

# **Can I Tell You My Story? The Story Beyond the Stories: An Exploration into The Use and Value of Autoethnography Within Cross-Cultural Qualitative Research in Uganda, A Postcolonial Approach**

**Elle Bunyan**<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Division of Psychology, Sociology & Education, Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, Scotland, UK*

## **Abstract**

*This methodological exploration engages critically with autoethnographic technique and scholarship, to examine and exemplify the value of autoethnography in enhancing qualitative inquiry within cross-cultural research. Though encompassing a myriad of definitions and approaches, autoethnography represents both a process and a product, that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experiences (auto) in relation to their wider cultural (ethno) context, producing an account of this critical process (graphy) to enhance sociological understandings. However, there is debate and methodological polarisation among autoethnographers concerning the degree to which (re)presentations of the method (the product) should be explicitly analytical, whereby personal stories are embedded within specific theoretical framings, and relevant wider literature. Therefore, specifically; this piece examines and demonstrates the use of autoethnography as a methodological tool in facilitating enhanced critical reflection and understandings within the context of the researcher's wider study in which she; a Scottish, white, self-funded PhD student, employed narrative interviews amongst other qualitative methods within a population of Ugandan children living within an orphanage in Kampala. Given Uganda's geopolitical history of colonial oppression and ongoing semi-authoritarian rule, combined with the researcher's positionality plus a decade of personal experiences before, and beyond formal fieldwork, this article demonstrates the use of autoethnography engaging a postcolonial lens to illuminate the sociocultural and historical systems of power, that that shape personal reality (ontology), the ways the experiential components of this reality are portrayed and therefore the constraints under which such portrayals can be interpreted (epistemology), for example within narratives or interviews. In doing so, the methodological value of a moderate approach to autoethnography is argued: that blends the human, heuristic value of personal experience as embodied knowledge with the scholarly affordances of theory and literature, showing how this method assists in situating one's positionality and consequent influence within their research context; but offers words of critique and caution concerning the challenges of autoethnography.*

**Keywords:** Cross-cultural Research, Qualitative Methods, Epistemology, Narrative, Field-study; Reflexivity; Neo-colonialism

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## **1.INTRODUCTION**

The following paper presents an exploration into the use and value of autoethnography as a methodological tool in enhancing critical reflection, understandings and practices within field-based research in a cross-cultural context. Described by Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011, p.1[1]) as both a *process* and a *product*, autoethnography seeks to “describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experiences (auto) in order to understand cultural experiences (ethno)”. As such, autoethnography fuses personal narrative with sociocultural exploration and critique, by systematic analysis of the self and others, individual and collective experience, and identity politics, to extend and enhance sociological understandings of a culture or phenomenon (Holman Jones, 2007 [2]; Ellis Et al., 2011 [1]; Poerwandari, 2021 [3]). Through such methodological layering (Ronai, 1995 [4]), autoethnography provides a means by which to produce complex and nuanced cultural critiques (Boylorn & Orbe, 2020 [5]; Ronai, 1995 [4]; Toyosaki, 2018 [6]) thus expands beyond than telling a story of one's experience, to critically thinking outward at power relations that restrict the meanings available for understanding the author's text (Banks and

Banks, 2000 [7]). Given the myriad of definitions and approaches to autoethnography (Poerwandari, 2021 [3]; Wall, 2006 [8]; 2016 [9]) this piece engages critically with autoethnographic scholarship *and* technique to explore how such an approach may contribute to a wider multi-method qualitative study in which the researcher; a female, Scottish, white, non-religious, self-funded PhD student and mental health practitioner, employed narrative, semi-structured and in-depth interviews to explore the lived experiences of children within an orphanage and on the streets in Kampala, Uganda. As is elucidated, this study was located within a community in which the researcher has been involved for over a decade - both in the field and remotely throughout - thus drew on previous experiences in which the children would ask to “tell their (my) story”, informing the use of narratives with the 30 children aged 12-18 in the study. Additionally, the study employed a range of semi-structured and in-depth interviews methods with a diverse range of local community members, both affiliated and unaffiliated with the children/orphanage, to explore understandings of the experiences of children in and around Kampala from a range of local perspectives. However, as I illuminate, throughout personal and research experiences in Uganda, challenges were encountered and concerns raised regarding predominantly White, western Evangelical Christian Missionaries, prompting a shift in perspective and need to critically examine the sociocultural context further, including my own positionality. [1]

Given the confluence of previous experiences with the study community, as well as my position as a privileged white western researcher within a historically subjugated population that has endured colonialism; as protectorate of the British Empire between 1894 - 1962, a two-decade civil war (1986-2006) between the Lord’s Resistance Army rebel group (LRA) and the army of the Ugandan government, and ongoing adversity, poverty and corruption under the semi-authoritarian regime of Museveni, president since 1986 (Gumisiriza, 2021 [10]); scrutinising my positionality and influence within my research context is crucial in situating findings. The significance of researcher reflexivity (critical self-evaluation) is well documented (Berger, 2013 [11]; Palaganas et al., 2017 [12]; Pitard, 2017 [13]; Willig, 2019 [14]), however, in this piece the significance pertains to the limits within which findings of my Ugandan study can be understood; illuminating how I am implicated *in* and *by* the process of creating *representations* of my study community. As such, autoethnography emerged as a vehicle by which to facilitate and demonstrate this process, foregrounding the situated, transient and subjective nature of knowledge production (Ellis Et Al., 2011 [1]; Guba & Lincoln, 1994 [15]; Poerwandari, 2021 [3]). [2]

