# Writing evocative case studies: applying autoethnography as a research methodology for the psychotherapist

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**Abstract**

This is an introduction to the application of autoethnography, a qualitative research method, an aesthetic inquiry into the psychotherapy process. The method engages the practitioner as researcher-autoethnographer who enters a field, which is their client's therapy process. The aim is to derive insights and deepen the understanding of process, theory and diagnostics from psychotherapy sessions in practice. The therapist creates a reflexive account of their experiences, recording this in their session notes, which are also the field notes and the data. As an autoethnographer, the therapist begins therefrom a process of creative writing. The writing process is reflexive, and aesthetic. Integral to the research method, the act of writing forms a hermeneutic circle where new insights of the phenomenon of therapy happen for the researcher. The writing is created as an art form, usually a story or poetry. The result of this method is a written, evocative, aesthetic representation of the therapy process, based on the phenomenological experience of the practitioner. Demonstrating this method, a single case study of an online Gestalt therapy session of a male client diagnosed with depression and borderline personality disorder is featured in this article. The outcome of this form of aesthetic inquiry is the embodiment of psychotherapy theory through the aesthetic sensibility of the therapist-researcher.

**Keywords**

autoethnography, psychotherapy case studies, psychotherapy process research, Gestalt therapy, aesthetic inquiry

## Introduction

If *every person's life is worth a novel* (Polster, 1987), then every therapeutic encounter is worth a story. In this article, I introduce a method of qualitative inquiry that encourages the psychotherapist to be researcher and storyteller. The method proposed here is an adaptation to an established methodology called autoethnography. The method involves the creation of a genre of academic writing that is aesthetic in nature, an art form, a creative non-fiction, a story. This method engages the psychotherapy practitioner to be a researcher who conducts real-life, non-evasive, practice-based psychotherapy research, by producing a body of academic writing that belongs to a genre that stokes interest in the psychotherapeutic process, while evoking deeper understanding of theory.

The word, *autoethnography* is composed of three parts which, in Latin, are *autos, ethnos* and *graphia,* meaning 'the self', 'culture', and 'writing' respectively. It is an observational, data-driven phenomenological method of studying a field. Integral to the process of doing autoethnography is its reflexive and personal creative writing. Through this method, researchers have been able to illuminate social, emotional, theoretical, political, and cultural aspects of human life. Unique to autoethnography is the use of aesthetics to provide analyses and communicate results. The aesthetics are formed from writing stories that are poetic, impressionistic, and even lyrical, evoking feelings that reflect the tales of human existence (Ellis, 2004; Poulos, 2021). Autoethnography utilises the use of the researcher's personal experience to describe phenomena, giving attention to and acknowledgement

of differences between the researcher and others being studied. It involves reflexivity, deep and careful self-reflection on the part of the researcher to name and interrogate the differences at the boundary between self and the field. The method also requires the researcher to balance intellectual and methodological rigour, emotion, and creativity (Adams, Jones & Ellis, 2015, p. 2).

More so than other qualitative research methods, the underlying principle of applying autoethnography complements the philosophical attitude of Gestalt therapy practice. As with practice, the research process requires of the researcher to 1) intentionally take a phenomenological approach to observing the field, with an attitude of being neither positivist nor postpositivist, 2) present possibilities of how situations and phenomena can arise, rather than seeking probability of the phenomenon, 3) to make contact with individual experiences, differences, and knowledge, avoiding making generalised assumptions of populations. Observations and results from data collected are transmitted aesthetically through evocative forms of writing. The results presented are sensed and felt rather than statistically analysed. The story told is not about the field, but of the observer-researcher who has entered the field, and subjected to it. The derivation of knowledge from the research is driven by memory, insights and felt sense, rather than through generalisations based on numbers. The end product of the research is not the report written in the third-person voice, but an evocative narrative art form written in the first-person voice (Ellis, 2004; Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Poulos, 2021).

## Method

The method introduced here is specifically designed as an instrument to study the psychotherapeutic process through the lens of the therapist practitioner. The methodology of autoethnography is applied for the purpose of setting a framework of design, since it is an already established method of qualitative inquiry. One only needs to explore the writings published in the online autoethnography magazine, *The Autoethnographer*[1], to realise how the application of autoethnography is as varied as the autoethnographers themselves. At the time of writing this article, I am not aware of the application of this methodology specifically for psychotherapy process research yet.

