Strong Reflexivity and Its Critics: Responses to Autoethnography in the German-Speaking Cultural and Social Sciences

Andrea Ploder[1] and Johanna Stadlbauer[2]

Abstract

This contribution explores autoethnography as a strongly reflexive approach to qualitative research and its reception in German-speaking sociology and cultural anthropology. Over recent years, our academic communities have developed an increased interest in autoethnography, although many reactions range from critical to hostile: It is accused of solipsism, narcissism, lack of arguments and theory, affective immediacy, non-criticizability, endorsement of neoliberal politics, a threat to disciplinary identity, and a strategic mistake in the fight for appreciation of qualitative research. We discuss each point of criticism and translate our insights into more general considerations on strong reflexivity in German-speaking cultural and social sciences.

Keywords

autoethnography, cultural anthropology, reflexivity, sociology, subjectivity

Introduction

Within the logic of this special issue (as outlined by Kuehner, Ploder, and Langer in the introduction), evocative autoethnography is a prime example of epistemologically strong reflexivity.[1] It pushes the idea of reflecting on the positionality, perspectivity, and subjectivity of the researcher toward the extreme, as the researcher becomes not merely an *additional* subject of research, but its primary focus. In this contribution,[2] we explore the reception and critique of autoethnography as a mode of strong reflexivity in the German-speaking social and cultural sciences. One of us is a sociologist/philosopher and the other a cultural anthropologist; we were both trained and are currently working in Austrian universities. We look at the approach and its reception through the lens of our own lived experience as scholars engaging with autoethnography.[3]

In recent years, the interest in autoethnography has increased in our academic communities. It is a topic at conferences, student seminars, and department colloquia, and publications on the topic are slowly making their way into the heart of the journal landscape of our disciplines.[4] Despite this noticeable engagement, the idea of scientific self-narratives is rarely regarded with unreserved enthusiasm. Placing the researchers' own experience and life story at the center of their academic work seems to transgress the limits of what is broadly accepted as "scientific."[5] In some cases, the examination of the researcher's subjectivity is accepted as a legitimate mode of quality assurance but not as an independent source of knowledge. Many colleagues in the German-speaking social sciences and cultural sciences receive autoethnography as a provocation and respond to it cautiously or with hostility. Interestingly, their criticism—so far—rarely manifests itself in publications.

One major source for this contribution is our own observation and experience in the academic field during the last five years. Much of our material consists of accidental field notes such as conference and teaching notes, emails, and research memos.[6] From the perspective of our disciplines, autoethnography is a rather deviant approach, breaking several "rules of the academic game." It transgresses the border between academic and artistic work; refuses to present clear-cut findings, theories, and arguments; and addresses researchers not only as cognitive but also as emotional and physical

[1]University of Graz, Austria
[2]Alpen-Adria University Klagenfurt, Austria

Corresponding Author:
Andrea Ploder, Institute of Legal Philosophy, Sociology of Law, and Legal Informatics, University of Graz, Universitätsstraße 15/C2, 8010 Graz, Austria.
Email: andrea.ploder@uni-graz.at

human beings.[7] Because sanctions toward deviant behavior always teach us something about the normative order of the sanctioning group, the critique of autoethnography also serves as a window into the normative constitution of our disciplines. We learned a lot about the hopes, anxieties, and norms of our disciplinary communities and developed a better understanding of how German-speaking social and cultural sciences engage with strongly reflexive approaches.[8]

In the following, we start with an account of autoethnography as a strongly reflexive approach. After that, we provide a brief history of self-narratives within our disciplines combined with an account of our own engagement with autoethnography within our professional environments. In the main part of the article, we outline and discuss the most prominent critical responses to autoethnography we have encountered and then translate our insights into a lesson about the reception of strong reflexivity in the German-speaking cultural and social sciences in general.

Autoethnography as a Strongly Reflexive Approach

Being data, medium of interpretation, and research report at the same time, autoethnography has a hybrid position within the fabric of the cultural and social sciences. In order to establish a writer–reader relationship that enables identification and the generation of meaning, it deliberately exceeds the limits of established scientific text genres, borrows from autobiography, and uses the performative power of the literary medium for epistemic purposes. Because of this fundamentally transgressing quality, it is often located within the tradition of *blurred genres* (Behar, 2007; Geertz, 1983).

Autoethnographies can be based on memories, systematic introspection (Ellis, 2008), diary entries and personal documents, letters, photographs, drawings, and so on. The approach welcomes all sorts of materials that bear traces of the researcher's everyday experiences and feelings connected to the research topic. Based on this material, researchers write texts, read them to themselves and others, rewrite, revise, perform, enact, and re-enact them. This process of working with and through their own story is guided by a search for emotionally productive and, thus, epistemically rich elements. Similar to the process of interpretation in the interpretive paradigm, writing and enacting are the *methods of inquiry* in autoethnographic research (Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, 2005).

The epistemological concept behind evocative autoethnography can be described as performative.[9] It uses a concept of knowledge that differs from hermeneutic–interpretive approaches in several respects.[10] First, autoethnographies do not embody the product of a process of understanding but are part of the process itself: "[A] personal text can

move writers and readers, subjects and objects, tellers and listeners into [a] space of dialogue, debate, and change" (Holman Jones, 2005, p. 764). Second, the researcher is both subject and object of inquiry—with all her physical, emotional, and mental experiences. In writing about herself, she produces a narrative that is meant to evoke epistemic moments on behalf of the readers. Third, the process of writing and the process of reception are both conceived as sites where knowledge and meaning are neither "found" nor "received," but actively constituted. The goal of autoethnographies is not to represent learned lessons but to trigger cognitive processes within the recipients. They do not present final analyses and research "results" but remain open to different readings and interpretations. This is a very deliberate decision based on the belief that life stories never involve only the person who experienced them, but always offer points of connection with the stories of others.[11] Fourth, autoethnographies point toward a type of knowledge that is not merely cognitive. As Spry (2001, 2011) has pointed out, emotional and physical experiences are at least as important for the "embodied methodology" of autoethnography as cognitive ones. Fifth, the goal of performative research is not to describe, reconstruct, or ultimately understand, but rather to *change* social reality.[12]

