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# Representing Ourselves in Information Science Research: A Methodological Essay on Autoethnography

# La représentation de nous-mêmes dans la recherche en sciences de l'information : Essai méthodologique sur l'auto-ethnographie

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**Abstract:** Autoethnography offers a promising methodology to illuminate information experiences, yet it has been relegated to the margins of information science. This paper reviews examples and critiques of autoethnographic research and supports the idea that autoethnographic approaches increase information professionals' awareness of their cultural assumptions and provide a framework for analysing such assumptions when developing programs and services (Michels 2010, 166).

By showcasing an exemplary autoethnographic study (Michels 2010), this paper presents autoethnography as a useful methodology that acknowledges the researcher's subjectivity, accounts for the affective aspects of information experiences, and focuses on how personal stories can teach us about information behaviour.

**Keywords:** autoethnography, interpretive methods, narrative, reflexivity, information experience

**Résumé :** L'auto-ethnographie propose une méthodologie prometteuse permettant d'éclairer les expériences informationnelles. Elle se trouve malgré cela reléguée dans les marges des sciences de l'information. Cet article examine plusieurs exemples et critiques de la recherche auto-ethnographique, et soutient l'idée que l'approche auto-ethnographique accroît la prise de conscience chez les professionnels de l'information de leurs présupposés culturels, et fournit un cadre d'analyse de ces présupposés lors de l'élaboration de programmes et de services (Michels 2010, 166). Avec pour illustration une étude auto-ethnographique exemplaire (Michels 2010), cet article montre l'utilité de l'auto-ethnographie comme méthode capable de reconnaître la subjectivité du chercheur, d'expliquer les aspects affectifs des expériences informationnelles, et de se concentrer sur ce que les histoires personnelles peuvent nous apprendre sur les comportements informationnels.

**Mots-clés :** auto-ethnographie, méthodes d'interprétation, narrations, réflexivité, expérience informationnelle

## Introduction

In the midst of the postmodern movement, anthropologists and their colleagues in other social sciences began to explore narratives about personal experience as a viable research methodology for analysing cultural phenomena. In his widely cited monograph *Culture and Truth* (1989), leading cultural anthropologist Renato Rosaldo reflected on his own grief over the death of his wife, fellow anthropologist Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, as a way to understand Ilongot ritual headhunting practices in the Philippines. During fieldwork in the Philippines in 1981, Michelle Rosaldo died from an accidental fall from a 65-foot precipice (Rosaldo 1989, 4). In the opening essay to *Culture and Truth*, entitled “Grief and a Headhunter’s Rage,” Renato Rosaldo introduces the reader to the Ilongot headhunter who expresses that “rage, born of grief, impels him to kill his fellow human beings” (1). Rosaldo then goes on to describe his personal account of losing his wife in the field. In contrast with earlier generations of anthropologists who advocated detached objectivity in the field (Clifford 1983), Rosaldo illustrated that rather than diluting the theories presented in his monograph, reflexivity enabled him to interpret a cultural phenomenon that eluded objective explanation. By reflecting on rage as a response to bereavement, Rosaldo demonstrated that a researcher’s personal experiences have the potential to inform one’s understanding of human behaviour and social relations in other cultural contexts.

Autoethnographic work such as Rosaldo’s is not without its critics (e.g., Anderson 2006; Gans 1999; Konner 1990; Madison 2006), and autoethnography remains a contested methodology. Scholars within and outside of cultural anthropology have pondered whether lines can be drawn between autobiography and ethnography if we are to incorporate our own stories into our research. Certainly, autoethnography presents challenges to conventional assumptions about the removal of bias from research and the criteria with which we evaluate research. As it develops as a methodology that creatively combines elements from autobiographical narrative and ethnography with an aim to understand the researcher’s sociocultural context, autoethnography will likely continue to face criticism about its ability to inform rigorous research.

