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Main Article:

Exemplifying Collaborative Autoethnographic Practice via Shared Stories of Mothering

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Abstract

In this piece, we articulate the “collaborative autoethnographic practice” we utilized to illustrate the complexities of mothering that involved: (a) individually writing autoethnographic narratives on mothering, (b) sharing these autoethnographic narratives in a public forum, (c) publicly discussing the heuristic commonalities across these autoethnographic narratives, (d) tying those commonalities back to the literature, and (e) revisiting the autoethnographic narratives for aspects of social critique where our autoethnographic narratives (intentionally or unintentionally) hegemonically reproduced cultural scripts. We argue that presenting knowledge of mothering in this way, through collaborative autoethnographic practice, creates a myriad of opportunities for growth and self-reflexivity, and our stories illuminate a part of our existence that often remains unexamined in other methodologies.

Keywords: mothering; autoethnography; everyday moments; identity; cultural script

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1. Introduction

“I would like to put together a panel . . . on mothers and mothering. Let me know what you think” (Patricia Geist-Martin, personal communication, May 2009).

Over a year ago, we joined together as co-authors via this simple e-mail soliciting participants for a panel for the October annual meeting of the Organization for the Study of Communication, Language, and Gender ([OSCLG](#)). Thus began the process that would later lead to our writing this article recounting our experience and method, because Patricia wanted to use autoethnographic practice and have the seven of us “offer short stories of our own experience of motherhood, either in our relationship with our own mothers or in our relationship with our children.” Accordingly, the original impetus for the present project is mothering and the mother-child relationship; we view autoethnography as an opportunity to explore the selves we become through our mother/ing and so the lived experience of mothering permeates our essay.

Yet mothering is not the focus of this essay--instead, we utilize mothering as an exemplar context for accomplishing autoethnography as research practice via a nontraditional approach. Specifically, we articulate how we utilized “collaborative autoethnographic practice” to illustrate the complexities of mothering by (a) writing sole-authored autoethnographic tales on mothering, (b) sharing these tales in a public forum, (c) discussing collaboratively the heuristic commonalities across these tales, (d) tying those

commonalities back to the literature on the topic of mothering, and (e) revisiting the tales for aspects of social critique when we (unwittingly) hegemonically reproduced *cultural scripts* of mothering. Key to this piece on collaborative autoethnographic practice is that we assert this process is not unique to mothering, but instead that sharing narratives around a multiplicity of lived experiences is possible and desirable.

We begin with our scholarly stance on autoethnography as research practice, and offer the procedures we utilized to engage in a collaborative autoethnographic practice of (re)presenting these complicated, rewarding, and challenging relationships. We then share excerpts from our seven autoethnographic tales of mothering. The stories reveal the value of autoethnography as research practice in articulating--even revealing in--what may be lost if not honored, and the value of collaborative autoethnographic practice in “crystallizing” (see Ellingson, 2009) motherhood from many facets. We then revisit the stories via the lens of the literature to illustrate how shared autoethnographies can be knowledge-building and critique our own stories of motherhood. In combination, we hope to illustrate the opportunities and challenges of collaborative autoethnographic practice.

2. Utilizing Collaborative Autoethnographic Practice to Study the Complexities of Mothering

According to Ellis, the move toward impressionist and artistic aspects of qualitative work in (auto)ethnography means blending:

the practices and emphases of social science with the aesthetic sensibility and expressive forms of art, [telling stories] that show bodily, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual experience. The goal is to practice an artful, poetic, and empathic social science in which readers can keep in their minds and feel in their bodies the complexities of concrete moments of lived experience. (Ellis, 2004, p. 30)

Autoethnography as research practice offers stories that are:

drawn from the shadowy, liminal spaces of human life--between dreams and daylight, between memory and action, between secret and story--and then placed within a framework . . . of contemporary everyday life among friends, in the family, and in the broader community. (Poulos, 2009, p. 17)

Writing autoethnography as research practice is a way to engage our “narrative inheritance” (Goodall, 1995), a way to “discover--in the eruption of a story, the soft reminiscent light of accidental talk, in a burst of memory overstepping forgetting--a world of hope” (Poulos, 2009, p. 15).

