Choosing Methods, Negotiating Legitimacy. A Metalogue on Autoethnography

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For a doctoral student, choosing a research method is not a simple, rational act. It is an act that involves an assessment of our position and power within the academic setting, as well as a negotiation of the legitimacy of the method. It is also an act of expressing our values and political commitments. Thus, this choice becomes an opportunity to investigate the ways in which power relations may come to shape both our understandings of 'legitimate research' and our performance of that legitimacy. This paper looks into these issues by means of an imagined dialogue (a metalogue) between a student and a supervisor on the possibility of choosing autoethnography as a method for a doctoral project. As a contested method located within the qualitative paradigm, autoethnography allows me to explore the question of what makes a method a legitimate way of inquiry within the academic context. My interest here is to show how the networks of power within which I am positioned as a doctoral student, with a particular set of values and committments, come to play into the negotiation and performance of the legitimacy of the method. Using Foucault's discussion of power/knowledge, I am arguing that such networks of power are both external to me, constituting the institutional context within which I am acting, and part of my own self, shaping my values and my performance as an authorized speaker within the academic setting.

As a graduate student, I have often been advised to choose a method that is able to tackle the research question I am asking. Yet, this choice is "something that reaches into the assumptions about reality that we bring to our work" (Crotty 1998, 2). In other words, this choice is not only a simple, rational act of matching your research question to the ways in which you will investigate it. It also involves your worldview, your beliefs about the nature of society and the ways in which it can be known. But acknowledging this is often at odds with the 'regime of truth' (Foucault 1977/1980b, 1997/1995) of our modern world that equates truth with science. In this equation, the latter stands for rational and rigorous testing that can explain the nature of things (Fay 1992; Hamilton 1992; Hollis 2002). To the extent that this regime of truth has become part

and parcel of the network of power in modern societies, the choice of a method within the framework of a doctoral dissertation becomes interwoven with the politics of the disciplines and of the wider academic setting. The purpose of this paper is to look into this process by means of an imaginary metalogue on authoethnography. It is contended here that such an enterprise may be able to shed some light on the ways in which academic settings (schools of thought, disciplines, departments, universities) and personal contexts intersect, marking a method such as autoethnography as a site of struggle for and against power in terms of knowledge production.

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that takes the researcher/ author as the subject of research (Denzin and Lincoln 2002; Ellis 2004; Richardson 2000, 2002). Autoethnographers reflexively examine their own feelings, meanings and understandings of the social world in order to "connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social and political" (Ellis 2004: xix)[1]. Thus, researchers are both the subject of their own analysis, and the analysts examining the data to understand wider social dynamics. The method is firmly rooted in a constructivist epistemology (Crotty 1998), retaining a strong commitment to critical social science. Although related to a variety of qualitative methods, such as critical ethnography, reflexive eth-

nography or performance narrative (Denzin and Lincoln 2002), autoethnography is different from them in that the only empirical data used to trigger the critical analysis is the researcher's own experience.

As a method, autoethnography is also contested primarily for its lack of theory, its relation to subjectivity and its forms of writing (Denzin & Lincoln 2002; Ellis 2004; Holt 2003; Sparkes 2000, 2002). It is mostly the charge of being "too personal" that challenges autoethnography's legitimacy as "proper academic research" (Sparkes 2000, 2002). These accusations are also made against other qualitative methods, such as ethnography, in what Alexander has described as "residual ideas of truth and objectivity [that] remain stubborn features of much ethnographic research and writing on ethnicity in Britain" (2004: 137). As such, contesting autoethnography may be seen as part of the wider ongoing debates between quantitative and qualitative approaches. Autoethnographers respond to such accusations by relying on the repertoire provided by constructivist epistemologies, building on established critical reflections on the status of knowledge and the role of the researcher vis-a-vis the production of (academic) knowledge.

