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Citation:

Sparkes, A (2021) When judgment calls: Making sense of criteria for evaluating different forms of autoethnography. In: Handbook of Autoethnography (2nd edition). Routledge, London, pp. 263-276. ISBN 9780429431760, 9781138363120

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Document Version:

Book Section (Accepted Version)

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in Handbook of Autoethnography on 22 July 2021, available online: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9780429431760>

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## **When judgment calls: Making sense of criteria for evaluating different forms of autoethnography**

**By**

**Andrew C. Sparkes**

In T. Adams, S. Holman Jones and C. Ellis (Eds.) (2021). *Handbook of Autoethnography* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) (pp. 263-276). London: Routledge.

### **Introduction**

Evaluating research is a necessary yet contested terrain. In making judgments about any form of inquiry we draw either implicitly or explicitly on criteria. I learned this the hard way when, some years ago, whilst walking with a colleague to the campus café for a mid-morning coffee, I mentioned to him that I was in the process of writing an article about my own experiences of, in my younger days, being a high level sports performer whose career was prematurely terminated by a serious injury and the impact this then had on my life over the years (Sparkes, 1996). Without breaking his stride, and without hesitation he said, “Sounds like an academic *wank* to me.” His use of the vulgar British slang word for male masturbation stunned me. Not knowing how to respond, I quickly changed the subject and didn’t mention my autoethnographic aspirations to him again. But the sting of his words, flippantly released in a definitive act of judgment about a piece of work he had not seen or read, had seared itself into my body. It took me a while to find an antidote in the writings of others and to slowly cleanse the venom from my system (Sparkes, 2002, 2003, 2013a).

Whether or not we like it, as Denzin (2018) reminds us, “We can never say farewell to criteria” (p. 191). Likewise Faulkner (2016) states, “I do not see a way out of NOT assessing the quality and effectiveness of qualitative research” (p. 665). In thinking about criteria, rather than seeing them as abstract, pre-determined or universal standards to be applied regardless of context, I am drawn towards Smith and Hodkinson’s (2005) suggestion that criteria are best viewed as socially constructed lists of characteristics.

As we approach judgment in any given case, we have in mind a list of characteristics that we use to judge the quality of that production. This is not a well-defined and precisely specified list; to the contrary, this list of characteristics is always open-ended, in part unarticulated, and always subject to constant interpretation reinterpretation ... Our lists are invariably rooted in our standpoints and are elaborated through social interactions. (pp. 922-933)

Reflecting on this process in action, Pelias (2011) describes himself sitting at his desk trying to contemplate what qualitative work he wants to applaud and what efforts seem lacking. He’s curious as to why he is seduced by some work but not others, why the best work seems to engage and the weaker work seems to fall flat and leave him cold. Sitting there he is ready to consider other readings, but then he continues, putting an *evaluative self*

forward that lists twelve contrasts between a flat piece and an engaging piece. One of these is as follows:

The flat piece, a cold dinner, is forced down, taken in with little pleasure. It lacks the heat of the chef's passions, the chef's sensuous self who knows, without spice, all is bland. The engaging piece makes each mouthful worthy of comment, encourages lingering, savoring, remembering. In its presence, I want to invite my colleagues and students to enjoy its flavors. (p. 666)

The list of twelve contrasts provided by Pelias (2011) can be seen as an articulation of the criteria he calls upon and the process he goes through when acting as an evaluative self. Others, as indicated in Table 1, have also generously offered lists of criteria to assist the evaluative self in passing judgment on various forms of inquiry.

Table 1. Sample of lists of criteria

	Creative analytical practice ethnography (Richardson, 2000)	Poetic inquiry (Faulkner, 2009)	Qualitative research in general (Tracy, 2010)	Arts based research (Barone & Eisner, 2012)	Arts based research (Chilton & Leavy, 2014)
Criteria	Substantive contribution Aesthetic merit Reflexivity Impact Expression of a reality	Artistic concentration Embodied experience Discovery/ surprise Conditionality Narrative truth Transformation	Worthy topic Rich rigor Sincerity Credibility Resonance Ethical Meaningful coherence Significant contribution	Incisiveness Concision Coherence Generativity Social significance Evocation Illumination	Question/method fit Aesthetic power Usefulness Participatory and transformative Artful authenticity Canonical generalization

More lists of criteria (as characteristics) for judging various forms of qualitative inquiry can be added to Table 1. To do so, however, would be to labour the point made by Sparkes (2018a) that when it comes to the criteria issue, scholars tend to create and use lists according to their specific needs and purposes. It is nonetheless so for autoethnography.

### **Lists of criteria for judging autoethnographies**

Reflecting on the power of names, Charmaz (2006) notes how “names carry weight, whether light or heavy. Names provide ways of knowing – and being” (p. 396). Thus, when I act as an evaluative self and review a journal article or student dissertation, I am sensitive to the names chosen by the authors to describe their work as this signals their intent and purpose within the framework of a tradition of inquiry. So when I read something like, “in this article I draw upon an autoethnographic approach” I begin to expect something that displays the general characteristics of this genre. This is my first act of judgment.

As autoethnography has gained greater acceptance as part of its coming of age within the social sciences various scholars have helped to clarify the key characteristics of this genre that bind it together without seeking to determine what it is once and for all in an act of closure. For example, Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis (2013) list the following characteristics: purposefully commenting on/critiquing of culture practices; making contributions to existing research; embracing vulnerability with a purpose; and creating a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response. Likewise, Manning and Adams (2015) state that two essential qualities should be present in all autoethnographic projects.

