Autoethnographic International Relations: exploring the self as a source of knowledge

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Abstract. Research is all about a person's engagement with an issue. But most approaches to International Relations actively discourage personal involvement by the researcher. We question the adequacy of this norm and the related scholarly conventions. Instead, we explore how the personal experience of the researcher can be used as a legitimate and potentially important source of insight into politics. But we also note that simply telling the story of the researcher is inadequate. We engage the ensuing dilemmas by discussing how to both appreciate and evaluate autoethnographic insights. Rather than relying on pre-determined criteria, we argue that methodological uses of the self should be judged within knowledge communities and according to their ability to open up new perspectives on political dilemmas. We then advance two related suggestions: one advocates conceptualising research around puzzles; the other explores the methodological implications of recognising that producing knowledge is an inherently relational activity.

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Introduction

Researchers produce knowledge. We choose a topic of interest and then seek to provide others with meaningful information about it. Our methodologies

vary greatly, from surveys to textual analyses, from statistical calculations to ethnographic inquires. But all scholars, diverse as we are, share one commonality: we serve as a type of 'hub' through which the world becomes known.

To argue that the scholar is central to research is to state the obvious. But the significance of this seemingly commonsensical situation remains largely unrecognised and unexplored. The most prominent approaches in political and international studies have gone out of their way to distance the self from the topic even as the research process draws the self ever deeper into the questions and issues that come with the topic. Doing so is seen as necessary for knowledge to be objective and scientific. An author's personal view is subjective and thus should not taint his or her collection and presentation of data. But is such a strong denial of the central agent in the research process really appropriate? Or could it be that the very drive to be 'scientific' produces incomplete knowledge and, by extension, unscientific results?

The role of the author cannot be erased. We contend that research should not be presented as if there had been no other possibility from the beginning, as if the facts lay out there, ready to be discovered and unveiled in their authentic meaning – the author a mere messenger, framing events at their time and place of occurrence and carrying them to a far-off destination, where they unwrap and shine in their original brightness. The voyage cannot be erased, and neither can the framing, the fading, the restoration work. To erase the author is to erase potentially important insights: it leaves us with less knowledge rather than more.

The purpose of this article is to appreciate and evaluate how the self can become a more legitimate source of knowledge about International Relations. We begin by briefly outlining – and challenging – the deeply entrenched assumption that value-free knowledge is possible, that research can be presented in a manner that is completely independent from the choices made by its author. Such stark positivist assumptions have meanwhile lost much of their currency, but even constructivist approaches tend to neglect the fundamental ways in which a researcher is bound up with the world and the process of inquiry. The absence of substantial discussions on this issue is surprising given that much of International Relations scholarship now recognises the futility of assuming that knowledge can be articulated from a value-free vantage point. If the author is an integral part of producing and conveying knowledge, then we should, by consequence, embark on more systematic attempts to understand how knowledge is constituted through the self.

We build our case for considering the self as an explicit source of insight by illustrating some of the approaches that have already done so. The contribution of feminist and postcolonial scholars is particularly important here, perhaps because they cannot easily slip into existing scholarly conventions. Being confronted with disciplinary rules that question the legitimacy of their research, these scholars can hardly forget their role in the knowledge production process. Highlighting the self as a source of insight is thus a logical and compelling step – as we illustrate through work by Carol Cohn and Kim Huyhn. But we also note that even interpretive traditions offer only very few methodological guidelines about how to proceed. We seek to address this gap by drawing on literature about autoethnography, which directly engages the self as a methodological resource.

We show that autoethnography can be a valuable methodological approach for pursuing research in International Relations. But we do not simply accept autoethnography at face value. We take seriously the often-expressed criticism that autoethnography lacks rigour and risks self-indulgence. We engage the associated dilemmas by discussing questions of how to evaluate autoethnographic reflections on International Relations. Rather than relying on pre-determined criteria we argue that methodological uses of the self should be judged by their ability to open up new perspectives on political dilemmas. We then advance two suggestions about how this may be done: one advocates the need to conceptualise research around puzzles; the other explores the methodological implications of recognising that producing knowledge is an inherently relational activity that takes place within knowledge communities.

Our suggestions may appear 'radical' to some readers, but we demonstrate that our recommendations for evaluating autoethnographic research within knowledge communities are much closer to prevailing ways of evaluating scholarship than is initially apparent. The reception, circulation and uptake of scholarship rely in many respects upon the judgment and actions of peers. Appealing explicitly to knowledge communities is thus hardly revolutionary. Doing so does not, of course, resolve questions about the power to define what counts as scholarship. Indeed, more activist-oriented autoethnographers may feel that some of our suggestions make too many concessions to social scientific conventions. To these critics we will demonstrate that questions about what counts as adequate scholarship can never be fully resolved. Such questions should not be sidestepped: they ought to be debated continually within our knowledge communities. Indeed, such debate and ongoing contestation is a scholarly responsibility that we try to take on in our article.

Our conviction about the need to take autoethnographies seriously has emerged out of our own research experiences. One of us, Morgan Brigg, has made use of autoethnography in doctoral research and has conducted related work through the use of so-called contingency theory in ethnography.[1] The other, Roland Bleiker, has for many years explored alternative ways of knowing International Relations, focusing, for instance, on representing political events from multiple perspectives and through multiple means, including literary and aesthetic ones.[2] In the present article we do not actively draw on our experiences with these research projects. There is simply no space to do so. Instead, our aim is to open up methodological debates and to engage questions of how to appreciate and evaluate autoethnographic insights into International Relations. Given the relative dearth of previous research on this topic, we believe that conceptual engagement with questions of purpose and evidence is necessary alongside actual autoethnographic explorations.

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[1] Morgan Brigg, *Asking after Selves: Knowledge and Settler-Indigenous Conflict Resolution*, PhD Thesis, University of Queensland (2005); 'Governance and Susceptibility in Conflict Resolution: Possibilities beyond control', *Social and Legal Studies*, 16:1 (2007), pp. 27–47. For contingency theory, see Stephen Muecke, 'Contingency theory: The Madagascan experiment', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 6:2 (2004), pp. 201–15.

[2] For instance, Roland Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics* (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); 'Why, then, is it so bright? Towards an Aesthetics of Peace at a Time of War', *Review of International Studies*, 29 (Summer 2003), pp. 387–400; 'The Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies,* 30:3 (2001), pp. 509–33; and 'Forget IR Theory', *Alternatives: Social Transformation and Humane Governance,* 22:1 (1997), pp. 57–86.

We hope that doing so will generate debate and, in turn, lead International Relations scholars to develop more refined ways of using the self as a source of knowledge.