Nonetheless, the autoethnographer’s intimate knowledge of the cultural and social setting in which he/she is situated can help the audience to “understand human group life” (Kleinknecht 2007, 243) through the lens of one individual’s experience. In information science, much time and effort are spent focusing on the information practices of users, but literature dedicated to our own information experiences is scarce. Narrative methodological approaches such as autoethnography can offer significant insights into how which individuals interact with information; how such interactions are shaped by the norms and practices of the social, cultural, and professional groups to which people belong; and how information services and technologies might be improved by taking into account a wider range of user experiences—including the experiences of information scholars and practitioners. Although autoethnography offers an alternative methodology to illuminate information experiences and transcend artificial boundaries between the self, culture, and society, examples of this form of inquiry remain

relegated to the sidelines of more conventional approaches to information science research.

In the pages to follow, I offer an operational definition of autoethnography and review significant examples of autoethnographic research. For instance, Barbara Myerhoff's (1978) pioneering autoethnographic research on Jewish communities in southern California set a precedent for anthropologists to study their own cultures and social groups rather than merely focusing on "exotic peoples." In addition, I review notable critiques such as sociologist Leon Anderson's (2006) arguments against "evocative" autoethnography in favour of a more "analytic" approach. Most important, I articulate the relevance of autoethnography for information science research. David H. Michels's (2010) article "The Place of the Person in LIS Research," published in the *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science*, is presented as an exemplary autoethnographic study. In it he challenges widely held characterizations of library users by applying poetic, visual, and narrative devices to reflect on his dual identity as graduate student and academic librarian. I also consider possible avenues for the application of autoethnography in future information research. While autoethnography is not without its limitations, it can serve as a useful methodological framework for information scholars who seek to understand information practices in their own communities, by acknowledging the researcher's subjectivity, accounting for the affective dimensions of information experiences, and emphasizing the lessons that personal stories can teach us about human information behaviour.

### What Is "Autoethnography"?

During the 1960s and 1970s in American anthropology, the terms *emic* and *etic* began to be used widely to distinguish between analyses of human cultural settings and their members based on indigenous world-views (*emic*), and such analyses based on criteria derived from outside of particular cultural contexts (*etic*) (Barnard 2002, 275). This distinction was introduced by Kenneth L. Pike (1954) in *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior*, in which he linked the linguistic concepts of "phonemic" and "phonetic" to the analysis of cultural data (Barnard 2002, 275). The *emic-etic* distinction is noteworthy because it serves as a conceptual framework from which anthropologists and other social scientists have approached their fieldwork. While *etic* analysis tends to "imply a value judgment" by imposing certain "universal" definitions or classification systems on the group being observed, *emic* analysis strives to include culturally specific ideological categories (276). Nevertheless, *emic* models are not inherently "native model[s]"; rather, they are constructed by the researcher based on his/her interpretation of the cultural phenomena observed and/or experienced in the field (277).

Autoethnography developed at a time when anthropologists and their colleagues in other social science disciplines were calling into question the relevance of the *emic-etic* distinction for the analysis of cultural phenomena. Influenced by more reflexive approaches that became prominent during the postmodern movement of the 1980s, many anthropologists who employed ethnography as

their primary methodology for studying human cultures turned to other literary forms to guide their work. As Anderson describes, the turn by ethnographers towards narrative approaches was largely the result of a “crisis in representation” (2006, 383) in the 1980s, which challenged conventional ethnographic approaches and their presentation of the ethnographer as an invisible, omniscient figure telling tales of exotic cultures (383–84). Meanwhile, ethnography was being challenged for exploiting the lives of research participants by collecting cultural data to advance researchers’ careers, and its questionable ability to accurately represent social realities (Hammersley 1990, 15). While ethnographers remained focused on writing about the ways in which “people see and talk about their everyday social activities and groupings, and the wider worlds they live in” (Sanjek 2002, 299), the shift to reflexive research approaches enabled ethnographers to study and write about their own cultures.