First, any work labeled ‘autoethnography’ should include personal experience and demonstrate, through thoughtful analysis, why this experience is meaningful and culturally significant. An essay that does not use or describe the importance of personal experience in a cultural context should not be considered an autoethnography. Second, this personal experience must be reflexively considered through the use of extant theory, other scholarly writings about the topic, fieldwork observations, analysis of artifacts (e.g., photographs), and/or involvement with others (e.g., interviews). If many of these elements are not evident, then a project should not be considered an autoethnography. (p. 205)

The thoughts above are echoed directly by Adams and Herrmann (2020), the editors of the newly established *Journal of Autoethnography*, in the guidance they offer to those interested in submitting an article to this journal. While they do not wish to be prescriptive about what autoethnography is or how to do it, Adams and Herrmann state the following.

What makes a particular work an ‘autoethnography’? ‘Autoethnography’ is comprised of three interrelated components: ‘auto,’ ‘ethno,’ and ‘graphy.’ Thus, autoethnographic projects use selfhood, subjectivity, and personal experience (‘auto’) to describe, interpret, and represent (‘graphy’) beliefs, practices, and identities of a group or culture (‘ethno’). Manuscripts published in this journal must engage these components . . . We expect every manuscript to engage at least some aspects of the ‘auto,’ ‘ethno,’ and ‘graphy,’ and these components will inform how we assess manuscripts. (2–3, emphasis added).

Such guidance and identifying of characteristics are useful in helping my evaluative self to judge if what is being offered to me actually *is* an autoethnography rather than something else, such as, an autobiographical study, or a ‘confessional’ piece in which the author provides methodological reflections based on their personal experiences of being involved in various aspects of the research process (Sparkes, 2020). Often, in the introduction the author *tells* me they have produced an autoethnography but none of these key characteristics are present in what follows. Alternatively, the author *tells* me that their piece contains the characteristics named by Adams and Herrmann (2020), Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis (2013) and/or Manning and Adams (2015) above. However, when it comes to *showing* me these characteristics in action in what follows, none of them are present. My conclusion, therefore, is that wherever the piece is, it is *not* an autoethnography and I am obliged to point this out to the author in my review. This is a sharp reminder that simply claiming that one has produced an autoethnography does not mean that one has actually done so.

Of course, just how the characteristics of autoethnography outlined by Holman Jones et al. (2013) and Manning and Adams (2015) are played out in practice is very much up for

grabs (Short, Turner & Grant, 2013). This is because there is no one definitive form or containing category of autoethnography owned by individual scholars but many variations and possibilities. Here are but a few: *analytic* autoethnography (Anderson, 2006), *Black feminist* autoethnography (Griffin, 2012), *collaborative* autoethnography (Chang, 2012), *community* autoethnography (Toyosaki et al. 2009), *critical* autoethnography (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016), *evocative* autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2016), *indigenous* autoethnography (Whitinui, 2014), *impressionistic* autoethnography (Skinner, 2003), *interpretive* autoethnography (Denzin, 2014), *performance* autoethnography (Denzin, 2018), *performative* autoethnography (Spry, 2011), *phenomenological* autoethnography (Regina, Aguirre & Duncan, 2013), *poetic* autoethnography (Speedy, 2015), and *psychoanalytic* autoethnography (Garratt, 2014).

Not surprisingly, as Holman Jones (2005) states following her review of various definitions of autoethnography, “taking these words as a point of departure, I create my own responses to the call: Autoethnography is ...” (p. 765). In this she is not alone and, as others have responded to this call they have, by necessity, articulated different lists of criteria for judging their preferred kind of autoethnography. For example, Hughes, Pennington, and Makris (2012) developed their notion of what makes a good autoethnography by examining those published in highly selected education journals to see how they matched the existing publication standards for empirical research established by the American Educational Research Association (AERA). From this, they suggested that to warrant publication in such journals autoethnographies should meet the following criteria.

- Address social scientific problems
- Provide critical, careful, and thoughtful discussion of methodological choices and claims.
- Provide multiple levels of critical analysis, including self-critique, name privilege and penalty, and select classification schemes and units of analysis while being critically self-reflexive about the selection.
- Offer credible analysis and interpretation of evidence from narratives and [connect] them to researcher-self via triangulation, member-checks, and related ethical issues. (pp. 212- 215).

In contrast, rather than focusing on autoethnographies published in selected journals to establish which external criteria must be met to establish goodness, others have started with what they value and see as the purpose of the particular kind of autoethnography they aspire to before developing their lists of criteria for judging goodness. To illustrate this point, I will now consider the lists provided by some of those who advocate analytical, evocative and performance kinds of autoethnography.

#### (a) Analytic autoethnography

According to Anderson (2006), analytic autoethnography has the following five key features: complete member researcher status, analytic reflexivity, narrative visibility of the researcher’s self, dialogue with informants beyond the self, and a commitment to theoretical analysis. For him, these key features clearly differentiate it from evocative autoethnography because the purpose of analytic autoethnography is not just about documenting personal experience, providing an insider’s perspective, or evoking emotional resonance with the reader. Rather it is about, using empirical data “to gain insight into some broader set of social phenomena than those provided by the data themselves” (387). In this respect, according to

McMahon (2016), analytic autoethnography represents a more ‘traditional scientific’ autoethnographic approach, “with a focus both on telling readers what the tale is about and how it should, ideally, be read” (p. 307).

Drawing on Anderson’s work, others have developed his approach and the criteria used to judge both its processes and products. For example, speaking of how health researchers can produce desirable (i.e., analytic) autoethnographies that potentially contribute to advancing health-related knowledge, Chang (2016) offers the following five standards (criteria) for judging the quality of such work.

- *Authentic and Trustworthy Data*: Does the autoethnography use authentic and trustworthy data?
- *Accountable Research Process*: Does the autoethnography follow a reliable research process and show the process clearly?
- *Ethics Toward Others and Self*: Does the autoethnography follow ethical steps to protect the rights of self and others presented and implicated in the autoethnography?
- *Sociocultural Analysis and Interpretation*: Does the autoethnography analyze and interpret the sociocultural meaning of the author’s personal experiences?
- *Scholarly Contribution*: Does the autoethnography attempt to make a scholarly contribution with its conclusion and engagement of the existing literature? (p. 448)

Like Anderson (2006), Chang (2016) also signals that her criteria, along with her suggestions for what she describes as probably the most systematic process of autoethnographic research proposed regarding data collection, organization, analysis, and interpretation, “may stand contrasted with more fluid approaches of evocative and narrative autoethnography and of interpretive and performative autoethnography” (p. 445).