Writing the self out of social science

Established methodological approaches in political and international studies often pursue knowledge in ways that simultaneously police the boundaries of valid research and bypass the role of the self in knowledge production. Illustrative here is one of the most authoritative and influential methodological texts in political science: Gary King, Robert O. Keohane and Sidney Verba's *Designing Social Inquiry*.[3] The authors passionately believe that quantitative and qualitative research methods are inherently similar. The differences between them are merely stylistic and thus 'methodologically and substantively unimportant'. Both approaches need to be systematic and scientific which entails, in the authors' view, that the objective of research is to 'to learn facts about the real world', and that all hypotheses 'need to be evaluated empirically before they can make a contribution to knowledge'.[4]

Seen from such a vantage-point an author has no place in the final presentation of research. This is not to say that King, Keohane and Verba entirely ignore the scholar's personal involvement in research. They readily admit that an author's choice of topic 'may have a personal and idiosyncratic origin' and that it may be 'influenced by personal inclination and values'.[5] Keohane and other adherents of positivist research have, indeed, actively reflected on how their personal journeys have shaped their academic work.[6] But they have gone a long way to separate such reflections from the more systematic pursuit of scholarly knowledge. Indeed, Keohane and his colleagues explicitly stress that personal experiences and related observations 'should not appear in our scholarly writings'.[7] The latter have to be based on scientific and precisely delineated procedures of inquiry because, ultimately, 'no one cares what we think – the scholarly community only cares what we can demonstrate'.[8]

Few scholars today would adhere to such a stark defence of positivism.[9] But many of the underlying assumptions, particularly regarding the role of the author, continue to guide scholarship in much of political science and International Relations. This is even the case with constructivist research, which has in recent years challenged the idea that political reality is pre-given. Instead, political actors and dynamics are seen as being socially constructed. But numerous constructivists,

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[3] Gary King, Sidney Verba and Robert O. Keohane, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).

[4] Ibid., pp. 3–6, 15.

[5] Ibid., p. 14.

[6] See chapters in Joseph Kruzel and James N. Rosenau (eds), *Journeys through World Politics: Autobiographical Reflections of Thirty-Four Academic Travelers* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989).

[7] King, Verba and Keohane, *Designing Social Inquiry*, p. 15.

[8] Ibid., pp. 6, 15.

[9] For context see Leszek Kolakowski, *The Alienation of Reason: A History of Positivist Thought*, trans. N. Guterman (New York: Anchor, 1969), pp. 1–10; David M. Ricci, *The Tragedy of Political Science: Politics, Scholarship and Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

such as Alexander Wendt or Nicolas Onuf, also strongly defend a positivist understanding of political inquiry, stressing that 'constructivists need not repudiate positivism just because it is liable to criticism'.[10] Even more hermeneutically oriented constructivist scholars, who are critical of some positivist claims, tend to display what John Ruggie calls a 'commitment to the idea of social science'.[11] This commitment comes in various shades, but often includes, as Richard Price and Christian Reus-Smit stress in a revealing review article, a basic adherence to an 'empirically-based form of critical scholarship' which is designed to arrive at 'logical and empirically plausible interpretations of actions, events or processes'.[12]

Merely acknowledging that reality is socially constructed is not enough to deal with the implications of the fact that the author is both the subject and object of knowledge.[13] Although a wide range of constructivist scholars challenge the idea that political reality is pre-given, they adopt much of the methodological orthodoxy of conventional scholarship. As a result, they neglect the centrality of the researcher in constructing political realities and the possibility that explicitly acknowledging the centrality of the self might serve as a valuable methodological resource – including for empirically-based critical scholarship. Elizabeth Grosz highlights the related challenges when noting that neither positivism nor constructivism deals with the fact that an author not only depicts or produces the world (the respective claims of positivism and constructivism) but is also fundamentally bound up with, indeed enveloped by, our world.[14] While some in the natural sciences have begun to work with and examine the implications of the way humans are entwined within their world,[15] many International Relations scholars routinely fall back on positivist assumptions about what it means to be a self and to know. They tend to assume that the self is an autonomous cognitive and emotional entity, set against other such entities and the natural and social world.[16]

Scholars who defend positivism will continue to search for research results that are void of personal assumptions or biases. We believe that this manoeuvre is not only logically problematic but also fails to draw upon a fuller spectrum of knowledge, including insights that could be developed by more explicitly engaging

[10] Nicholas Onuf, 'A Constructivist Manifesto', in K. Burch and R. A. Denemark (eds), *Constituting International Political Economy* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998), p. 8. See also Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 47.

[11] John Gerald Ruggie, *Constructing the World Polity: Essays on International Institutionalism* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 35.

[12] Richard Price and Chris Reus-Smit, 'Dangerous Liaisons: Critical International Theory and Constructivism', *European Journal of International Relations*, 4:3 (1998), pp. 259–94. For a critique see Maja Zehfuss, *Constructivism and International Relations: The Politics of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Cynthia Weber, 'IR: The Resurrection: Or New Frontiers of Incorporation', *European Journal of International Relations*, 5:4 (1999), pp. 435–50.

[13] See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1970), p. 312.

[14] E. A. Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution and the Untimely* (Crows Nest, N. S. W.: Allen & Unwin, 2004), p. 191.

[15] See Robert Nadeau and Menas Kafatos, *The Non-Local Universe: The New Physics and Matters of the Mind* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[16] See Clifford Geertz, 'From the Native's Point of View: On the nature of anthropological understanding', in P. Rabinow and W. M. Sullivan (eds), *Interpretive Social Science: A reader* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 225–41, p. 229; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *What is Philosophy?*, trans. H. Tomlinson and G. Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 134–5; Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 56.

our selves. No matter how meticulously researched and presented, scholarly work cannot provide pure access to the realities it seeks to capture. Our methodological practices create particular renderings of the world through factors other than pure reason or objectivity. Our efforts to know, to justify or ground our categories and inferences, invariably fall back upon some aspect of being human. We cannot escape, in short, the fact that social science research requires that we are both the subject and object of inquiry. This brings into play factors that derive from our involvement with others, such as language, identity, culture and historical context. It is not possible to entirely separate the object or issue to be studied from the values, experiences and societal influences an observer brings to his or her analysis.

There are meanwhile numerous approaches to International Relations that employ explicit post-positivist methodologies. They range from Foucauldian genealogy to the interpretation of visual data. But even these approaches do not explore the position of the author as extensively as one might expect. In many cases the role of the author is mentioned in a contextual manner, such as in an extended preface or introduction that outlines the author's background and his or her choices when designing and implementing the research. Such moves are highly commendable and a big step forward from attempts to erase the traces of the author in the research process. But locating oneself within research does not necessarily extend our ethical engagement with the subject-matter under consideration, nor does it fully explore the insights that may be developed from our experiences. The subject position and subjectivity of the knower needs to be worked through rather than merely alluded to if a scholar is to adequately grapple with the ambiguous placement of humans as both the subject and object of knowledge.