To elaborate; autoethnography emerged as a postmodern response to the ‘crisis of representation’, which challenged the notion of universal truths claimed within the traditionally dominant, objectivist forms of qualitative inquiry that seek to research process and findings, or - the researcher from researched, de-emphasising or omitting expression of the influence of the researcher throughout these processes (Pitard, 2017 [13]; Thorpe & Holt, 2008 [15]; Toyosaki, 2018 [6]). Pathak (2010 [16]) suggests that this is a result of false beliefs that knowledge can, and should, be apolitical, engendering a false binary that knowledge is *either* embodied (experiential/anecdotal) *or* intellectual. As such, autoethnography is aligned with the constructivism-interpretivism and critical paradigms, associated with a continuum of ontological perspectives that assume personal reality, research processes, and findings, to be a psychosocial construction; but vary in emphasis on internality, externality, discourse and power relations dependent on the autoethnographer’s ideological positioning and focus (McIlveen, 2008 [17]; Pitard, 2017 [13]; Toyosaki, 2018 [6]). Doloriert and Sambrook (2011 [18]) delineate autoethnography further, into three - often overlapping - epistemological styles. The most dominant form: evocative *interpretivism* as typified by Ellis & Bochner (2000 [19]), prioritises emotional resonance amongst readers to evoke interpretations of the author’s experiences, deprioritising explicit theoretical framings to inform the readers understandings. Secondly, analytic *realism* as typified by Anderson (2006 [20]) represents a more traditional, formalised scientific approach, tending toward attempted objective writing and analysis (Mcilveen, 2008 [17]). And thirdly, a postmodern *critical* form typified by Holman-Jones (2007 [21]) that emphasises the influence of power relations and discourse on the interpretation and representation within texts, meaning that users typically embed their autoethnographies within a specific theoretical frame to elucidate the influence of specific systems of power (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2011 [18]). [3]

For example, scholars such as Butz and Besio (2004 [22]), Pathak (2010 [16]; 2013 [23]), Toyosaki (2018 [6]) and Dutta & Basu (2013 [24]), contend that engaging a postcolonial theoretical frame within the autoethnographic enterprise is essential in research contexts historically subjugated populations, to illuminate the social, political, cultural and historical systems influencing knowledge production. Postcolonialism refers to a theoretical perspective that is concerned with identifying, analysing and challenging the perpetuation of colonial systems of power, discourse and Western hegemony in contemporary contexts, that maintain an oppressive binary between the West and formerly colonised nations (Loomba, 2016 [25]; Pathak, 2010 [16]; Toyosaki, 2018 [6]). Whilst a broad theoretical perspective informed by FOUCAULT’S (1970 [26] ; 1977 [27]) conceptualisation of power-knowledge; postcolonialism is underpinned by Said’s, (1995 [28]) *Orientalism* which broadly, described the foundations of these systems in terms of the way the West (Occident) constructed the identity of the East (Orient) through misrepresentation of the non-western world entrenched in binary discourse; framing such populations as homogenous, uncivilised, and inferior - thereby creating ‘the other’ (the Orient). Thus through the perpetuation of colonial discourse which implicitly or unintentionally, or explicitly, frames non-western populations within this same dichotomy whereby representations and praxis are based on Western conceptualisations, space is left for neo-

colonialism; the economic, political, religious, ideological and cultural hegemonic influence of the West (Butz & Besio, 2004 [22]; Duniy, 2020 [29]; Nkrumah, 1965 [30]). Ultimately, applied to the autoethnographic enterprise, postcolonialism offers a means by which to situate personal experience and sociocultural critique, offering users a more formalised, robust approach to demonstrating reflexivity grounded in theory. [4]

Therefore, considering Uganda's geopolitical and sociocultural and historical context and concerns arising throughout my research experiences regarding the influence of predominantly white westerners in the field, after presenting the methodological foundations and forms of autoethnographic *process*, this piece engages a postcolonial frame in exemplifying autoethnographic (re)presentation - the *product*. Specifically, in what follows I first discuss the foundations and forms of autoethnography (2), further delineating between approaches and establishing the key principles and practices (2.1), including ethics (2.2). To contextualise application of the method and the demonstrative autoethnographic representation that follows; the nexus between my research context and the foundations and forms of autoethnography is embedded throughout, conveying the points of resonance, and allowing a further understanding of autoethnographies' relevance to my research in Uganda. Subsequently, in engaging critically with approaches to representing (writing) autoethnography (3) guided by Wall's (2016 [9]) moderate approach, drawing on the techniques and scholarship of (Dutta & Basu, 2013 [24]), Pathak (2010 [16]) and (Adams et al., 2016 [31]), I exemplify how the method facilitated constructive critical reflection within my research context, by allowing me to make sense of difficult experiences and observations of predominantly *white, Western* Evangelical Christian Missionaries which engendered internalised concerns about my own presence and influence in Uganda. In turn, propelled by autoethnographic process which encourages examination of the ways in which we relate to those in the field (Adams et al., 2016 [31]; Wall, 2016 [9]), I critically examine the intersections between our intercultural identity comprised of juxtaposed positionalities and practices; encapsulated within the "Mzungu" phenomenon. Mzungu is a common term in Uganda denoting white westerners, predominantly associated with Missionaries or humanitarian volunteers. As such, within this demonstrative piece (3) that seeks to document exploration of engagement with autoethnographic method, I embody an ontological stance embedded within social constructionism; emphasising the influence of social and power relations, and discourse in shaping personal and social *reality*, thus epistemologically assuming that *truth* and *knowledge* are socially constructed, influenced by surrounding power relations, including by that of the researcher responsible for producing representations of an individual/group (Crotty, 1998 [32]; McIlveen, 2008 [17]; Pathak, 2010 [16]). In concluding, I refer back to key criticisms of autoethnography and acknowledge challenges and limitations, but like Wall (2016 [9]), Griffin & Griffin (2019 [33]), I advocate for a moderate approach to autoethnography; that combines the value of *human* embodied knowledge and innovative, creative expression, but maintains the *academic* value and commitment to theory and literature. [5]