The common process of doing autoethnography is that it begins as the researcher enters the field. The

researcher is the autoethnographer. The field is the subject of research. Autoethnographers collect data from being in the field of study. In ethnography, the 'field' represents the individuals in a culture or situation that is being studied.

In this paper, the psychotherapy practitioner, who is the therapist of the session, is the autoethnographer. The 'field' is the therapy situation of a particular client or a group of clients being studied, where the researcher is the therapist. The field notes are the therapist's session notes. Data comes from the field notes and the therapist's recollection of their lived experience of the therapeutic encounter.

## The therapist as autoethnographer

The autoethnographer is a researcher that takes seriously the epistemic (claims to knowledge) as well as the aesthetics (practices of imaginative, creative and artistic craft). Following the Wampold and Brown (2005) study revealing the therapist as the determinant variable in psychotherapeutic outcomes, psychotherapy researchers have turned their focus onto therapist effects, putting the therapist at the centre of research (Barkham et al., 2017; Wampold et al., 2017). Employing the therapist as autoethnographer puts the probe of inquiry of the psychotherapeutic process in the right place; the personal experience of the therapist themselves. Valuable learning will come from knowing who the therapist is, while they are in-session with the client.

'So, in the chemistry of mental health treatment, orientations, techniques, and even medications are relatively inert. The catalyst is the clinician.'
(Miller et al, 2014)

The primary rationale applying this methodology is to engage the therapist-researcher's voice in the writing process. Through the writing process, the therapist-researcher fleshes out their lived, embodied experience of being in the field of the session with the client. Instead of seeking 'objective' accounts and analyses of the situation in the therapy process, autoethnographers situate themselves in an engaged subjective position (Poulos, 2021). The therapist-researcher's felt experience in the field is a fertile source of information, which has the potential of capturing rich nuances of the psychotherapy session from the perspective of the therapist.

## The therapy process as 'the field'

There are many aspects of autoethnography that resonate with Gestalt therapy theory. One of which is the phenomenological attunement to 'the field'. Autoethnographers collect data from being in the field, which is the culture, society, situation, or event that the researcher finds themselves in. In this method, the field is the therapy process or the series of therapy sessions of which the researcher is the practitioner.

## The act of writing as research process

Writing is a creative process which is integral to the method. The writing produced is an art form. While other qualitative research methods employ the writing stage at the end of the research work, whereby the writing is a report of the observed phenomenon, autoethnography is inquiry through creative writing. A form of art-based research, the act of writing evokes added insights and understanding of the phenomenon for the researcher, forming a hermeneutic loop of insights and expression (Leavy, 2017).

> 'The artwork is...a thing that is made, but it says something other than the mere thing itself is, allo agforeuei. The work makes public something other than itself; it manifests something other; it is an allegory. In the work of art something other is brought together with the thing that is made... The work is a symbol.'
> (Heidegger, 1971, p. 19)

## Story from theory and theorising stories

Writing stories enables us to share, in the form of aesthetics, lived experiences that are cognitively ungraspable. Parallel to the writing process, the consuming of the story affects the recipient in a hermeneutic loop, a circularity of evoking emotions, insights and understanding. There is reciprocity between theory and the story. We use theory to inquire and explain the nuances of an experience, while the story is a mechanism that illustrates how these nuances are sensed and felt (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 90). Theory does not add to the story or vice versa, but rather, both theory and story exist symbiotically, oftentimes told together, for 'there is nothing more theoretical or analytic than a good story' (Ellis, 2004, p. 194-196).

## Ethical considerations

Ethical challenges discussed in Bochner & Ellis (2016, pp. 137-161), over procedural, process and relational ethics, highlights the importance for the therapist-researcher, especially, to address each case uniquely, involving continual monitoring and circumspection. We cannot be mindful enough of the risk which belongs not only to the client, who may feel shamed, exposed, or judged from the literature, but also to the professional life of the therapist, who may be judged for having their work out there for all to evaluate. In the case study below, identifiers of the characters in the stories have been masked. Part of the strategy is to create composites of different individuals. The client in this case study is aware of the writing, and the reflections on the therapist have been reflected to them as part of their continued therapeutic process. I am, however, not advocating that all clients can be aware of the writing as circumstances are unique to the individuals. Adopting the phenomenological attitude of looking at what is, with positive regard and compassion, showing and not telling, affords an extra layer of assurance of ethical soundness.