A possible reason why the legitimacy of the method is more problematic in the case of autoethnography (as compared to, say, ethnography) may have to do with autoethnogra-

phy's relative newness. While a historiography of the method remains to be written, autoethnography has been established as an academic method primarily through the work of Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner in the early 1990s (Anderson 2006; see also Ellis 2004)[2]. Although now autoethnographers often draw from feminist epistemologies (e.g. Code 1991; Collins 1990; Haraway 1988; Harding 1991), postcolonial theories (e.g. Bhabha 1994; Spivak 1999; for a discussion of autobiography and postcolonial theory, see Huddart 2008), sociology of illness (e.g. Frank 1991, 2004) and the 'cultural turn' in anthropology (e.g. Geertz 1983; Clifford and Marcus 1986), Ellis and Bochner were located within the field of sociology and thought of autoethnography in the context of symbolic interactionism (see Anderson 2006; Ellis 2004). The history of autoethnography is also intrinsically connected to methodological debates in anthropology and to the use of personal narratives in traditional social science (particularly anthropology and sociology); the word 'autoethnography' was coined by an anthropologist, while the term 'autobiography' was used in literary studies to designate a specific writing genre (Ellis 2004). Thus, it is fair to say that autoethnographers reclaim historical origins that often disregard (and thus challenge) disciplinary boundaries. This trend continues, as autoethnographers cross disciplinary boundaries

and borrow from a variety of theoretical frameworks to legitimize their choice of method and to frame their approach to the research problematic. Most importantly however, these scholars 'perform' the legitimacy of the method, by submitting their work to peer-review processes and publishing it in academic journals and books (Bochner 2002; Denzin 2006; Ellis 1993, 1997, 1998, 2004; Holt 2002; Richardson 2002; Sparkes 2000, 2002). In this process, autoethnography's contested position presents an opportunity to inquire into the power dynamics through which the 'academic norm' becomes constructed and perpetuated.

In this paper, I offer a personal account of what the choice of autoethnography as a method may look like from the point of view of a doctoral student. My own take to the method cannot be divorced from both the 'politics of the method'[3] (Frank 1983; Clifford and Marchs 1986; Eisner 1988; Gitlin et al. 1989) and my own position within the academic system. Informed by Foucault's discussion of power, discourse and authority (Foucault 1966/1970, 1972, 1976/1980, 1977/1980, 1977/1995), I begin by asking 'what is autoethnography and why is it such a contested method?', only to realize that this question should be situated within a larger context of inquiry which includes asking: what constitutes 'academic' knowledge; who grants it legitimacy; and how am I, as a student, relating

to these processes in my own work? My methodological choices, as well as my ambivalence on autoethnography appear as part and parcel of the networks of power within which I am trying to position myself as an academic in the hopes of gaining access to the higher-education professions and to positions of authority within disciplines or departments. Such networks of power are at the same time external to me (such as the relation with supervisors, professors, reviewers etc.) and part of my own self (such as my professional goals, values and worldviews).

Instead of tackling these questions within the format of the traditional academic paper, I propose to look at them by means of a personal - yet imagined - narrative: a metalogue between a student and a supervisor[4]. It is fair to point out from the beginning that the two characters come to be quite unequally constructed: while the student is filled with doubts and uncertainties, the supervisor appears to have moved beyond such dilemmas, expressing only a pragmatic attitude to the dissertation writing process. My intention was not to pit an enthusiastic and ethically troubled student against a pragmatic supervisor, worn out by the vicissitudes of the system. Rather, these characters should themselves be understood as part of my own position in (as well as understanding of) the power networks within the academic system. In my case, being a doctoral student is not an experience located entirely within the 'student' arena: I am also a sessional instructor, teaching my own courses. In this position, I am required to constantly shift between being a student and teaching students. This may be interpreted as a self-disciplining process, through which I internalize the norms of academic scholarship and evaluation as both a student and an evaluator. Yet, just as Foucault has noted, such processes of self-disciplining are never smooth: they are also the moments of resistance, or, in my case, of ambivalence, uncertainty and questioning. In this sense, autoethnography has allowed me to both acknowledge and reflect upon this process, and preserve its emotional depth.