Within this epistemology, reflexivity lies at the very heart of the autoethnographic endeavor (see for example, Humphreys, 2005). This seems to be immediately plausible (what could be more reflexive than writing about oneself?), but things are more complicated if we take a closer look. We can easily think about self-narratives without any deeply reflexive dimension. A mere description of experiences and feelings, an inner monologue, a stream-of-consciousness depiction of mental, physical, or emotional experiences can be completely non-reflexive. But these are not autoethnographic texts in the sense described above. In order to live up to the epistemological promise of performative research, autoethnography needs to use a strong form of reflexivity on at least two levels. First, the researcher needs to actively engage with her story, reflect her affects, physical experiences, mental states, anxieties, joy, and excitement, and work on their textual or performative representation. In short, she needs to work with and through her story and text. Much more than in other styles of qualitative research, the epistemic power of autoethnographies depends on the reflexive connection between the researcher, her story, and her text. A description, an inner monologue, or a stream of consciousness does not in itself make a powerful autoethnography. In order to trigger moments of knowledge production, the material has to be "worked through." Second, the same is true for the level of reception: The epistemic power of an autoethnographic text depends on its potential to connect with the stories of the recipients and evoke reflexive moments in their minds and bodies. Ideally, these reflections are manifested in a strong emotional, physical, or mental

experience, a change of perspectives that affects not only their academic work but also their everyday life. In the long run, it should result in empowerment and social change (see Denzin, 2003). This demands unusual involvement and commitment from the recipients. They must be prepared and able to actively engage in a strongly reflective process—within and beyond the moment of reception.

Academic Engagement With Autoethnography

Self-narratives are no novelty within the social and cultural sciences. They have been their controversial attendants for several decades, an early example being the diaries of Michel Leiris (1934, 1939).[13] It is hard to tell when the term "autoethnography" was first introduced (one of the many stories ascribes it to the cultural anthropologist David M. Hayano, 1979), but today, it is used as an umbrella term for various types of scientific self-narratives, not only in anthropology but also in other disciplines. They differ in terms of subject (liminal phases or everyday practice), genre (literary or academic), and aim of the text (evocative, descriptive, or analytical),[14] and they overlap with *autobiographical ethnography* (Coffey, 1999; Reed-Danahay, 1997), *narrative ethnography* (Abu-Lughod, 1993), *blurred genre ethnography* (Behar, 2009), or *ethnographic poetics* (Marcus & Fischer, 1986), to name just a few. Numerous other terms are to be found (for a more extensive list, see Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

This multitude of terms reflects not only the broad variety of approaches, but also their complex history of rejection and re-invention. In several cultural and social science disciplines, autoethnography has emerged over and over again without ever entering the canon of established methods. Despite the sharp criticism with which it is often confronted, the mental path to autoethnography is actually a short one: Writing about oneself is a response to a basic condition of the cultural and social sciences; no matter what we study, we always have a relationship with the phenomenon and we look at it from a very specific perspective. Researchers are often part of the studied phenomenon themselves, and once they realize that their perspective inevitably influences their research, it is only a small step to the idea of using their own experience as legitimate research data.

When we first started to engage with autoethnography, we found only a small number of texts within our academic communities that explicitly dealt with it. One of the rare sources was the journal *Forum Qualitative Social Research*, in particular, *the Special Issue* edited by Jones et al. (2008). Most of the authors were not part of our own research communities but lived and worked in the United States, the United Kingdom, or Canada and rarely or never appeared on the German-speaking scene. It took quite a while until we met local colleagues who had read the same texts, and

even longer to find German-speaking colleagues who actually write autoethnographies. Our own interest in the approach was, and to some extent still is, mostly theoretical. Autoethnography provides fascinating links to some of our central research interests, such as research relationships, ethics, and representation, the (historical and current) identity of our disciplines, the border between research and art, and many other thrilling topics. Yet, although we have certainly been influenced by the approach in our empirical work, so far, neither of us has published an autoethnographic text. In our own empirical research projects (Johanna worked on migration and gender, Andrea on the history of qualitative research), we experiment with different methodologies and explore the reflexive dimensions of our material, but our main methodologies have not been autoethnographic.

It is no coincidence that most of our teaching and publishing on autoethnography has been in the field of cultural anthropology and much less in sociology. The research perspective of cultural anthropology shares important characteristics with autoethnography (for a more detailed account of these commonalities, see Ploder & Stadlbauer, 2013), and there, we encountered much more openness toward this approach. Since the 1980s, subjectivity and reflexivity in research are broadly discussed within this field. Large sectors of contemporary German-speaking cultural anthropology demonstrate a critical awareness of the interconnectedness of scholarly analysis and socio-political contexts, which is also reflected in extensive research on the history of the discipline. In this sense, it is a highly self-reflexive discipline, not least due to a number of shifts in subject matter, methods, and disciplinary self-concept during its recent history.[15] Another connecting point is the widespread belief that research can, and should have, socially transformative, emancipatory impact. Although not always at the forefront of the concerns of researchers in cultural anthropology, an interactive, dialogical, perhaps even participatory research attitude (where ethnographic knowledge is generated collaboratively with the research participants) is supported by many colleagues.

Still, our engagement with autoethnography was a provocation for both of our communities. More than once, mentors and more advanced colleagues discouraged us from engaging with this topic. In conference programs, we were paired with experienced scholars who held forth on the dangers of certain aspects of autoethnography (some of which will be discussed in the following). We had to clarify that we did not suggest using autoethnography as the new "standard approach" to all anthropological and sociological research, but were trying to establish it as a legitimate topic for discussion within our fields. We argued for the potential of autoethnography for triggering discussions and critical reflections on fundamental methodological and epistemological premises and for its power to open up new

fields of research that are hardly accessible with the established approaches. In general, our students were more open to the topic than our mentors, and cultural anthropology was more open than sociology. In the winter term 2012/2013, we taught our first seminar on autoethnography with 12 students at the Institute for European Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology in Graz.

