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Autobiography, ontology, autoethnology

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'"But enough of you, let's talk about me", said the native to the autoethnographic IR scholar.'

We are in Roland Bleiker and Morgan Brigg's and also Elizabeth Dauphinee's and Oded Löwenheim's debt for highlighting autoethnographical concerns.[1] I agree that 'insights through the self are always already formed in relationship with the world and others' and 'that research should be structured around puzzles', with the caveat that there are also other kinds of research; criticism of other's work, construction of chronology and narrative, categorisation, etc.[2] This rejoinder will be an exercise in the latter. What is now being discussed under the heading of autoethnography may be broken down into at least three issues. There is, first, the question of awareness of and reflection on one's situation, in the sense of situatedness, and how this situatedness is a precondition for doing research. Then there is the question of how to hook up to the world in order to do research, of what Patrick Jackson has recently termed philosophical ontology.[3] And then there is the question of how the writing process itself – the choice of genre, the choice of model reader, the use of tropes and metaphors, etc. – impinge on the finished narrative. There is a certain modular quality to this categorisation, in the sense that research economy follows basic human experiences and writing economy follows research choices, but like any exercise in categorisation, this one has its break-down point. It will at least do for this textual moment.

Situation

The importance of the researcher's socialisation has been discussed since before the institutionalisation of the social sciences, and it was present at the creation. To Max Weber, values came with socialisation, there were inevitable value choices to be made before drawing up an ideal type and the values choices were inevitably encased in the ideal type. I think it may be useful to draw on the son-in-law of

[1] I am also eagerly awaiting Naeem Inayatullah's edited volume on the issue.
[2] Morgan Brigg and Roland Bleiker, 'Autoethnograpic International Relations: Exploring the Self as a Source of Knowledge', *Review of International Studies*, 36:3 (2010), pp. 779–98.
[3] Patrick Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and Its Implications for the Study of World Politics* (London: Routledge, 2011).

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another founder of the social sciences, Durkheim's collaborator Marcel Mauss, in order to further specify the situation. In a classical essay on the techniques of the body, Mauss postulates that the body is the place where three social systems meet.[4] They are the physiological system, the psychological system and the social system. Note that we are on the level of social facts here; these systems are all mediated by language, and cannot be understood outside it. Physiology or psychology cannot speak; they are interesting only in how they appear within language. And once again, as for any classificatory system, it is very easy indeed to dedifferentiate this one. No matter, if it proves useful in sensitising us to our own sundry situations.

Physiology situates. Brigg and Bleiker rightly highlight feminist and post-colonialist exemplars. Anne Norton has suggested that the physiological difference and the entropy-resistance of gender and race lend a particular ferocity to political struggles.[5] It is certainly the case that, when marked in language by subalternness, physiologically based situation offers a particular perspective on the world.

Physiology is not alone in offering such a perspective, however. Psychology may also do so. Wittgenstein, to mention but one recent philosopher who has given us a new perspective on the world, seems to have been an Asberger's. It may also be circumstantial, something social leaving psychological patterns. Brigg and Bleiker are also in the forefront of introducing the study of emotions into International Relations (IR), so instead of preaching to the converted, I should like to exhort them to integrate their work on autoethnography more closely with their work on emotions. This may also be the time to dabble in a bit of both. I grew up with in-house nurses. From the ripe age of three and a half to four, I had one who used me as a sexual plaything, putting my little arms to intimate use. In order to keep me from telling my parents, she would threaten me with needles and let me suck her breasts. I still cannot stand the idea of substituting my glasses for contacts. There is no doubt in my mind that I took to Foucault like a duck takes to water because there was something immediately familiar about a relational understanding of power that stressed micro-practices being inscribed on the body, the production of docile bodies and the participation of the subaltern party in his own subjection. For psychological reasons, my gaze was training the kind of situation he was talking about, and so I recognised his perspective on the world as akin to my own. Colleagues have sometimes wondered out loud how a white upper-middle class male who leads a fairly regular family life ended up as a Foucualdian. Well, autobiography consists of more than consequences of physiological and social situatedness. As to the latter, since this is the very starting point of the social sciences, let's just leave it at that.