Bringing the self back in: examples from feminist and postcolonial International Relations

The current broad methodological state of play presents us, then, with a situation in which the author is frequently written out of research despite the fact that he or she is central to the production of knowledge. Rectifying this shortcoming is no easy task, in part because some of the more radical interpretive inquiries in International Relations, including occasional contributions which draw upon the self, often do not explicitly engage the accompanying methodological challenges. A relatively recent example is Iver Neumann's otherwise very insightful examination of diplomatic speech writing.[17] Drawing on his own experiences in the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, Neumann examines how deeply entrenched institutional habits gear the process of speech writing toward producing and sustaining ministry identity, harmony and a stable view of an external world over and against other goals.[18]

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[17] Iver B. Neumann, '"A Speech that the Entire Ministry May Stand for", or: Why Diplomats Never Produce Anything New', *International Political Sociology*, 1:2 (2007), pp. 183–200. For other excellent examples of participatory research into International Relations see Michael N. Barnett, 'The UN Security Council, Indifference, and Genocide in Rwanda', *Cultural Anthropology*, 12:4 (November 1997), pp. 551–78, and J. C. Sharman, 'Testing the Global Transparency Regime', *International Studies Quarterly*, 54, (forthcoming in June 2011).

[18] Ibid.

By exposing the tension between his personal ambition as a speech writer and the dictates of bureaucratic behavioural norms, Neumann uses his dual role of participant and researcher to scrutinise taken-for-granted entities, such as the individual or the state. Yet while Neumann draws directly on his personal experiences to offer valuable insights, he does not explore the methodological quandaries accompanying his research. We learn little, for instance, about how Neumann negotiated his position as both the subject and object of research, as both knower and part of the empirical world under investigation. Add to this that Neumann, as any other author, is not a stable and given 'entity', but a person whose sense of self and whose knowledge of the world is constantly reshaped by historical, cultural and political influences. How might we draw upon the self and evaluate the resulting research in such circumstances?

We begin to address the ensuing challenges by engaging some of the International Relations scholars who have already drawn on their own experiences. Successful examples other than Iver Neumann include Ken Booth,[19] Roxanne Lynn Doty[20] and Elizabeth Dauphinee.[21] Rather than trying to offer a comprehensive survey of these and similar scholarly engagements, we illustrate the issues at stake through two key examples: one inspired by feminist and the other by postcolonial commitments.

The first example we engage is Carol Cohn's classical essay on 'Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defence Intellectuals'.[22] Feminists have, of course, long been at the forefront in exploring the position and insights of the author. Some commentators go as far as stressing that one of the key features of feminist methodologies has been the notion of reflexivity, which 'encourages the researcher to re-interrogate continually her own scholarship'.[23] A methodological refusal to keep the researcher and the research separate is, indeed, one of the recurring themes in feminist scholarship. This is also why many feminists view an exposure of the author's position and experience as an asset, rather than a problem. It produces research results that are at least more transparent than positivist attempts to erase the traces of the author from the result of his or her work.[24]

Cohn's work is an excellent example of this tradition. She provides crucial and influential insight into defence policy by exploring her position as a scholar. Although written during the 1980s, her research has remained relevant even after the collapse of the Cold War. Cohn's work was based on her own experience of spending a year as a feminist in a centre for defence technology and arms control,

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[19] Ken Booth, 'Security and Self Reflections of a Fallen Realist', Occasional Paper Number 26 (York University, Centre for International and Strategic Studies, 1994).

[20] Roxanne Lynn Doty, 'Maladies of Our Souls: Identity and Voice in the Writing of Academic International Relations', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 17:2 (2004), pp. 377–92.

[21] Elizabeth Dauphinee, *The Ethics of Researching War: Looking for Bosnia* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2007).

[22] Carol Cohn, 'Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals', *Signs*, 12:4 (1987), pp. 687–718.

[23] Brooke Ackerly, Maria Stern and Jacqui True (eds), *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 4.

[24] J. Ann Tickner, 'Feminism meets International Relations: Some Methodological Issues', in B. A. Ackerly, Maria Stern and Jacquiy True (eds), *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 27–8; Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986); Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Sandra Harding, *Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

an institution that trains people – mostly men – in nuclear deterrence and defence. Rather than writing her personal experiences out of her research results, she actually made them the central theme of her work.

Cohn's version of participant observation describes how she came to know and interact with present and future policy makers who face the seemingly inconceivable reality of planning for the possibility of a nuclear war and thus massive suffering, perhaps even an annihilation of humanity. She is shocked by the absurdity of this task. And she is even more shocked because the defence experts she works with seem kind, sensitive and sensible men. She likes them. And she cannot help asking herself: 'How can they do this? How can they even think this way?'[25]

Cohn's use of her experiences as a participant and author is particularly revealing when she describes how she tries to learn and communicate in the language of defence experts. This language, Cohn notices immediately, is not only highly abstract, but also sanitises war. It creates a safe distance from the grotesque realities of nuclear weapons. Absurd as the human implications of nuclear deterrence may be, Cohn's engagement with the language of defence experts leads her to explore how her own thinking changed as she started to use the techno-strategic language herself. And eventually she came to ask herself: 'How could I think this way?'[26]

Cohn's intimate descriptions of her own experience with learning and communicating the language of defence intellectuals convey far more than a personal story: she manages to provide insight into an important political dilemma – one that remains as relevant today as it was during the Cold War: On the one hand an array of abstract metaphors have removed our understanding of defence issues further and further away from the realities of conflict and war. On the other hand we have become used to these distorting metaphors to the point that the language of defence analysis has become the most accepted – the most credible and rational – way of assessing issues of security. The ensuing construction of commonsense provides experts – those fluent in the techno-strategic language of abstraction – not only with the knowledge, but also with the moral authority to comment on issues of defence. But the accompanying strategic mindset narrows down issues of defence to military means alone, delegitimising virtually all other approaches to understanding and addressing issues related to war and conflict in general.

We would now like to briefly illustrate a second example of a researcher who successfully explores the role of the author, this time from postcolonial scholarship: Kim Huynh's more recent *Where the Sea Takes Us*.[27] This book is a mixture of biography and autobiography, presenting the story of the author's parents, Thiet and Van, and their fate as Vietnamese refugees. *Where the Sea Takes Us* oscillates between chapter entries, written mostly as dialogues between

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[25] Cohn, 'Sex and Death in the Rational World', pp. 688, 712. See also Carol Cohn, 'Motives and Methods: Using Multi-Sited Ethnography to Study US National Security Discourses', in Brooke A. Ackerly, Maria Stern, Maria and Jacqui True (eds), *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 27–8.
[26] Cohn, 'Sex and Death in the Rational World', p. 688.
[27] Kim Huynh, *Where the Sea Takes Us: A Vietnamese – Australian Story* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2007).