Our “burst(s) of memory” about (our) mothers sprung forth after responding to Patricia’s e-mail that we would like to be involved. In narrating our own experiences of motherhood, we “resist[ed] the disembodied voice that characterizes traditional academic

prose” (Ellingson, 2009, p. 34) in recognition that traditional forms of scientific writing may be limited in what they can offer about the complexities of mothering as a meaningful, subjective whole (Denzin, 1997). Embracing autoethnography as an artistic, evocative research practice allowed us to represent the whole of a meaningful moment of motherhood and illuminate some of the complexities of mothering that often remain in the dark in other methodologies. While such situated stories are inherently “partial, incomplete, and full of silences” (Ellis, 2009, p. 13), concomitantly our written stories can also reveal what we desire in mother-child relationships, what we fear about these relationships, and even the disappointments routinely present in mother-child relationships.

Then, since autoethnography is a knowledge-building practice beyond storytelling, we engaged in a collaborative discussion of the issues that surrounded the mother-child relationships in our stories. Our goal was to create a meta-narrative of sorts about mothering centered in lived experience via sharing our autoethnographies. Questions we created to guide this process included:

- a. How does a mother’s love help guide us through emotional distress?
- b. In what way is a mother’s unconditional love reciprocated?
- c. Are there limits to a mother’s unconditional love?
- d. How is mother-love reflected in every-day life?
- e. In what ways do we tend to practice the forms of mother-love we have (or have not) previously experienced in our relationships with our own children?

And of course, other questions could be written for diverse arenas of lived experience to produce a similar discussion of heuristic commonality.

Given that this special issue is about methodological practice versus the autoethnographic data, by necessity we offer 220-word excerpted versions of our autoethnographic narratives that we presented at OSCLG in October 2009, using the data as a means to exemplify method. We felt the “cut” of shortening these stories quite deeply; every time we shortened the narratives, our (once rich and descriptive) autoethnographic narratives felt more shallow . . . and of course the question also emerged on a seven-person author team of “who decides what to cut?” We see this as a compromise between highlighting theory/context and method; we contemplated removing some stories and highlighting others, but this led to the question of “whose autoethnographies are most valuable?” Thus, to be as inclusive as possible, we highlight excerpts from all seven narratives to provide a glimpse into the rich discourse that prompted us to push forward our collaborative autoethnographic practice past the original panel discussion in the first place. We hope these highlights provide enough background to illustrate how this practice of collaborating across autoethnographic narratives provided unique insights on mothering--and concomitantly led to a meta-narrative that enabled us to critique our stories.

3. (Re)Presenting Our Autoethnographic Tales of the Complexities of Mothering

We begin with Patricia and Renee's stories because they both offer an enduring view of mothering where an activity becomes ritualized. Doing puzzles and making cakes represent communal, yet personal and emotional expressions of time invested for and with a child. We see nurturing in both activities as suspended, yet ephemeral moments. Patricia's tale, *Pieces of Puzzles*, weaves a narrative between present (with her daughter) and past (with her mother), attempting to capture those moments of mothering that can be represented in seemingly mundane activities such as putting together puzzles.

I want to go back, before my mom died of cancer. I want to bend over a card table searching for just the right piece. I can feel her at my side, our elbows a whisper away from each other, "the red flag, I just need a few more pieces with red," she would say, encouraging us to keep her needs in mind as we focused on our own segment of the complicated scene. Slowly but surely, the scene expanded from shades of colors to become black iron chairs, hand built stone walls, multi-colored pansy-lined garden paths, and deep blue skies. With a cry of "I found it!" I lift one small puzzle piece and pass it from my fingertips to my mom's fingertips and watch as she scans her corner to find just the right spot, turning it between her fingers, pressing it down, lifting it up, turning it once more, and then snapping it in place. We pooled our resources to magically transform this inanimate box of cardboard pieces into a place somewhere in time that we could go together. Everyone wanted the joy of hearing that last piece click into place. I remember that suspended moment of just being in that scene. You are there, but you know you are not really there. (Excerpts from *Pieces of Puzzles*, Patricia's autoethnographic tale, September, 2009)

Renee's tale, *Baking Values*, illustrates how the meanings of baking a "homemade" birthday cake run deep, and how the quest for the perfect cake can create a communal mothering experience and represent values far beyond the food itself.