To provide a working definition of autoethnography, it is necessary to outline some of the basic principles and assumptions of ethnography. Although definitions of ethnography are diverse, a useful description is that ethnography is a social research methodology which typically studies human behaviour in small-scale “everyday contexts” (Hammersley 1990, 1), focuses on observation and unstructured conversations as its primary data-gathering techniques, collects as wide a range of data as possible without imposing fixed analytic categories at the beginning of fieldwork, and analyses data by interpreting “the meanings and functions of human actions” (2). Ethnography is primarily a qualitative methodology, although statistical analysis may play a “subordinate role” (2) in some studies. Ethnography is based on the following assumptions: social research should be conducted in “natural settings” (7) to appropriately represent human behaviour relative to the context in which it occurs; ethnographers must learn about and understand their research participants’ culture to explain their actions in a valid way (7–8); and theoretical explanations of observed cultural practices must develop over the course of the research process, rather than being set out in hypotheses before ethnographers enter the field setting (8). Since human behaviour cannot be controlled in the same manner as can that of inanimate objects—or even other animals—ethnographic research is not evaluated on the basis of its ability to replicate findings but based on its ability to examine “‘naturally occurring’ behaviour” (57) in a plausible and credible way that has relevance to various practitioners, researchers, and the public (61–62). Thus, plausibility, credibility, and relevance remain the most appropriate criteria for assessing the validity of findings about small-scale cultural settings and the dynamic phenomena that occur within them.

Contemporary ethnographers have expressed concern with the ways in which lived experience is represented in texts; inevitably, aspects of everyday life will be left out of the ethnographic record, and it is the researcher’s task to present the participants’ perspectives to the best of his/her abilities without imbuing the text with his/her own bias. Recently, however, ethnographers such as Carolyn Ellis have embraced autoethnography as a methodology that leaves space for their own ideas and experiences to be included. In essence, autoethnography is a

methodology that blends elements from autobiography and ethnography—respectively, a literary genre and a research methodology, which share a central focus on narrative. Autoethnography encourages the researcher to be “both the author and focus of the story” and to “expand and deepen our understandings of the lives we have lived, and the work we have done” (Ellis 2009, 13). It is not a narcissistic methodology but rather serves a simultaneous purpose to “expand scholarship about human experience” (16) and to “provide companionship and coping strategies for dealing with personal disappointments, traumas, and losses; and help us understand, reframe, and live through collective natural and human-made disasters that increasingly seem to be part of our lives” (17). As Ellis eloquently writes in her “meta-autoethnography,”<sup>1</sup> *Revision*, “a good story is one that others can take in and use for themselves” (230).

In her chapter “Narrative Analysis” in *The Qualitative Researcher’s Companion*, Catherine Kohler Riessman (2002, 217–70) discusses the use of personal narratives as data, the problematic nature of representing human experience through narrative analysis, and strategies for dealing with possible “non-truths” encountered when conducting ethnographic research. With regard to personal narrative, Riessman argues that although “individuals become the autobiographical narratives by which they tell their lives” (218), these individual stories become intertwined with stories of others in the community. Thus, autoethnographic research, while presented from the perspective of the author’s experiences, can convey valuable insights about the broader culture, society, or institution in which the researcher is situated. Adding to this, sociologist Susan E. Chase (2005) examines narrative inquiry as a way to challenge hegemonic cultural discourses and foster social change through in-depth reflections on alternative beliefs and practices. She describes autoethnography as a research approach in which the researcher places primary focus on producing an interpretive biography of his/her own stories. Researchers who use autoethnography as a methodological framework present their stories in a variety of literary and creative forms, including plays, poems, and novels (Chase 2005, 423). According to Chase, autoethnography aims to perform or illustrate cultural experiences, rather than merely describing them; as such, this methodology disrupts the power dynamics inherent in “traditional forms of representation, and traditional social science orientations to audiences” (423). Although autoethnography has not yet been used extensively in information science, it holds potential as a methodological framework from which information researchers can present personal narratives and reflect on broader issues that have relevance outside of their immediate context.

### **Social Science Research Gets Personal: Key Examples of Autoethnography**

To understand autoethnography’s methodological relevance for information science, it is worth noting some of the key works about autoethnography and studies that have employed it as a guiding methodology. I began my literature review by referring to works cited in entries on ethnography and narrative inquiry in

widely used handbooks of qualitative research—namely, *The Qualitative Researcher's Companion* (Huberman and Miles 2002), *Reading Ethnographic Research: A Critical Guide* (Hammersley 1990), and *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). I then used a backward chaining/snowball method to identify additional scholarly, peer-reviewed articles and book chapters to which the secondary sources cited in the handbooks referred. In addition, I searched a comprehensive database of dissertations and theses for recent English-language doctoral dissertations, using *autoethnography* (and variations of the term) as a subject term and limiting the search to the last three years, to assess the adoption of autoethnography across disciplines since the publication of Michels's exploratory study in 2010. Finally, I referred to Ellis's new edited volume, *Handbook of Autoethnography* (Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis 2013b), to identify additional leading scholars from various disciplines who use autoethnographic methods in their work.

