fought there; if its remnants persist in the children of the Soviet veterans who returned home? [3]

Inspired by familial experiences of war and trauma (my father was a captain in the Soviet army and served in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation), this research is focusing on the Soviet-Afghan conflict of 1979-1989, and how the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan impacted on the first post-Soviet generation. This study includes interviews with Soviet veterans and children of Soviet veterans, and an exo-autoethnographic account of how my father's story and trauma impacted on my development and personal story, with a focus on elements of transgenerational transmission of trauma (the sociocultural and socialization model, psychodynamic relational model, and family systems and familial communication). [4]

I will begin with a background on autoethnography (Section 2.1), its evocative and analytic methods (Section 2.1.1-2.1.2), and discuss some of the criticism aimed at the methodology (Section 2.2). After that I will introduce exo-autoethnography, its aims in research, writing, and outcomes, and its relationship to transgenerational trauma transmission (Section 2.3). I will then show the process involved in conducting exo-autoethnography and discuss its elements (Section 2.4); give an overview of transgenerational transmission of trauma (Section 2.5), and conclude the article (Section 3). [5]

## 2. What Is Exo-Autoethnography?

### 2.1 On autoethnography

ELLIS et al. define autoethnography as "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (2011, §1). It is both a research method and a method of writing, while the autoethnographic researcher is both author and focus of research and writing: the observing and the observed (ELLIS, 2009, p.13). [6]

In the 1970s a move toward autoethnographic research grew from the need for social scientists to self-observe first, including their communities and people (HAYANO, 1979). Anthropologist HAYANO's essay "Auto-Ethnography: Paradigms, Problems, and Prospects" is the first time the terminology, autoethnography, is used in its current framework. HAYANO discusses the use of autoethnography for the purpose of an anthropologist's self-observation during their ethnographic research, likening "auto-ethnography with insider studies in which the researcher was a native, or became a full insider, within the community or culture being studied" (BOCHNER & ELLIS, 2016, p.47). [7]

A "renewed interest in personal narrative, in life history, and in autobiography among anthropologists" is observable in the 1990s as autoethnography began to merge postmodern ethnography with autobiography (REED-DANAHAY, 1997, pp.1-2). Today, autoethnography retains its main principle: giving voice to the voiceless (DENZIN, 2014, p.6), while its definition is refined to suit the researcher's individual work (DENEJKINA, 2016, p.2)—that is, autoethnography can serve a different purpose across different projects and investigations (DENZIN, 2014, p.20). [8]

Autoethnographic research focuses on events directly experienced by the self—or, as in the case of collaborative witnessing, a relational autoethnography (to be discussed in more detail further in this paper), focuses on evocatively telling the lives of others while in the process becoming part of the other's story—including its principles of interventionism; commenting on cultural practices; critiquing cultural practices; contributing to existing research; and compelling a response from its audience (HOLMAN JONES, ADAMS & ELLIS, 2013, p.20). [9]

Presently, the two main forms of autoethnography are evocative autoethnography and analytic autoethnography. [10]

*2.1.1 Evocative autoethnography*

Defined as "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (ELLIS & BOCHNER, 2000, p.739), evocative autoethnography can be seen as the principal or fundamental autoethnography (DENEJKINA, 2017). [11]

A combination of autobiographic and ethnographic characteristics, autoethnographic method sees the researcher write about her/his own experiences in a selective and retrospective manner while analyzing these epiphanies (ELLIS et al., 2011). To examine personal experience, evocative autoethnography focuses on emotion, evocation of emotion, and self-expression, "allowing us to examine the self, our identity, emotions and experiences as relational and institutional stories affected by social and cultural structures" (HAYNES, 2017, p.217; also see ELLIS & BOCHNER, 2000). [12]

Evocative autoethnography is a method rejecting generalization of experience, and thus the representation of *the other* (ANDERSON, 2006). It is an approach

that challenges traditional processes of social science research and representation of others, while treating "research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act" (ELLIS et al., 2011, §1). [13]