By Josh's fourth birthday, which had to be about dinosaurs, my mom insisted on purchasing and mailing a dinosaur cake mold. Somehow I thought using a mold was cheating, but I caved. Problem! I couldn't find the right green frosting. I called mom: "Help!" She had some suggestions, yet the frosting dilemma continued. I couldn't cover the cake without smearing bits of cake into the frosting. Another call: "What now?" "Call your aunt." One phone call empowered me to successfully cover the cake and enjoy a new connection with my aunt, who became a member of the cake debacle brigade. After a decade, I look back and wonder why making cakes is so important to me. Of course, it's a central moment of joy and celebration, but somehow producing those cakes meant more. For a while I was convinced that I was enacting the mothering I experienced, yet in a recent conversation with mom she remembered having made only one of my birthday cakes! In

spite of what may seem to be my inaccurate impression of my mother I've come to understand mothering as a community value--a value that means family is connected not only by creation and celebration, but also by the site of discourse that emerges in multiple spaces with spouses, aunts, moms, or even the intended celebrants, our children. (Excerpts from *Baking Values*, Renee's autoethnographic tale, September 2009)

Next we move to the stories offered by Liesbeth, Lisa, and Erika because they extend the notion of responsibility both in terms of what a mother offers her child and what a child hopes for in a mother. But in addition, we see in these stories mothers needing mothering, mothers not being there or not being able or willing to talk, and going on, moving forward despite these tensions. For Liesbeth, her tale, *Pull My Socks* combined joy and pain in her description of going home to take care of her mother who was recovering from a broken hip, and the role her own daughter played in that visit.

"The doctor told me a daughter's care is the best there is for a mother. The best," my mom repeats this several times during the weeks I am with her as she recovers . . . After her shower, as I kneel down in front of her to help her into her briefs and insert a pantyliner, she is muttering apologies, for what she needs me to do, for how she looks, her nudity, her wrinkles, her bruises, her helplessness. I slide socks on her feet. "Pull my socks," she snaps. I recognize that tone from my childhood, but also from my daughter who wants me to do the same thing every morning. "You sound like your granddaughter," I snap back as I pull her socks. We start laughing. We laugh so we don't cry . . . Three weeks later I am crying my guts out . . . it feels so wrong to leave. Once in the airplane, I lean back and think . . . I will talk with my mom on the phone every week . . . but I can't share my pain about her decline with her. A tear escapes and rolls down my cheek. "Don't cry mama," my daughter says, as she grabs my hand. "I am with you! I will always be with you!" *A daughter's care is the best care there is*. What else can I do but smile? (Excerpts from *Pull My Socks*, Liesbeth's autoethnographic tale, September 2009)

Lisa's tale, *Just Like Her*, recounted her memories of her mother in several life stages; this excerpt highlights the end of life when she was dying of colon cancer.

Despite the fact that cancer--like brown eyes and olive skin--runs in our family, my mother appeared shocked after years of diarrhea added up to the colon cancer that killed her. I was well versed in her cancer treatment options . . . yet our conversations addressed current events, family matters, and where to have lunch. Speaking the truth about her cancer felt like a form of violence against her. So as I walked the sterile, yet homey hospital corridors I wrestled with how to convince her to have chemo after her cancer surgery . . . "The doctor said if you were his mother he'd give you chemo to kill any cancer cells that might be floating around in there." I gestured toward her abdomen. She replied, "I'll think about it. I *don't* want

to lose my hair. It is my decision, Lisa Rose.” It came as no real surprise when she decided against chemo. There would be no dramatic deathbed goodbyes. She would die on her terms. I learned from my mom that, just like her, I should do life, and eventually death, on my terms . . . This new view, this re-birthing, is something that I am thankful to her even now for providing. I don’t recall the beginning of my mother’s love--it was just always there. And now I realize it has no end. (Excerpts from *Just Like Her*, Lisa’s autoethnographic tale, September 2009)

For Erika, her *Unanswered Question* is a pained narrative of the loss of an idealized image of her mother; she recounts a letter from her father to her and her sisters that (in her mind) communicated only one message--“that there was a time when my mother didn’t want me.”