In response to autoethnographies such as Myerhoff's in which the researcher uses narrative to reflect on emotional responses to sociocultural phenomena in the context of his/her own community, Anderson argues for social science researchers to adopt "analytic autoethnography" (2006, 373–95). According to Anderson, "analytic autoethnography" is similar to "evocative autoethnography"<sup>2</sup> in presenting accounts by the researcher as a member of the group or community under study but differs in its "commitment to theoretical analysis" (378). From Anderson's point of view, "evocative autoethnography," with its emphasis on personal, emotional experiences in a social or cultural setting, is merely committed to conveying stories about the researcher's subjectivity (386). However, Anderson's suggested approach has been challenged by scholars such as DeLysa Burnier (2006), who argue that the separation between "evocative" and "analytic" autoethnography perpetuates the kind of gendered dichotomies described below.<sup>3</sup> Evidently, autoethnography, in spite of being invoked by anthropologists and other social science researchers as a methodology since at least the 1980s, is a diverse, creative, and contested approach to the study of human cultures and social relations.

In addition, anthropologist Deborah Reed-Danahay's (2009) article about social science researchers (such as cultural anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner) who study the academic settings in which they participate or with which they are familiar provides an excellent analysis of the varying degrees of proximity that researchers experience to the social groups they study. Moreover, autoethnographic approaches to studies of educational settings may inform the adoption of similar methods in studies of information institutions, particularly with regard to shared concerns about learning, literacy, and the power dynamics involved in interactions between information professionals and information users. Earlier works about autoethnography include anthropologist David M. Hayano's article on autoethnography as a method, methodology, and theoretical framework, which asserts that autoethnography offers researchers the ability to "intuit culturally significant questions and answers" (1979, 101). Other works, such as Mary Louise Pratt's (1986) chapter on the relationship between personal narrative and conventional



ethnography in James Clifford and George E. Marcus's *Writing Culture*, and Judith Okely's (1992) chapter in *Anthropology and Autobiography* about the historical context of autobiographical writing in anthropology, describe the promise that autoethnography holds for creatively connecting the anthropologist's personal experiences in the field with his/her writing to frame cultural studies. In the edited volume of the proceedings of the 1985 Association of Social Anthropologists conference, *Anthropology at Home*, Tamara Dragadze (1987) discusses the advantages of conducting fieldwork in a familiar context—with reference to autoethnographic research in the former Soviet Union—while Stella Mascarenhas-Keyes (1987) shares her experience in Goa as a so-called native anthropologist who shares the cultural heritage and kinship of her research participants.

More recently, social scientists have elaborated on tacit notions of the self, which inform autoethnographic writing (de Freitas and Paton 2009), and have challenged the concept of autoethnography as self-indulgent (Sparkes 2002). Notably, cultural anthropologist Ruth Behar has discussed the notion of “blurred genres”—instances “when fiction bleeds into memoir and vice versa” (2007a, 145). Behar's earlier work in *Women Writing Culture* (Behar and Gordon 1995)<sup>4</sup> set the groundwork for her reflections on the vulnerability of ethnographers (Behar 1996) and her own autoethnographic accounts of her connection to Cuba's Jewish community (Behar 2007b). In *An Island Called Home*, Behar confronts the liminal identity of the autoethnographer: “I was accustomed to going to other places to do fieldwork. But could Cuba be a fieldsite? Cuba was my native land. How could I be an anthropologist there?” (2007b, 16). Behar's work—in addition to other contemporary autoethnographies (Berry 2013; Dutta and Basu 2013; Metta 2013; Tamas 2013)—addresses the inevitable messiness of researching human cultures, and the complexities involved when researchers study their own.

Since Michels's study was published in 2010, autoethnography has gained popularity as a methodology for doctoral research. My search for English-language dissertations published since 2010 that identify *autoethnography* as a subject term retrieved 103 results (compared with 81 results published between 2007 and 2010, and 41 results for 2004–2007), including studies in anthropology, communication, education, family studies, geography, kinesiology, music, psychology, sociology, and theatre. Such widespread adoption of autoethnography as a methodology within and outside of anthropology illuminates the myriad topics that can be investigated with autoethnographic approaches, as well as the potential it holds for information science research.

