Autoethnography: An apicultural journey with beekeepers and among honeybees

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Abstract

Understood as a form of reflexivity, autoethnography (AE) is a conscious practice of self-reflective evaluation within research. In this Critical Reflection, beekeepers, honeybees and myself (a novice PhD researcher and fellow beekeeper) intermingle in the exploration of various existential viewpoints and meanings that may have wider apicultural significance. Without forcing artificial generalisations, I consider whether, and how, an apiary of hives and a beekeeper's story intersect with local environmental and wider planetary challenges within the organic research process. At this stage of the iterative journey, I ask, 'What value could AE offer my research?' I reflexively grapple with the challenges of being an insider, developing a deeper research subjectivity and coping with the possibility of a fractured future for all lifeforms sharing many precarious ecologies at present. I argue that exploring the agency of honeybees and other lifeforms, whatever their distinct or shared evolutionary path, is a valid avenue of academic inquiry capable of embracing inconclusive findings that can be recorded, audited, and analysed. Like other academic methodologies of reflexive praxis, AE has the potential to become a self-reflective learning experience that fully acknowledges the evolving historical and social power dynamics embodied by both the researcher and research participant. In many respects, I lean into the realisation that there has been and will be multiple surprises along this particular road of inquiry.

Keywords: autoethnography; AE; reflexivity; apiculture; embodied knowledge

Introduction

I grew up beside a canal. As a boy, during the summer months I caught slippery eels, roach and perch and returned them to the water. I fed the swans all year round. Sometimes barges passed by, and occasionally, homemade rafts floated precariously against an eastern headwind with urban Huckleberry Finns aboard. As an adolescent, thoughts and feelings bubbled up inside me; I imagined the reflective depths of the water empathised with and talked back to me during evening walks with our dog. The engineered water course and all it supported became a living presence that was both a physical companion and discursive neighbour.

Having been introduced to Heraclitus (544–483 BCE) in my first undergraduate year, I was most taken with the wisdom of the philosopher's words, 'No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he is not the same man' (**Stern, 1991: 580**). More than forty years later, reflecting upon the first completed year of my PhD was akin to standing in a river of fast-flowing thoughts and feelings, while attempting to offer a simultaneous articulation of my unfolding and challenging research journey. I found myself wondering things like: *What theoretical frameworks are making sense to me? Is the concept of intersubjectivity or relationality suited to my area of sociological inquiry into apiculture*—the science and culture of beekeeping—*and the embodied entanglements of beekeepers and honeybees within it?* These questions touch on a growing tension with which I continued to grapple, eagerly searching for my theoretical grounding within a fluid process of inquiry wherein the slippery research question and I, the experienced beekeeper and novice researcher, will naturally evolve as the study inevitably runs its undulating course.

The fellow members of my three-person graduate research committee (GRC) suggested autoethnography as a companion on my journey, if I was willing to take on the extra journalling work it would necessitate. My supervisor explained that AE was a contemporaneous recording of feelings, events and encounters that could be revisited later when data analysis was underway'. Through my immersion in a variety of research moments, I would be challenged to source and show evidence from literature, online surveys, semi-structured interviews with beekeepers, and my own personal reflections within my academic journey. Merely relying on my ten years of practicing beekeeping to tell the reader what matters would be insufficient to the task. Following my reading of many AE-related articles, I wished to make sense of this key question: *What value and challenges could AE offer my research?* I have identified a range of relevant themes,

which I cover in the following sections, that attempt to plot a path of critical understanding. Related questions include:

- *What are the changing faces of autoethnography?*
- *How might different ways of knowing impact and change the social positionality of the research(er), if at all?*
- *How is power and agency experienced and negotiated for both interviewee and interviewer?*
- *How might the practice, process and product of AE be critiqued and evaluated?*