In retrospect, many of our experiences can be read as consequences of academic boundary work. Thomas Gieryn (1995) described this as the discursive practice of establishing, shifting, and protecting disciplinary boundaries in three different modes: *expulsion* ("insider's effort to expel not-real members from their midst," p. 432), *expansion* ("insiders seek to push out the frontiers of their cultural authority into spaces already claimed by others," p. 429), and *protection* ("the erection of walls to protect the resources and privileges of those inside," p. 434). In light of this concept, we understand part of our experiences as symptoms of the erection and protection of walls against other disciplines and research paradigms. As will become clear below, we were engaging with a topic that was (and is) perceived as a threat to the scientific identity and integrity of our disciplines. The advice from our mentors to be cautious, our conference experiences, and our overall feeling of excitement but also unease, can be understood as the result of crossing a border.

Critical Responses to Autoethnography

In the following, we will summarize and discuss the most prominent lines of critique that we have encountered during the past years.[16] Some of them overlap, some occur in several variants, and, of course, this list is not exhaustive.

Solipsism and Narcissism

One critique we often heard relates to autoethnography's emphasis on the individual experience of researchers. According to the critics, autoethnography turns the virtue of reflexivity into the evil of narcissistic navel-gazing. It is trapped in a solipsistic self-misunderstanding, cannot possibly capture anything outside of the inquiring self, and certainly cannot provide any relevant knowledge about the "world out there."[17]

We encountered these arguments in both cultural anthropology and sociology, and it came in different forms. The word solipsism was not always used, but it capturesthe heart of the critique quite well.[18] Sometimes combined with the "strategic mistake" argument (see below), it points to the heart of the program of strong reflexivity—the idea of using the researcher as the starting point for the research and as a central source of data.[19] From a historical point of view, this reaction is not new. The first voices calling for

reflexivity in cultural anthropology were also exposed to criticism of this kind. Some talked about a problematic shift from the "actual object of investigation" toward the author, and the work of those who criticized previous ethnographies as "author evacuated" was, in turn, attacked as "author saturated."[20]

The solipsism claim can be countered in several ways. First, most autoethnographers do not in fact hold solipsistic convictions. At least in its classic version, solipsism requires a strong notion of truth (a proposition is true if it corresponds with the world out there) that is hardly compatible with performative research logic. Second, it is the declared ambition of many autoethnographers to embed the experience of the researcher in a broader social and cultural context. They start with the story of the researcher, but they do not stop there. Autoethnography is often combined with "classical" research interviews or participant observation (see for example, Ellis, 1999; Veissiere, 2011) and can also include collaborative approaches in which the subjectivities of different researchers interact (see Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2012; Martini & Jauhola, 2014). The subjective experience of the researchers is not meant to replace a "thorough study" of cultural and social reality but to give privileged access to its understanding. Third, pragmatically, all research begins and ends with researchers, however broadly or narrowly we want to define that group. They ask questions, observe, interpret, draw conclusions, and write. If it were truly impossible to do good research about the "world out there" from the perspective of one particular researcher, all social and cultural research would be doomed to failure.

A variant of the solipsism claim attacks autoethnography for its implicit focus on a very specific and privileged social milieu—members of academia. In line with the British sociologist Sara Delamont (2007), some of our colleagues claim that this focus reproduces power imbalances and, moreover, that the experience of academics is not interesting enough to deserve privileged attention in scientific publications. Autoethnography—that is the essence of Delamont's (2007) argument—"focuses on the powerful and not the powerless to whom we should be directing our sociological gaze" (p. 2).

This argument ignores the fact that the path of many autoethnographers to academia was neither straightforward nor do they necessarily hold a secure position within the system. Their stories are often stories of of marginalization, be it as a child of parents with mental illness (Ronai, 1996), a refugee (Khosravi, 2007), or a Black woman feminist (Boylorn, 2013). In contrast to Delamont's assumption, autoethnographies not only (and certainly not necessarily) represent the voices of those in power. And where this is indeed the case, it might enable us to learn something about the dynamics of domination.[21]

No Arguments, No Theory, and No Tangible Results

With their emphasis on interpretative openness, autoethnographies refuse to produce results that can be measured against traditional quality criteria. They typically do not focus on arguments and do not try to develop a consistent theory in the classic sense of the term. This makes them subject to a second line of criticism that points toward a lack of arguments and quotable "findings." Critics argue that because autoethnographic texts are neither theory-forming nor argumentative, they do not live up to the scientific standards of their disciplines—or of any academic discipline. They are hard to criticize and not accessible to intersubjective revision (e.g., Geimer, 2011).[22] Because they often refrain from taking clear positions, autoethnographic texts are also not easily used as reference texts for a particular theoretical position or analytical concept.

This line of criticism is based on several hidden premises that teach something about the scientific standards of our disciplines. Obviously, it is considered the task of researchers to produce propositional knowledge about their research subject, argue for its truth (or at least for its plausibility), and, thereby, make it accessible to criticism and reception by their academic colleagues. Ultimately, they should contribute to an increase of knowledge and advance their disciplinary discourses. Many qualitative researchers (especially within sociology) also consider it part of their duty to develop theories about their research field. In most sectors of German-speaking sociology (also among scholars who frame their work as "qualitative"), the main goal of research is still the production of stable knowledge, ideally in the form of a theory. In cultural anthropology, the idea of research as accumulation of knowledge has been contested in recent decades. In light of the *Writing Culture* debate (Clifford & Marcus, 1986), it is neither new nor scandalous to say that the meaning of a text does not originate within the author but is produced anew in every reading. Nevertheless, an overall demand for the production of quotable knowledge is defended against external and internal attacks here as well. German-speaking sociology, on the other hand, has hardly been influenced by the *Writing Culture* debate.[23]