## Results

Presented here is a single-session case-study story entitled 'Scream'. I have written about this case on several occasions, and shared versions of it in supervision and inter-vision groups. The essence of the story shifts however, with each version, and different facets of the process come to the fore each time. Writing this version, I felt the need to mourn how I 'cancel'[2] myself out, while in the presence of another, in such a way as to diminish the value of my presence in the world. This is a story of Matt's process, but it's not only about Matt. It's also a story of how, through having been subjected to the pathos of Matt's phenomenological field, I was jolted, even resuscitated, returning to the *élan vital*, and once again allowing myself to be present.

## Case study: 'Scream'

I click open the Zoom[3] application on my PC. Matt comes on screen. He fumbles with the camera and ear-pods[4] of his mobile phone. He is also sitting in a car, snugly wrapped in a puffy leather coat. The air outside is below zero degrees Celsius. 'I got our appointment time wrong. I thought it was going to be tomorrow. I'm sorry,' he says. He apologises for the fact that he is sitting in a car. He had got the date of our appointment confused because of the twelve-hour time difference

between Singapore and Chicago. Matt flew in from Singapore two months ago to visit his soon-to-be ex-husband, Edi. Matt explains that he needs the time to be there with Edi, living in the same apartment that they have shared for many years, to 'process' the breakup of their decade-long relationship. On his therapy nights, they planned for Edi to vacate the apartment so that Matt can be alone at home. Tonight, however, things did not work out as planned, so therapy takes place in the car.

'Good thing you realised the mistake in time!' I say, aware of, and supporting myself by laughing off my feelings of discomfort at the chaos of the start of this online session.

We laugh.

I wait silently as Matt shifts himself in the front passenger seat of the car. He recounts in detail the turmoil he had experienced the past week, and how he feels the dread of eventually taking the cab to the airport, getting on to the plane and landing in Singapore, never to see Edi again. A loss. Forever. Edi, he would often tell me, is the one person he desires to have by his side on his dying breath; a scene that he plays over in his dreams. The decision to separate, however, is mutual. Matt had spent a decade living with Edi in that very apartment in Chicago, during which time he had felt 'like a nobody'.

Matt should be back in Singapore by now; he had planned to end his visit on New Year's Eve. Instead, he extends his stay an extra month. That would come to three full months of him and Edi in a situation of being together, alternating between touching and fighting, dredging out past pains, and grieving the future. I tilt my head to stretch my neck muscles that have begun to 'nag' at me. My impulse is really to nag at Matt.

'My friends and my mom are screaming at me to take the next flight home,' he laughs.

'Ah, so, then I don't have to do likewise,' I say.

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'I am in a bad place,' Matt said at the start of our first session together. He had come dressed all-black in t-shirt, cropped pants, and a baseball cap; the kind of gear one would wear as a crew member on a film set. His voice has a somewhat 'sing-song' character to it, which I associate with spoken Cantonese. This was five months before this session in the car.

'Tell me something about that place,' I remember saying, feeling as if I were being led towards a threshold, beyond which is an intangible space. Now, I am not sure if he had heard what I had said then, for we promptly got ourselves lost somewhere in the conversation of that intake session. We didn't directly address that 'bad place' that day, but it lingered amongst us like fertile ground. This is where I find myself standing at every session, at this threshold, with Matt always on the other side. I begin to feel the pain of that bad place. Sometimes we'd sit together in silence, oftentimes he'd reach out. My heart wrenches and I feel the urgency to pull him out, over to my side. Each time I reach out, I find no grasp. Having to take our sessions online is as much of an impediment as it is a relief. The distance buffers me from sensing the pain of being at that threshold in its intensity. At the same time, I feel painfully inept.

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'Do you mind if I light up this cigarette?' He asks.

'No, of course not,' I say. The irony of that question.

He turns the ignition on in order to wind down the window nearest to him. The skin on his cheeks twitches on contacting the icy midnight air. He lights up, and inhales deeply into the cigarette.

'I had time last weekend to work on my latest film,' he says. It is going to be an arthouse[5] type of film, somewhat different from his usual commercial documentary film projects. 'The entire film is going to be about a butterfly girl trapped in a cocoon. Her birth, long overdue. The mother gods have forgotten about her. She finds herself alone, screaming in the dark, but no one hears her.'