#### (b) Evocative autoethnography

According to McMahon (2016), evocative autoethnography can also be referred to as emotional autoethnography. For her, this kind of autoethnography involves a literary approach to research that seeks to *show* rather than *tell* the reader about the subjective emotional experiences of the author. This showing is accomplished by creating compelling stories that invite the reader to feel an emotional resonance and connection with the author, as well as gain an understanding of the culture central to the story being told. [SEP]

With regard to evaluating evocative autoethnography [SEP]Bochner and Ellis (2016) offer some reflections in the form of a conversation between them and a group of students. Here, they note that depending upon the kind of autoethnography you are doing, the criteria by which it should be evaluated will be different. For Bochner and Ellis, if you are aspiring to do something akin to analytic autoethnography, then the criteria “should be more social scientific, such as considerations of validity, data collection, categorization processes, and generalizability across cases” (p. 212). If, however, you aspire to an evocative form of autoethnography then, they suggest, you will not be so concerned with these issues. To illustrate this point, as part of their conversation with their students, Bochner lists the following criteria he uses for evaluating evocative autoethnography.

- I look for abundant, concrete details. I want to feel the flesh and blood emotions of people coping with life’s contingencies.
- I am attracted to structurally complex narratives that are told in a temporal framework representing the curve of time.

- I also reflect on the author's emotional credibility, vulnerability, and honesty. I expect evocative autoethnographers to examine their actions and dig underneath them, displaying the self on the page, taking a measure of life's limitations, of cultural scripts that resist transformation, of contradictory feelings, ambivalence, and layers of subjectivity, squeezing comedy out of life's tragedies.
- I also prefer narratives that express a tale of two selves, one that shows a believable journey from who I was to who I am, and how a life course can be reimagined or transformed by crisis.
- I hold the author to a demanding standard of ethical self-consciousness ... I want the writer to show concern for how other people in the teller's story are portrayed, for the kind of person one becomes in telling one's story, and to provide space for the listener's becoming.
- I want a story that moves me, my heart and belly as well as my head; I want a story that doesn't just refer to subjective life, but instead acts it out in ways that show me what life feels like now and what it can mean. (Bochner & Ellis, 2016: 212- 213).

Based on what they consider to be the core ideals, research design considerations, and reasons for doing autoethnography, Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis (2015), created four categories or goals that they use to assess the value and success of evocative forms of autoethnography. These are, "making contributions to knowledge; valuing the personal and experiential; demonstrating the power, craft, and responsibilities of stories and storytelling; and taking a relationally responsible approach to research practice and representation" (p. 102).

### (c) Performance autoethnography

In performance autoethnography, according to McMahan (2016), the autoethnographer/story teller/researcher can be likened to the lead actor in their own story through a theatrical performance that "brings to life or to the stage/theatre transcribed or text-based lived experience" (p. 309). Here, she suggests, the lead actor "enacts the performance in storied form, particularly in terms of the specific cultural context within the performance" (309).

Reflecting upon the possibilities of criteria for evaluating performance autoethnography, Holman Jones (2005) developed a list of actions and accomplishments she looks for in the work of others. These are as follows:

- *Participation as reciprocity*: How well does the work construct participation of authors/readers and performer/audiences as a reciprocal relationship marked by mutual responsibility and obligation?
- *Partiality, reflexivity, and citationality as strategies for dialogue (and not mastery)*: How well does the work present a partial and self-referential tale that connects with other stories, ideas, discourses, and contexts (e.g., personal, theoretical, ideological, cultural) as a means of creating a dialogue among authors, readers, and subjects written/read?
- *Dialogue as a space of debate and negotiation*: How well does the work create a space for and engage in meaningful dialogue among different bodies, hearts, and minds?
- *Personal narrative and storytelling as an obligation to critique*: How do narrative

and story enact an ethical obligation to critique subject positions, acts, and received notions of expertise and justice within and outside of the work?

- *Evocation and emotion as incitements to action.* How well does the work create a plausible and visceral lifeworld and charged emotional atmosphere as an incitement to act within and outside the context of the work?
- *Engaged embodiment as a condition for change.* How does the work place/embody/interrogate/intervene in experience in ways that make political action and change possible in and outside the work? (p. 773)

Similarly, Denzin (2018) grapples with the problem of how best to judge performance autoethnography. As part of this grappling, he offers the following criteria to help us evaluate whether or not performance texts accomplish the following:

- Unsettle, criticize and challenge taken-for-granted, repressed meanings
- Invite moral and ethical dialogue while reflexively clarifying their own moral position
- Engender resistance and offer utopian thoughts about how things can be made different
- Demonstrate that they care, that they are kind
- Show, instead of tell, while using the rule that less is more
- Exhibit interpretive sufficiency, representational adequacy, and authentic adequacy
- Are political, functional, collective, and committed. (p. 197)

Of course, performance autoethnography often moves from the text to being staged in front of a live audience who can react to it directly. Here, as Cho and Trent (2009) point out, the performance in use involves “transacting the lived experiences of Others to audiences by means of voices and bodies of the performer(s)” (p. 11). Given this change in transactional context in which, Pelias (1992) reminds us, the performer carries the obligation to fashion an aesthetic form while the audience member has the burden of response, then modes of judgment will shift accordingly.