## 2. Autoethnography: Foundations and Forms

Autoethnographies share a common foundation in portraying the inextricable links between the interactions, relationships and influence between the researcher and researched within a sociocultural context (Holt, 2003 [34]; Wall, 2016 [9]). However, the different forms the method takes in process and (re)presentation, create polarisation between analytical and evocative approaches rendering 'autoethnography' a contested term, ultimately resulting in ambiguity for budding autoethnographers and reviewers in determining what constitutes quality autoethnography (Wall, 2016 [9]). The most dominant form: evocative autoethnography, typified by Ellis and Bochner (2000 [19]) is described as blurring borders between social science and literary technique, whereby explicit use of theory and literature is deprioritised in framing personal narrative. Instead, narrative is used heuristically, whereby an "epistemology of emotion" is invoked, stimulating empathetic emotion and consequent further thinking and learning among readers (Denzin, 2006 [35]). Despite its dominance, this is the most critiqued form with scholars such as Delamont (2009 [36]) and Atkinson (2006 [37]) suggesting that without explicitly linking narrative to scholarship, an autoethnographer cannot expand broader sociological understandings and is solipsistic - meaning that resulting texts are limited to decontextualised stories of the privileged self-inquiring academic. Conversely, Anderson's (2006 [20]) analytic autoethnography is closely aligned with traditional realist ethnography, deprioritising portrayal of visceral personal story or exploration, in favour of analytic reflexivity, and generalisability through expanding theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena. Additionally, he stipulates the prerequisites that the researcher has "*complete membership within the research group or setting, that they are visible as such a member in their published texts*" (p. 375). However, DENZIN (2006 [35]) and Wall (2016 [9]) argue that by restricting the use of self purely analytic reflexivity, this form of autoethnography doesn't offer a novel approach. Moreover, in limiting the voices that can be heard on experiences of a social or cultural issue to only those who have "full membership" of the group to which the issue pertains, arguably this restricts not only the researcher but also the range of legitimate knowledge and insight that can emerge from unique social positionings and perspectives. Overall, despite opposing approaches, autoethnographic forms are united in principles, purposes and ethics that underpin the methodology, which beyond Anderson's (2006 [20]) model, are

framed as indicators of quality and effectiveness in implementation as opposed to conventional, standardised evaluative frameworks (Adams et al., 2017 [38] ; Holman Jones, 2007 [21]; Wall, 2016 [9]). [6]

### **1.1 Purposes and Practices**

Broadly, Adams et al (2017 [38]) emphasise five main purposes for doing autoethnography, each of which resonates with my own methodological objectives. Firstly, they emphasise the commitment of using the researcher's personal experience to "*speak against or provide alternatives to, dominant, taken-for-granted and harmful cultural scripts, stories or stereotypes*" (pp.3) They argue that autoethnographers provide accounts of personal experiences to expand upon existing literature, or address gaps within it, reflecting the nuances of cultural issues or phenomena that can be lost through alternative research designs constrained by more traditional, positivist models of rigour in reliability and validity. Relatedly, a second key purpose of autoethnography is to present insider knowledge of a cultural experience or specific aspects of life within a particular culture that other researchers may not be able to know or articulate. As Adams et al (2017 [38]) note, this doesn't mean that the knowledge of a culture generated by an 'outsider' is devalued. Rather, autoethnographers provide a novel, alternative perspective on cultural experiences, which often includes every day sporadic experiences that aren't easily captured by alternative data collection methods. [7]

Relating to my engagement with autoethnography, these two primary objectives were symbiotic in their resonance with my commitments and objectives in the context of my research in Uganda, with regards to the unique lens I am afforded by which to critically examine harmful cultural stories. As Adams et al (2017 [38]) suggest, providing alternative understandings that capture the complexities and nuances of a phenomenon beyond that which is possible with time-limited, more traditional rigid ethnographic methods, my situated knowledge and understandings of the community in Uganda are shaped by experiences over a ten-year period, before and beyond formal fieldwork. Indeed, my research activity in Uganda was a result of experience and observations throughout voluntary experiences alongside Ugandan caregivers in 2011, in which I facilitated a role of supporting psychosocial wellbeing amongst children within their care. As opposed to being affiliated with academia or research, my being in Uganda within this community of children identifying as 'orphans' and 'street kids' was for this purpose, having heard through a colleague within my Mental Health based role, about two former street children trying to establish their own support services there. However, upon return to Scotland to complete the final year of a degree in Psychology, reflections upon experiences and observations in Uganda lead to exploratory research - within the travel and time-limited confines of an undergraduate dissertation, personal and academic commitments intersected resulting in a study investigating psychological trauma and potentially culturally appropriate support amongst this population of children. Throughout the decade since, until illness and Covid-19 Pandemic travel restrictions prevented, I have returned to the same community, the same 'children' – some of whom now adults with children of their own, whilst concurrently this community has grown into an established non-government organisation (NGO), funded predominantly by North American Christian groups. In the time I've worked alongside this community, they've gone from having just acquired one dilapidated property to serve as an orphanage, to now comprising of multiple homes; a 'fee free' school for children in the local community who reside with their families; and maintaining the delivery of various outreach services to children living on the streets of Kampala, namely within slum dwellings. Throughout this time, I've been/am known as Aunt, Maama, sister, Mukwano (friend), and to much amusement amongst our community more recently; Jjajja - grandmother. [8]

Because of these long-term relationships and experiences, though I'm not an 'insider' within this community in Uganda by ANDERSON'S (2006 [20]) standard, nor am I considered a distant outsider; as is often the case with ethnographic studies in which a researcher enters an unfamiliar cultural setting, rarely returning (Adams et al., 2017 [38]). Simultaneously in the Ugandan context, my western origins and white skin incur a perceived cultural identity membership amongst other White Westerners there, a phenomenon typically referred to as "Mzungu". As De wet (2016 [39]) also indicates within her postcolonial critique of NGO run orphanages in Eastern Uganda, in my experience, Mzungus including myself are most often assumed to be Christian Missionaries. As I expand upon, this creates a juxtaposition between being a Mzungu, but non-religious; again, suggesting only partial membership. Consequently, this multidimensional positioning affords a novel lens by which to "*articulate insider knowledge of cultural experience*" to inform other researchers of aspects of a cultural context which they may not know, which is the second purpose of autoethnography (Adams et al., 2017, PARA.11 [38]). Within autoethnography, Reed-danahay (2017 [40]) suggests that the term "insider" doesn't reflect that which is used dichotomously within traditional ethnography, instead, framing the autoethnographic conceptualisation as occupying the intersection between the two; emphasising the reflexive, collaborative and interrelated nature of knowledge production and articulation of cultural experience between researcher and researched. [9]