Huynh and his parents, and meticulously researched third person accounts of key moments in the lives of his parents and the political history of Vietnam. A particularly revealing passage, where Huynh directly uses his experience as author, describes the clash between his life in Australia and the traditional values his parents brought with them from Vietnam. The tension is epitomised in the author's frustration of being a progressive and gender sensitive young man, but seeing his mother preparing food just to postpone eating until her husband and sons have done so.

Journeys across time, culture and genres, as represented by *Where the Sea Takes Us*, can tell us as much about the ethics of dealing with colonialism and its aftermath. This is the case even though Thiet warns his son that 'nobody wants to know about us, there's nothing to tell'. But, of course, there is. Huynh's insertion of the author's story – and those of his parents – not only opens up reflections on gender but also provides fresh perspectives on well-known political events, from the first Indochina War between the French colonial forces and the Viet Minh, when his father Thiet was four years old, to Dien Bien Phu, the US occupation, the Tet Offensive and, finally, the 'fall' of Saigon and its communist aftermath. We encounter these events not as turning points in Western understandings of international history, but in the context of a local family struggling with everyday life, searching for ways to make ends meet, sometimes barely, sometimes with considerable success. We come to view international organisations, such as the UNHCR or Médecins Sans Frontières, not as elements of an international human rights 'regime', but as a cluster of individuals struggling to make a difference at a time of political turmoil.

By retracing and retelling the story through the voice of his parents, Huynh shows how and why the grand narratives of International Relations, from colonialism to revolutionary progress, shape the lives of people. But more importantly, he shows that these people – the unnamed and often forgotten objects of International Relations – are not entirely defined by the events we often identify as the sole political reality. Everyday struggles seep into, around and through larger narratives. But these transgressions are only rarely explored and theorised in prevailing scholarly approaches. Thiet and Van have no choice but to accommodate their lives to the colonial occupation or the dictates of communism, but they are not entirely subsumed by them. Part of their mind and lives escapes the logic of grand narratives, and so does their ultimate fate which, together with those of other refugees, transformed international politics 'from the ground up'. Vietnam today is no longer what it was in the mid-1970s, nor have our moral, political and legal attitudes to refugees remained static.

Taking it further: learning from autoethnography

These two examples from feminist and postcolonial approaches to International Relations reveal that scholars have already made effective use of their own experiences. But the ensuing methodological challenges and possibilities have not yet been explored and appreciated as much as one might expect. This is in part because most of these approaches are seen as marginal, in part because there have

been few if any methodological debates about how to validate personal experiences as a source of knowledge. This is linked to a larger problem with interpretative approaches to International Relations, where discussions on methods have so far not been waged as extensively and as systematically as in the more social-scientific segments of the scholarly community. Even Cohn and Huynh, who very effectively draw on autoethnographic strategies, do not systematically think through the methodological implications of their work. One of the first book-length studies that begins to address this shortcoming is an edited volume by Brooke Ackerly, Maria Stern and Jacqui True. The authors stress and lament how there has, indeed, not been a systematic scholarly work that discusses how to conduct feminist research in International Relations.[28] And those few approaches that do deal with methodological issues in interpretative approaches, such as a very useful essay by Jennifer Milliken, pay little or no attention to the author as a source of knowledge.[29]

We now seek to address at least some aspects of this shortcoming by drawing on what is the most explicit effort to explore the self as a source of knowledge: the growing interdisciplinary body of literature on autoethnography, which has developed over recent decades in fields ranging from the sociology of sport[30] to studies of health and illness[31] and numerous ethnographic inquires.[32] Key points of reference are the work of qualitative methodology scholars, such as Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, as well as regular discussions in newly established methods journals, such as *Qualitative Inquiry.*[33]

The objective of autoethnography is to (re-)introduce the self as a methodological resource. By problematising the strict object-subject separation that characterises quests for scientific legitimacy, autoethnography places the

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[28] Ackerly, Stern and True, *Feminist Methodologies*. See also J. Ann Tickner, 'What is your Research Program? Some Feminist Answers to International Relations Methodological Questions', *International Studies Quarterly*, 49:1 (2005), pp. 1–22.

[29] Jennifer Milliken, 'The Study of Discourse in International Relations: A Critique of Research and Methods', *European Journal of International Relations*, 5:2 (1999), pp. 225–54.

[30] Andrew Sparkes, 'The fatal flaw: A narrative of the fragile body-self', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 2:4 (1996), pp. 463–94.

[31] Ann Neville-Jan, 'Encounters in a world of pain: An autoethnography', *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 57:1 (2003), pp. 88–98.

[32] Carol Rambo Ronai, 'The Reflexive Self through Narrative: A Night in the Life of an Erotic Dancer/Researcher', in Michael G. Flaherty and Carolyn Ellis (eds), *Investigating Subjectivity: Research on Lived Experience* (Newbury Park [Ca.]: Sage Publications, 1992), pp. 102–24; Marcela Ramirez, Zlatko Skrbi and Michael Emmison, 'Transnational Family Reunions as Lived Experience: Narrating a Salvadoran Autoethnography', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 14:4 (2007), pp. 411–31.

[33] See, for example, the *Special Issue*, 9:2 (April 2003): *Arts-Based Approaches to Qualitative Inquiry*. For further overviews and examples of autoethnography see Paul Atkinson, Amanda Coffey and Sara Delamont, *Key themes in qualitative research: continuities and changes* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2003), pp. 64–7; Leon Anderson, 'Analytic Autoethnography', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35:4 (2006), pp. 373–95; Mark Neumann, 'Collecting Ourselves at the End of the Century', in A. P. Bochner and C. Ellis (eds), *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing* (London: Sage, 1996), pp, 172–98; and Deborah E. Reed-Danahay, 'Introduction', in D. E. Reed-Danahay (ed.), *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social* (Oxford: Berg, 1997). For some key publications see the edited collections by Michael G. Flaherty and Carolyn Ellis (eds), *Investigating Subjectivity: Research on Lived Experience* (Newbury Park (Ca.): Sage Publications, 1992); Deborah E. Reed-Danahay (ed.), *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social* (Oxford: Berg, 1997); and Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis (eds), *Ethnographically speaking: autoethnography, literature, and aesthetics* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002).

researcher's experience at the centre of the phenomenon under investigation. The premise behind this methodological move is to bring the author into a more fundamental relation with the empirical world.[34] In an ideal scenario, an author would then be able to access important insights that would otherwise remain dismissed or devalued.