*2.1.2 Analytic autoethnography*

Like evocative autoethnography, an analytic autoethnography explores individual experience with a theoretical analysis of said experience—that is, analytic autoethnography aims to shed light on a "broader set of social phenomena" and is not just about evoking an emotional response or resonance from the audience, or documenting the personal experience of the researcher, or to produce an insider perspective on the issue studied (HAYNES, 2017, p.218). [14]

ANDERSON (2006) suggests that the following researcher characteristics are critical in analytic autoethnographic research. They

1. "[are] a full member in the research group or setting" (p.375);
2. "[are] visible as such a member in the researcher's published texts" (ibid.);
3. "[are] committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena" (ibid.);
4. "[participate in] dialogue with informants beyond the self" (p.378); and
5. "[are] committed to theoretical analysis" (ibid.). [15]

Within the spectrum of analytic and evocative autoethnography lie varied approaches to the method, including, but not limited to, meta-autoethnography; collaborative autoethnography; co-constructed decolonizing autoethnography; relational autoethnography and collaborative witnessing. For a further discussion on the varied approaches to autoethnography and different autoethnographic methods, see "Autoethnography and Family Research" (ADAMS & MANNING, 2015) and "Interpretive Autoethnography" (DENZIN, 2014). [16]

In addition to these autoethnographic models of research and writing, autoethnography involves reflexivity, specifically an ethics of care. Developed by ELLIS (2009), an ethic of care holds the researcher accountable for the consequences her/his research has on participants within their work; the reader; and themselves. Reflexivity in autoethnography is conceptualized further with meta-autoethnography—a practice of reflexive autoethnography. Established in 2009, meta-autoethnography is an autoethnographic examination of previous autoethnographic work, allowing the researcher to ask questions she/he did not ask originally (p.13). [17]

Autoethnography begins inside the researcher who "retrospectively and selectively write[s] about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity" (ELLIS et al., 2011, §8). Furthermore, if the ethnography or the project does not make use of the personal experience, memories, or storytelling techniques, then the work cannot be considered a work of autoethnography, "just as an autobiography

without any fieldwork, observation, acknowledgment of extant research or theories, or cultural participation and analysis cannot be an autoethnography" (ADAMS & MANNING, 2015, p.352). The outcome of the research and text may be political; giving a voice to the voiceless; healing; and powerful advocacy—paralleling the impact produced by trauma narrative as advocacy: "[I]f the most vulnerable tell their own narratives, in their own way, in their own time and on their own terms, then this can become a form of powerful advocacy" (JOSEPH 2016, p.211). [18]

### 2.2 A note on criticism of autoethnography

To begin autoethnography means to critically study the personal and individual experience through the lens of an ethnographer: to see yourself as the subject of study. Conducting autoethnography opens discussion for an audience and empowers research to give voice to those not afforded with a platform or ability to openly discuss their narrative (DENEJKINA, 2016). 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" (2014, p.6). Despite this, autoethnography continues to face criticism targeting its research practice, research rigor, output, and ethics, as well as its position within academia. [19]

Due to varied applications of autoethnography (see DENZIN, 2014; ELLIS & BOCHNER, 2000 for details of forms and applications), there is also a variation in the degree of detail in the study of self and informants, interaction with informants, data collection and analysis, including "traditional analysis, and the interview context, as well as on power relationships" (ELLIS et al., 2011, §15). These potential issues stem from the positioning of the arts and scientific fields at conflict (§39), a condition "autoethnography seeks to correct" by disrupting "the binary of science and art" (§39). [20]

As an amalgamation of ethnography and autobiography, criticism aimed at autoethnography concerns the similarities between the academic autoethnographic method and writing, and creative non-fiction (including memoir and autobiography). Importantly, these criticisms are based on applying ethnographic and autobiographic criteria to the method. Critics argue that autoethnography, therefore, either lacks scientific rigor (by ethnographic and social science standards), or is inadequate as a literary art (by autobiographic standards) (§36-37). ELLIS et al. write that autoethnographic writing and research are acts of social justice, in that the researcher's goal is "to produce analytical, accessible texts that change us and the world we live in for the better" (§40); also see HOLMAN JONES, 2005). "Simply put, autoethnographers take a different point of view toward the subject matter of social science" (ELLIS et al., 2011, §40). [21]