Elucidating the complexities and intersections of these positional dynamics and consequential affordances and restrictions this unique lens entails, as Adams et al (2017 [38]) suggest, is best achieved by the use of everyday experiences and observations. Prioritising this use of the unplanned, sporadic occurrences as a foundational purpose of autoethnography, in contrast to traditional, predetermined methods such as interviews, affords autoethnographers

a means by which to disseminate knowledge and understandings of sensitive, or controversial topics, that aren't otherwise necessarily possible to capture. For example, Gerena's (2019 [41]) account of the homophobia, discrimination and oppression experienced within Church related settings, Boylorn's (2011 [42]) portrayal of experiences of racism whilst shopping or Boyd's (2008 [43]) portrayal of the impact of his whiteness in an interracial dialogue group. This reflects a further point of pertinence to my research context in which sporadic, unexpected experiences outside of formal research procedures have shaped my understandings of my study community, the cultural context - with particular regard to ubiquitous power relations - and consequently, the way I am implicated by and within my research. The importance of recognising and showing how researchers are implicated by their observations and conclusions, is captured by its identification as the third purpose of autoethnography (Adams et al., 2017 [38]). As such, "*autoethnographic texts strive to be performative – to demonstrate how selves-in-cultures and cultures-in-selves are not constituted outside of or beyond discourse, language, and history*" (Holman Jones, 2007 Para. 6 [2]). As is elucidated in engaging with autoethnographic representation, this critically reflexive element is integral to my research in Uganda, in avoiding the perpetuation of colonial discourse and stereotypes through misrepresentations or portraying Ugandan children as a single story, or identity. Specifically, within the 'post-colonial' Ugandan context, as Butz (2021 [44]) Butz And Besio (2004 [22]) Pratt (2010 [45]) argue; this "autoethnographic sensibility", from a postcolonial perspective that acknowledges the colonial systems of power explicitly and implicitly influencing subject(s) of study *and* researcher, shaping the way narratives are produced, understood and represented. [10]

Finally, in foregrounding personal experiences and their implications in sense-making in more human life-like ways, illuminates the research context with more verisimilitude, autoethnography embraces the dynamic confluence of personal and academic learning, contributing to texts that can be more relatable or palatable to audiences beyond academia than traditional scientific literature (Ellis et al., 2011 [1]). A point of resonance with my concerns over the inaccessibility of academic bodies of knowledge that *could* inform practices in Uganda, but are too exclusive to academics, who do not reflect a significant proportion of those actually engaging with communities there. Specifically, beyond the first barriers of paywalls, lay additional barriers in terms of information presentation that may lose human relatability in favour of impersonal, jargon filled, abstract texts to appease the academy (Holman Jones, 2007 [2]; 2016 [46]). [11]

## 1.2 Relational Ethics

Inevitability though, the use of personal stories that inevitably implicate close others within a method that typically doesn't require formal institutional ethical approval processes (Wall, 2016 [9]), can render autoethnography ethically problematic (Delamont, 2009 [36]). Therefore, an additional priority unanimous among autoethnographers is the importance of *relational ethics*, which acknowledge that throughout research processes if not already, close bonds are formed meaning that the researcher typically doesn't view those implicated as impersonal participants to be mined for data (Ellis, 2007 [47], 2015 [48]; Ellis Et Al., 2011 [1]). To autoethnographers, the term *relational ethics* refers to the responsibilities upheld and strategies adopted in navigating the tensions between speaking against harmful cultural scripts, stories or stereotypes whilst also those *protecting close bonds*, and those implicated within one's story (Holman-Jones, 2007 [2] ; Wall, 2016 [9]). Spry (2001[49]) offers guidance on mitigating these tensions, which inform the way I engage with autoethnographic representation in what follows. She emphasises the use of critical reflection upon motives for autoethnography in order to avoid self-indulgence and, as far as is possible, connect motives, method and content of writing to a wider cultural issue. For example, my motives for engaging with autoethnographic technique and scholarship are in vain of facilitating critical reflection, to illuminate the influence of colonial power relations and discourse on the content *and* wider context of my research. Relatedly, Spry (2001 [49]) suggests that autoethnographers must interrogate our positioning within, and connection to, larger cultural systems, especially investigating our involvement in the perpetuation of oppressive systems, to avoid blaming and shaming. [12]

Given the topics of sensitivity or controversy to which autoethnographies frequently refer, this can represent a significant challenge in utilising the approach. Like Carolyn in Adams et al (2014 [50]), who questioned the ethics of showing of racist and sexist displays in her stories, I take the position that presenting issues of social injustice or discrimination displayed by others, is important in understanding, and in hopes of changing harmful practices. For example, in engaging in autoethnographic representation I refer to my experiences with Evangelical Missionaries, not to shame or blame, but to demonstrate how recognising them within a wider system of power, allowed me to interrogate my own involvement in this system of which we both comprise. In maintaining this critically reflexive approach that analyses the self/other within systems of injustice or oppression, Spry (2001 [49]) suggests autoethnographers can avoid portraying the self/others as victims. As she suggests, this includes acknowledging our identities and privileges as researchers to avoid self-righteousness, which - I would argue - is extremely pertinent not only as a *white* researcher in recognising white privilege, but also what this whiteness combined with *Western* culture represents in terms of maintaining colonial systems of power and discourse. [13]