The quest for autoethnographic knowledge has historical roots in social anthropology and qualitative sociology,[35] where 'participant-observation' is a well established research practice. Interventions by scholars such as Johannes Fabian[36] and James Clifford[37] have opened up greater space for acknowledging the role of the self in research. Christian Ghasarian, for instance, points out that with this shift also emerged the recognition that the values and emotional responses of researchers should become transparent and be made an integral part of the research itself.[38] Ghasarian goes as far as stressing that those who want to investigate the practice of ethnography cannot find more appropriate materials to study than their own experiences in 'the field'. The ensuing reflections about the relationship between the author, the subject of study and the reader open up a range of possibilities to rethink political and social dynamics.[39]

Introducing the personal leads, of course, to the predictable objection that autoethnography suffers in objectivity, rigor, and verifiability. Such criticism has to be taken seriously, for some autoethnographic approaches suggest – rather problematically – that 'telling one's story' in a personally reflective way is enough to produce insightful scholarship or engender political transformation.[40] It is thus not surprising that autoethnography has been charged with self-indulgence. Sonia Ryang, for instance, stresses that emphasis on the scholar's 'inner' feelings risks simply rehearsing Western forms of individualism, neglecting the contingency of the self and its emergence in particular social, historical, and political circumstances.[41]

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[34] Patricia Ticineto Clough, 'Autotelecommunication and autoethnography: A reading of Carolyn Ellis's final negotiations', *The Sociological Quarterly*, 38:1 (1997), pp. 95–110, at 100–1; Andrew C. Sparkes, 'Autoethnography: Self-Indulgence or Something More?', in A. P. Bochner and C. Ellis (eds), *Ethnographically speaking: autoethnography, literature, and aesthetics* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002), pp. 209–32, p. 22.

[35] See Anderson, 'Analytic Autoethnography'.

[36] Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Objects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

[37] James Clifford, 'On Ethnographic Self-Fashioning: Conrad and Malinowski', in Thomas C. Heller, S. Morton and D. E. Wellbery (eds), *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, individuality, and the self in Western thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), pp 140–62.

[38] Christian Ghasarian, 'Sur les chemins de l'ethnographie reflexive', in C. Ghasarian (ed.), *De l'ethnographie à l'anthropologie reflexive: Nouveaux terrains, nouvelles pratiques, nouveaux enjeux* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2002).

[39] Ibid.

[40] See Nicholas L. Holt, 'Representation, Legitimation, and Autoethnography: An Autoethnographic Writing Story', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2:1 (2003), np.; Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, 'Introduction: Talking Over Ethnography', in Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis (eds), *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing* (London: Sage, 1996), pp. 13–45; Carolyn Ellis, *Final Negotiations: a story of love, loss, and chronic illness* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).

[41] Sonia Ryang, 'Ethnography or Self-cultural Anthropology? Reflections on Writing About Ourselves', *Dialectical Anthropology*, 25:3/4 (2000), pp. 297–320, at 315. See also Clough, 'Autotelecommunication and autoethnography'.

Against *a priori* judgments: evaluating autoethnography within knowledge communities

We are sympathetic to the autoethnographic impulse, but we also find that we cannot easily dismiss criticisms, including those from more traditional social science scholars. Not all personal experiences are equally relevant or valuable for political analysis, nor is every attempt to understand and interpret such experience.

How, then, can we simultaneously appreciate and evaluate autoethnographic research? We now attempt to outline the broad contours of how such an evaluation process might work – being fully aware that doing so inevitably constitutes only the beginning of an intricate process.

Autoethnographers stress that their use of the personal should not be judged by methodological assumptions that do not inform their approaches.[42] We agree in principle with this position. If one were to use the criteria of evidence established by King, Keohane and Verba, for instance, then all autoethnographic research, no matter how insightful, would be scientifically suspect at best. Numerous philosophers have, indeed, stressed that a range of important alternative knowledge practices, such as those stemming from the humanities, 'cannot always be verified by methodological means proper to science.' So believes Hans-Georg Gadamer, who adds that the significance of alternative insights is located precisely in the fact that they 'cannot be attained in any other way'.[43] Autoethnographic insights deserve to be assessed and validated by means other than the prevailing scientific methods for observation, evidence, and measurement.

We propose to evaluate autoethnographic insights in the context of investigating broader and collective processes of generating knowledge.[44] To suggest such a shift in evaluating scholarship is not necessarily radical. All forms of scholarship, particularly those in the social sciences and humanities, rely to some extent on rhetorical appeals to knowledge communities.[45] Or, to put it in more stark terms: scholarly debates can be seen as a type of storytelling. Even when scientifically presented, these discussions share similarities with what people have done for time immemorial: 'they gathered about the fire and told tales of the great deeds, great triumphs, and great defeats of their heroes'.[46] This is precisely the case with International Relations scholarship, which constantly retells the story of its great battles, as those between realists and idealists, and the deeds of its great heroes, from Thucydides to Morgenthau and from Machiavelli to Waltz. Numerous philosophical contributions have drawn attention to the nature and implications of such processes. Pragmatists, for instance, highlight how important communities of

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[42] Holt, 'Representation, Legitimation, and Autoethnography'; Andrew C. Sparkes, 'Autoethnography and narratives of self: Reflections on criteria in action', *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 17:1 (2000), pp. 21–43, at 28–31.
[43] Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd edition (London: Sheed & Ward, 1979), pp. xxii–xxiii.
[44] See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. xxii; Jay Bernstein, 'The Death of Sensuous Particulars: Adorno and Abstract Expressionism', *Radical Philosophy*, 76 (March/April 1996), pp. 7–18; and Prem Kumar Rajaram, 'Disruptive Writing and a Critique of Territoriality', *Review of International Studies*, 30:3 (2004), pp. 351–72.
[45] Ellis, *Final Negotiations*, p. 303.
[46] Alphonso Lingis, *Dangerous Emotions* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), p. 14.

scholars are to questions of method and evidence. From such a vantage-point, knowledge never exists in isolation.

No scholar can have a thought or gain some form of insight out of nothingness. Knowledge is an inherently social phenomenon. This is why many marginalised scholars, such as feminists, are inherently sceptical about tightly controlled academic disciplines.[47] The ensuing conventions establish their own rules of knowing, delegitimising those that do not fit into the shared value system. Such is the case in the current disciplinary organisation of scholarly inquiries into International Relations, which tend to favour traditional methods from the social sciences over those that offer alternative ways of knowing world politics.

