
Autoethnography and the “So What?” Question

Welcome to the third volume of *JoAE*. Similar to the previous two editorials, here we offer an update regarding the journal, as well as ponder one of the stupefying dilemmas we have encountered: the “So What?” question.

Last year we found ourselves in some manuscript submission conundrums. The primary issue involved the processing of manuscripts. As of this writing (September 2021), we have 90+ submissions for this year, and more than 200 manuscripts in some form of revision or review from the previous two years. Using Google’s G Suite for manuscript submission and correspondence was not sustainable. We needed to evolve.

We migrated to the web-based journal management system Scholastica. We made some beginners’ mistakes, but the system makes organizing submissions quicker and easier. Moreover, we felt we were overwhelming our editorial board and ad hoc reviewers. After consultation with experienced journal editors, we began issuing more “desk rejects.” If manuscripts do not follow submission guidelines¹ and/or disregards our previous editors’ introductions² or the *JoAE* blog,³ we no longer send them out for peer review. We appreciate our reviewers and want to protect their time and effort; they offer their passion and unpaid labor to make this journal go.

Another issue was the overwhelming number of COVID-19 submissions. We made the decision to reject a majority of these. Why? Most were chronologies: “This happened, and this happened, and this happened.” They did not satisfy the showing-telling characteristic of solid autoethnographic writing. Moreover, while providing personal experience, a majority of manuscripts did not answer the all-important “So What?” question: Why does (or should) your experience matter to others? Why should readers care about your issues and experiences? For COVID-19 manuscripts, we believe the So What? question was (is) difficult to answer because we are all still living with the pandemic.⁴

The “So What?” dilemma was not just a challenge for COVID-19 submissions. Many submissions we desk rejected also did not answer the “So What?” question. In some manuscripts it was not clear if the author even considered the “So What?” question. Therefore, in this editorial, we thought it would be meaningful to consider the “So What?” question not only for *JoAE* but for autoethnographic research in general.⁵

We reflected on why some autoethnographers appear to have difficulty answering the “So What?” question. We suggest that to answer the question, autoethnographers need to seriously consider four “How” questions:

1. How is my autoethnography pertinent to individuals besides myself? Yes, autoethnography is personal. You had an experience. So did we. Why should anyone care?⁶ Excellent autoethnographies move beyond oneself by connecting with the relationships we have with others and/or with cultural beliefs, norms, situations, structures, and institutions. Excellent autoethnographies also demonstrate verisimilitude.⁷
2. How is my autoethnography connected to autoethnographic research? We've had submissions that *never* mention autoethnography. We get manuscripts that don't show us how extant research informs a manuscript's topic or focus. What ideas and arguments have other writers and researchers made about your topic or focus? Tell us. And then tell us how your experiences align with, or diverge from, these ideas and arguments.
3. How is my autoethnography pertinent to theory? There are both implicit and explicit theoretical traditions that inform your autoethnography. What theoretical concerns does your article address? How does your autoethnography (re)frame your research topic?
4. How is my autoethnography pertinent to policy, whether international, national, local, or organizational? For example, how does your autoethnography of bullying help to change practices at school or the workplace? How can your autoethnography be used to challenge racist microaggressions? How can your autoethnography assist in changing anti-trans laws in your community? At its best, autoethnography looks to create change, emancipate, and make life more humane.

This list is not all-encompassing, nor do all the “how” questions need to be answered to fully answer the “So What?” question.

Answering the “So What?” question is clearer when pursuing research in the sciences. “This analysis is the first in the United States to assess COVID-19 vaccination coverage among pregnant women.”⁸ This statement (and article) has obvious important health care implications. The Event Horizon Telescope Collaboration answered the “So What?” question when they showed “Our radio-wave observations thus provide powerful evidence for the presence of supermassive black holes in centers of galaxies and as the central engines of active galactic nuclei.”⁹ They are moving physics forward. Even in traditional quantitative and qualitative social science research, the “So What?” question is more easily answered. “Group identification and stream familiarity were found to be positively related to perceived credibility. These findings hold implications for using video game streams as a marketing tool . . .”¹⁰ But, for autoethnography, answering the question requires much more skill, deliberation, and nuance.