Regarding how to evaluate performance autoethnography when it is acted out on the stage, Cho and Trent (2009) suggest various validity criteria for guiding and developing the enactment and evaluation of performance-related qualitative work in relation to the following phases: pre-performance (criteria = imaginative), during performance (criteria = artistic), and post-performance (criteria = co-reflexive member checking). Likewise, Spry (2011), in reflecting upon what she calls *performative* autoethnography, has also considered the movement from the body, to the page, and then to the stage that involves the aesthetic process of creating performance and enacting autoethnographic analysis in front of an audience. Such movement, Spry suggests, calls for various forms of judgment associated with, for example, the self-other-context, connection, the performative-I disposition, putting flesh on the bones of discourse, practicing vulnerability as agency, and aesthetic accountability, that are to be called upon at different moments in the process.

As ever, the lists of criteria offered above do not exhaust those available for judging the various kinds of autoethnography that have been discussed. Furthermore, a careful reading of the lists will indicate that they might have some common features with the criteria associated with, for example, analytic autoethnography. This said, they also have significant differences due to the values and purposes of those producing evocative and/or performance autoethnography that need to be acknowledged and respected if judgment is to be passed on each of them in a fair and ethical manner.



### The danger of lists

According to Bochner (2000) “criteria always have a restrictive, limiting, regressive, thwarting, halting quality to them, and they can never be completely separated from the structures of power in which they are situated” (p. 269) Likewise, Adams et al. (2015) state that, “evaluation criteria are political, they privilege some voices and research projects while discouraging and silencing other voices and projects” (p. 102) In relation to this, Smith and Hodgkinson (2005) remind us that researchers of *all* persuasions, including autoethnographers, use whatever resources they have at their disposal to “support, preserve, or strengthen those rules (or lists of characteristics) that they approve of or are in their interests and/or to change the rules (or lists) lists in a direction that favors their interests” (p. 923). This is not surprising if we adopt the position held by Gingrich-Philbrook (2013) that any evaluation of autoethnography captures the efforts of real people as they deploy arguments that advance the evaluator’s own paradigm, psyche, and professional identity-work. For that matter, he adds, so do any evaluations of those evaluations, which is only to be expected since any evaluation (and evaluation of evaluations) of autoethnography always take place in a shared world, “not at an Archimedean remove from what they evaluate” (p. 615). Thus, as Gingrich-Philbrook states, any evaluation of autoethnography is always simply another personal story “from a highly situated, privileged, empowered subject about something *he or she* experienced” (p. 618).

In telling another personal story, however, lists of criteria can have a dark side. They can serve a strong exclusionary and legitimation function when used in a foundational, prescriptive and normative manner to regulate the boundaries of specific forms of inquiry and control its practitioners in punitive ways. Here, lists of criteria get defined as permanent and universal to be applied to *any* form of inquiry under the general label of ‘qualitative’ regardless of its intents and purposes. This list can quickly become a rigid quality appraisal ‘checklist’ that is then used to set standards of ‘quality control’ for *all* forms of qualitative research. As Gingrich-Philbrook (2013) points out, the checklist gets confused for a meta-language and something that is universally endorsed. Such lists, he argues, can too quickly get converted into a *magic contract for power relations* with, for example, professors marking and grading an autoethnography assignment, journal editors and their reviewers making publication assessments, and administrators judging promotion and tenure applications from academic staff in ways that make the absence of some criteria from the list being defined as a ‘deficit’ in the work. Of course, this is not to say that checklists are worthless. Rather, the problem lies in their inappropriate application and political use especially in the hands of anonymous evaluators.

As with all the lists of criteria provided earlier, what this means is that those proposed by Chang (2016) for analytic autoethnography, and the lists provided by Bochner and Ellis (2016) for evocative autoethnography and Denzin (2018) for performance autoethnography can easily, as part of a magic contract for power relations, become *the* lists for judging these genres at the exclusion of all others. In such circumstances the list quickly becomes ossified, inflexible and impermeable. All this creates the dangerous illusion that different genres of autoethnography are ahistorical, fixed, and bounded with pre-determined and separate judgment criteria for each one that have no connection with each other. That is, one either does analytic autoethnography or one does evocative or performance autoethnography in accordance with specific lists of criteria for each genre. Such a view is highly problematic.

In the first instance, Winkler (2018) points out that the first two criteria proposed by Anderson (2006) for analytic autoethnography could also be used to describe evocative

autoethnography, a point that is acknowledged by Anderson himself who does not state that creative or evocative writing *must* be excluded from analytic works. Likewise, in seeking to expand analytic autoethnography and enhance its potential, Vryan (2006) notes that including data from and about others (Anderson's third criteria), is not a necessary requirement for all analytic autoethnography, and that the necessity, value, and feasibility of such data will vary according to the specifics of a given project and the goals of its creators. Furthermore, Vryan argues, a distinction between analysis and creative or evocative first-person writing styles is "unnecessary and counterproductive, as are implications that an analytical project must avoid delving too much, or too expressively or exclusively in the autoethnographer's experience" (p. 407). Of interest here is that Anderson, in reflecting back on the position he took in 2006, states that he has since developed a more nuanced and appreciative understanding of a range of potential analytic autoethnographic styles, and that if he were to remain committed to an analytic model then he would do so with a "greater sense of blurred boundaries as opposed to clear distinctions" (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013, p. 64).

Analytic autoethnography, therefore, can include evocation and emotionally rich texts and this is not incompatible with analysis. Accordingly, Hayler (2013), Sparkes (2020), and Winkler (2018) reject the notion that evocative and analytic autoethnography need be mutually exclusive, and note that a fruitful combination can enlarge the spectrum of autoethnographic research and open up further possibilities for development. In terms of these possibilities, Colyar (2013) shows how, in combining expressive writing (that foregrounds energy and emotion) with transactional writing (that emphasizes analysis and theorizing), along with poetic writing (that creates literary texts), she is able to produce an *evocative analytic* text. All of which leads Tedlock (2013) to call for the *braiding* of evocative with analytic autoethnography in ways that produce "powerful writing about the self in the world in order to help change the world" (p. 361).