Shifting Reflexivities

Sikes (**2022**) defines autoethnography as an existential practice, one 'that offers a means of interrogating what being may involve as we live through particular contextualised experiences' (**2022: 24**). This I understand to mean examining, at appropriate times, how my previous experiences and values are shaping the thoughts, feelings and anxieties that inform the choices I make within the research process and its cultural context. Such an approach, according to Koopman et al. (**2020**), facilitates reflexivity, which for Berger (**2015**) demands an honest appraisal of how the researcher engages in knowledge creation while being attentive to personal biases and without diminishing or sidelining the primary data subjects. Far from being a self-indulgent exercise, Pillow proposes 'reflexivities of discomfort' (**2003: 187**), a call to engage in ethnographic research with a self-critical approach and a humility that upholds the integrity and ethical challenges of the collaborative research process (for example, acknowledging the limitations of language). Implicit to this position is the question of whether research is done 'to' or 'with' others and what such methodological approaches might look like (**Pillow, 2003: 185**). Going beyond the surface to profile the complex meanings of what lies beneath may inevitably reveal what Muncey calls 'disjunctions' of understandings and interpretations that might otherwise be (as they were in my case) 'missed-understandings', all of which legitimately deserve appropriate inclusion in storytelling and analysis (**Muncey 2005: 84**).

According to Pelias, this is no research country for 'ethnographic tourists' who wish to merely see the epistemological sights from a distance and acquire some digitally archived findings (**2003: 371**). For instance, Brown (**2019**) ethnographically researches a history of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster by officially visiting the present-day Exclusion Zone. Here, Brown, embodying the literal and metaphorical research journey, becomes a

'reflection-in-action' (**Duncan, 2004: 32**) who recognises and is open to encountering multiple viewpoints and different forms of knowledge from, for example, archival records, biologists, and landscape samples, as well as anecdotal evidence, such as the story of a 98-year-old woman resident whose nearby village was not evacuated after the meltdown. Unlike a neutral or detached observer, this is the proactive work of 'the insider' (**2004: 30**) who 'consciously interrogates the theories, assumptions, values and emotions they bring to the research' (**Collins & McNulty, 2020: 204**).

Official exclusion zones are intended to restrict access. However, the airborne contamination of such sites is borderless. Brown's research reached out to me with the shocking reality of lives lost and bodies contaminated, and the realisation that Brown potentially faced great danger and health risk in order to conduct it. Ethnographic roles are not fixed, as continual reflection is influenced and impacted by the historical and social contexts within which the research is being enacted (**Bruskin, 2019**), even though the search for meaning can be inconclusive, resulting in an experience of 'fractured reflexivity' (**Burkitt, 2015: 470**).

Many Ways of Knowing

Ethnographic research that is subject-focussed, context-specific and exploratory also requires in-depth analysis solidly underpinned by theoretical and methodological buoyancy (**Wall, 2006**). Akehurst & Scott argue that such autoethnographic roles 'cannot be acted with rational detachment, but rather must be lived, felt and embodied' (**2023: 436**). Unlike empirical positivism, which seeks out more solid terrain, the ethnographic research raft needs to be able to launch and travel in untested open waters. However, autoethnography invites the practitioner to become more sensitive to how personal identity and theoretical choices enable and constrain the 'nonlinear' and 'conscious effort to stand with instability' (**Rambo, 2011: 541**).

Paradoxically, 'both distance and involvement' are needed, demanding the emotional intelligence to meet the challenge of finding a balance between what the researcher discloses and what remains private (**Anteby, 2023: 1283**). In and of itself, the researcher's investment potentially becomes a 'relational, dialogic and emotional' resource of reflective data (**Burkitt, 2012: 471**), though 'experiences of emotive dissonance' may arise when access to the field of inquiry is temporarily denied or disrupted (**Bergman & Wettergren, 2015: 701**). The research road travelled potentially forms and re-forms the practitioner, who asks, 'Why? What if and So what?'

(**Gabriel, 2015: 334**). These are no small research demands, potentially eliciting feelings of risk and exposure at once daunting and enticing.

Deciding to undertake my PhD thesis was the result of much personal reflection and consultation with beekeepers and academics, including those known to me who had already completed a similar journey. A core challenge would be to find my personal voice and claim my distinctive authority within the field of apiculture. Engaging with my GRC prompted a further question: *How can my inner processes and reflections be articulated and recorded as a socio-cultural critique of both my apicultural and academic journeys?* It is important to view these as complementary learning paths: intertwining, mutually influencing thinking, learning and writing. I would have to assess whether and where an apiary (i.e., the physical location where beehives are placed) and a beekeeper's story intersect with wider planetary challenges within the organic research process (**Conrad, 2016**) without forcing artificial generalisations (**Ghobrial, 2019**).