'Beautiful,' I say, deeply impacted. 'Beautiful.'

'Yes, and the funny thing is,' he says, 'you will not hear a sound of her screams in the film.'

In that moment, I hear a scream. It wasn't a sound, but rather a deep reverberation in my chest. I see Matt look back at me from the PC monitor. He has wound the window back up. He is once again in an enclosed car. I find myself standing back at that threshold. This time, I see it. I see that place. That is the place where, for years, the boy endured the blows from his elder brother while shielding his younger sister from them, the place where he was made to feel sorry for, and then give in to the sexual needs of a school teacher. The boy knew that he was left there alone. He cries. He looks at the clock on

the wall. He cries on. He wonders when someone would come for him.

A ping from Matt's phone distracted us. We suddenly become aware of the time. It's now almost the end of our session.

'Matt,' I ask him, 'I am wondering if you, too, feel like screaming?'

'All the time,' he says.

'What stops you from screaming right now?' I ask.

'H...huh... I can't do that,' he says.

'Too bad that we're meeting remotely this time,' I say. 'Had I been in that car with you right now, we may have had a chance to scream, together.'

Matt's eyes well up. 'Thank you,' he says, now sobbing. 'Thank you for saying that.'

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We stayed online for a moment till it felt right to sign out.

## Discussion

How could I have imparted even a taste of the resonance of the session without having crafted a story? The experience of being in the field is a corporeal sensation of what philosophers describe as the aesthetics of the atmosphere (Böhme, 2017; Francesetti, 2019). Atmospheres contain indeterminate, ungraspable information laden with emphatic tunings. This data is not cognitively verifiable, for attempts at using words to directly 'talk about' the atmosphere, serve only to delimit the vastness of the lived experience; leaving us with 'curious situations that lose meaning when one tries to describe them: one has to be in them to understand them' (Galati, 2002 cited in Griffero, 2010, p. 3). Since using words to explain alone will not suffice, in trying to convey the lived experience of the field, we need to 'show and not tell'. This is fulfilled with the use of aesthetics, an allegory, and art form. To describe the ambiance rather than merely using the emotion lexicon. This has been the attitude of humanistic teachers since the time of Plato. This is also not unlike how in Gestalt therapy practice, we describe the phenomenology instead of assigning 'emotion words'. Writing the story, for example, I found myself consciously editing out phrases like, 'I felt helpless and uncomfortable' with 'my neck muscles have begun to nag at me'; the latter requiring more introspection. Creating the aesthetics

of the story involves condensing the many hours of dialogue into a coherent package. Not having done so would have left the reader disorientated, as often happens when reading a recorded session's transcript. Structuring the story adds rhythm and contributes to the aesthetics.

In Gestalt therapy practice, aesthetic sensibility to the atmosphere is instrumental to the therapist, in order that they can attune to the movement of the phenomenological field (Francesetti, 2015). This is where this research methodology aligns with Gestalt therapy practice. Theory of the phenomenological field is central to Gestalt therapy (Parlett, 1991; Staemmler, 2006; Francesetti, 2019; Philippson, 2009; Robine, 2006; Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013) as it is in psychology (Lewin, 1951). Attunement to the aesthetics of the phenomenological field allows therapists to move beyond the mono-personal, third-person attitude of diagnosing the client's psychopathology using manuals like the DSM (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and evaluating clients using psychometrics. It goes even beyond the bi-personal, relational attitude of inquiry into the therapeutic alliance (Greenberg, 1986; Clarkson, 2003; Jacobs & Hycner, 2009; BCPSG, 2010). Aesthetic attunement brings the psychotherapeutic process beyond therapist and client, into the atmospheric realm of the phenomenological field of the here-and-now.

Matt had come to therapy with a clinical diagnosis of depression and borderline personality disorder. The diagnosis alone is a label, which had offered me nothing to hold on to. The client, however, wasted no time in providing me with the aesthetics of his pathological field. He had intuitively used a metaphor, describing himself as being in a 'bad place'. I was drawn to noticing the mystery of his words and had captured it in my session notes. I feel humbled by this reflection, for I tend to trivialise what I instinctively do, often berating myself for scribbling on my iPad during sessions. I appreciate now that I have recorded something rather precious, even though I had almost no idea what he had meant by saying them at that first meeting. The mystery in itself, was fertile ground, undifferentiated, preverbal, pre-reflexive. In *Ego, Hunger and Aggression*, Perls describes this as the 'zero point', referring to philosopher Salomo Friedländer's philosophy of Creative Indifference (Perls, 1942/1947). Friedländer says, 'yet in this indifference lies the real secret — the creative will, the polarizing one itself, which objectively is absolutely nothing. However, without indifference, there would be no world'