Tedlock's (2013) notion of braiding becomes even more important when different forms of autoethnography are taken to exist on a continuum rather than in discreet boxes. For example, Tullis (2013) believes that autoethnography "exists on a continuum from highly fluid and artistic to formulaic and highly analytic" (p. 245). Likewise, Manning and Adams (2015) identify the four common orientations that many autoethnographers use to design, conduct, represent, and evaluate autoethnographic projects. These are as follows: *social scientific* autoethnography (i.e., analytic autoethnography in Anderson's, 2006, terms); *interpretive-humanistic* autoethnography; *critical* autoethnography; and *creative-artistic* autoethnographies. Importantly, Manning and Adams point out that although they list four distinct orientations, "it is not unusual for autoethnographers to blend the goals and techniques of each in a single project or as they write about the same experiences over time" (p. 191). For Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011), therefore, autoethnography, as method, is necessarily disruptive of binary oppositions and can be rigorous, theoretical, and analytical and emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal and social phenomena. All this suggests that the boundaries of autoethnographic types or orientations in terms of the balance between showing and telling, and the lists of criteria associated with them, need not be viewed as rigidly bounded systems but as something more permeable and fluid in nature, which allows them to be used in a creative rather than a conservative and formulaic manner.

Significantly, a number of the scholars cited above, are acutely aware of the dangers associated with their lists of criteria being used inappropriately for judging the kinds of inquiry they speak of. For example, Tracy (2010), reflecting on the possible uses of her own list of criteria warns that "grasping too strongly to any list of rules – and treating them as

commandments rather than human made ideas is an act of delusion, suffering, and pain” (p. 849). Likewise, regarding their motivations for producing their lists of criteria, Adams et al. (2015), Hughes et al. (2012) and Schroeder (2017) emphasize that their lists should not be taken as a universal, closed or permanent set of criteria against which to measure all autoethnographic texts regardless of purpose or context. Joining in this self-reflective chorus of caution, Pelias (2011) states the following.

I wish to articulate what I like and what I don't without imposing my evaluative stance but acknowledging that I have one that guides my practice as a reviewer, teacher, and writer. I leave open the possibility of other evaluative and more productive schemes. (p. 666).

Having expressed what he does and does not like, Pelias (2011) does not insist that readers *must* adopt his standpoint or that they *must* apply his list of criteria regardless of the nature of their inquiry and their intentions and purposes. He simply offers the criteria he uses for consideration by others in their own work *if they so wish*. Barone and Eisner (2012) also express their own particular standpoint and emphasize that each of the criteria they have included in their list for judging arts based research functions as *cues for perception*. They offer these criteria *as starting points* for thinking about the appraisal of works of arts based research. While their criteria may act as a common point of reflection, Barone and Eisner do not want them to be seen as a fixed recipe that all must follow as this would lead to rigid standardization at the cost of innovation.

So, finally, we invite you, the readers, to use your own judgement in applying these criteria to the examples of the works of arts based research included in this book and to those many that are not included. But we also urge you to use your imagination in ascertaining other criteria that may emerge from your encounters with arts based work in the future. (p. 154)

Clearly, in generously providing their own lists of criteria for the consideration of others as starting points, and cues for perception, the authors above are willing to describe what one *might* do, but are not prepared to mandate what one *must* do across all contexts and on all occasions prior to any piece of research being conducted. In this sense, therefore, we can begin to discuss the characteristics of a particular approach to inquiry, such as analytic, evocative, or performance autoethnography, and simply note that these criteria are the way different researchers seem to be conducting and evaluating this particular kind of autoethnography at the moment and that this could, and probably will, change over time.

### **Creatively creating lists of criteria**

Smith and Deemer (2000) emphasize that any list we bring to judgment is always open-ended and we have the capacity to add to or subtract characteristics from the lists. This is necessarily so because the criteria used to judge a piece of research can change depending upon the context and the purposes. A characteristic of research we thought important at one time and in one place may take on diminished importance at another time and place as perspectives, climates, cultures, and goals change. Equally, something innovative might come along that does not fit well with existing lists of criteria. The following question asked by Gingrich-Philbrook (2013) acknowledges this shifting terrain: “if some of the autoethnographies from the past were good even when they were viewed as bad, might some of the ones that are viewed as bad even now really be good?” (p. 620)

For Smith and Deemer (2000), the open-ended nature of lists means that there is always the possibility that one must reformulate one's lists and possibly replace the exemplars one calls upon in the "never-ending process of making judgments" (p. 889). Regarding this possibility, Smith and Hodkinson (2005) note the following:

The limits for recasting our lists derive not primarily from theoretical labor but rather from the practical use to which lists are put as well as from the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which they are used. The limits of modification are worked and reworked within the context of actual practices or applications. (p. 922)

That the creation and reworking of lists of criteria is accomplished in the *doing* and engagement with actual inquiries rather than via the distillation of some abstracted epistemology is evident in the work of Holman Jones (2005). Speaking of the list of criteria she has developed for judging her own work and that of others, she notes that they are *changing* and "are generated in the doing of this writing rather than outside or prior to it" (p. 773). Likewise, Gingrich-Philbrook (2013) argues that lists "make so much more sense as something developed over time and experience, something that changes and grows, adapts to different writers, writing different projects, for different purposes, at different times" (p. 619). Indeed, even when discussing universal criteria for judging qualitative research, Tracy (2010) acknowledges that understanding qualitative goodness is best appreciated by embodying the methods ourselves as apprentices in the practice of research, and also vicariously studying the dilemmas of others.

A good example of researchers actively engaging with criteria in practice is provided in the work of Gordon and Patterson (2013). They explored each of Tracy's (2010) universal eight criteria for judging excellence in qualitative research by applying them to two separate studies they had conducted within a womanist caring framework. While they found Tracy's criteria useful as a guide, Gordon and Patterson found they lacked grounding in an ethical framework. From their perspective, Tracy mistakenly treats ethics as a stand-alone category whereas for them, using womanist caring as a framework to guide research places ethics at the heart of the research process from start to finish. Gordon and Patterson, therefore, depart from Tracy in that they do not believe that ethics can, or should, be bracketed into its own discrete category. Accordingly, they develop and build on her thinking to foreground ethics as an overarching framework for criteria rather than a stand-alone category. Whether one agrees with this point of departure or not, the key point is that its challenge to, and modification of, the list of criteria proposed by Tracy comes about via Gordon and Patterson's practical application of her work to the *doing* of their own studies and not by a process of disengaged abstraction.