The discussions presented here have been part of my academic experience. My own graduate background is interdisciplinary, which may be one of the reasons why I have not engaged here with a specific social science discipline. In my own doctoral research, I am located within a communications studies department. The field of communication is itself contested and interdisciplinary, drawing its theoretical positions from a variety of social science thinkers (see Craig 1999). Many of the discussions below rest on insights from this field, along with cultural studies, sociology and anthropology. Of course, this is also a major limitation: trying to keep the discussion on a more general level

leads to glossing over the particularities of methodological debates in specific disciplines. Yet, I do not think this undermines the validity of this autoethnographic exercise: the major contemporary theoretical and epistemological debates in social theory have a meta-disciplinary aspect (e.g. Delanty 2000)[5]. As already indicated, the historical contexts reclaimed by autoethnographers, as well as the use of autoethnography has always involved such meta-disciplinary theories and epistemological debates. This does not preclude the fact that autoethnographic projects are employed and legitimized within the context of specific disciplines[6].

While this paper deals with the networks of power within which I find myself as a doctoral student, it also represents an act of direct engagement with them. After all, I am writing a paper for the purpose of publishing it within an academic journal and my ability to do so comes from being part of this expert system (Giddens 1990). For this reason, the paper takes the form of a metalogue, which is a "conversation about some problematic subject" (Bateson 1972, 1) in which both the topic and the form invite the writer and the reader to navigate between layers of understanding and order. As a submission to a peer-reviewed journal, I also had to compromise on the metalogue: although part of the paper is written in a nonconventional, dialogical format, the other part follows some of the "rules" of academic writing, such as resting a case upon prior academic literature or the citation style. Where traditional academic writing insists on the separation of the author/ text, logical sequencing and (linear) flow of the argument, a metalogue is a personal story where the argument does not necessarily follow a well-rehearsed path (from premises to conclusions). Its role is to reveal the complexity of the problematic, provoking readers to make sense of it through their own frames. This is by no means something new; for instance, post-modernism has challenged the traditional author/ reader positions, arguing for the need to develop a new aesthetic of academic writing that takes all texts as 'oriented' by the intentions and contexts of its producers and readers (e.g. Hutcheon 1983).

By taking this form, the paper allows me to follow more closely my thinking flow, which often times has a tree-like structure simultaneously branching in various directions. It also allows me to bring forward the values that accompany specific ideas, exposing the feelings, questions and uncertainties brought along by the act of choosing a suitable method. This personal struggle is an often- ignored aspect in academic publications on methods[7]. Yet, the selection of a method remains an important mechanism of situating oneself within particular schools of thoughts and disciplines.

The metalogue is thus able to contextualize a reflection about autoethnography within a view from below of the 'politics of the method' (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Eisner 1988; Frank 1982; Gitlin et al. 1989) and the specific emotional space that accompanies such politics. The choice and understanding of the method, together with the emotions that accompany these processes, are means by which we insert ourselves into the complex networks of power that make up the social world in which we exist.

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Student: I have finally found a method for my dissertation that really suits me. I would like to do an autoethnography!

Supervisor: Autoethnography? Let me remind you that you will present this work to a defense committee. You need to be cautious of such highly subjective methods... they may be inspirational, but they are hard to defend. Besides, if you want to become a scholar, you have to learn to distance yourself from your own beliefs. With an autoethnography, you can only talk about your own beliefs, your own views. And that's the problem right there: if it's about you, it cannot be empirically falsifiable (Popper 1965).

Student: Why is it such a bad thing if I am the object of my own inquiry? Autoethnography would re-ally work for me, because my own research is driven by my personal background. I should acknowledge that, shoudn't I? My project deals with identity issues. Doesn't it seem strange to talk about identity as if it's something that the researcher can study, without her own identity to come under microscope? Many autoethnographic projects deal with identity questions, precisely because this method gives the researcher an avenue to question how their own identity comes into play in the research process and then connect this to wider social structures (Ellis 1998; Richardson 2000; Sparkes 2000, 2002; Stapleton and Wilson 2004).