### 2.3 On exo-autoethnography

In its initial development, exo-autoethnography aims to add knowledge and evidence to the study of transgenerational transmission of trauma through evocative narrative and analytic research. Its purpose is to understand and expose the personal and cultural experience of children of parent(s) with trauma. Specifically, exo-autoethnographic research and writing aims to narrate and analyze the impact of trauma on children of a traumatized parent(s) through family functioning—by exploring the historical events of the trauma, and the personal experience of having a traumatized parent(s)—and transgenerational transmission of trauma. [22]

To build on ELLIS et al.'s definition of autoethnography (2010), exo-autoethnography is an approach to research that seeks to analyze (*graphy*) individual and private experience (*auto*) as directed by the other's experience or history (*exo*) to better understand:

1. a history that impacted the researcher by proxy (*exo*); and
2. personal and community experience (*ethno*) as related to that history;
3. exo-autoethnography comprises of all that is autoethnography, including its tenets of commenting on and/or critiquing cultural practices; contributing to existing research; compelling a response from its audience (HOLMAN JONES et al., 2013, p.20), as well as its interventionist principle: "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, p.6). [23]

However, instead of exclusively focusing on events experienced directly by the self, exo-autoethnography places focus on a history that impacted the self (researcher) by proxy. It connects the present with a history never directly experienced, through transgenerational transmission of trauma and/or experiences of an upbringing influenced by parental trauma. Not to be confused with postmemory—"the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (HIRSCH, 2008, p.103)—exo-autoethnography aims to analyze parental trauma which impacted on the self through the familial unit resulting in the transmission of trauma, directly and/or indirectly. [24]

In a 2004 literature review, GALOVSKI and LYONS found that combat-related posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) affects familial relationships and psychological adjustments of family members through direct and indirect transmission of PTSD, differentiating between the two models as: PTSD symptoms (such as anxiety and dissociation) transmitted to the child, in *direct* transmission; and PTSD symptoms impacting or affecting the child's distress, in *indirect* transmission (GALOVSKI & LYONS 2004; also see DEKEL & GOLDBLATT 2008). The exo-autoethnographic account sees the story's focus as the self, as well as the history that has created the self: what was inherited by the

researcher directly and/or indirectly, and is thus impacting and forming who the researcher is today. [25]

On the surface, exo-autoethnography might appear to share similarities with collaborative witnessing due to both methods having a focus on the other and on the story of the other. Developed by preeminent scholar of autoethnography, Carolyn ELLIS, collaborative witnessing is a form of relational autoethnography that gives opportunity to the researcher to "focus on and evocatively tell the lives of others in shared storytelling and conversation" (ELLIS & RAWICKI, 2013, p.366). Collaborative witnessing "extends an autoethnographic perspective in its emphasis on writing for and with the other … bearing witness to others as well as to oneself" (ibid.). [26]

However, exo-autoethnography is about a history of the other that directly impacts the researcher (author) in her/his development, rather than the researcher becoming part of the other's story through collaborative witnessing (that is shared storytelling and conversation). In other words, in exo-autoethnographic research and writing, the researcher does not proactively seek to collaboratively witness the other's story or trauma, but is impacted by the other's story or trauma through familial or other close relationships (for example, via the process of transgenerational trauma transmission). [27]

Further, exo-autoethnography is not to be confused with narrative inheritance. GOODALL writes, "narrative inheritance refers to stories given to children by and about family members" (2005, p.492). Importantly, a narrative inheritance can be part of the silences within families, where "important and relevant stories may never have been told, or told incompletely" (McNAY, 2009, p.1178). [28]