### 3. (re)Presenting Autoethnography: The Product

Overall, regardless of the specific approach one takes, upholding the foundations of autoethnography in terms of purposes, principles and practices, whilst navigating relational ethics and remaining faithful to experiences, leads to the tumultuous production of a “messy representation”, reflecting the complex, unique, non-linear, and never complete, ways in which humans make sense of their world’s (Ellis et al., 2014 PP, 97 [50]). However, the myriad of forms autoethnographic products take cause ambiguity for potential users and reviews alike. Consequently, in recognising the polarisation within autoethnography and critiques of each approach, WALL (2016, P.7 [9]) proposed a ‘moderate’ approach, which captures the described methodological foundations and combines: *“the power of the personal perspective with the value of analysis and theory, so that sociological understanding is advanced in ways it might never have otherwise been”*. As such, like Holman Jones (2007 [2]), Chang (2008 [52]), Griffin and Griffin (2019 [33]) and Poerwandari (2021 [3]), Wall (2016 [9]) emphasises the need to embed critical reflections within theoretical, conceptual, and research literature. In this sense, in adopting a moderate approach that retains a commitment to innovative literary styles, autoethnographers are afforded the scope to draw on a range of literary techniques in representing, as Ellis et al (2014 [50]) describe in-depth. Thus, through writing, autoethnography encompasses a means of processing experiences and reflections, *and* showing this process, in accordance with the previously highlighted foundational methodological principles. [14]

Therefore, in order to further explore autoethnographies value in facilitating critical reflection in the context of enhancing sociological understandings of my study community in Uganda; the following section portrays an extract of engagement with moderate autoethnographic representation. As such, the purpose is twofold: to illustrate and argue the value and affordances offered by autoethnographic *process* in enhancing and expanding upon sociological understandings, particularly in cross cultural field-study settings. And secondly, to elucidate how this approach offers a means by which to disseminate a valuable scholarly *product*, which here refers to an enhanced understanding of the power relations influencing my study community in Uganda. This includes a situated portrayal of how I, as researcher, am implicated within - and by - this system, in terms of the production of representations, knowledge and identity. [15]

Accordingly, the following autoethnography employs Adam’s et al (2014 [50]) literary technique and structure to first present a moment of poignance or ‘epiphany’, that renders a long-lasting impression and influence on overall experience and understandings, after the moment has ended. Here, this refers to a specific exchange between myself and a Western volunteer identifying as a ‘Born again Christian Missionary’, the experience of which has been derived from field notes and personal diary, re-worded to omit potentially identifiable information thus preventing identification. It is important to re-emphasise that it is not the intention here to ‘blame or shame’ any individual, group or belief system concerning their activities; rather, it is to *show* the process of connecting personal experience (auto), to a broader cultural context (ethno) in writing (graphy). Conscious of sensitivity, however, I choose to only use one direct interaction and have been careful in my choice, then describe in more generalised terms which is more synonymous with my experiences, in that they don’t pertain to only this individual. This autoethnographic strategy is in-keeping with the use of re-narrativization to lend sense, salience and focus in contextualising consequent broader reflections (Dutta & Basu, 2013 [24]), a strategy informed by bochner & Ellis’ (2003 [52]) ethnographic wide-angle lens that focuses outward then inward, between personal experience and its wider social and cultural context. [16]

Subsequently, in exemplifying a moderate approach frame my analyses within a postcolonial theoretical lens, to portray the ways this theory and scholarship served as a means of understanding my experiences, and consequently - interrogating my position in the wider sociocultural and historical system of power. Additionally, this conveys the inductive, iterative analytical process I embodied in shifting my focus between memories, diaries and notes, photos and videos, and narrative transcripts, to theoretical and research literature, then back onto my self (Wall, 2016 [9]; Adams Et Al., 2014 [50]). [17]

#### 3.1 (A part of) My Story:

As WALL (2016 [9]) CHANG (2008 [51]) suggests, autoethnographies most often begin with a topic of interest from personal or professional life, and like her exemplar; my engagement with the method in what follows represents a confluence of both in respects to my existing personal relationships in Uganda, that took on a professional facet in my capacity as a researcher. Adams et al (2016 [31]) capture the essence of where I initiate my autoethnographic exploration: *“Autoethnographies begin with the thoughts, feelings, identities, and experiences that make us uncertain—knocking us for sense-making loops—and that make us question, reconsider, and reorder our understandings of our- selves, others, and our worlds”*.

“I can’t believe you haven’t been saved yet!”

Tired, with that familiar dull buzzing, slightly ‘spaced-out’ headache from - I always assume - inadvertently inhaling the fumes of the metal works and paraffin throughout my afternoon with my friends and children in the heart of Kisenyi slum (Kampala), my confused expression was perhaps what prompted them to continue. That, or it was their own equal bewilderment, that I wasn’t saved from this danger I wasn’t yet privy to.

“I’m just surprised that you would come to Uganda, everybody is born-again here”

Ah. Now, this reference I did know. I’d just met this person the day before, as they arrived in Uganda for their first time in East Africa, and candidly said that I wasn’t religious when they asked - as was my go-to line in response to this common question. I hadn’t contributed to their preaching in the slums either, where I was dressing children’s wounds and listening to their stories; so I was pretty sure this reference was in the realms of religion. As usual, I hadn’t thought much of not concealing my lack of religion, to my knowledge it was never an issue or source of contention within my relationships with anybody else in Uganda before. On the contrary, although I wasn’t sure why; most appeared to find it amusing, but then again - a shared sense of humour, good-natured sarcasm and finding laughs in everything and anything had always been factors that permeated my relationships there, with many built on laughs. So, although I now knew the context of this person’s statement, my lack of response beyond “what?” was perhaps telling; I wasn’t prepared for what followed.

“It’s just if you’re not a missionary, why did you come here?”

I’m not sure what exactly went through my paraffin fogged head in this instance, my body reacted faster than I registered my thoughts. My heart rate increasing, the crunching sound of my water bottle broke the silence before my voice did, as my hand clenched around it in unison with my jaw. “Wait, saved from what?” I asked, my heart rate increasing, intensifying the paraffin fueled pounding in my head.

“You know...from hell”

I didn’t realise my chest had mimicked my clenched hands until it released as my voice caught up with my thoughts and an exasperated “so I’m going to hell unless...?”