Although autoethnography can inform emotionally powerful and thought-provoking cultural analysis, scholars such as feminist anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (1987) have drawn attention to the limitations of autoethnography and the challenges that such a methodology presents to conducting ethically responsible research. As mentioned above, autoethnography cannot be assessed on the basis of the same evaluation criteria used in other scientific disciplines; as a result, questions have been raised about the capacity for studies of one's own community to produce valid, rigorous research. In *Revision*, Ellis notes some of



the most recent examples of critiques of autoethnography, including [Anderson's \(2006\)](#) and [James Buzard's \(2003\)](#) arguments that autoethnography lacks the theoretical rigour of other methodologies. Ellis also describes sociologist [Kathy Charmaz's](#)<sup>5</sup> [\(2006\)](#) critique of autoethnography's preference for conveying the personal experiences of researchers over analysing the cultural group being observed and [Susanne Gannon's \(2006\)](#) post-structural critique of autoethnography's claim that subjects can write about themselves. Finally, Ellis highlights [Craig Gingrich-Philbrook's \(2005\)](#) expressed suspicion about autoethnography's ability to effectively combine an aesthetic approach to narrative with a methodology that tries to produce and present scholarly knowledge ([Ellis 2009](#), 359–60). Other social science researchers have critiqued autoethnography for producing studies that claim to present “true” portrayals of cultures ([Charmaz 2006](#), 399), in spite of the methodology's intentions to empower groups whose voices were previously heard only through the accounts of colonial anthropologists ([Moreira 2009](#), 652). In the contemporary postcolonial era, autoethnographers need to be careful not to promote their studies as authoritative sources about cultural groups, so as to avoid romanticizing “the Other” ([Said 1978](#)) or producing narratives that reduce the diversity within cultures to homogeneous geographically and temporally bound groups.

Despite its critiques, autoethnography has enabled numerous scholars to examine culturally and emotionally sensitive topics such as illness, gender and sexual identity, and death. Examples of such studies include [Myerhoff's \(1978\)](#) monograph and accompanying film, *Number Our Days* ([Littman and Myerhoff 1977](#)), about a community of elderly Jewish immigrants living in Venice, California, and the autoethnographic film *In Her Own Time* ([Jayanti and Littman 1985](#)), which resulted from Myerhoff's search for miracles through Orthodox Jewish rituals following her diagnosis with lung cancer two years into her research in the Fairfax neighbourhood of Los Angeles. Others, such as [Edward M. Bruner \(2010\)](#), have used autoethnography to reflect on personal relationships and their cultural implications. Similarly, [Paula Saukko's](#) autoethnography, *The Anorexic Self* (2008), incorporates the author's personal narrative about her clinical treatment for an eating disorder in early adolescence to offer an analysis about discourses on anorexia from a feminist social scientific perspective. [Camilla Gibb's](#) chapter in *Auto-ethnographies: The Anthropology of Academic Practices* (2005) is also rooted in personal experience; here Gibb poignantly articulates the emotional challenges of fieldwork and some practical implications, and discusses her transition from anthropologist to fiction writer. For Ellis, autoethnography uniquely combines her research interests in

ethnography, social psychology of the self and role-taking, subjectivity and emotionality, face-to-face communication and interaction, writing as inquiry and for evocation, storytelling, and [her] social work orientation toward social justice and giving back to the community. ([Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis 2013a](#), 17)

Ellis reminds scholars in her disciplines of communication and sociology, and in other disciplines, of the multifaceted character of autoethnography and

the benefits it brings to researchers who want to acknowledge the emotional and subjective aspects of human life.