I read this autoethnographic piece about Asian women who married US servicemen after the Second World War and came to live in the US. Initially, the researcher wanted to map the problems these women encountered in the US. But she was also the daughter of one of them, so she was afraid that her own identity would "bias" her research. Her fear made her "overlook[…] the possibilities for exploring what a more self-reflexive ethnographic representation might look like – one based upon a lifetime of talk story with [her] mother and her circle of friends." (Creef 2002, 80). In the end, she did an autoethnographic project where her own life became the lens through which the stories of these women were linked to the wider social structures in which they

lived. It was this personal lens that allowed her to tell the story of how identity and race feel like within those structures. This also allowed her to question her own relation, as both a researcher and a daughter, to the subjects of her research. She did not produce yet another account where identity was reduced to numbers and cases to be examined. With her mother becoming "her most willing chief informant", both author and readers are prompted to question their own ethics of researching and consuming 'the other'. As she narrated identity and race, we, as readers, re-constructed and lived them through her. The personal lens forced her to question the ways in which writing as an outside researcher transformed these women into 'cases' and 'objects' of research, further denying them their individuality and agency.

Supervisor: Well, it seems like an interesting story. But this is also the source of the problem: it sounds more like a story and less like a piece of research. Unless autoethnographers are part of your committee, this may get you in trouble. The committee members may not share your enthusiasm for this method. What will you do when they will ask about the generalizability of your results? What can you do to defend a project where the method through which your results are reached is under question? No, I do not think autoethnography is a good idea.

Not to mention that it will be very hard to get any funding for such a project. Grant-giving agencies want to see reliable results, that can be extended and used. You have to be more strategic here and think in terms of your final goals: to write a defendable dissertation that will get you what you need for now, the doctoral title.

Student: I know, I do want to write a good thesis. But I feel I owe it to myself to stay true to who I am and how I insert myself in my own research, because to "know an object without considering the way [I] participate in the production of that knowledge" (Gitlin et al 1989, 245) seems a bit unfair to me[8]. I do not want to write a thesis fearing the committee won't like it. I want to write a thesis that I feel brings something new, and most importantly, addresses social inequality and structural oppression. I am motivated by strong feelings here. I start from a political position, and it seems only fair to acknowledge it and incorporate it in a reflexive manner in my research, don't you think? Why is it that if it's a personal story, it is suddenly less defendable? What makes a thesis defendable anyway? Just because you follow the 'standard' research steps it doesn't mean your personal story is not inserted into the whole research project. It's not as easy as coming up with a research question that can be investigated, defining its terms and building a methodological

design that can address the question; making sure the design is replicable to ensure results are reliable. Then, crafting a clever argument as to why only this research design really works for my specific question (hence, why others do not work). And finally, doing the research and presenting the findings in a concise and clear manner, by connecting them to the theory I have used (Iowa State University n/a). As long as the method is rigurous, the conclusions are defendable!

I am a qualitative researcher and I am espousing a particular political stance. I think this is how I can defend the method if the committee and I do not see eye to eye on the legitimacy of this method[9]. Autoethnography is only another form of the "reformist movement" in social science research introduced by qualitative research from the 1970s on (Denzin and Lincoln 2002). If I position myself firmly within this paradigm and within a constructivist epistemology, then shouldn't this be enough to make a strong case for my choice of method?

Supervisor: There is a difference between making a strong case for your method and the acceptance of that method as legitimate. Remember that legitimacy is contextual: you try to establish it in relation to the prevailing forms that are considered legitimate. Writing autoethnographies for doctoral projects remains quite rare, and I have never

sat on any committee evaluating an autoethnography. Yet, in my experience, the method is one of the most scrutinized aspects of your research project. You may position yourself as a qualitative researcher, but you are still doing a research project and you are still writing an academic dissertation. A thesis where you are both the author and the object of inquiry seems self-indulgent (Sparkes 2002). It comes into conflict with some of the most entrenched values of academic work: the ability to arrive at conclusions by means of a rational argument that can be explained and then tested by logical means. Autoethnography may be a qualitative research method, but it remains contested even within (qualitative) ethnography (see Anderson 2006; Atkinson 2006).