What should perhaps be noted, however, is the radical under-determinedness of situation for value commitments. The percentage of women who are feminist activists is low. Perhaps one molested boy in a million dedicates his adult life to fighting female violence. It would be wrong to expect commitment from a certain scholar simply on the strength of that scholar's situation. A parallel may be drawn

[4] Marcel Mauss, 'Les techniques du corps', *Sociologie et anthropologie*, 5e edition (Paris: Quadrige/PUF [Presses Universitaires de France] (1936) 1993), pp. 363–86.

[5] Anne Norton, *Reflections on Political Identity* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988). Bourdieusians would probably disagree, noting that habitus is incorporated and hence also entropy-resistant. I would nonetheless stress the difference.

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to the area of adoption. Most adoptions take place at a very early age, the result being that the ethnicity of the adoptee is clearly that of the receiving community. A one-year-old born in Korea and raised in Norway is ethnically Norwegian. There are those, however, who claim the allegiance of adoptees on the strength of physiology alone. Certain adoptees have come to identify with Korea, and insist that all Korean-born ethnic Norwegians should do the same. A number of other ethnic Norwegians assume the same. For example, when I mentioned to a diplomat that there were no immigrants working in the Ministry, he retorted that there was X, indicating a Korean adoptee who was clearly ethnically Norwegian. There are a number of moral, political and practical reasons why such situation of others on the strength of physiology alone, a situation which is at loggerheads with self-situation, is uncalled for. IR scholars should take heed. It would be incredibly authoritarian to heap expectations about research agenda and research choices upon colleagues on the basis of their situation, be that situation physiological, psychological or social.

Philosophical ontology

Situation concerns the human condition as such. Given certain ontological commitments, autobiography is a necessary, but not a sufficient thing to do in order to produce research. The IR debate about autoethnology has to range wider. It must also include the question of how, as social scientists, we place what Jackson calls our philosophical ontological wagers, that is, how we decide to hook up to the world to substantiate knowledge claims. If it were not for the fact that Dauphinee was already situated as a scientist, the reactions she recounts from meetings in Bosnia would make no sense.[6] Most social scientists will begin by stressing their separateness from the world. Such scholars may, as Brigg and Bleiker argue with reference to Rosenau, Keohane and others, acknowledge the importance of situatedness for their choice of an Archimedean point, but they would argue that the importance of the issue stops there, with autobiography.[7] Autoethnography is a methodological choice for researchers who place their philosophical ontological wager on themselves being an inseparable part of the world. Such researchers may make one of two methodological choices, a reflexivist choice or an analyticist choice.

The reflexivist ontological wager is that the social consists of stuff produced by structures.[8] Amongst this stuff, we find individuals. But if individuals are the stuff of structures, and structures may only be known indirectly, through the study of their effects, then studying the individual which is yourself is one methodological

[6] Elizabeth Dauphinee, 'The Ethics of Autoethnography', *Review of International Studies*, 36:3 (2010), pp. 799–818.

[7] The central work of this phalanx of the discourse police is Gary King, Robert O. Keohane and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

[8] The central work of this phalanx of the discourse police is Wanda Vrasti, 'The Strange Case of Ethnography and International Relations', *Millennium*, 37:2 (2008), pp. 279–301. For a pluralist critique of the latter, see Jason P. Rancatore, 'It *is* Strange: A Reply to Vrasti', *Millennium*, 39:1 (2010), pp. 65–77. For Vrasti's response, naming her interlocutors after the old Nazi Dr Strangelove, see 'Dr Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying about Methodology and Love Writing', *Millennium*, 39:1 (2010), pp. 79–88.