Le Roux (2017) also provides an example of a researcher engaging with lists proposed by others, prior to creating a bespoke list of criteria to guide her own work. As part of her deliberations on the notion of rigour in autoethnographic research, Le Roux conducted a literature review of relevant research articles in which established autoethnographers gave their views on the nature of this genre and the issue of rigour. Le Roux also called upon her own experiences of undertaking an autoethnographic study, and finally, she drew upon data generated from a questionnaire administered to proven researchers in her own institution to access their perceptions of the rigour of autoethnography as a research method. As part of this process, she recognized that the criteria she had applied to her own autoethnographic study were more inclined towards theory-driven, analytical research and that she had not evaluated her research in terms of it being a reflexive, honest account of her own experiences situated in culture.

As a consequence, Le Roux (2017) realized that she had not used criteria such as, resonance, researcher subjectivity, narrative truth, reflexivity, aesthetic merit, or plausibility as advocated by, for example, Bochner and Ellis (2016), Manning and Adams (2015), and Richardson (2000). In view this, working on what she believes is an apparent consensus among autoethnographers about certain markers of excellence for their studies, and based on her expanded understanding of how to judge different forms of autoethnography, Le Roux goes on to develop the following list of five criteria, each of which have inbuilt to them the expectation that the research is ethical.

- *Subjectivity*: The self is primarily visible in the research. The researcher re-enacts or re-tells a noteworthy or critical personal relational or institutional experience – generally in search of self-understanding. The researcher is self-consciously involved in the construction of the narrative which constitutes the research.
- *Self-reflexivity*: There is evidence of the researcher’s intense awareness of his or her role in and relationship to the research which is situated within a historical and cultural context. Reflexivity points to self-awareness, self-exposure, and self-conscious introspection.
- *Resonance*: Resonance requires that the audience is able to enter into, engage with, experience or connect with the writer’s story on an intellectual and emotional level. There is a sense of commonality between the researcher and the audience; an intertwining of lives.
- *Credibility*: There should be evidence of verisimilitude, plausibility, and trustworthiness in the research. The research process and reporting should be permeated by honesty.
- *Contribution*: The study should extend knowledge, generate ongoing research, liberate, empower, improve practice, or make a contribution to social change. Autoethnography teaches, informs, and inspires. (p. 204)

Having constructed her own list of criteria, Le Roux (2017) makes the important point that checklists such as the one she provides, along with those offered by other scholars, *cannot substitute for informed judgment* and that any appraisal of an autoethnography should be subject to individual judgment based on insight and experience. For her, competent researchers and appraisers of research “must acquire not only the ability to use and understand the application of various research skills but also the acumen to judge when some kinds of research are likely to prove more productive and germane than others” (p. 204). This raises the pedagogical issue of how we might go about assisting students, work colleagues and ourselves, to develop the ability to make informed judgments about different kinds of autoethnography.

### **Lists of criteria and their pedagogical potential**

Newcomers to qualitative inquiry can be bewildered by the vast array of criteria that are available for judging their own work and that of others. For Tracy (2010) such bewilderment can be reduced initially by offering students her eight universal criteria as this provides them with what she calls a “common language of excellence for qualitative research” (p. 849). Equally, the lists of criteria provided earlier for judging different kinds of autoethnography can also be used initially to reduce bewilderment by providing a common language or set of characteristics for discussing what goodness might mean in each kind. As Le Roux (2017) states, given that autoethnography can be approached from diverse orientations, having available a concise list of criteria can be useful.

The usefulness of lists is evident in a collaborative project described by Schroeder (2017) that drew together a group of scholars in the field of Library and Information Science to explore, via the use of autoethnography, an approach they were all unfamiliar with, the issue of the self as subject in the kinds of research they conducted (see Deitering, Schroeder & Stoddart, 2017). Schroeder admits that at the start of this project, that was to lead to an edited book, he had no idea what autoethnography was and so he undertook a major literature review to explore what criteria were possible for reviewing or evaluating autoethnographies. Based on this review Schroeder pulled together a number of criteria around the following general categories: Revealing the Self (*auto*); Exploring Culture/Society (*ethno*); Storycraft (*graphy*); Ethics; Social Justice and Transformation. He notes that some of the criteria he found fitted into multiple categories but that he just slipped them in where it seemed right. This was because categorization was not a goal in itself but rather a way to talk about the disparate criteria that he found.

Adopting Gergen's (2014) view that local communities of qualitative scholars are best positioned to create their own criteria to help them review and evaluate their work so as to create better research, it was agreed that each chapter in the edited volume would be reviewed by another contributing author and one of the editors. To assist this process, Schroeder (2017) distributed his list of criteria to all involved.

We used the list of criteria I gleaned from my readings as a starting point. Each author picked criteria from the list, ones that resonated with the goals they had for their own chapter. They were encouraged to change any of the criteria and to invent new ones as needed. The list they individually created was the criteria that the reviewers used to help make sure they met their goals. (p. 324)

Once the reviews of the chapters had taken place, Schroeder (2017) then surveyed each of the author-reviewers with various questions about whether or not they found his list of criteria helpful in determining those useful for developing, and improving, their own autoethnography and then having it judged by others. They were also asked if the criteria selected by authors to evaluate their work from the list provided help or hindered their review. Their responses indicate that Schroeder's list of criteria were helpful in a number of ways. All of the author-reviewers said that having the criteria to choose from helped them focus more precisely on their task, and that, after using their criteria they also *felt good*. One stated, "It was comforting to be able to communicate directly to my reviewers what I hope to achieve with my writing." Another commented, "The criteria provided comfort that I had in fact actually written an AE."