The respective agency of both the honeybee and the beekeeper combined with the dynamics of the apiary and the climatic environment are 'co-constituted inside dense webs of lively exchanges' (**van Dooren et al., 2016: 14**) that require equal ethical attention to identify and acknowledge the varied ways each is known and understood. It strikes me that there is much for a researcher to discover, theorise, decipher and analyse here. One important underlying challenge is to humbly recognise the active roles of all the intermingling elements (**Cornips, 2024**) and co-influencing materialities (**Gibas et al., 2011**). Will this involve a voluntary and intentional process of unlearning to learn new perceptions and behaviours?

Mortan (**2009**) argues that to counter the objectification of nature and the corresponding detached positionality of humans, a more inclusive ecocentrism could motivate a political repositioning based on the idea that the 'only ethical option is to muck in' (**Morton, 2019: 13**). To re-negotiate power imbalances on the basis that all lifeforms have many shared ecologies (**Abram, 2010**) will first require, at a minimum, the dissolution and reframing of the normative divide between 'natural' and 'human' history (**Chakrabarty, 2009: 201**).

Balancing Power and Agency

Caven (**2012**) maintains that prior histories and social roles inevitably impact both interviewee and interviewer, with the former more in command, though not exclusively, of how the relationship develops and

what data is to be shared. However, nothing is pre-defined; respective identities and positionalities emerge via the dialectical process of the research encounter, and the knowledge elucidated is historically and politically contextualised (**Voloder & Kirpitchenko, 2014: 22**). Listening to interview 'pauses, hesitations, and silences' can be a rich source of 'knowledge production' compared to reading transcripts (**Koopman et al; 2024: 7**). Audio recordings are more impactful and lead to better understanding of the meanings and nuances shared within the encounter (**Clark et al., 2021**). Relational spaces locate the researcher and participants within 'hyphen-spaces' (**Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013: 370**) and 'the space between the insider and outsider' (**Greene, 2014: 11**). Both conceptualisations evoke a sense of the unknown, unsteadiness, trying to find one's footing and an impulsive desire to grasp for any form of security.

Such was my experience of engaging with Bernedette Kiely's exhibition 'Don't Need No Country, Don't Fly No Flag', held as part of the 2024 Galway International Arts Festival. The artist's childhood memories of her community being flooded by the river Nore in Carrick-on-Suir, South Tipperary, Ireland, left her with an abiding sense of 'uncertainty, instability and unknowing', which was reflected in the exhibition's paintings (**Printworks Gallery, 2024**: **2**). The greyish-whitish over-wash on each canvas blurs the images, leaving me within the exhibition space unsure of my footing and feeling a vertigo of sorts within my body.

Kiely's paintings strike me as both a mirror of the present and a harbinger of future climate catastrophe. The artist describes them as 'all together in a watery world which knows no boundaries—the earth wide open' (**Printworks Gallery, 2024: 2**). For Kiely, vivid personal memories and historically contextualised feelings inextricably mingle to 'become co-authors of the work' (**Printworks Gallery, 2024: 3**). In this instance, the artist's formative experiences are woven through the contemporaneous interpretations and meanings she expresses in each painting, making statements and posing questions about both our survival and legacy. While no face-to-face discussion took place between myself and Kiely, it seems self-evident that both she and I are 'toggling between our experiences and larger relational and social contexts' (**Adams et al., 2021: 5**).

What Value AE?