We want to publish articles that use autoethnography to add to understandings of the complexities of personal and social experience. Or manuscripts that add to or complicate our understandings of the philosophical underpinnings of autoethnography. Or manuscripts that examine new subjects through an autoethnographic lens. The “So What?” question is critical, and authors must show and tell why their research is important and necessary, as well as why we, readers, should care about their work.

Insightful and nuanced answers and analyses will help steer manuscripts away from a dreary desk reject ■

NOTES

1. Submission guidelines, including *Chicago Manual of Style* examples can be found here: https://docs.google.com/document/d/131WfN_f7GoTu_6Mo-Uu0rPIAiA3vVr7GlmPFMsWn_w/edit
2. Tony E. Adams and Andrew F. Herrmann, “Expanding our Autoethnographic Future,” *Journal of Autoethnography* 1, no. 1 (2020): 1–8. doi:10.1525/joae.2020.1.1.1; Andrew F. Herrmann and Tony E. Adams. “Learning to be Editors.” *Journal of Autoethnography* 2, no. 1 (2021): 1–4. doi:10.1525/joae.2021.2.1.1
3. www.ucpress.edu/blog/48826/introducing-journal-of-autoethnography
4. Andrew F. Herrmann, “Forum Introduction: Frailty and Strength During COVID-19,” *Journal of Autoethnography* 2, no. 2 (2021): 217–220. doi: 10.1525/joae.2021.2.2.217
5. See Robert L. Krizek, “Ethnography as the Excavation of Personal Narrative,” in *Expressions of Ethnography*, edited by Robin Clair (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000), 141–151. Bob continually reminds us to ask the all-important taken-for-granted questions about research.
6. As Mitch Allen, a visionary publisher of autoethnographies, remarked during an interview: “[With autoethnographies] you have to look at experience analytically. Otherwise [you’re] telling [your] story—and that’s nice—but people do that on ‘Oprah’ [a U.S. television program] every day. Why is your story more valid than anyone else’s? What makes your story more valid is that you are a researcher. You have a set of theoretical and methodological tools and a research literature to use. That’s your advantage. If you can’t frame it around these tools and literature and just frame it as ‘my story,’ then why or how should I privilege your story over anyone else’s I see 25 times a day on TV?” (Personal Interview, May 4, 2006).
7. See Arthur P. Bochner, “Criteria against Ourselves.” *Qualitative Inquiry* 6, no. 2 (2000): 266–272. doi:10.1177/107780040000600209. See also Carolyn Ellis, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography* (Thousand Oaks, CA: AltaMira, 2004), particularly pp. 122–127 on verisimilitude.
8. Irene A. Stafford, Jacqueline G. Parchem, and Baha M. Sibai. “The Coronavirus Disease 2019 Vaccine in Pregnancy: Risks, Benefits, and Recommendations,” *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* 224, no. 5 (2021): 484–495. doi:10.1016/j.ajog.2021.01.022
9. The Event Horizon Telescope Collaboration, Kazunori Akiyama, Antxon Alberdi, Walter Alef, Keiichi Asada, Rebecca Azulay, Anne-Kathrin Baczko, David Ball, et al. “First M87 Event Horizon Telescope Results. IV. Imaging the Central Supermassive Black Hole,” *The Astrophysical Journal Letters* 875, no. 1 (2019): L4. doi:10.3847/2041-8213/ab0e85
10. Lisa Brianne Foster and Robert Andrew Dunn. “Marketing to Gamers: The Effects of Video Game Streams on Consumer Attitudes and Behaviors.” In *Digital Marketing Strategies and Models for Competitive Business*, edited by Robert Andrew Dunn (IGI Global, 2020), 160–186.