### Why Autoethnography Matters: Its Relevance to Information Science

In many ways, autoethnography has an advantage for researchers who “want to be as close to our subject matter as we can,” as sociologist Robert Prus puts it in his interview with [Steven Kleinknecht \(2007, 229\)](#). The autoethnographer’s intimate knowledge of the cultural and social setting in which he/she is situated can help the audience to “understand human group life” (243) through the lens of one individual’s experience. In information science, a lot of time and effort is spent focusing on the information practices of users, but literature dedicated to our own information experiences is scarce. Indeed, writing about personal experiences has not been the norm in information science. In recent years, scholars such as [Paulette Rothbauer \(2004\)](#) have taken more reflexive approaches to their research,<sup>6</sup> but our field continues to be influenced by earlier attempts to justify studies of information systems, technologies, and practices as detached, scientific endeavours<sup>7</sup>.

In this sense, information science is not dissimilar to other academic disciplines, such as political science, which are rooted in traditions of positivism and empiricism. [Burnier’s \(2006\)](#) examination of autoethnography from her perspective as a political scientist who is interested in interpretive and narrative approaches to policy research sheds light on the hegemonic discourses that regulate writing styles and genres in various academic disciplines. As Burnier notes, autoethnography can provide a “methodological justification” for including the self in scholarly writing (414), since personal narratives can illuminate social scientific issues and cross artificial boundaries between the self and culture, politics, and society (416). By crossing such boundaries, autoethnography can destabilize the “gendered dichotomies” that have proliferated in social science research between “heart/mind, emotional/rational, literary-poetic/analytical, personal/scholarly, [and] descriptive/theoretical” (416). Burnier’s reflections on autoethnography in political science make a compelling case for the adoption of autoethnography as a methodological framework in other fields of inquiry—not the least of which is information science.

Not only is autoethnography a relevant methodology for information science on the grounds of its capacity to cut across dichotomized territories of personal stories and social scientific scholarship, but it can also inform practice. As Michels writes in his exploratory autoethnographic study about his information experience as a doctoral student using an academic library, data about the self can enable us to reflect on our own cultural assumptions. According to Michels, an increased awareness of our cultural assumptions can help us to interpret and analyse such assumptions in the context of professional practice (2010, 166). In other words, the lessons we learn about our cultural and social contexts from reflexive approaches can assist in developing information technologies, programs, and services that help rather than hinder the information experiences of students, faculty, and other individuals who use—or have yet to use—the

resources and services provided by information institutions such as libraries and archives.

### **Bringing Autoethnography to the Library: David Michels's "The Place of the Person in LIS Research"**

The aforementioned autoethnographies examine familiar settings in an effort to produce sociocultural analyses that have relevance for the broader scholarly community and society at large. While there are many excellent studies that illustrate a reflexive and/or self-conscious approach to social science research (e.g., Behar 1996, 2007b; Ellis 1995, 2002; Gatson 2003; Rosaldo 1989), one exemplary study for information science is Michels's (2010) "The Place of the Person in LIS Research." Michels's exploratory study about his experience as a doctoral student at his university's law library not only represents a contemporary autoethnographic approach but also demonstrates a relevant application of this methodology for information scholars. Specifically, Michels's research critically examines the library system's conceptualizations of individual users and raises awareness about the impact that such perceptions have on the information practices of library professionals and the people who use library resources and services (2010, 161). Michels's decision to present data in the form of three two-minute video clips with accompanying poems was influenced by the use of narrative and poetry in interpretive ethnography,<sup>8</sup> particularly by feminist sociologist Laurel Richardson's (2001) "poetical reporting" and ethnomethodologists Stephen Heister and David Francis's (2003) reflexive study about scenes observed during a trip to the supermarket. Like Richardson, Michels includes "afterwords" to contextualize his poems and connect them to the study's research objectives (2010, 172). The afterwords in Michels's study frame the poems and the issues they address with narrative "vignettes," which elaborate on Michels's information experiences as a person with the dual identity of graduate student and academic librarian (176–80). By integrating video and poetry, Michels's study represents an "experimental" (Anderson and Glass-Coffin 2013, 57) and innovative departure from earlier autoethnographies, which rely on narrative reporting to represent the issues being examined.