“When your mother and I originally split up, she was going to leave with him [stepdad] and leave you with me. She was going to leave you, but then decided she was unable to leave her children behind . . . you see he [stepdad] was important enough that she was willing to do that, and so I want you to see how my feeling that she [stepmom] comes before you is justified by knowing that your mother felt that way too . . .” My mom is my best friend. We talk nearly every day. I admire her in so many ways--for the way she raised us on her own, for her love and support, and for her dedication to others in the community. So I wonder, “How could my mother have wanted to leave me? Who IS this person my dad is describing? Are you a ‘mother’ if you choose to leave your children?” My heart told me I would never be able to leave my kids . . . and honestly, that they come first, not my husband, at least until they are adults. The next day, I tearfully talked to both of my sisters about it, and we all decided not to tell our mom. We have lived for more than a decade not knowing if it is true--and honestly, not wanting to know. (Excerpts from *Unanswered Question*, Erika’s autoethnographic tale, September 2009)

Finally, the stories presented by Juan and Anne take us to redemptive moments in crisis, healing moments with our mothers, moments when we savor time with our mothers, not knowing for sure how long they will be a part of our lives. Juan’s mothering tale, *A Million Little Pieces* was a journey into the dark parts of his past that were changed by his mother’s love.

Mom did everything she could to protect us from Dad’s abuse, including bearing the brunt of his fury. I hated myself for not being able to stop his fist from landing on her body. When I was 16, I could take no more . . . My heart pounded loudly as I walked up to him and said “don’t you ever touch her again!” I closed my eyes really tight, clenched my fist, wound my arm back and swung. I came up short. Before I could open my eyes, I felt that familiar heavy-handed sting on my face. He yelled, “get the hell out of my house! You are no longer my son.” Those words nearly knocked me out.

Walking away, I could hear Mom begging me to come back. I turned and saw her heart breaking into a million little pieces . . . At 16, I was without a family, without a place to truly call home, and was not attending school. One night, several years later, when I felt like giving up, I opened to a knock at the door, and standing there was Mom. Without words she simply hugged me tighter than ever, like she was afraid that I would disappear if she let go. Immediately, I felt the pain and anger washing away with my tears. It was as if that hug was putting all my broken pieces back together. (Excerpts from *A Million Little Pieces*, Juan's autoethnographic tale, September 2009)

Our final tale, narrated by Anne, is of her annual *Road Trip* to South Lake Tahoe with her mother and the special moments this has created in their relationship--and indeed in her desire to live her life.

Ten years ago, I started our trip to Tahoe alone in the hotel room drinking my sorrows away . . . in a drunken, emotional state with a broken heart, mind, and soul and ready to give up on life. Yet, Mom never gave up on me. She nurtured, consoled, counseled, prayed for, and loved me through every stumble with unconditional love, and I am a sober woman today . . . In a sense, I've had an extended childhood through our Tahoe trips. Extended time with my mom to observe her, laugh with her, heed her advice, and experience her love. No one will ever love me the way that she does, how could they? She carried me for nine months, nurtured, fed, and created me . . . I am part of her . . . We walk hand in hand along the beach path as the sun beats down on our laughter. I stop our tracks and gaze in Mom's eyes, "I love you mom." She responds, "Thank you! I love you too darlin'" and we hug ever so tightly for a few precious moments. She seems small and fragile, having that special mom scent of Passion perfume mixed with her sweetness. As we walk on, the smells of warm pine and wood from the Sierras fill the air. Every year I wonder if this will be our last trip . . . I will always equate Tahoe to time with mom. (Excerpts from *Road Trip*, Anne's autoethnographic tale, September 2009)

All seven stories take us full circle, remembering who we were/who we are with our mothers and who we are becoming as we nurture our children and our own mothers. In all of our stories, mothering is clearly represented in "quality time" mothers and children spend together. The quintessence of mothering is what is valued in that time together--what is known and considered precious but does not need to be spoken as mothers and children luxuriate in suspended moments of caring, supporting, appreciating, and learning from one another.