“Well, unless you repent and receive the Lord, surrender your life to Jesus”

And so, the debate began, with much ignorance on my side. I wasn’t aware that it didn’t matter what I did, how ‘good’ I tried to be in life, how hard I worked or how much I tried to put others first or anything other factors - nothing of my own identity matters. If don’t become one of them, if I don’t live *their* identity, *their* truth, *their* story; I can never be enough - I’m going to hell. [18]

### 3.1.1 My Wide-Angle Lens

“Hell” bound, little did I know that evening, that these moments represented the biggest ‘knock into sense-making loops’, that would make me question, reconsider, and reorder my understandings of myself, others and my world, within my research context. The significance of this moment didn’t entirely emerge until my experiences and observations of Missionaries accumulated; until I recognised the themes encapsulated within the above interaction transcending through their practices and words to the children. However, what did immediately strike a chord was that I had never felt like, or experienced somebody *trying* to make me feel like, in Uganda “*everybody is*” a part of this single-story that the White Western Missionaries have taught me about ever since. I’d never experienced anybody suggest or imply that to not “*surrender your life (identity) to Jesus (the missionary’s conceptualisation of Christianity)*” and live this single story, thus relinquishing or at least silencing any other beliefs, values, or ways of living, *unworthy*, a *bad* person, or to simply not *belong*. Much less so, so ‘bad’ or immoral that I’m destined for hell! But, beyond a term of insult, the concept of ‘hell’ doesn’t actually have much meaning to me, given my lack of religion; it doesn’t have the meaning or fear that it does to those whose belief systems involve a variation of the concept. Moreover, having as we say in Scotland ‘thick skin’, I could manage insults and debates of Missionaries directed at *me* concerning *my* lack of adherence to the beliefs and practices over the years. It doesn’t dramatically change my life if they don’t all accept me, it doesn’t affect my access to education, the roof over my head. They don’t hand me money or food in the streets or offer me shoes and clothes. They don’t hold that power over me. Because I’m not a Ugandan child on the streets, or in their orphanage. I’m a Mzungu too. [19]

I couldn’t and admittedly still cannot reconcile the anguish - and at times anger - felt about the messages of hate encapsulated within their teachings, much less that people may associate me with such views. For example, whilst to them, their teachings on sexuality, sexual practices and the condemning of other religions are theological, to me - they are discriminatory hate - which I vehemently oppose. This was especially painful in coinciding with overt support for Museveni’s proposed “Anti-Homosexuality Act 2014”, as Kaoma (2014 [53]) and Ward (2015

[54]) also illuminated. Moreover, whilst their aversion to contraception for girls and opposition to sex education that is inclusive, or much beyond abstinence is framed theologically, to me is patriarchal, harmful and unrealistic. Their teachings are entrenched within their desire to help, their desire to ensure the children are “*Saved*”. Where the missionary’s teachings reflect their identities, their positionalities, my anguish reflects my own, it reflects my ever-developing positionality within my research context in Uganda. From listening to the life stories of those within my study community and beyond in Uganda before any interaction with Western Evangelical Missionaries, I’m aware of the pain the homophobic messages could cause, and the stories of those who felt they had to change their name from their Muslim birth name to obtain sponsorship. Through these same stories, I’m conscious of the pain that can be caused in reinforcing patriarchal messages opposing contraception and heralding abstinence, to those who have already been raped, or who work in the sex trade. But my awareness and representation, although engendered by the stories I hold in my heart or in narrative transcripts, ultimately rests on my understandings of these stories, shaped implicitly by not only my personal experiences of childhood physical and emotional abuse, but by Western constructs of the meanings of experiences, embedded within my background as a Psychology student and mental health practitioner, and this Western institutionally ingrained desire to “help”, or “save” people so far from our own. It is at this intersection, of the shared desire and intention to “help”, where regardless of our differences, the Missionaries and I are united, and can be understood through a postcolonial lens. Through this lens, the potential repercussions of the narratives engendered by these efforts to “help” or “save”, in the way we represent them as White Westerners, becomes visible. [20]

### **3.1.2 The Postcolonial Lens: Thinking with theory**

Like many, Postcolonial scholar Kapoor (2008) argues that globally, absolute decolonisation has yet to be accomplished, leaving space for the maintenance of Western hegemony in formerly colonised nations; for example, through reproducing colonial discourse manifesting from Missionaries civilising expeditions, in which the London Missionary School was a significant agent of colonial dominance. From a postcolonial perspective, the continued imposition of Western conceptualisations of religion upon formerly colonised nations perpetuates colonial Anglo-American power structures whereby these conceptualisations of religion assume a hegemonic cultural construct (Ntarangwi, 2003 [55]). Whilst explicit objectives may have changed from “civilising” to “salvation” missions under the guise of development work (Bandyopadhyay, 2018 [56]; Bandyopadhyay & Patil, 2017 [57]; Warren & Hytten, 2004 [58]); as Said’s theory of Orientalism (1995 [28]) suggests, this process still frames the non-western world (Orient) as “the other” - inferior to, or in need of salvation by, the West (Occident), a dichotomy created by the West. According to Said, (1995 [28]), the reductive process that diminishes perceptions of those from outside of the West to an inferior homogenous entity, as well as the ability of members of these non-western cultures to generate their own cultural representations, is fundamentally underpinned by Foucault (1970 [26]; 1977 [27]) theories and conceptualisations of knowledge, power and discourse, and their inseparable relationship. To Foucault (1977 [27]) *knowledge* is not representative of objective reality, it is instead influenced and constrained according to the situation and structures of *power* surrounding those proclaiming knowledge. Foucault (1979) conceptualised *power* as the foundation beneath knowledge, describing it in terms of the intrinsic systems of social relations permeating society that determine how and what knowledge is derived, and how this is used. Thus within this integrated, cyclical understanding: bodies of *knowledge* exist as culturally specific products of power; constructed, regulated and operated systemically, as mechanisms of maintaining *power* relations (Zhao, 2017 [59]). [21]