In part, this critique reflects the discursive situation of our disciplines. If theory building is considered a prerequisite of sociological work and autoethnography cannot fulfill this task, sociologists have good reason to criticize it. But there is a problem with the second premise of the argument: Autoethnographic texts *can* and *do* include theoretical elements from other texts and contribute to theory building in other research contexts. A good example is the fictional diary of the working poor by Marc Augé (2013), which implicitly refers to the author's theory of places and non-places (Augé, 1995). This reference accentuates and deepens his story and opens up new points of connection for the readers. Although the book is no autoethnography in the narrow sense, it illustrates quite well how theory can be incorporated into a scientific-literary text. So there is place for theory in autoethnography, but it has another function and—in part—also another site. In accordance with their performative research logic, many autoethnographies extend the site of theory production into the process of reception. They claim that the production of theory does not end with writing, but includes the experience of reading a text or witnessing a performance.[24]

Of course, not every autoethnography actually includes theoretical work. Some autoethnographers, such as Ellis and Bochner (2006), explicitly dissociate themselves from theorizing when it comes to autoethnographies: "Intimacy is a way of being, a mode of caring, and it shouldn't be used as a vehicle to produce distanced theorizing" (p. 433). But the fact that it is possible shows that the critique reported above is, at least in part, due to a lack of knowledge about the approach.

What remains unsolved is the problem of quality criteria. Given that they avoid propositional results, autoethnographic texts can hardly be measured against "classical" standards—not even those developed for qualitative research.[25] As Arthur Bochner (2000) points out, "[W]hen there is no agreement on goals, there can be no agreement on the terms by which those goals can be judged as successfully achieved" (p. 268). As a response to that problem, Denzin (2003) formulated an alternative set of criteria for performative approaches, drawing on the work of Ellis, Bochner, and Richardson:

> Claims to truth and knowledge are assessed in terms of multiple criteria, including asking if a text: (a) interrogates existing cultural, sexist and racial stereotypes, especially those connected to family, femininity, masculinity, marriage and intimacy; (b) gives primacy to memory and its connections to concrete lived experience; (c) uses dialogue and an ethics of personal responsibility; values beauty, spirituality and a love of others; (d) implements an emancipatory agenda committed to equality, freedom and social justice and participatory democratic practices; (e) emphasizes community, collective action, solidarity and group empowerment. (p. 256f)

So there is an attempt to come up with adequate criteria, but it is not fully satisfying. The catalog reads like a political program, equating scientific knowledge with emancipatory and empowering political practice. But what are the "ethics of personal responsibility?" What is "social justice?" Who is to be empowered, and toward which kind of action? How does this translate into research topics and ways to write about them? And even if it *was* clear which goals are to be achieved, does good autoethnography only need to *work toward* these goals or do we need proof that it has actually

reached them? How can we ever know whether an emanci-patory agenda was successful, and (even more challenging) how can we judge its *potential* to be so? Denzin's catalog helps to deepen our understanding of the logic of performa-tive research, but it does not help us much in deciding whether a piece of research is actually good.

Not Criticizable Because of "Affective Immediacy"

Autoethnographies use the emotions of the researcher and the affective potential of the research text as an epistemic tool and use the subjectivity of the researcher to evoke cognitive, emotional, and physical reactions in the recipi-ents. Creating an affective tie between researcher and audience is one of its central epistemic tools. Some of our colleagues (especially from cultural anthropology) argued that the "affective immediacy" of a strong autoethnogra-phy creates an emotional closeness to the writer that pre-cludes criticism. A text that reveals private vulnerabilities of the writer and/or affects the reader emotionally, they argue, makes it hard to criticize it from an academic (and, as such, "purely cognitive"?) point of view.[26] Another version of this argument relates to the solipsism critique and asserts that autoethnographies can never claim to be more than an individual account of individual experi-ences and feelings. As they always speak from the experi-ence of one individual to the experience of another, it is hard to find an external point of reference to criticize them (see Geimer, 2015).

Like the solipsism claim, the "affective immediacy" argument is directed toward a key feature of all forms of performative research—the ability to evoke epistemi-cally productive experiences in the recipients-and ignores the fact that autoethnographers do indeed criticize each other's work.[27] This is observable at conferences and in book reviews, but also in the practice of reading each other's texts before publication. The process of writing and rewriting is essential to autoethnography and requires the critical voice of colleagues. It takes a supportive aca-demic environment, practice, and the willingness to engage in alternative modes and directions of critique, but it is possible.

Autoethnography and other approaches within the "performative" research logic require specific settings and are not always easy to integrate into well-established academic routines. In fact, they do not only call for a new epistemology but also for a change in scientific culture.[28] Readings of autoethnographic texts often go along with experiences of irritation and anxiety — and the participa-tion in autoethnographic performances does so even more. Talking about private matters in a scientific context is unusual. It suggests a mode of private talking and empathy that is hard to combine with the setting of

academic conferences or journal contributions, as most of our colleagues know. Our own first readings of autoeth-nographic texts left us touched and excited as private individuals, but speechless and confused as academics. Which questions were we allowed to ask? What could we criticize? How could we connect with our own work—or should we rather connect with our own life? Many col-leagues in our fields share this experience, and some of them react with resentment. The transgression of norms often leaves us irritated and uncomfortable, and the answer to that feeling is often rejection.

Some colleagues who pursue this argument also claim that other strongly reflexive methods handle the problem of "affective immediacy" much better than autoethnogra-phy. Ethnopsychoanalysis (in the tradition of Devereux, 1967; Erdheim, 1982; Nadig, 1986; and others), analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2006), or methodologies in a phenomenological tradition also use the experiences and feelings of the researcher as a central epistemic tool but develop an analytical distance from the researchers per-spective in the course of the research process.