4. Discerning the Complexities of Mothering through Collaborative Autoethnographic Practice

[Mothering is] an atmosphere . . . the bedrock of existence . . . a foundation . . . a way of life. (Quindlen, 2005, p. 227)

In the moments of performativity, these narratives (especially in their longer form) were powerful, and sharing them in the panel session was emotion-laden for each autoethnographer. The process produced an interesting tension between how writing solo (as in autoethnography) can be a lonely practice, and how there was communality in hearing our stories in chorus. For us, collaborating on these autoethnographic tales in a public forum provided insights into mothering that no one narrative (and certainly no traditional form of social scientific writing) could have provided in isolation. Perhaps the most meaningful point in our collaborative autoethnographic practice was in those moments of sharing, when we were all deeply feeling, understanding, and connecting with each others' experiences. Each mothering story--a time of struggle, a time of recognition, a time of change or transformation, a time of presence--offered an insight that could only be offered in this evocative, narrative form. Autoethnographic writing was discovery, an opportunity to break out of and away from "traditional generic constraints" (Ellingson, 2009, p. 3).

Once the tales had all been shared, our collaborative efforts took the form of discerning what these autoethnographies illustrated about the complexities of mothering. In the resulting discussion after the panel (and interactions after the conference), we discovered that all of the stories could be linked one to the other in a myriad of ways (e.g., stories told about a ritual, a life-changing event, an every-day activity, or a moment never to be forgotten). The autoethnographic stories presented offered an opportunity to understand the sense making that all of us engaged in as we reflected on our mothers, being mothered, and our own process of mothering our children or our mothers. What we realized through these stories is the inclination to write what we desire: we wanted to return to a place, even if it was not ideal.

We deify the mother role, often glorifying the mundane. We learn through reading these stories that mothering goes far beyond performing a particular role almost to a divine appointment; mothering encompasses far more than the day-to-day mundane work that must be performed, although such work is a significant part of mothering (see Rothman, 1989). We learn that we make sense of the mother-child relationship in mundane moments and critical turning points through role-switching, transcendence, suffering, symbolic acts, sacrifice, and even silence. These stories present opportunities for learning through empathy, for validating lived experience, and for understanding the self in the everyday life of mother-child relationships. They also illustrate forms of maternal healing and care; we recognized Glass-Coffin's (2006) heuristic frame of five centralities of maternal care--"sacrifice, empathy, discipline and right action, forgiveness, and surrender/letting go" (p. 896)--exemplified in our stories.

One of the most selfless acts for mothers is to sacrifice for the well-being of their child. This responsibility may fall to mothers as illustrated in Juan's story of his mother offering the ultimate sacrifice of bodily harm to protect him from abuse and Erika's story of her mother's decision to (potentially) sacrifice romantic love for mother-love. Empathy, or the ability to feel the pain of another, is also intuitively maternal as mothers often will care for their child's pain as though it is their own. Still, the nature of empathy as reciprocal is illustrated in Liesbeth and Lisa's stories of the mutuality of pain; in their

mother's experience of pain they experience pain. Mothers can both experience and encourage discipline and right action as they accept responsibility for their own mothering experiences, as well as encourage discipline and right action in their children. This is exemplified in Renee's story of enacting the narrative of making birthday cakes as carrying forward her own mother's (right) actions, later revealed as her own sense of what mothers "should do."

In mothering, children often experience a "pass" on making mistakes; mothers focus on the innocence of the child and perhaps see children's mistakes as failings of their own teaching (Glass-Coffin, 2006). With our own children, we may be able to forgive, yet do we extend that forgiveness to our mothers in the face of their alleged or actual mistakes? An understanding of the forgiving nature of mothering enables Erika to focus on her mother's decision to stay with her children, thereby offering her forgiveness.