Because knowledge is social and relational, we will never be able to step beyond questions of power and legitimacy in the production and reception of knowledge. But this is precisely the reason why autoethnographies are useful: they can expose and perhaps even shape these relations. Feminist scholars, for instance, point out how innovative insights into gender relations have to engage with the power-knowledge nexus involved in the relationship between the researcher, her or his subject, its context and the community of scholars trying to make sense of the phenomena in question.[48] Autoethnographers, likewise, tend to locate their work in the inherently political connections between selves and others.[49] For the most part they also recognise that they and their readers need to employ criteria when judging if their contribution is credible or meaningful. But the methodological suggestions for evaluation that have merged in the wake of these insights are not entirely satisfactory.

The most commonly advocated additional criteria for evaluating the methods of autoethnographers are literary, affective, aesthetic, and activist. This is particularly evident in a special focus section of *Qualitative Inquiry* devoted to questions of method. The contributors here look for 'evocative writing techniques and form'[50] or for aspects that 'surprise or move me'.[51] They want to know if the writing is 'artistically shaped'[52] or if it 'interrogates existing cultural, sexist, and racial stereotypes'.[53] Such features are undoubtedly valuable for scrutinising the frequently closed and narrow approach of conventional social science. They may also enhance the quality and appeal of an autoethnographic account. But by themselves, these criteria are not enough to evaluate the scholarly merits of autoethnographies. Such mechanisms of verification are either too derivative (framed against mainstream scholarship) or arbitrary (framed without reference to other knowers). For these reasons the guidelines proposed by the aforementioned contributors to *Qualitative Inquiry* run the risk of establishing their own regime of exclusion. How can a work of scholarship be judged as succeeding 'aesthetically'

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[47] S. Laurel Weldon, 'Inclusion and Understanding: A Collective Methodology for Feminist International Relations', in B. A. Ackerly, Maria Stern and Jacqui True (eds), *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 68–71.

[48] Ackerly, Stern and True, *Feminist Methodologies*, p. 5.

[49] Sparkes, 'Autoethnography and narratives of self', p. 31.

[50] Laurel Richardson, 'Evaluating Ethnography', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 6:2 (2000), pp. 253–5, at 253.

[51] Carolyn Ellis, 'Creating Criteria: An Ethnographic Short Story', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 6:2 (2000), pp. 273–7, at 275.

[52] Richardson, 'Evaluating Ethnography', p. 254.

[53] Norman K. Denzin, 'Aesthetics and the Practices of Qualitative Inquiry', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 6:2 (2000), pp. 256–65, at 258.

or as having achieved 'higher, sacred goals'?[54] Who is judging? And according to which aesthetic and cultural values? A new set of pre-determined criteria, even if they are open-ended, will not enhance the quality and credibility of autoethnographic knowledge.

Our suggestions for advancing and evaluating autoethnographic knowledge are based on the proposition that insights developed through an exploration of the author's position should be evaluated not by some *a priori* standard of reference, but by their ability to generate new and valuable insights for particular knowledge communities. For instance, if examinations of an author's personal experience can provide explanations of political features or behaviour that would not have been possible through other, more conventional accounts, then they have made a contribution to knowledge. We could then judge, say, the significance of Carol Cohn's engagement with nuclear defence policies not by some preconceived criteria, but by her ability to employ her personal experiences to open up new perspectives on how knowledge, language, and power are at play in the construction of defence policies. If debates within the relevant knowledge communities judge that Cohn's reading allows us new insights, for instance by illuminating how the particular language of defence experts shapes their attitude to policy making, then her use of personal experience generates a legitimate scholarly contribution.

Based on the foregoing approach, we want to propose two suggestions that can help frame and evaluate insights developed through an author's experiences. The first suggestion, pursuing puzzle-driven research, is relatively uncontroversial. We stress this point here primarily – and only very briefly – to convince sceptical social scientists of the viability of using authoethnograhic methods. The second suggestion consciously pushes the limits of disciplinary thinking by exploring the consequences for individual research practice of accepting that knowledge is inherently relational.

Proposition One for evaluating autoethnographic research: the methodological significance of puzzles

The idea of puzzle-driven research, as advocated by Ian Shapiro and others, is perhaps the most obvious way for evaluating autoethnographic research, at least in conventional social scientific terms. Shapiro laments that some of the most influential approaches to the study of politics have taken on the form of internal disciplinary discussions, as if theorists and their disciplinary debates were themselves the proper objects of study. Rather than structuring research around existing theoretical and methodological debates, Shapiro urges scholars to engage 'the great questions of the day'.[55] Research should thus be guided by concrete political problems rather than by disciplinary conventions or a scholar's personal interests.

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[54] Denzin, 'Aesthetics and the Practices of Qualitative Inquiry', p. 262.
[55] Ian Shapiro, 'Problems, Methods, and Theories: What's Wrong with Political Science and What to do about it', in S. K. White and J. D. Moon (eds), *What is political theory?* (London: Sage, 2004), pp. 193–216, p. 597. See also Donald Green and Ian Shapiro, *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory: A Critique of Applications in Political Science* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).

Following the establishment of a broad puzzle, the next step consists of identifying research questions that could serve to focus and structure scholarly investigations into the puzzle. Only then is it productive to think about which methodologies are best suited to approach, understand and perhaps solve the problem.

Puzzle-driven research is meanwhile a well-recognised method in the study of International Relations. It is equally well-recognised that different puzzles require different methodologies. In some cases social science methods, such as statistics, surveys or structured interviews, may be the most useful and appropriate means of research. In other cases, however, a range of alternative tools, including auto-ethnography, may yield more insights into the puzzle and related research questions.

If a puzzle is the main research challenge, then it can be addressed with all means available, independently of their provenance or label. A source may stem from this or that discipline, it may be statistical or autoethnographic, sanctioned by conventional academe or not, expressed in prose or poetic form, it may be alphabetically-based or visual or musical or take any other shape or form: it is legitimate as long as it helps to address and better understand the puzzle in question.

Puzzle-driven research is, of course, not specific to autoethnography. But orienting research toward political problems and not disciplinary conventions explicitly provides autoethnographic approaches with a path to scholarly legitimacy – as long as the insights they engender can meaningfully engage knowledge communities. Puzzle-driven research thus demonstrates why and how exactly autoethnographic accounts are not just self-indulgent ways of telling personal stories, as is often feared by those who adhere to traditional social scientific standards, but can actually produce systematic knowledge and contribute meaningfully to scholarly debates. Perhaps just as importantly, this very contribution can be evaluated based on fairly conventional evaluation methods anchored in puzzle-driven approaches to the study of International Relations.

Proposition Two for evaluating autoethnographic research: retracing the author's process of knowledge production

Our second proposition for making the self a more legitimate source of insight is based on the methodological implications of our earlier argument that knowledge is relational.