Schroeder (2017) notes that none of the authors modified any of his criteria, but they did add some questions or concerns of their own to the list. One felt that "using criteria, instead of questions, likely encourages a more robust and critical response from a reviewer/evaluator/reader." Another pointed out how the criteria, especially with respect to autoethnography, made the reviews feel less of a critique:

The process was less about evaluation, in the end, and more about creating a conversation about perceptions of the draft. I think this is particularly useful for AE writing, where at times the subject matter might be rather personal and a reader/reviewer may hesitate to critique or question the subject matter of the author's approach. The evaluative criteria create a sort of formal layer of mediation—it gives both the reader and the writer a comfortable space where critique can happen without concerns related to sensitivity about the subject of the AE. (Schroeder, 2017, p. 325).

Importantly, the responses to Schroeder (2017) also indicated that those involved found the use of criteria to be equally useful in reviewing another author's work. As one stated, "I was able to focus not just on a review of the overall piece but also on what the author herself indicated she hoped to accomplish in her work." This supports the comment above that talked about how the criteria helped make the peer review more of a supportive conversation than a traditional critique. Thus, a virtue of using criteria might be that it can move us beyond evaluation towards a way of re-seeing the text.

As the feedback provided to Schroeder (2017) suggests, lists of criteria, when used as *starting points* can provide an initial sense of security and direction for researchers when they take the risk and engage with autoethnography for the first time. In this instance, Gingrich-Philbrook (2013) notes the following.

Budding autoethnographers may very well want the reassurance of a checklist outlining things a good autoethnography does, the quality it possesses, because that might help them decide when they have finished a piece they're working on. Wouldn't it be great to have a kind of a cross between an existential oven-timer and a drag-queen fairy godmother to look over your shoulder at the screen and say 'Bing! You're done, Honey; this shit is *baked*; anyone tells you different, I will come over and stomp their ass'? (p. 619)

Of course, it is not only budding autoethnographers who need such reassurance. I suspect that many a seasoned scholar has wished for, and found in some guise or other, the existential oven-timer and a drag-queen fairy godmother described by Gingrich-Philbrook (2013). I certainly know I have and still do. At times, we all need somebody we trust and respect to say, "You're done, Honey; this shit is *baked*." And equally, sometimes, we need this very same person to gently tell us that, "You're not quite done yet, Honey; this shit is still *half-baked* and not ready for public consumption." Indeed, as a teacher developing the confidence of my students on qualitative courses and in supporting my colleagues when they engage with creative analytical practices, I have often adopted, sometimes knowingly and sometimes less so, the role of existential oven-timer and a drag-queen fairy godmother. It is a worthy role to be celebrated.

Even when not present in corporeal form, the combined existential oven-timer and drag-queen fairy godmother can manifest itself in a list of criteria. For example, Gordon and Patterson (2013) acknowledge how Tracy's (2010) list provided them with a *useful* guide for analyzing and evaluating their own work framed by womanist caring theory, and suggest that her criteria could also prove useful with other theoretical frames depending on the intentions and purposes of the studies involved. Accordingly they propose that when writing qualitative studies for publication, Tracy's criteria can provide a *tool* for scholars to monitor the quality of their own work and they believe that scholars "will strengthen their work if they make their use of Tracy's criteria explicit" (p. 693). Of course, any of the lists provided earlier can prove equally useful guides for the tasks described by Gordon and Patterson for other researchers depending on their starting points, intentions and purposes.

But then, I begin to worry a little about the notion of criteria as a tool, with its mechanistic, linear and functional implications, to strengthen autoethnography as a process rather than a product. My undergraduate and postgraduate students often ask me what criteria I use as reference points when I go about writing an autoethnography. They feel unsettled when my answer is 'None'. A sense of unease is also evident when I tell them that I have never produced an autoethnography with a view to it being of a certain kind, be it, analytical,

evocative, performance, or any other.

By way of explanation, I offer them the words of Winterson (2012) who draws attention to two kinds of writing: “the one you write and the one that writes you. The one that writes you is dangerous. You go where you don’t want to go. You look where you don’t want to look” (p. 54). I also ask my students to access the sublime words of Leonard Cohen in his 2011 *How I got My Song Address* at the Prince Asturias Awards in Spain. Cohen tells the audience that he feels uneasy because he has always felt some ambiguity about an award for poetry. This is because, for him, “Poetry comes from a place that no one commands and no one conquers. So I feel somewhat like a charlatan to accept an award for an activity that I do not command. In other words, if I knew where the good songs came from I’d go there more often.”

Echoing such thoughts, I inform my students about my feeling that, as an activity I do not command, my own autoethnographic stories have always written me far more than I have ever written them as part of an embodied process rather than just a textual product. Thus, as I have suggested elsewhere (Sparkes, 2013b), autoethnography is at the will of the body, often involving unbeknown yet-to-be told stories that circulate within us at the pre-objective, enfolded, multisensory and carnal level, not yet ready for language to take its hold. When the body is ready to release its story it lets us know in subtle ways so that we can accept its gift and engage in the sensuous somatic work of crafting a tale for the telling to self and others (Sparkes, 2017).

Of course, this then leads to the question of how, acting as an evaluative self, I pass judgment on autoethnographies produced by others. In response, I tell the students that for me this is not a purely cognitive, linear or rational act but rather a messy, tentative, contingent, sensuous, and deeply embodied process in which my evaluative self feels its way into the autoethnography in front of me, reading it multiple times with gaps in between where a cocktail of thoughts and emotions mingle in my body as I drift towards certain kinds of judgment calls over others. Then, I try and show the students this messy process in action by sharing some published autoethnographies with them and offering my reflections on the criteria I am drawn towards in passing judgment on each as an evaluative self (see Sparkes, 2020). In so doing, it becomes evident that I draw upon multiple criteria from the various lists available for judging different kinds of autoethnography as well as criteria beyond these lists. Hopefully, this illustrates to the students that while lists of criteria are useful as starting points they are not enough on their own and so the evaluative self must be creative in using them along with any other criteria that are relevant to making a fair, balanced, and ethical judgment about the quality of a piece of work.