Endorsement of Neoliberal Policies

Some colleagues also raise ethical and political concerns. Rather than turning "outwards" to identify and criticize sociopolitical macro-structures, autoethnography focuses on (seemingly) individual and personal issues (see Geimer, 2015, p. 23) and promotes the use of private experiences in academic texts. Thereby, the biographies of researchers become their academic capital and are used as an invest-ment in the academic market. Among others, the Canadian autoethnographer Sophie Tamas (2009) points out that the employment of personal experiences (and traumas) to advance academic careers is politically and ethically prob-lematic. She refers to the gap between emotional experi-ence, empathy, and academic knowledge production and claims that coherent, perhaps even "cleaned," narratives suggest a "pseudo-recovery" and "pseudo-insights," con-nected to a moment of either self-exploitation or self-denial. This becomes even more problematic as the exploitation of biographical narrative has been demanded in a variety of everyday contexts in recent years. The soci-ologist Eva Illouz (2007) observes that the private self is an almost ideal commodity: It is produced, processed, and disseminated by all professional cohorts and numerous media. Individuals are increasingly encouraged to deal with their feelings in a confessional style. These political and ethical issues were also raised by some of our col-leagues. Klara Löffler (2005, 2011), an anthropologist at the University of Vienna, points out that biography is increasingly called into the service of a neoliberal optimi-zation of work life. A similar point has been made by Burkart (2006), as well as Langreiter (2002), who consider

a critical perspective and political awareness as key elements of their academic practice.

What can be read as a tension within the autoethnographic project itself also creates a tension in the wider social and cultural sciences. According to the self-understanding of cultural anthropology, research approaches need to be reflected on and discussed critically—also as a product of their political and economic circumstances (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997). From a critical cultural studies perspective—whose goal is to critically *address and reflect on* neoliberal policies in their historical context instead of reproducing neoliberal patterns in their own research—the connection of a methodology to neoliberal policies is indeed problematic.[29] Given the inherent political dimension of performative research (one of the central claims of which is to contribute to an empowerment of the weak and a political change for the sake of those in need), the danger of reifying one's own voice and serving neoliberal self-marketing demands should not be ignored. It underlines the necessity to take its emancipatory potential seriously and to aim for its enforcement in research practice.

Transgression of Boundaries and Threat to Disciplinary Identities

A further line of criticism claims that the use of autoethnography in sociology or cultural anthropology transgresses the boundaries of the disciplines and, ultimately, the boundaries of academia altogether. Many autoethnographic texts come very close to artistic–literary text genres, and some of our colleagues find it hard to pin down their "academic surplus": It might very well be art, but why should we call it research? Autoethnography is accused of being "unscientific,"[5] transgressing the boundaries of legitimate academic work. This critique implies the conviction that art and science are substantially different fields of knowledge and the boundaries between them should be protected—for epistemological as well as political reasons.

The transgression argument occurs within cultural anthropology as well as in sociology, again with different emphases. Scholars in cultural anthropology have been experimenting with artistic forms of expression ever since the crisis of representation (starting in the 1980s) and could be expected to have an affinity toward the transgression of disciplinary boundaries. But on the contrary, judging from many responses to autoethnography, it seems very important for the discipline to make clear where (extended) cultural anthropology ends and (pure) art begins. Indeed, the critique of autoethnography as being "too artsy" is often embedded in an argument for the identity of the discipline.[30]

Sociology does not share this historical relation to the arts, but it does have other boundary issues. It has a long history of quantitative methodologies and—throughout recent decades—has developed a self-image as a discipline that "masters both types of instruments": qualitative and quantitative. At the same time, it is concerned to defend its scientific qualities against the natural sciences. In this situation, a (even subtle) transgression of methodology from sociology into the arts is considered illegitimate by many colleagues. Moreover, the idea that art and science are substantively different is still very present in German-speaking sociology. The claim that autoethnography is close to literature typically implies fundamental skepticism about its scientific potential.[31]

An obvious answer to this argument is to point out that disciplinary boundaries (and the boundaries of academia as a whole) are constructed and preserved by scholars in their everyday practices. If they decide to extend the current boundaries of their disciplines, they can do so. In practice, things are, of course, not that easy—it takes a common effort, identity politics are complex, and a few researchers in weak academic positions can hardly introduce a sudden change of disciplinary boundaries. But still, this argument shows that academic boundaries are neither natural nor unchangeable.

Even if we acknowledge disciplinary boundaries to be fluid, the identity problem remains. Despite all rhetoric about interdisciplinarity, German-speaking sociology and cultural anthropology are still very eager to preserve their distinctiveness and educate their students in a specific framework of disciplinary identification. The reasons are complex and cannot be discussed here, but the effects are strong and probably add a great deal to the ambivalent attitude toward autoethnography within our disciplines.

Strategic Mistake

The "strategic mistake" argument is mostly formulated behind closed doors. It does not point toward a specific theoretical or methodological problem but toward the strategic dangers of engaging with autoethnography. If qualitative researchers allow this approach to be considered an option—that is the core of the argument—they risk a good deal of the reputation their colleagues have worked for throughout the last 40 years.

This argument can be found in both cultural anthropology and sociology but is typically formulated with much more emphasis in sociology. Given the history of qualitative research as a "second culture" within this discipline,[32] it is easy to understand what these critics are afraid of. Although nowadays most sociologists consider both qualitative and quantitative research to be valuable qualitative research still faces more pressure to defend its scientific standards within the disciplinary community. Quite obviously, the battle for equal recognition of qualitative and quantitative approaches is far from won. In this situation, autoethnography becomes a strategic threat for qualitative

research in general. With its focus on the subjective dimension of research and its refusal to live up to most of the classic criteria for good sociological research, it raises a number of issues that qualitative researchers have been trying to get off the table throughout the last decades.[33]

In cultural anthropology, the debate between qualitative and quantitative approaches is not a debate within the discipline but much more a debate about the identity of the discipline as a whole. The emphasis on qualitative methodologies is considered a central feature of cultural anthropology and becomes particularly important in struggles for resources with other disciplines.