A crucial prerequisite to exploring and making use of the relational nature of knowledge is to question the widely-held assumption that an author operates autonomously from his or her surroundings. Anthropologists have long warned us that the idea of an autonomous self is a particularly Western assumption which is not shared by many of the world's other cultures.[56] As individuals we are subjected to a constant stream of sensory experience. We are influenced by our environments and others, whether through direct encounter or secondary experience held in records ranging from writing to memory. We are entwined with the world and others.[57] Scholars are, of course, no exception. Writing and academic practice

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[56] Geertz, 'From the Native's Point of View', p. 229.
[57] Sylviane Agacinski, 'Another Experience of the Question, or Experiencing the Question Other-Wise', in P. Connor, J.-L. Nancy and E. Cadava (eds), *Who comes after the subject?* (New York; London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 9–23, p. 12.

inevitably link the author with the world. External relations are central to how an author conceptualises, analyses, and communicates. Placing this internal-external entwinement at the centre of research, as we suggest in this article, is not to abandon the idea of science: quite the contrary, closely engaging the network of relations in which the author produces knowledge promises to deliver more nuanced, comprehensive, and perhaps even more scientific forms of insight than approaches that strive for authorial self-sufficiency and detachment. Expressed in other words, once we abandon the idea of a detached and sovereign author we can begin to develop forms of knowledge that are based on a more insightful engagement with others and the world.[58]

We now seek to identify the methodological elements necessary to pursue autoethnographic research in the context of such a relational understanding of knowledge. We identify three interrelated components:

First: embracing the network of relations in which the author produces knowledge requires that a researcher cultivate openness and vulnerability to others and to the outside world in general. One way of approaching this task is to see the author as a shifting node in a larger and constantly moving network of experience. The network of relations with others continually brings the author into existence as a relational rather than self-subsistent being. Autoethnographic research can and should use this relational aspect to its advantage. Developing self-awareness through vulnerability and openness expands the range of research data available for addressing the research puzzle: connections can be made which are not available by adopting traditional social science methods.

Take Carol Cohn's earlier discussed analysis of nuclear policy. She was able to provide valuable insight not by adhering to the idea that she is an independent and self-sufficient subject pursuing detached research; an author whose knowledge is independent of her relations with others. Quite to the contrary, Cohn's influential contribution emerged directly from her willingness to open up to the world – in this case, the world of defence experts. She did not remain insulated or aloof from her colleagues. Among the insights we gain from Cohn's research is understanding how people, including herself, are shaped by the language they use to articulate defence policies. Oscillating back and forth between her identity as a feminist author and her increasingly deep involvement in her research setting, Cohn made effective use of her own experience as an author-observer. She managed to use her own displacement and vulnerability to examine the articulation and implementation of defence policies.

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[58] In an article of this length we are unable to engage important theoretical traditions – let alone individual theorists and philosophers – which might support and guide this effort. Perhaps the most obvious tradition to serve as a philosophical resource – because of the way it positions the self as the creator of knowledge – is the interpretive tradition, most well known through the above cited work of Hans Georg Gadamer. In the phenomenological tradition, the work of Emmanuel Levinas is valuable, particularly for his approach to moving beyond essence and the self in order to encounter others (see, for example, Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1991). Post-structuralism, including the work of Deleuze and Guatarri (1987) on becoming-other, also has much to offer. Finally, we have already mentioned some feminist authors, but could easily add important feminist scholarship on narrative (see Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) and situated knowledges (see Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York: Routledge, 1991).

A second component is a self-aware willingness to draw upon a full range of faculties – rather than solely the rational elements sanctioned by traditional social science methods. Being vulnerable and susceptible to new experiences can help an author mobilise his or her other faculties, including intuition and emotions. Such openness requires a willingness to search for and learn from sources of knowledge that have been obscured by traditional social-scientific methods and conceptions of the self. One non-technical way to articulate this element is to refer the researcher to the importance of *felt* experience, and even to strange and hitherto excluded bodily and emotional sensations. Social science tends to dismiss such potential sources of knowledge, together with other emotional experiences, as inherently private and irrational phenomena. They are seen as having little or no place in understanding and analysing political phenomena. But numerous scholars meanwhile stress that turning toward physical reactions can open up new and plural sensory events and experiences.[59]

Consider one illustrative example: how bodily sensations, for instance in rituals, can become a means for connecting, knowing, and contributing new insights. Stephen Muecke shows how ceremonies commemorating war-dead induce experiences in the bodies of participants.[60] These ceremonies harness the power of death as a vital force for nation-forming in contemporary state society. They transport individuals to places beyond their selves, and into connection with others. The spilling of blood is the medium for people taking an epistemological and imaginative journey;[61] a journey that 'makes visible the larger patterns and connections that informs our and others' lives'.[62] The forces and dynamics at play here can perhaps best – and in some senses only – be accessed through bodily sensations and the openness of the researcher to this experience, but neither such experience nor drawing on the self is sanctioned by conventional social science. The researcher's experience can become a way of understanding otherwise inaccessible social and political relations which are important to forming and sustaining political community. Learning from such experiences can be crucial even through the so-produced insight may never be confirmed by empirical validation or falsification methods.

The third component involves analysing the data collected and then presenting the outcome in a way that is meaningful to others. Analysis involves, as is the case

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[59] See, for example, José Gil, *Metamorphoses of the Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 126. The literature on emotions and politics has meanwhile grown into a complex body of theory. We do not pretend to even begin addressing the issues at stake here. For examples of recent attempts to engage the respective methodological issues in the realm of International Relations scholarship see, for example, Roland Bleiker and Emma Hutchison, 'Fear No More: Emotions and World Politics', *Review of International Studies*, Special Issue on 'Cultures and Politics of Global Communication', 34 (2008), pp. 115–135; Neta C. Crawford, 'The Passion of World Politics: Propositions on Emotions and Emotional Relationships', *International Security*, 24:4 (Spring 2000), pp. 116–36; Emma Hutchison, 'Trauma and the Politics of Emotions: Constituting Identity, Security and Community after the Bali Bombing', *International Relations*, 24:1 (2010); Jonathan Mercer, 'Emotional Beliefs', *International Organization*, 64:2 (Jan 2010), pp 1–31; and Andrew A. G. Ross, 'Coming in From the Cold: Constructivism and Emotions', *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:2 (2006), pp. 197–222.