Finally, the metaphor of motherhood involves surrender; mothers surrender a part of themselves when birthing a child and then later surrender control over the child to allow them to grow into their own person (Glass-Coffin, 2006), as illustrated in the story of Anne whose mother's enduring love allowed her to focus on the importance of spending time with her rather than on her daughter's destructive sense of self. Lisa's story highlights another aspect of the power surrender offers us to let go of our own mothers. In letting go she understands that her mother's choices are ultimately hers and recognizes her lack of control in the situation.

Much of the work of mothering is invisible. Perhaps this explains why the value of mothering is most clearly realized when a child, regardless of age, loses it (as described through the stories of Patricia and Lisa, and Liesbeth's impending sense of loss); daughters in particular are likely to stay connected to the lost parent (Edelman, 2006). This is true even when mothers were viewed as abusive, addicted, punitive, and/or overly critical because "Your mother is the mirror. Whether you elect to gaze at the reflection with equanimity, to tilt the glass or crack it outright, it is the point from which you always begin. It is *who you are*" (Quindlen, 2005, p. 227, emphasis added).

5. Critiquing Our Autoethnographic Tales of the Complexities of Mothering

[Mother-love is] universally desired, yet paradoxically [under]valued . . . the supreme archetype of one-way giving. Ideals of the "good mother" dictate a woman who always stands by her offspring, whatever they do, bathing them in the warm glow of unconditional love. (Langford, 1994, p. 98)

After examining our stories in light of the common heuristic of mothering as maternal care and sacrifice, empathy, discipline and right action, forgiveness, and surrender/letting go, Lisa suggested a final step in our collaborative autoethnographic practice--(re)approaching our tales via feminist critique. In telling an isolated autoethnographic tale, none of us may have been self-reflexive enough to recognize our role in (re)producing the cultural institution of motherhood via the story we chose to tell about

mothering. Yet in combination, this (re)production across our stories cannot be denied, which illustrates a value-added component of collaborative autoethnographic practice. When (re)approaching our own stories through the lens of feminist/cultural critic, we recognize the perpetual, altruistic nature of mothering, as presented in our stories, may be detrimental to women, including ourselves.

In taking a critical approach to these autoethnographic narratives, we do see an expectation that the mother be more than she is--or at least it is hoped that she will be more than she is--within some of the contexts described in the writings. The ever present challenge for mothers to be the empathic, smiling encourager of their children is next to impossible. Yet mediated and real life notions of maternal love challenge mothers to do the work required to be just that and such expectations of the mother have been met with criticism by feminist scholars who argue there may be significant assaults to the self when the emotional work of the mother is romanticized (Hochschild, 2003; Langford, 1994; McQuillan, Greil, Shreffler, & Tichenor, 2008; Walzer, 2004). A feminist critique of our narratives reveals an assumption, expectation, or desire for mothers to meet the needs of their children. Yet when emotional support flows one way, a mother's needs go unmet, challenging her well being. And, apart from Liesbeth's tale of caring for her mother, the implicit idea of the mother meeting the needs of her child remains unchallenged. If mothering means determining and then meeting needs, we must also ask: What about the mother's needs? This question points to the culturally perceived selflessness involved in mothering.

Connecting the virtue of selflessness with motherhood suggests a great focus on caring for children, and offers an explanation for the uniquely valued maternal role. And yet such lofty expectations for altruistic endurance can force mothers to keep a particular narrative going that may wear thin without structures of significant support in place. Well into adulthood, we may be unable to let go of motherhood as the "place" or "space" that embodies the favored story of who we are. At the same time, a collaborative autoethnographic practice reveals spaces in these stories that release individual mothers from such responsibility. Renee relieves herself from having sole responsibility for the cakes by attributing the reason for making them to her mother's practice and then including her mother and her aunt in mothering as a communal activity. Lisa's mother, in an epic decision, refuses the possibly life-saving treatment her daughter desperately wants her to receive. And Erika's mother's contemplation of possibly leaving challenges the conception of mother as the one who not only is always there, but as the one whose primary desire is to always be there.