Anxiety about risking the scientific reputation of qualitative research, perhaps even of the disciplines themselves, might also be a reason for the lack of critical publications on the topic in both sociology and cultural anthropology. Critique implies a certain level of attention to an approach, and one of the most powerful weapons in academic discourse is to ignore it.

Nothing New

The "nothing new claim" usually comes up at the end of a longer discussion and is often combined with some of the abovementioned arguments. Some colleagues argue that the idea of using the researcher as the empirical starting point is not new, and the qualities of autoethnography can be retained much better within other methodological frameworks. They refer to approaches that have been used in the German-speaking countries for a longer time (such as ethnopsychoanalysis) and suggest staying with them rather than engaging with something that is new and less elaborated.

This argument is interesting for two reasons: It stages an otherwise marginalized approach (such as ethnopsychoanalysis) as an established alternative, and it claims that autoethnography, the contested method that is confronted by all of the critique we have discussed above, is, at the end of the day, neither new nor radical. As shown above, autoethnography does have a long history within the social and cultural sciences, but this history is usually neglected. Like some of the other arguments, this one also has a strong tendency to protect the methodological status quo of the discipline and, thereby, support the academic identity of the field.

Strong Reflexivity in the German-Speaking Cultural and Social Sciences

We began this contribution with a characterization of autoethnography as an example of epistemologically strong reflexivity and discussed several lines of criticism of this specific approach. Before we conclude, we want to explore what this teaches us about the standing of strong reflexivity in the German-speaking cultural and social sciences in general.

Much of the critique toward autoethnography can also be directed toward other strongly reflexive approaches and, indeed, German-speaking colleagues from ethnopsychoanalysis or participatory research tell us that they face similar challenges. All research that uses the experiences of the researcher as a privileged source of data exposes itself to the accusation of taking the researcher too seriously, of being narcissistic, and privileging the academic milieu. Furthermore, the philosophical argument claiming that there is no way from introspection to knowledge about "the world out there" (see fn. 16) affects all strongly reflexive approaches—although, apart from some variants of ethnopsychoanalysis (e.g., Weiss, 1996), autoethnography is the only approach that takes the story of the researcher as the *central* and most important source of data. The critiques that point to a lack of theory, arguments, and tangible results are directed against autoethnography's performative research logic and do not affect strongly reflexive approaches that remain within a "classical" interpretive paradigm. Interpretive research allows for theories, arguments, and results in the classic sense of propositional claims about what is going on in the field (see for example, the contributions of Siouti & Roukonen-Engler and Müller in this issue). On the other hand, these critiques seem to function as a typical boundary work argument that can be directed against every approach that does not try to live up to the "hard science" ideal of academic research. Throughout the history of academia, this argument has been used to maintain and strengthen the "scientific" status of those formulating it. The affective immediacy and preclusion of critique argument also concern all strongly reflexive approaches. Whenever the researcher becomes visible as a vulnerable private person, she exposes herself to this argument. This critique affects autoethnography more strongly because it depends on the creation of an emotional bridge between the writer and the reader. Participatory research and ethnopsychoanalysis do not need that bridge in the same way. The political argument (endorsement of neoliberal policies) can also be directed toward all strongly reflexive approaches as they all use the researcher's self for academic purposes. But, again, the critique is much stronger when it is directed against autoethnography because, here, the researcher is the central and most important source of data. The identity argument can be held against every strongly reflexive approach because all of them transgress the borders of disciplines or contemporary notions of academic research in one way or another: Ethnopsychoanalysis crosses the border into psychoanalysis, participatory research crosses the border into social work. The "strategic mistake" argument expresses an anxiety of the whole field of German-speaking qualitative research. It can be directed toward every approach that endangers the reputation of the field with regard to research funding, chairs, and other sites of the academic power struggles. It relates to all other points of criticism and helps to

understand the vehemence with which some of these critiques are formulated and the tendency of some qualitative researchers to dismiss strongly reflexive approaches altogether. Although some of these arguments work toward a preservation and strengthening of disciplinary and methodological identities, many of them also point toward issues whose consideration can help to advance strongly reflexive research. In any case, a debate with the "methodological mainstream" promises to be rewarding for both sides.

Conclusion

Autoethnography operates at the frontiers of our disciplines. This position makes it irritating, provoking, and risky, but it also provides for a strong source of inspiration. Its reception is ambivalent; curiosity and interest are mixed with a great number of reservations and critique. This reveals implicit rules within our fields and, thereby, opens up a space for their renegotiation. Autoethnography triggers debates about the borders of disciplines and academia as a whole, about research ethics, research politics, epistemology, and modes of academic argumentation and critique. It provides a stimulus to discuss the relevance and limits of "reflexivity," the concept and role of ethnography in our fields, and the experience and relevance of ethnographic research "at home."

We are convinced that an active engagement with autoethnography and other strongly reflexive approaches can enrich our disciplines with new ways of collecting, interpreting, and representing data, as well as sharpening, accentuating, or questioning the self-concepts of our fields. It might also support a change in academic culture that affects all areas of scholarly work. In this contribution, we tried to show that the borders of disciplines, as well as academia as a whole, can not only be exceeded but also shifted, and that an active engagement with this process can be a valuable source of inspiration. It may result in an expansion of the range of legitimate academic work, and it may give rise to new fundamental debates and elicit critical ideas and stimulation for the future of our disciplines.

Notes

1. Among the different types of autoethnographies, we focus on *evocative* approaches in the tradition of Ellis & Bochner (2000).

2. We are grateful to our colleagues, students, and reviewers for their thoughtful and useful comments on earlier versions of this article. Particular thanks go to Angela Kuehner and Hella von Unger. Some of the ideas presented here have been previously formulated in an article for the *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* (Austrian Journal of Volkskunde; Ploder & Stadlbauer, 2013).