While this creative approach to studying librarians' perceptions of those who visit academic libraries pushes the boundaries of traditional information behaviour research, arguments could be made against relying on one person's experience in the gathering and analysis of data. Unlike ethnographic research, which involves collecting data from multiple research participants through methods such as interviews and participant observation, autoethnographies such as Michels's use the researcher's autobiographical data to interpret the phenomenon under study (Michels 2010, 166). This reliance on data from one participant's introspection may leave out alternative perspectives that would otherwise be accessed in a multi-participant study. Furthermore, it remains unclear how to assess the credibility of the data that are generated by a researcher who uses autoethnography as the primary methodology. Arguably, autoethnography runs the risk of producing biased research that draws from one person's past experiences

and memories, which cannot be empirically observed and analysed. In the case of Michels's study, the focus remains on derogatory connotations of information "users," while positive information experiences that students may have in an academic library are overlooked. Finally, given that library staff and the students, faculty, and community members who visit libraries represent a variety of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, any indication that academic libraries comprise a homogeneous community with shared values and perceptions that can be analysed using autoethnographic methods is potentially problematic.

Despite these limitations, Michels's study draws attention to the potential that autoethnography holds as a methodology in information scholarship. The author directly responds to concerns about "excessive reliance on personal memory" (2010, 167) by asserting that additional data drawn from "self-narratives of key experiences and dialogue with staff members, emails, print documents, and screen captures and video footage" (166) support such introspection. Michels also acknowledges that the study is exploratory in nature, leaving room for possible future research that could expand on the autoethnographic data by applying additional data-gathering methods such as ethnographic interviews and participant observation. Indeed, the initial autoethnographic data could prove to be advantageous when trying to access additional research participants for future studies, as it establishes a common ground or "bridging capacity" (Evans et al. 2012, 1056) with other students who visit academic libraries. While credibility assessment is a challenge for autoethnographies because of the use of personal accounts and experiences as data, the same challenge applies for all ethnographic research and for any study that includes personal interviews with participants. Rather than evaluating the credibility of ethnographic data on the basis of positivist assumptions about the nature of truth and reality, it may be more productive to distinguish between what is "true" and what is "truthful" (Waterston and Rylko-Bauer 2006, 407). In this way, information researchers might separate what are legitimized as historical or empirical "facts" about what happened from what it felt like to experience particular moments within a sensory context (407), and consider what those "truthful" accounts tell us about information experiences.

Although academic libraries are diverse in their staff, faculty, and student populations in addition to their geographic location and institutional mandates, the characterizations of library users that Michels challenges in this study have been identified in other (non-autoethnographic) information research. As Michels notes in Vignette #2, "I am a complex individual; we all are. I am not easily categorized as a library user unless I am prepared to compromise something" (2010, 177). In using autoethnographic poetry to reflect on his role as a graduate student in the library, Michels (163–64, 178) invokes earlier critiques of the concept of "user" in library and information science research, such as Heidi Julien's (1999) claim that the term *user* automatically excludes those who do not use library services and reflects a negative connotation of users as inferior dependents who exploit people and systems for their own gain. This critical element emphasizes the value of autoethnography as a methodology that aims to understand human

experience and lead to positive social change. Far from being self-indulgent, Michels adopts an autoethnographic approach to shed light on the problematic nature of how “users” are perceived by professionals in the library system. By situating his individual information experience at the forefront of the study, Michels highlights how the “tacit and subaltern” (Parry and Boyle 2009, 694) assumptions held by academic librarians about current or prospective library “users” impact the actual information experiences of university students. In other words, Michels’s reflections on his own narrative through video and poetry expand our understanding of pervasive assumptions and library practices “as [they are] experienced and put into action” (Grace and Sen 2013, 519). Finally, as a researcher examining information experiences in an academic library, Michels illustrates that autoethnography can be used as a viable methodology across disciplines, not merely in anthropology.

### **From the Edge to the Horizon: Autoethnography in Information Science Research**

As the above examples of autoethnographic research illustrate, autoethnography is a creative methodology with diverse and contested objectives, a narrative approach to research that enables scholars to be reflexive, engage in sociocultural analysis of their own communities, develop and share emotional coping strategies for personal loss and collective tragedy, and bridge the gendered divide between heart and mind. In particular, Michels’s (2010) exploratory study demonstrates that autoethnography is a useful methodology for information scholars who seek to examine, analyse, and interpret various information phenomena and who aim to improve human information experiences. While Michels focuses on librarians’ conceptualizations of those who use (or have yet to use) academic library programs, resources, and services, autoethnography could also be applied in future studies of public libraries; archival reference and documentation practices; human-computer interaction; games research; access to corporate, non-profit, and government records centres; and information policy development.