For example, in her postcolonial critique in studying Western NGO-run orphanages in Eastern Uganda, De Wet (2016 [39]) describes the continued Missionary efforts to convert Ugandan’s to a western construct of Christianity in terms of neo-colonialism, or “the colonisation of Faith”, whereby the West continues to assert hegemony over indigenous belief systems. Nkomazana & Setume (2016 [60]) enhance this understanding further when describing how in silencing Botswanan indigenous religious beliefs and practices to appease Western Evangelical missionaries, Christianity engenders an ideology legitimising White dominance, framing Western constructs of religions as superior. Moreover, in perpetuating the ideological dichotomies that frame Western belief systems as superior and essential to “salvation”, within a population that sees North American Evangelical Protestant Missionaries or Church groups as the majority providers of financial support (Ashdown, Dixie & Talmage, 2020 [61]; De Wet, 2016 [39] ; Hearn, 2002 [62]) engenders a notion of micro-level conditional aid within the Ugandan context. In other words, a notion that one must at least appear to assume the way of life suggested within Missionary teachings in order to be deemed *worthy* or *good* enough, to *belong* within the orphanages and outreach projects facilitated by them. Ultimately this seeks to engender a culture of perceived dependency on the White Westerner (Ashdown Et Al., 2020 [61]; Corbett & Fikkert, 2009 [63]; Reese, 2010 [64]) and consequently a perceived need to represent one’s story dependent on audience. Specifically, in telling their stories to a Mzungu, the children’s narratives are shaped by and reflective of the colonial systems of power, in not only the way they are presented - but the way they are interpreted and represented. Or as postcolonial autoethnographers such as Pathak (2010 [16]; 2013 [23]) and Toyosaki & Pensoneau-Conway (2013 [65]) contend;



our stories reflect our intersubjectively produced identity construct, influenced and shaped by the social, political and cultural systems in which they are suspended. [22]

### **3.1.3 The Reflective Researcher Lens: Looking back inwards and onwards**

Overall, regardless of our differences, in engaging in voluntary work *then* research as a white Westerner I have been unconsciously complicit in reproducing the colonial legacy that assumes the “subaltern” or “other”, needs “help” from a Mzungu; as defined by our own constructs of knowledge and understanding (Spivak, 1988 [66]). In *No More Heroes*, Flaherty (2016, P. 18 [67]) attributes this to systemic rather than individual flaws: “*The saviour mentality is not about individual failings. It is the logical result of a racist, colonialist, capitalist, hetero-patriarchal system setting us up against each other*”. He suggests that this is evidenced in everyday life; from the way disaster relief funds are advertised on TV, to movie plots and education in schools, which frame African children as in need. Indeed, like most white people of Western culture, my upbringing engendered an incognizance of the pervasive and omnipresent privilege we are afforded, and the historical abominations from which this privilege was conceived, such as colonialism (Boyd, 2008 [43]). As Toyosaki (2018 [6]) suggests, viewing this system and resulting construct that heralds ‘helping’ others within as a process *and* product of colonial power relations and discourses, allows an understanding of its nature and implications within praxis *and* research. [23]

The way this system transcends into, or from, research is described by Postcolonial theorist Bhabha (1994 [68]) who articulates a process in terms of the subjectification and representation of the “other”, creating stereotypes based on definitions of culture in their relation to Western ideals, or as Toyosaki (2018 [6]) argues; the colonisation of knowledge, whereby the West colonises the non-western world through the act of “knowing”. Spivak (1988 [66]) refers to this as *epistemic violence*, and like Said (1995 [28]), attributes the mechanisms of this process to that of Foucault’s theories of power-knowledge, contending that ultimately, this process of silencing or subverting indigenous knowledge, results in the perpetuation of colonial discourse, misrepresentation, and marginalisation. For example, regarding children on the streets in urban Uganda, the dominant narrative perpetuates a stereotype of these children as all or majority orphans, having suffered the loss of one or both parents (Perry et al., 2020 [69]; Swahn et al., 2017 [70]), neglected by parents (Swahn et al., 2012 [71]), as a problem to the city/country, who collectively need to be relocated, or ‘resettled’ (Jacob et al., 2007 [77]), as entirely vulnerable and in *dire need* (Perry et al., 2020 [69]; Swahn et al., 2017 [70]). Whilst presenting important findings relevant to children’s experiences in the case of my own study community; to date there is no literature capturing the life stories of the children in their own words, foregrounding the plurality, intersectionality, and nuances within and across these stories; reflecting a range of diverse voices and identities. For example, Perry et al (2020, para 1 [69]) claimed that psychological distress is prevalent among *all youth living in the slums of Kampala*. They go on to state, that based on statistical analyses of self-report survey measures generated for and by a Western population, that “there is an urgent need to intervene with all youth that reside there”, framing the entire youth population of the slums as “vulnerable”. Moreover, these conclusions were drawn from a service seeking group attending an internationally (western) maintained NGO, yet there is no consideration of the ways this power structure may influence the way youths respond to the survey when actively seeking support. Ultimately, this perpetuates colonial discourse of Africa as a single story of helplessness; in need of salvation by the West and doesn’t represent the diverse nuances replete with individual and collective agency, that makes this a population of many stories, and stories within stories. Overall, the repercussions of the issues in knowledge production are evident in the Westerner’s - Missionary or otherwise - endeavours to ‘help’ in the field, ultimately perpetuating colonial discourse and power structure, undermining, or disempowering indigenous voices, knowledge and efforts to support their children/citizens, framing Western intervention as superior. [24]