3. We do not aim at a complete and final report on our respective disciplines' self-concepts and their relationship to autoethnography. Given the variety of schools and styles of research in both fields, this would be a futile endeavor. When we talk about "sociology" and "cultural anthropology," our analysis represents our own perspective on these fields, shaped by our academic training and the departments we have worked in.

4. Two important media for the "import" of autoethnography into the German-speaking cultural and social sciences were the writings of Rainer Winter (e.g., Winter, 2011; Winter & Niederer, 2008) and a Forum Qualitative Research (FSQ) Special Issue on Performative Social Science (Jones et al., 2008). Autoethnography was also a topic in two lunch lectures (see Diaz-Bone, 2011; Winter, 2011) and two workshops (Rainer Winter, 2009, and Johanna Stadlbauer, 2015) at the *Berlin Annual Meeting on Qualitative Research*. In cultural anthropology, the following publications have recently dealt with autoethnography: Bönisch-Brednich, 2012; Bürkert, Keßler, Vogel, and Wagner-Boeck, 2012; O'Dell and Willim, 2011; Ploder and Stadlbauer, 2013. For sociology, see Antony, 2015; Geimer, 2015, 2011; Zifonun, 2012. FQS continues to publish contributions on autoethnography, mostly written by colleagues whose main academic affiliation is outside of the German speaking countries. Interestingly, the topic of performance and performativity was prominently discussed in German-speaking philosophy and *Theaterwissenschaften* only a few years before autoethnography (and other performative approaches) started to appear in the German-speaking social and cultural sciences (see for example, Fischer-Lichte, 2012; Krämer, 2001; Wirth, 2002).

5. In the German, the term *scientific* is translated as *wissenschaftlich*. Compared with the English *science*, the German term includes all academic disciplines and is not restricted to the "hard sciences." The English term "cultural studies" is, for example, often translated as "Kulturwissenschaften" (literally: cultural *sciences*).

6. Our main sites of accidental fieldwork were the fields of sociology and cultural anthropology, but also the interdisciplinary contexts of gender studies and qualitative research networks. Large parts of of our material are reactions to our own academic work. We wrote a paper for the *Austrian Journal of Volkskunde* (Ploder & Stadlbauer, 2013) in which we called for a critically reflexive but also courageous use of autoethnography in research and teaching; we gave a paper on autoethnography as an approach to the study of emotions at an Austrian conference on the "emotional turn" in cultural anthropology (Dornbirn, 2013); we taught two courses on autoethnography and its relevance for cultural anthropological research (2012, 2014 in Graz, Austria), presented ideas on the relationship between autoethnography and ethnopsychoanalysis at a conference on subjectivity and fieldwork relationships in Germany (Bremen, 2014), talked about autoethnography and research on bodies at a gender studies conference in

Vienna (2015), introduced autoethnography as an alternative approach to writing and representation in qualitative research (2015 in Graz, Austria, later in the year in Germany), gave an introductory workshop on autoethnography as a method for the social sciences in Berlin (2015), and talked about auto-ethnography as a mode of radical reflexivity (Munich, 2015). We engaged in most of these activities together but also gave some presentations and workshops individually. Our papers, presentations, and teaching resulted in feedback from students and peers during class and conference discussions, coffee breaks, conversations in hallways, and on long train rides, but also some unpublished written accounts such as emails, anonymous paper reviews, and so on.

7. In fact, autoethnography refuses to separate the cognitive, emotional, and physical elements of the human condition and concrete experiences. In the following, we will use the terms "emotion" and "emotional" in a broad sense, including physical as well as cognitive components and being deeply rooted in social relations (see Barbalet, 1998 as one of many authors who share this broad terminology). Whenever we talk about "affects," we address a concrete emotional experience within a particular situation.

8. In this article, we focus on critical reactions, although we have encountered a lot of curiosity and enthusiasm as well. After publishing an article on autoethnography in the Austrian Journal of *Volkskunde* (Ploder & Stadlbauer, 2013), we received emails from previously unknown colleagues who also (mostly silently) work on the topic or are interested in it. Other scholars (young as well as established) saw connections to their work and realized that part of the work they had completed to date was in fact some kind of autoethnography. Several colleagues sent us their texts with the remark: "I actually also wrote an autoethnography but I didn't name it as such." In particular, students and other younger colleagues often shared our fascination with the genre, but this was always combined with the anxiety of academic rejection. Several students asked us whether we really thought that they would "get away" with this kind of research in their bachelor's or master's thesis. Apart from the other reasons mentioned above, it was these irritations, the ambivalence, and the cautious curiosity that made the approach worth exploring for us.

9. Denzin (2003) frames it as a method in the canon of *Performative Social Sciences (PSS)*.

10. Although many cultural anthropologists and sociologists combine elements of interpretive and performative research logic, there are some distinct differences between the two: While interpretive research aims at a reconstruction of meanings, a representation of social reality, and conceives of the reader as a consumer of research results, performative research starts from the assumption that meaning is constituted in the research process, reality is transformed through research, and readers produce research results. Some elements of performative research logic had already found their way into the work of cultural anthropologists and sociologists during the 1980s in the wake of the *Writing Culture* debate.

11. Allowing for all sorts of strong connections is, therefore, one of the characteristics of good autoethnography.

12. This goal of changing social reality and adopting a moral and political stance has been made explicit in a catalogue of quality criteria by Norman K. Denzin (2003) and seems to merit a more extensive discussion. For a critical analysis of the goal to extend the program of research from describing and understanding to changing and improving social reality, see Geimer (2015), a contribution on "critical arts based inquiry," and German reconstructive social research.

13. As a literary self-narrative, autoethnography has numerous antecedents in the history of literature as well. After ancient and medieval predecessors such as the aphoristic *Meditations of Marcus Aurelius* or *Augustine's Confessions*, the birth of autobiography as a genre is mostly set in the 18th century with *Rousseau's Confessions*. Scientific self-narratives in research also have their own controversial history, which we cannot follow in detail at this point.