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option. As Löwenheim puts it, it is all about 'understanding oneself as a product of a certain culture and a certain power/knowledge, *à la* Michel Foucault'.[9] Given that the research procedure that flows from this choice of methodology is explicit and in accordance with general research standards, it is neither more nor less scientific than what flows from other methodological choices. I could think of no substantial reason for naming it otherwise. In the name of reflecting on institutional situatedness within academia, I could think of a number of ethical reasons why it should be so named. In a research environment where research is increasingly made possible by grants from foundations that call themselves scientific, I could also think of a number of strategic and tactical reasons why reflexivists should stress the scientific nature of reflexivist research.

Brigg and Bleiker are unhappy with me for being a bad reflexivist. With reference to my work on how speeches are made within a foreign ministry, they charge that

> [w]hile 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.[10]

The premise here is that the only way to do autoethnography, or draw on personal experience, is reflexively. That is not the case. The methodological issues for me in that piece were not reflexivist. For that textual moment, I took advantage of my social situation as a foreign element in a well entrenched practice. I looked at how my presence upset an ideal-typical bureaucratic practice, namely the production of text. I did write about being a subject and object of research, in the way I created situations which I could then analyse, but I left my reflections on what that did to me as a person out, yes. The methodological challenges involved were not of the reflexivist kind that Brigg and Bleiker are talking about. Given my analytics, as the ingrained organisational practice reasserted itself, there was no reason why I should reflect on my own experience of being sidelined and bypassed beyond detailing my moves. I could have chosen otherwise and foregrounded my own reactions, as I did in the conclusion to my second doctorate, in social anthropology, where I detailed what it was like going from studying foreign policy making from within the discipline of IR, to studying it from within social anthropology, reflexive style. A different exercise, which called for a different writing style.[11] As Jackson puts it,

> [a]n analyticist might articulate a value-commitment to beginning with everyday understandings and proceed to elaborate an ideal-typical model of everyday understanding [. . .], but that would not make her work reflexivist because the warrant for her claims would not simply be the fact that they were connected to a social group's common-sense

[9] Oded Löwenheim, 'The "I" in IR: An Autoethnographic Account', *Review of International Relations*, 36:4 (October 2010). Note, however, that there is little or no soul-bearing and performing of the wound in Foucault's own text; the writing is indirect, with the personal pulse located just below the surface. Exemplary, as I see it.

[10] Brigg and Bleiker, 'Autoethnographic International Relations', p. 785 commenting on 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.

[11] Iver B. Neumann, *Diplomats and Diplomacy: An Anthropological View*, Dr. Philos. in social anthropology (Oslo University, 2009).

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practices but would instead be the fact that they were connected to an ideal-typical model rooted in a particular value-commitment.[12]

Writing

We need books and symposia on 'Writing International Relations', where the topic would be how stuff is left out when we write up, how such stuff leaves traces, how the choice of a specific genre will invite a specific choice of heroes and villains and the relationship between them, what kind of reader(s) are implied.[13] It would not be good if the entire methods question tied up with this part of the research process went undiscussed, for example by being subsumed under general debates about autobiography or scientific ontology.

Conclusion

In light of the above, Löwenheim's article comes across as a very nice exercise in situation. The data he uses, however, is not ethnographical, but is culled from memory. Memory work is certainly a legitimate and apt data collecting method, but I cannot see why it should be referred to as autoethnographical, not least because there was no writing (cf. Gr. *graphein*, to write) going into the data collection. Ethnography entails not only writing up, but also writing down, while in the field. Not least due to his writing, he also succeeds in his aim of making me '*feel* IR'.[14] I'd say that this is a successful exercise in IR autobiography. There is a cost. Foregrounding the 'I' backgrounds the 'you'. Placing the reflexive ontological wager invites illuminating your own experience and leave everybody else's in the dark. This is where placing the analytical ontological wager comes in as an alternative.

[12] I am still following Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations*.

[13] Exemplars for the exercise in addition to those mentioned by Brigg and Bleiker would include Jacques Derrida, 'The Question of Style', in David B. Allison, *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation*, second edition (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. ([1978] 1985), pp. 176–89; and Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). The IR John the Baptist would be Michael Shapiro, *The Politics of Representation. Writing Practices in Biography, Photography, and Political Analysis* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988).

[14] Löwenheim, 'The "I" in IR'.

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