(Frambach, 2003; Arment-Lyon, 2019). This is the point of the pre-formation, *das Vorgestalten,* where the perceptive experience of the field is undifferentiated, diffused and yet to emerge. Friedländer also uses the term, *das Weltenschwangerenichts*, meaning literally, 'the nothingness that gives birth to worlds'. A gestation can only follow.

Still, I question whether I was indeed indifferent, or if I was uninterested in the phenomenon. Writing this, I take comfort in realizing that what really matters is the intention to allow myself to be subjected to the unknown. Having done so, I intuitively 'stuck around', being present to the client's suffering, or *pathos*, of being in that 'bad place'. Intentionality, ultimately, is the fabric of relationality, 'a phenomenal structure of consciousness that directs us toward and makes meaning of the world' (Bloom, 2020). The intentionality of being indifferent also meant allowing myself, as a therapist, to sit (almost helpless) for many sessions not knowing what 'bad place' meant, or how to work with it. All I wished for was to 'get him out of there', but I (intentionally) didn't. Matt had bitterly complained about how he had felt lonely as when his friend expressed frustration at helping him, and I allowed myself to follow the process of not doing the same. Now I realise that 'cancelling' myself is self-supporting.

There were many elements of the session in the car that seemed to have gone awry at the beginning. The client and I creatively adjusted to this discomfort by deflecting through bantering, joking and even smoking. There was a sense of absence. Psychopathological suffering is the absence rather than the contact with pain (Francesetti, 2012). In this absence, pain was described in the story as having been 'buffered'.

Towards the end of the session, there was a change in the atmosphere that emerged from the client describing his screenplay. Reflecting on Parlett's (1991) principle of organisation of the field, we can grasp in this story how individuals of the field organised themselves to this point. This organisation process is clumsy and experimental. Something then becomes palpable to the therapist. The client had inadvertently created a work of beauty out of his own suffering. All at once, the aesthetics of the cocoon, the enclosed car, the remoteness, and our imminent separation towards the end of the session, converged. Everything seemed to have imploded in that moment. The 'bad place' becomes then perceptible. That which was absent becomes present. Matt's suffering is no longer absent in the field, but perceived. His diagnosis is no longer just another case of depression and a personality

disorder, but a fleshed-out existence of a child crying in isolation, forgotten, betrayed, abused, humiliated. The atmosphere of Matt's 'bad place' is so vast that only the aesthetics of the cocoon story coupled with his being alone in the car could make it palpable.

Matt's tears of appreciation for my offer being present in the car to scream with him jolted me like a gift which I accepted with humility. In that moment, there was no space for words, for the I-Thou is in the relationship (Buber, 1923/1937), and the relationship is felt in the atmosphere.

## Conclusion

While my words had touched the client, his tears remind me of how I trivialise my own presence, cancelling myself out, not daring to believe that I can be a resource for someone. That belongs to my own pathological field, perhaps inherited from my foremothers of Asian women, who were valued for keeping their mouths shut. In a way, both Matt and I share something in common, the un-hearable scream.

That is the *auto* aspect of the autoethnography. An aspect of my being that, through the hermeneutical process of writing this article, and working through edits and peer review, is also no longer absent or cancelled out.

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'What is really important to me, is to understand. For me, writing is the integral part of this process of understanding. [...] Writing establishes certain things. If I manage to process my thoughts adequately in writing, that satisfies me. [...] I do not see myself as influential [...] I see myself as somewhat of an onlooker. For if others understand the same way I've understood, that gives me a sense of satisfaction, like being among equals.' (Hannah Arendt, 1964, translated from German.)

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## Notes

[1] www.theautoethnographer.com

[2] What does cancelling mean when it's about a person? Cancelling, today, is used like a massive, informal boycott when someone or something in the public eye offends. Source: www.dictionary.com/e/people-getting-canceled

[3] Zoom is a video conferencing software that allows individuals to make video call over the internet.

[4] Wireless earphones.

[5] An arthouse film is typically an independent film, aimed at a niche rather than a mass-market audience.

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