14. Brigitte Bönisch-Brednich (2012) identified at least three influential schools of auto-narrative texts: *The Ethnographic Self as Resource, Evocative Autoethnography*, and *Analytic Autoethnography* (combining traditional epistemological paradigms of qualitative social research with autoethnography).

15. This seems to be especially true for Volkskunde/European Ethnology, the anthropological discipline within which Johanna Stadlbauer is situated and where we have taught and published together. For an English-language introduction to the history of the discipline, see Bendix (2012).

16. Due to the reasons mentioned above, only a small part of the data we use is published material; we mainly draw on informal conversations with colleagues and students at conferences, in classes, and at other gatherings (see Note 5).

17. This claim implicitly refers to a specific understanding of epistemological solipsism. While philosophy has developed rather fine-grained approaches to the solipsism problem throughout the last decades, the claim we talk about refers to a rather simple version. It holds that we can only have secure knowledge about mental contents that are directly accessible to us.

18. One proponent of this critique is Wolff-Michael Roth (2009), a scholar who works mainly in the United States but cooperates a lot with colleagues in the German-speaking countries. He attests a "frequently unprincipled, egoistical and egotistical, narcissistic preoccupation with and auto-affection of the Self" (paragraph 10) with regard to some forms of autoethnography. According to him, this results in ethical problems: "The problem with the latter form in which the idea of auto/ethnography realizes itself lies in the complete abstraction of the Self from its constitutional relation with and for the Other (i.e., the generalized other) . . . writing the Self without acknowledging the Other is itself a violent (symbolic) act against the ethical condition that comes with being human" (para. 11). This quote sums up what we often heard from our German-speaking colleagues. The German sociologist Alexander Geimer (2015) makes a similar point.

19. In fact, it is the only argument raising strictly methodological concerns.

20. In 1982, a programmatic anthology for reflexivity in cultural anthropology was published. Its authors made clear that there was no notable tradition of reflexive engagement with the researchers themselves, and the discipline was, therefore, far from the "excessive reflexivity" claimed by its critics (Myerhoff & Ruby, 1982, p. 24).

21. An illustrative example is Samuel Veissiere's (2011) study on sex work in Brazil, where a White anthropologist who teaches in Canada shares insights into his own sexual desire. Similarly, Martini and Jauhola (2014) use autoethnographic approaches and a postcolonial framework to reflect on the politics of their own professional experiences as aid workers and researchers. Their article is also an example of a strong understanding of reflexivity as they thoroughly, as well as creatively, work through each other's personal accounts.

22. Geimer (2011) talks about a "lack of truth claims" (p. 301f.) in autoethnography. He claims that autoethnography "abandons the methodologically controlled understanding of the other" for the sake of "political and moral intervention."

23. This leads to a set of interesting questions about the history and self-understanding of German-speaking sociology that cannot be pursued here. Still, it should be mentioned that there have been attempts to introduce the problem of representation to sociology in recent years. The main context was research on migration and racism where several colleagues started to work with postcolonial theory about 15 years ago (e.g., Reuter & Villa, 2010). Thereby, the crisis of representation entered sociology "through the backdoor" but, so far, has not left a major mark on the discipline as a whole.

24. In analytic autoethnography, however, active theorizing by the researcher is one of the key elements of the research process (Anderson, 2006; Antony, 2015).

25. For an overview of the German-speaking debate on the criteria of qualitative research, see Flick (2010).

26. In fact, critique of autoethnographic work does require sites and modes of academic communication that are hardly established in German-speaking academic communities.

27. Of course, non-autoethnographers also criticize autoethnographies, but usually with very general arguments against the approach as such.

28. We are grateful to Hella von Unger and Hans J. Pongratz for pointing out these issues.

29. Another problematic area could be autoethnography's aim to be "useful" to society and individuals (see for example, Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, paragraph 34)—It aligns with changes in university policies that increasingly demand marketable, communicable, and applied research findings.

30. At least, this seems to be an issue in the comparatively small field of German-speaking Volkskunde/European Ethnology, maybe more than in other anthropological disciplines (such as Cultural and Social Anthropology) in the German-speaking context.

31. For an explicit formulation of this critique, see Geimer (2011).

32. Although the history of qualitative sociology dates back to the earliest stages of the discipline, it faced a long and complex process of re-establishment in German-speaking sociology after World War 2. For a long time, quantitative research was considered to be *the* sociological approach, and even today, many sociological textbooks on "empirical social research" deal mainly, or even exclusively, with quantitative approaches. In 2005, Uwe Flick described qualitative research in Germany as "still struggling in establishing itself in terms of institutionalization, funding and its role in the regular methods training in sociology departments" (paragraph 47).

33. This observation also helps us understand our mentors' recommendation not to engage with this approach too deeply, and it helps to understand why the number of colleagues who write on the topic (even critically) is so much smaller than the number of those who have a strong opinion about it.

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Author Biographies

Andrea Ploder is a research and teaching assistant at the University of Graz. Prior to this, she was research and teaching assistant at the University of Salzburg (2012-2013) and at the University of Graz (2008-2012). She was a visiting scholar at the Technical University of Berlin (2013), University of California Berkeley (2014), and the University of Chicago (2015), and guest lecturer at the University Frankfurt am Main (2013 & 2014). In 2010, she and Johanna Stadlbauer founded the Network Qualitative Research Graz; in 2013, Andrea Ploder co-founded the Graz Methods Center. Her current research areas include qualitative research, history of the social sciences, cultural sociology, sociological theory, and science and technology studies.

Johanna Stadlbauer is a postdoc assistant in cultural anthropology at the University of Klagenfurt. She completed her PhD at the University of Graz where she was also an academic staff member from 2010 to 2015, in 2014 with a study of gender and privileged migration. In 2010, she and Andrea Ploder founded the "Network Qualitative Research Graz." Her current research and teaching interests are Qualitative Methodology, Migration Studies, Bodies, Sexualities, and Social Movements.