Recognising these factors - the ways my Whiteness and Western identity influences both the stories I hear and way I understand them - is critical in informing the ways I interpret and represent my study community. As well as awareness of my implicit biases in being more attuned elements of the children’s stories that intersect my personal, professional and academic selves in the context of lived experiences and mental health work; this also refers to critical understandings of the way representing these stories reinforces a colonial power structure. As such this is an epistemological issue, involving the need to resist objectivist representations thereby reducing the many diverse, unique and nuanced stories I hold narrative privilege over to a *single story* - that can be captured by Western defined scientific measures of truth (Toyosaki, 2018 [6]; Dutta & Basu, 2013 [24]). As Nigerian author (Adichie, 2008 [72]; 2009 [73]) suggests, depicting the people of a nation within the frame of one Western produced story, whether that’s concerning catastrophe or belief system, pushes out the plurality and intersectionality of identities, stories, and experiences that exist, thus diminishing the response of audiences to those depictions, to oversimplified, stereotypes. In other words, a part of the very issue that “knocked (me) for sense making loops”; the very silencing that caused me anguish above. [25]

#### 4. Reflecting upon Reflecting: Conclusions

Overall, as Wall (2016 [9]), Adams et al (2016 [31]) and Chang (2008 [51]) suggest, autoethnography encourages researchers to examine their perspectives in relation to the autoethnographic research topic, the ways in which we *relate* to those we write about in the field, as well as what we have learned. In critically reflecting upon my experiences and observations of concern arising throughout field study, autoethnographic *process* allowed identification and interrogation of intersections between myself and Missionaries. Consequently, although acknowledging the vast cultural differences across and within western contexts, by recognising our interrelated positioning as products and agents of a wider, system of power embedded in Colonial discourse, the constraints under which *my* own representations of my study community in Uganda, a become visible (Banks & Banks, 2000 [7]). This is important in transparently and comprehensively positioning myself within my research, emphasising how I'm implicated *in* the representations I produce in terms of the influence of the power and privilege I represent, combined with factors such as past experiences with the study community, shared childhood experiences, irreligion, and my background in psychology and mental health. Concurrently, adopting an autoethnographic approach through a postcolonial lens illuminates how I am implicated *by* the research process, in terms of the repercussions of producing 'single story' narratives or harmful stereotypes that perpetuate the colonial discourse that frames non-western nations as inferior or in need. Therefore, I echo the words of Pathak (2010 [16]) in concluding autoethnography better equips me in "telling the story and telling *its* story" in the context of Ugandan children living in an orphanage, or on the streets of Kampala. To that end, I argue that a moderate approach to autoethnography such as those exemplified by Wall (2016 [9]) and Chang (2008 [51]), that methodologically capture the confluence of the *human*, ever learning and trying to make sense of their stories; with the *academic*, equipped with theoretical tools and literature to contextualise and expand these lessons further, telling us what they may mean for those beyond ourselves. [26]

However, with the subjective and the personal comes risk and vulnerability. Although the process of autoethnography can be cathartic with many describing it as a therapeutic endeavour (Adams et al., 2014) [50], I would argue that in subjecting such personal vulnerability to the perceived validation of the academy, either in the context of publication or qualification, requires caution to protect wellbeing, particularly in case of rejection. Relatedly, and in a similar vein, at a human *and* academic level true to autoethnographic spirit, I also contend that autoethnography is somewhat of a paradox in offering what I have termed a 'false freedom'. Whilst DELAMONT (2009 [36]) criticises autoethnography as only representing the perspectives of the most privileged and power as academics, and although indeed we do represent both factors in abundance; I argue that we - 'academics' - do not represent a homogenous group *within* the academy. As such, particularly acknowledging autoethnographies growing popularity amongst PhD students and early-career academics amongst whom the approach is most common (Griffin & Griffin, 2019 [33]), I highlight the differences in freedoms constraining how, and what, one may write (Richardson, 2002 [74]; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005 [75]). For example, I would argue that from the perspective of a PhD student or early career academic, this can be a position fraught with insecurity, uncertainty, and isolation for many; often seeking qualification, work, or accreditation. As such, there are often many more restrictions upon our voices simply by the perceived expectations, or requirements of the academy (Levecque et al., 2017 [76]), as opposed to those in more advanced, secure positions. Therefore, in the context of publication or fulfilling the requisites of an academic programme, autoethnography isn't immune from the conventions of 'traditional' scholarly knowledge production that it intends to disrupt (Adams et al., 2017 [38]; Dutta & Basu, 2013 [24]; Pathak, 2010 [16]; 2013 [23]), in that ultimately, regardless of personal aspirations or commitments, for example in terms of matters of social (in)justice, the form this takes and whether one can even disseminate their story at all, is precipitated by the relevant scholarly structures. [27]

This is important in firstly highlighting the challenges and tensions for autoethnographers in reducing one's stories in terms of which 'snapshots' to include, as Wall (2008 [9]) also highlights; but additionally, in further recognising the potential limits within which one may interpret an autoethnographic account. To that end, navigating this challenge, the tensions between *personal* and *scholarly* commitment, ambition, or restriction, should serve as a point of methodological reflexivity for researchers on the position of their participants; whose own stories we seek to capture and represent within what is, an always limited, situated, frame. To reduce one's story to the perceived criteria of validity of another, is a tumultuous journey - and this in itself should serve as a heuristic reminder to those employing methods that expect our participants to do so; especially in the case of marginalised, historically subjugated and oppressed groups (Butz & Besio, 2004, p. 351 [22]). Nevertheless, in *beginning* to disrupt the scientific imperialism of academia's ivory tower by embracing the embodied *and* intellectual nature of knowledge production, engaging a postcolonial lens to a moderate autoethnographic approach offers a useful and valuable means of facilitating (*process*) and demonstrating (*product*) critical reflections and understandings those involved cross-cultural or intercultural research amongst historically marginalised populations (Adams et Al., 2017 [38]; Dutta & Basu, 2013 [24]; Pathak, 2010 [16], 2013 [23]; Toyosaki, [6] 2018). [28]

## Acknowledgements

This paper is dedicated to the children to whom it refers, and my Grandparents; James and Elizabeth Hume. Without each of whom, I wouldn't know such important stories, or still be here to tell them. Nkwagla nnyo. From the bottom of my heart, thank you to John Docherty-Hughes and Lesley Walker. Thank you for listening to my story; for saving me, believing in me and bringing my smile back. You are forever appreciated.

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