[60] S. Muecke, 'Travelling the subterranean river of blood: Philosophy and magic in cultural studies', *Cultural Studies*, 13:1 (1999), pp. 1–17.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Roxanne L. Euben, 'Travelling Theorists and Translating Practices' in S. K. White and J. D. Moon (eds), *What is political theory?* (London: Sage, 2004), pp. 145–73, p. 148.

with any other research, a process of interpreting data. The researcher gains some critical distance from his or her experience and then decides which components of the experience most directly and satisfactorily addresses the research question at hand. As with other social science methods, we are involved in a recursive process of alternately engaging and stepping back while moving among data, analysis, and research question. Autoethnographers may analyse and select from journal or diary entries, sound or video files, or any other means they have used to record data. As with other research, only a selection of the gathered data will likely make its way into any final presentation of the research result.

In addition to normal processes of selection and interpretation, the presentation of autoethnographic research should be characterised by a relatively high level of transparency. Rather than erasing the traces of the author, as is customary in the social sciences, the result of an autoethnographic investigation must expose and retrace some of the most important ways in which the author's experiences and faculties came into play in addressing the research puzzle.

The goal is not necessarily complete personal honesty and transparency. It is not possible or desirable to include all the author's experiences or choices made during data selection and analysis. Some of the contradictions, mishaps, dead-ends and – most of all – extraneous experience are to be left out. But the key choices the author has made, those that are essential to the selection and interpretation of data, have to be made transparent so that the reader can retrace the various steps an author has taken. Central to this process – and all too often overlooked in current autoethnographies – is a certain level of self-reflection that is sensitive to cultural and societal contexts. In an ideal scenario, the presentation of research should reveal how an author moved through various research processes and interpreted his or her interactions with others, the world, the data collected and the prior literature on the topic. A transparent exposition of such traces provides a reader with the information necessary to evaluate how meaningful and important research results are to the relevant knowledge communities.

Conclusion

When exploring the self as a source of insight into International Relations we have stressed that evaluating new ways of knowing should not be judged by established standards of social science. But creating an alternative set of stable criteria for evaluating knowledge is also inadequate. Rather, insights should be evaluated in the very relationship with the construction of knowledge – a process that inevitably takes place within and at times across knowledge communities.

We have argued that autoethnographic insights are legitimate if they open up perspectives on political issues or phenomena that would otherwise remain foreclosed. To frame such forms of autoethnographic scholarship we have explored the implications of two basic propositions: that research should be structured around puzzles and that insights through the self are always already formed in relationship with the world and others. The key to pursuing and evaluating the self as a legitimate source of knowledge is to recognise that autoethnographic claims are necessarily part of a larger struggle over the scholarly production of knowledge.

We then refined our approach by identifying three basic elements that can facilitate and guide autoethnographic research. They are: 1) openness and even vulnerability to the world as a way of identifying and engaging the relational dimensions of knowledge; 2) a willingness to draw upon a range of different faculties, such as sensation and intuition, to learn from hitherto excluded experiences and, 3) a process of selecting and analysing the so-collected data that partly exposes, rather than erases the traces of the author.

Our suggestions for evaluating and advancing autoethnography are intended as an introductory rather than definitive account, not least because embracing and exploring the relational nature of knowledge production brings on complications that are beyond the scope of this article. We want to briefly note two such sets of issues.

First, our proposals for advancing and evaluating autoethnographic knowledge include the suggestion that researchers gain some critical distance from personal experience to decide which part of this experience is most applicable to the research question. Here we share something in common with the traditional social scientists whom we have positioned ourselves against, although our suggestion begins from an explicit acknowledgement of the self's involvement with the world. To this extent we can probably say that knowledge of the form which is currently pursued in the academy involves all knowing selves in a process of alternately engaging and stepping back from our relations with the world and our selves. The related question of how the self is positioned through knowledge practices is an enduring one, yet it receives little attention in international studies. We hope that the current interest in autoethnography might lead to closer consideration of this issue.

Second, as part of our relational approach to knowledge we suggest that individual selves are also relational, and hence that they are, at least partially, a contingent effect of events and circumstances. We have not had space to elaborate this proposition or to examine its manifold methodological implications. Both these tasks are necessary for a fuller presentation of the relational approach we suggest here, including for advancing autoethnographic knowledge. For now though, it is sufficient to say that the relational self we conceptualise is not a free-floating and fully decentred being sometimes attributed to postmodern approaches, but a being with a level of internal durability and consistency which arises through time as an effect of external relations. In other words, we adopt an approach to selfhood which refuses both the sovereign and autonomous modernist subject and the dispersed and fragmented postmodernist subject. This firmly relational approach requires autoethnographers to develop accounts of the emergence of their own selves as part of the process of drawing upon the self as a source of knowledge.

We have not, then, claimed to provide a comprehensive or conclusive take on autoethnography, or on the way forward for autoethnography in international studies. Rather, our objective has been to draw attention to a neglected source of research in international studies and, by doing so, generate debate that could lead to more refined ways of using the self as source of knowledge. Not everyone will or should do so, of course. Nor do we believe that autoethnography should replace more conventional ways of knowing. But we do want to stress that drawing on an author's own experience is neither a speculative nor a purely subjective form of research. In fact, we have demonstrated that evaluating autoethnographies within

knowledge communities shares much with more traditional knowledge production. Although scientific data is not usually presented as relational, numerous scholars, from Paul Feyerabend to Quentin Skinner, stress how our judgment of what is reasonable depends not on some prior set of objective criteria, but on the concepts we employ to describe what we see or experience as rational.[63] Expressed in other words: all new forms of insight are either confirmed or dismissed by how they are received in the context of particular knowledge communities. Some insights, even if they are originally seen as irrelevant or idiosyncratic at best, may later come to be accepted. Other contributions are first heralded as path-breaking just to turn out as irrelevant over time.[64] This is why the significance of autoethnography deserves to be determined over time and by the extent to which the ensuing insights resonate with our efforts to address the key concerns of our time.

Autoethnographies provide important opportunities to expand the boundaries of research into International Relations beyond traditional modes of analysis and representation. Engaging the central role of the author reveals the envelopment of humans with their world and perhaps even engenders news ways of understanding and solving the problems and puzzles which animate our research. We have drawn attention to the crucial role that feminist and postcolonial scholars have already played in making this struggle over the power-knowledge nexus more transparent. These scholars have shown the possibility of drawing upon our selves in political and international studies by taking the inevitable risks that come with under-recognised methods. We hope others will join us in building on their work, and in discussing the more explicit use of the self in our field. Many questions undoubtedly remain, and so do the inevitable risks involved in diverging from well-established methodological traditions. But facing these risks is essential if we are to appreciate the full potential of autoethnography to expand our knowledge of politics and International Relations.

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[63] Quentin Skinner, *Vision of Politics: Regarding Methods*, 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 4, 44; Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 214–29.
[64] Muecke, 'Contingency theory', p. 214.