Given what I had said above, it is important for me in my teaching that when it comes to judging the products of autoethnography my students are invited to think *about* and *with* the various lists of criteria on offer that, as I have indicated above, are often contested, overlapping and contradictory. I ask them to reflect on how they *feel* about any given criteria in their guts and in their flesh. They can then start to consider the ways in which this informs how they make what Beckett and Hager (2002) call “embodied judgments” that are practical, emotional and corporeal as well as discursive in nature. As Svendby (2019) articulates in her PhD thesis:

There are so many lists, so many different opinions, and views on criteria... I am drowning here! Which one am I to choose? How can I even begin to legitimise my choice of one in particular and not another? Should I put together a new list based on



other lists? No. The ‘not’s’ are yelling that it is not a good idea. Hmmm... I think I will have to rely on my emotions in this case. Yes. I feel a ‘do’ coming on. I will use the list that I am most drawn to, the one that feels... if not right exactly, then at least less wrong... Yes. That feels right. I feel the ‘do’. (p. 137)

In terms of “feeling the do”, I therefore invite students in my classes to construct their own list of criteria from existing lists as part of a braiding process and to create and add their own criteria if they so wish. In this process, they can begin to explore why they are drawn towards, how they feel about, and are seduced by some criteria rather than others. I then ask them to consider if it would be fair and ethical to apply their preferred criteria to all forms of autoethnography regardless of the different intents and purposes that others might have for their work. We also reflect on what might happen if an autoethnography that self-defined as an evocative kind was sent for review to a person whose preference was for analytic autoethnography and its associated criteria, and vice versa. All of which leads to a consideration of what Gadamer (1995) calls their effective histories and the *prejudices* each person brings to the selection of criteria and how they are used in judging their own work and that of others.

As Smith and Deemer (2000) remind us, in any encounter with a production, especially something different or ‘new,’ one must be willing to risk one’s prejudices. They point out that, “Just as in the process of judgment one asks questions of the text or person, the person or a text must be allowed to ask questions in return” (p. 889). Approaching something novel or unfamiliar, therefore, requires that one be willing to allow the text to challenge one’s prejudices and possibly change the criteria one is using to judge the piece, thereby changing one’s idea of what is and is not good inquiry. This said, Smith and Deemer point out that to be open does not mean to accept automatically, and that one may still offer reasons for rejecting something new. The outcome of any judgment is uncertain. They also stress that there is no method for engaging in the risking of one’s prejudices. If anything, Smith and Deemer argue, “to risk one’s prejudices is a matter of disposition – or, better said, moral obligation – that requires one to accept that if one wishes to persuade others, one must be equally open to be persuaded” (p. 889). This view is supported by Gingrich-Philbrook (2013) in his following comment: ‘To evaluate autoethnography in a genuinely useful way, you have to open yourself up to being changed by it, to heeding its call to surrender your entitlement’ (p. 618)

Risking ones’ prejudices and surrendering one’s entitlement within the magic contract for power relations in relation to judgment criteria for autoethnography, or any other form of inquiry, is no easy task. It means assuming the responsibility to listen carefully and respectfully, attempting to grasp emotionally, viscerally and discursively what is being expressed in something ‘different’ so that judgment might be passed in an ethical, fair, and caring manner. This requires the qualities of *connoisseurship* as described by Eisner (1991). For him, connoisseurship involves the ability to make fine-grained discriminations among complex and subtle qualities, it is the art of appreciation and can be displayed in “any realm in which the character, import, or value of objects, situations, and performances is distributed and variable” (p. 63). Eisner emphasizes that the term appreciation should not be conflated with ‘a liking for’ since there is no necessary relationship between appreciating something and liking it. For him, “nothing in connoisseurship as a form of appreciation requires that our judgments be positive. What is required (or desired) is that our experience be subtle, complex, and informed” (pp. 68–69).

In seeking to develop the characteristics of connoisseurship in myself and my

students, I want to make it clear that this does not involve what Smith and Deemer (2000) call a romanticized “intellectual flight from power” (p. 202). Part of connoisseurship requires a critical awareness and appreciation of how power and politics at various levels operate and are interwoven into the complex social interactions that define which criteria, from all those available, are selected for use to sort out the good from the bad at a given historical moment.

Lists of criteria, as pedagogical devices, can assist students explore issues of power and politics in relation to how they are created, legitimized and used to foreground certain voices and silence others. To this end, I share with students my own experiences of crafting an autoethnographically informed piece of work that spoke truth to power and the consequences that followed when, as a hostile reaction to this work, managerial power was enacted in its most raw, intimidating and questionable form that led to me leaving a university I had worked in for twenty two years (see Sparkes, 2007, 2018b). Against this backdrop, and given that any list of criteria is never neutral in its construction or its use, I encourage and help students to develop their skills in the darker arts of conceptual self-defense and strategies of self-preservation. For example, calling upon various lists of criteria, we consider how to mount an articulate response to my former colleague’s charge that autoethnography is an “academic wank,” or as others might state it more politely, masturbatory or self-indulgent.

Using lists as a way of learning to play the criteria game for me, therefore, is not an act of consent to dominant views of what constitutes good or bad research. Rather, as Tracy (2010) notes, it is a strategically designed way to respond and act *within*, rather than being ‘worked over’ in hostile situations. All this said, I am fully aware that questions about how, as qualitative researchers of any kind, we create and construct our lists of criteria and the uses we put them to in various contexts will not be found in epistemology. They will, however, as Smith and Hodkinson (2005) remind us, “be found in our reasoning as finite practical and moral beings” (p. 930). And so the conversation continues.

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