Who decides autoethnography's legitimacy, its relevancy to a research journey? Critical feminist theory demands an encounter with 'unfamiliar—and likely uncomfortable—tellings' (**Pillow, 2003: 197**). Darawsheh (**2014**) contends that the researcher's philosophical positionality is made clear

and is self-critiqued. Wall (**2006**) requires a profile and exegesis of multiple ways of inquiry while knowing they are inextricably bound up with *who* is inquiring and *how* and *what* is produced. Adams et al. (**2021**) acknowledge positivist and post-positivist tensions vis-à-vis interpretive paradigms on ethical, reliability and validity grounds, which I interpret as asking, *Is the inclusion of the researcher as a source of living data (among other sources) academically justified and trustworthy, and is the analysis recounted indicative of a shared or universal experience?* Such criticism is hampered by how different ontological and epistemological perspective view 'data': whether it pre-exists to be gathered, quantified, tested or proven. In contrast, Dickson-Swift et al., ask whether the 'embodied responses' of the researcher 'are markers of meaning from which researchers can learn' (**2009: 68**), that is, whether the bulk of data discoverable in the life experience of the informant can be recognised as a legitimate repository of meaning-making without having to empirically prove universal principles or truths.

For me, beekeeper and researcher are joined together symbiotically, for better or worse, in exploring the theoretical composition of my own shifting position and the embodied theorising of others regarding (api)cultural behaviours and meanings (**Rabb, 2013**). For Collins and McNulty, 'insiderness is not fixed' (**2020: 220**). Autoethnography, for Akehurst and Scott (**2023**), 'stands outside the mainstream, refusing to adhere to normative standards of objective, representative and data reliability' (**2023: 438–39**). Beyond the risk of AE becoming 'overly narcissistic and self-indulgent' (**Nicholas and Holt, 2003: 26**) lies the reflective engagement, or lack thereof, of the reader (**Ashley, 2014**). For Bocher and Ellis (**2016**), AE's true potency and value, though not exclusively, lies in the dialogue that flows out of and continues beyond the research work; the agency of the storyteller and the impact of the story travelling further than originally expected. Implicitly, such positions, happenings and encounters promote the belief that research informed by AE communicates and co-creates an affective reader experience.

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Conclusion

Writing this reflexive paper was not easy. I felt encouraged by my GRC to be more aware of my position and voice. Adopting AE as an ethnographic practice felt like having to carry more research equipment without being fully committed to its value. Research work was already demanding enough without needing to bare my 'insides' to the world. And yet, understood as a reflexive praxis, AE has the potential to become a self-reflective learning experience through evaluation (**Johnson, 2019**). Nevertheless, questioning the social and cultural positions embedded in personal narratives will neither produce absolute objectivity nor subjectivity (**Reed-Donaghty, 2017**). Bourdieu questions whether the researcher can effectively undertake a 'doubling of consciousness' (**2003: 281**), a legitimate critique should I, the researcher, be unaware of the past experiences and choices that have inevitably influenced my current anthropological research and reflexive endeavour. However, reflexivity can unsettle the researcher's subjectivity lest the importance of informants be diminished either by accident or design (**Prussing et al., 2024**).

What has become abundantly clear is that my philosophical worldviews, informed by my 'internal mythologies' (**Harvey, 2024: 1**) need to be made explicit. I need to ask and answer: *How and where am I theoretically grounded that you may find me or at least recognise the terrain of my inquiry? Am I willing and satisfied to work with the uncertainty of inconclusive findings?* There is nothing detached, disembodied or neutral about the beekeeper–researcher, for 'insiderness is historically and politically constituted' (**Voloder and Kirpitchenko, 2014: 6**). Consideration of the agency of honeybees (**Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010**) and other lifeforms, whatever their distinct or shared evolutionary path, is a valid avenue of academic inquiry capable of embracing inconclusive findings that can be recorded, audited, and analysed.

Generative and creative fluidity in various forms have imbued this writing. Having begun with childhood memories of water flowing towards Dublin

port and onward into the Irish Sea, I now have a new companion and neighbour on the western Atlantic seaboard, namely the breadth and depth of Galway Bay. This wider tidal expanse of water invites playfulness in its refreshing energy and calmness, stimulates anxiety in the human jetsam (as evidenced by its fractal shorelines) (**Robinson, 2003**) and demands profound respect in its unpredictability and damaging ferocity. These and other tidings of its multiple personalities constantly shift and change only a short distance from my apiary. The same, I believe, can be said of beekeepers, honeybees and researchers, all intermingling in potentially co-authored new and Heraclitean coherences.

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