6. Final Thoughts on Collaborative Autoethnographic Practice

In summary, our collaborative autoethnographic practice involved a series of elements. We started with individually writing autoethnographic narratives on a shared topic of lived experience (in this case, mothering). We then performed these narratives in a public forum, sharing our stories with each other and the audience. In and after the panel discussion, we discussed the heuristic commonalities across these autoethnographic narratives and tied those commonalities back to the literature on the topic of the lived

experience of mothering. In our discussion of commonalities, we realized that we had (un)intentionally reproduced cultural scripts of mothering and therefore revisited the autoethnographic narratives through the lens of social critique. Presenting knowledge (of mothering) in this way, through collaborative autoethnographic practice, creates a myriad of opportunities for growth and learning, yet also involves some challenges.

In many ways, our collaborative ethnographic process is an excellent example of the social construction of reality and knowledge. While each person's story offers insights about the facets of mothering, the concept of mothering becomes not just an additive accumulation of these insights but instead the juxtapositioning of these facets creates something new in terms of a conceptualization of mothering. Concomitantly, we have wondered how the combining of multiple stories in a dialogic/collaborative approach might modify the initially perceived reality as lived by the original writer. Stated another way, in this collaborative process, as we seek to delve deeper and perhaps broaden the application, is there something lost in the original point of view of the story? Or, do multiple views allow readers to get something out of the situation they would not have otherwise? How does the notion of the "revision of reality" come into play in collaborative autoethnographic practice and whose reality matters most? What implications does this question have for how and if people will utilize and build upon this method in the future?

Furthermore, these stories have presented us with opportunities to witness moments that reveal the complexity of mothering, yet they also uncover some challenges in bringing these stories to the public arena. These have to do with making public what is inherently private, and implicating and exposing significant others by sharing their intimate information with strangers for the sake of research. Sharing intimate moments brings finality to what used to be an ephemeral, evolving reality. A shared secret is no longer a secret. Our narrated experiences have now become openly accessible, public knowledge. The suspended moments that lingered in our heads have become stories that are, in a way, now out of our control. For some, the release of the story may be a cathartic experience. For others, seeing their story in writing may be an unwelcome form of finality to those cherished suspended moments. It is not unthinkable that letting go of the story is much like opening the proverbial can of worms, as it presents a new form of uncertainty: "Where to go from here? Who am I now?"

Another challenge that comes with collaborating on these stories is found in the exposure of significant others as pivotal characters in our accounts. Many of the stories told in this piece reveal fears of communicating certain messages with our mothers. Does Anne's mother mind that everyone now knows that her daughter thinks every trip with her may be the last? What if Erika's mother finds out about the letter through this publication? How would Liesbeth's mother feel if she learned that her sock habits and use of pantyliners are now public knowledge? Is it ethical to share these stories that implicate them, to an extent, without their consent? Is it fair to discuss, in the name of social science, what we are able to explain in detail here, yet unable to communicate one-on-one to the person we have revealed to be so crucial to our existence?

Ellis (2007) describes these as “situational ethics, the kind that deal with the unpredictable, often subtle, yet ethically important moments that come up in the field” and suggests that “relational ethics requires researchers to act from our hearts and minds, to acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others” (p. 4). Bochner and Ellis (2006) suggest that autoethnography is an ethical practice, that “shows people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and what their struggle means” (p. 111). Clearly, the autoethnographies presented here shed light on the dialectic tensions of mothering, both through the gifts we give and receive and through the challenges that complicate the mother-child relationship. Autoethnography as collaborative practice is as Ellis (2007) writes “a reflexive attempt to construct meaning in our lives and heal or grow from our pain” (p. 26). The seven autoethnographers remain engaged in the process of figuring out what these stories mean, what secrets to keep, and how this collaborative autoethnographic practice may offer new understandings not only of mothering, but of a multiplicity of life experiences.

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