Varying levels of reflexivity may need to be included in such studies, as certain topics may engage with more or less autobiographical data than others. (For example, autoethnographic studies about researchers who participate in developing games software or archival reference services may be more reflexive than those on researchers who have experienced playing games or visiting an archive but are less involved with developing software or reference service policies.) To remain a viable methodology for information scholarship, autoethnography must balance reflections about personal experience with a primary focus on the people and phenomena being studied. As A. V. Sokolov (2009, 66) suggests, methodology is “the route for [the] curious researcher. A methodologist is unable to predict the adventures that a traveler has to face and what remarkable sights he[/she] will discover.” In this spirit of adventure, I encourage information scholars to be open to exploring narrative methodologies on the margins, such as autoethnography, as a way to creatively frame the research process and discover insights that may not be as easily identified using other methodological frameworks.

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## Notes

1. Ellis describes “meta-autoethnography” as a “story of the stories” (2009, 12), a reflexive approach that re-interprets existing narratives about one’s own cultural experiences and uses hindsight to revisit original stories, “consider responses, and write an autoethnographic account about autoethnography” (13).
2. See Carolyn Ellis’s chapter in William G. Tierney and Yvonna S. Lincoln’s *Representation and the Text* (1997) for a detailed discussion of evocative autoethnography.
3. See also Norman K. Denzin’s article “Analytic Autoethnography, or Déjà Vu All Over Again” (2006), which discusses evocative and analytical autoethnography in response to Anderson’s article in the same issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*.
4. *Women Writing Culture* (1995), co-edited by Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon, is a collection of essays by feminist anthropologists, such as Lila Abu-Lughod and Gelya Frank, which explores the intersections between feminism, identity, ethnography, multiculturalism, and creative writing.
5. Although Charmaz has critiqued autoethnography for positioning the researcher at the centre of cultural analysis (2006) and for imposing a narrative approach to interpreting experiences that may not be appropriately articulated in stories (2002, 303), the emphasis placed by constructivist grounded theorists (such as Charmaz) on the need for researchers to acknowledge their biases and identify their backgrounds suggests that autoethnography shares notable similarities with contemporary approaches to grounded theory. As Charmaz and her colleague Richard G. Mitchell explain in an earlier article, “we do not pretend that our stories report autonomous truths, but neither do we share the cynic’s nihilism that ethnography is a biased irrelevancy. We hold a modest faith in middle ground” (Charmaz and Mitchell 1996, 286).
6. Paulette Rothbauer’s dissertation “Finding and Creating Possibility: Reading in the Lives of Lesbian, Bisexual and Queer Young Women” (2004), represents the shift within library and information science from quantitative methods to qualitative methods by representing the use of personal narrative and reflexive voice in a scholarly text (Howarth 2012). By focusing on readers’ perspectives rather than attempting to prove a pre-formulated hypothesis, and by incorporating her own personal research diary, Rothbauer illustrates the value of exploratory, qualitative, and interpretivist inquiry (2004, 18) for examining information phenomena that cannot be separated from the very personal, social, and cultural contexts in which they occur.
7. Harold Borko’s (1968) article “Information Science: What Is It?” and its reflections on the name change of the American Documentation Institute to the American Society for Information Science bring attention to earlier attempts to situate the information disciplines in the scientific domain. Evidence of more recent arguments in favour of

empirical, positivist approaches to the information disciplines includes Birger Hjørland's article "Arguments for Philosophical Realism in Library and Information Science" (2004), which calls for information scholars to strive towards the ideal of objectivity by articulating knowledge claims based on evidence presented. The theme of information research as a scientifically rigorous discipline is further demonstrated in Hjørland's article "Empiricism, Rationalism and Positivism in Library and Information Science," in which the author proposes that empirical, rational, and positivist approaches can contextualize information scholarship and inform the ways in which "objects of research . . . are constituted" (2005, 131).

8. See Norman K. Denzin's chapter "Ethnographic Poetics and Narratives of the Self" (1997) for a detailed discussion of the history of poetry in interpretive ethnography, including examples of its uses in anthropology and sociology, as well as notable critiques of poetic narrative in social science texts.

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