The dynamics of the shared and silenced narrative inheritance reveals similarities with exo-autoethnography as it aims to uncover the impact of traumatic events of the other on the researcher; these events may have been shared by the other, or kept secret by the other. However, the difference of exo-autoethnography is its exploration of the other's trauma on the researcher, asking how it impacts the researcher's life from birth to now; how it unpacks trauma from the initial traumatic event, into the researcher's childhood through to her/his present. Furthermore, exo-autoethnography is not about writing the other's story; instead, it is about the researcher's story and how the other's story (untold or told) impacts her/him. [29]

### 2.4 Doing exo-autoethnography

The roots of exo-autoethnography can begin generations prior to the birth of the researcher. However, the event that influences the researcher, in this case looking through the frame of trauma, clearly shapes and directs his/her life. Along with the primary researcher, three distinct types of informants emerge from this event:

1. *the other*: the individual whose initial trauma influences their offspring (the researcher, or author) through transgenerational transmission of trauma;
2. *the others*: a group of individuals who are traumatized by the same event as *the other* (and are connected by said event), and whose initial trauma influences their own offspring through transgenerational transmission of trauma;
3. *the community*: a group of individuals who are impacted by the same event through the transgenerational transmission of parental trauma (and are connected by said event) similarly to the researcher. [30]

Like the ethnographic methods of immersion, in undertaking exo-autoethnography the researcher returns to the place of the initial (traumatic) event, in order to connect the past with the present. This can be a physical return (geographically), and/or a theoretical or emotive return (through journal entries, oral history, photographs, and interviews with informants—particularly the *other* who directed the private and individual experience of the researcher). [31]

To undertake exo-autoethnography the researcher engages with the self to produce an evocative autoethnographic component of the study. Furthermore, the researcher engages in an analytic exploration and theoretical analysis of individual and the *other's* experience in order to add knowledge to the understandings of broader social phenomena. The researcher engages with informants beyond the self, which take three forms:

1. *the other* directing the experience of the researcher impacted by proxy;
2. *the others* directing the experience of *the community* impacted by proxy:
3. *the community* impacted by the experience of *the others* by proxy. [32]

Exo-autoethnography is primarily a qualitative method, utilizing narrative inquiry and thematic analysis with interviews and surveys of the aforementioned informants, including introspection of the self through autoethnography. However, based on events interrogated and the research study's sample size, the method can also utilize quantitative numerical and thematic analysis of data collected through questionnaires or surveys. [33]

Exo-autoethnography exposes the issues of a traumatic past and its ability to influence generations in the future. It is about connecting a past never experienced in first-person to the self's present and own history through evocative and analytic research and writing by finding and exploring the threads that bind the current *self* (the researcher and her/his experience) to the experience of *the*

*other*. By creating an exo-autoethnographic account, the researcher understands the historical context of her/his life; the how and why of what she/he has inherited through a familial history; and the impact of these events on the researcher's community. [34]

### 2.5 Transgenerational trauma

Transgenerational transmission of trauma has been an "integral part of human history" (DANIELI, 1998, p.2), conveyed in writing, oral histories, body language, and in silences. In one word, it is endemic. Epigenetic, or acquired, transmission of trauma suggests that individuals absorb the trauma of their parents. In his research pertaining to the transmission of Holocaust trauma on the children of survivors, KELLERMANN suggests that children of other PTSD parents may be vulnerable. This includes offspring of war veterans; survivors of war-related trauma; survivors of sexual abuse during childhood; refugees; victims of torture, and others (2013, p.33). [35]

This process is known as transgenerational transmission of trauma, or TTT. It was first observed in 1966 (DANIELI, 1998, p.3), and has since been academically researched and described for more than half a century (KELLERMANN, 2009). KELLERMANN notes that this process connects to heredity: "… the transmission of characteristics from parents to their offspring" (2013, p.33). Presently, research has not been able to explain how—and the mechanisms by which (DEKEL & GOLDBLATT, 2008, p.284)—PTSD trauma of a parent is transmitted, genetically, to a child. KELLERMANN states that the controversial theory eludes logical explanation:

> "How can a repressed memory be passed on from one person to another? Can a child really ‘inherit' the unconscious mind of a parent? Is it possible for a child to remember what the parent has forgotten? Will we ever be able to produce ‘hard' neurobiological evidence of such far-fetched and preposterous assumptions and perhaps *see* traces of the unconscious trauma of a PTSD parent in a blood specimen or an MRI scan of the child? Probably not" (2013, p.33). [36]

In 2010, FRANKLIN et al. published results of a study hypothesizing that traumatic experience in early life persists through adulthood and can be transmitted across generations. The experiment exposed mice to chronic and unpredictable maternal separation, finding that this experience (or trauma) "induces depressive-like behaviors … in the separated animals when adult" (p.408) by altering the profile of DNA methylation (an epigenetic mechanism). Importantly, comparable changes in DNA methylation were *also* present in the offspring of the separated mice. Similar empirical evidence in people is presently insufficient (for a summary of examples, see KELLERMANN, 2013). Despite this, research does support the idea that transgenerational trauma is transmitted via the familial environment, suggesting that results of traumatic events affect others in the environment of the person(s) directly exposed to the event (DEKEL & GOLDBLATT, 2008, p.281). [37]

Theoretical approaches to understanding transgenerational transmission of trauma take into account heredity, and include: sociocultural and socialization models (DANIELI, 1998); psychodynamic relational models (DEKEL & GOLDBLATT, 2008); and family systems and familial communication (KELLERMANN, 2009). [38]

HARKNESS (1993) found that the effects of PTSD may have a larger influence on transgenerational transmission of trauma than the condition itself, suggesting that family violence resulting from a parent's PTSD projects greater distress in children than does the PTSD in itself. Further, it has been found that combat-related PTSD hinders the veteran's ability to parent a child, and may directly "interrupt the development of a positive parent-child relationship" (GALOVSKI & LYONS, 2004, pp.486-487). [39]

This is supported by DEKEL and GOLDBLATT's (2008) review on transgenerational transmission of PTSD, asking the question: what is transmitted from father to child? Relating to family functioning, the authors find that numbing symptoms of PTSD impact on the parent-child relationship, stating that "emotional numbing, detachment, and avoidance may directly impact on the veteran's parenting ability" (p.284). The review outlines three mechanisms pertaining to indirect transmission of trauma: functioning and involvement within the familial unit; familial atmosphere; and patterns of communication (pp.284-285). [40]

A 2016 review and study looking at transmission of trauma in refugee families highlights the limited knowledge on transgenerational trauma, noting that a considerable amount of work is still needed to address the current gap in research (SANGALANG & VANG, 2017, p.753). Exo-autoethnography aims to address this gap from a qualitative perspective, by interrogating the notion of transgenerational transmission of trauma from the experiences of 1. *the other*; 2. *the others*; 3. *the community*; and 4. *the self* (researcher), as one unifying historical event. [41]

## 3. Conclusion

Exo-autoethnography aims to further address criticism directed at autoethnographic research and writing by actively disrupting "the binary of science" (ELLIS et al., 2011, §39) in its amalgamation of analytic and evocative autoethnographic methods with rigorous qualitative research. It employs a qualitative method of research and writing, utilizing narrative inquiry and thematic analysis of interviews and surveys with four primary informants: *the self* (researcher or author); *the other*; *the others*; and *the community*. [42]

The developing method aims to connect a past never experienced in first-person, to the present: making connections with *the other's* history that directs the present of the researcher by proxy. An exo-autoethnographic account aims to explain to the researcher and *the community* some of the context of her/his life;

the how and why of what she/he has inherited through a familial history; and the impact of these events on the researcher and the researcher's community. [43]

As a developing method, exo-autoethnography aims to add knowledge to the study of transgenerational transmission of trauma. Its aim is to understand and share the personal and cultural experience of children of parent(s) with PTSD, and the impact of trauma transmission on the child. Current and future studies can be utilized to address policy pertaining to effective treatment and support of people with PTSD and trauma in order to break, or interrupt the cycle of trauma transmission. [44]

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