Ethnography is in fact a good example here. Ethnographic accounts existed before the method itself became accepted as scientific. But scholars persuaded the academic communities that ethnography can be done in a scientific manner if it uses narrative realism. To the extent that a description remained true to what people were doing, then ethnography was a reliable and scientific method. Thus, the earlier accounts were dismissed as 'literature' and the author became absent from the descriptive account he provided (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Gitlin et al. 1989). Thus, the qualitative shift you talked about earlier also affected debates on ethnogra-

phy. From the 1960s on, we have witnessed an increased recognition that no description is independent from its interpretation and that the author/ researcher is always using her own perspective in describing something (Gitlin et al. 1989). In this shift from description to questioning how people make sense of things - and how researchers intervene in this process- ethnography moved from being considered a descriptive method to being evaluated on the basis of the 'thick descriptions' and constant symbolic translation it achieved (Geertz 1983). Yet not even these discussions completely opened the door to embracing autoethnography, as the question of analysis remains a contentious issue (on similar questions around the evaluation of ethnography, see also Clifford and Marcus 1986). How is analysis to be done? What constitutes a good, academic autoethnography? Is autoethnography to be used in an evocative manner, to emphasize the journey and to expose the flow of "lived experience", without engaging in its direct analysis (Ellis and Bochner 2006)? Or should autoethnography be an analytical tool, "committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena" (Anderson 2006, 375)?

Student: The legitimacy of this method is what seems to be in my way here. How legitimate is autoethnography? How is this legitimacy being constructed? To what extent will the committee members see it as an established method or reject it as non-academic or self-indulgent. Should I understand that, in spite of the qualitative turn, the debate is still one about objectivity, reliability and validity?

Supervisor: It is a question of legitimacy. You know, "each society has its regime of truth [...] the type of discourse which [society] accepts and makes function as true" (Foucault 1977/ 1980b, 131). It is this regime of truth that provides us with the criteria for deciding what can count as 'truth'. Or, in our case here, as a method to access the 'truth' about social reality. To a certain extent, the legitimacy of a method is still measured against this 'regime of truth'. Of course, what one takes to be the 'regime of truth' depends on one's epistemologic and disciplinary position. For example, an understanding of 'race' as a biological category is considered as a fallacy from a constructivist point of view. These 'regimes' are not something immutable. They do change as they have to always respond to criticism stemming from new social circumstances.

Student: In my thesis and in my defense, I need to prove that I know the 'regime of truth' and the criteria it imposes. This would authorize me as a speaker within the academic setting (Foucault 1972). To a cer-

tain extent, this is what I think the defense is all about: prove I master the rules of the game, the intellectual legacy of my discipline and the debates around my chosen method. And that I am able to combine them, so that I come up with something new and original. I should be honest and admit that I do want to get the 'doctor' title!

Supervisor: That is exactly what I am trying to tell you: that you need to think in advance about your defense and about your career. I may be too harsh on autoethnography here, because there is a lot of room for the author/ researcher in the qualitative paradigm, especially when compared to positivist epistemologies. But with autoethnography it's almost like the boundaries of this qualitative paradigm are being pushed a bit too far. I guess it reads too much like literature (Richardson 2002, 39-50; see also Clifford and Marcus 1986)! Nobody says you should not be reflexive about your own position as a researcher . Insert a section on this in the methods chapter! But to make it into the method itself, I am not sure about that.

Student: It's true that I've also wondered about the whole literary aspect. I mean, I have a hard time confronting my own "academic" self, whispering in my ear that my writing doesn't even count as poorly written fiction, let alone academic work! But then I'm back to my earlier question about legitimacy: what counts as academic work and why?

Let's take what you said that autoethnography may read just like literature. The good part of it is that it makes academic research more accessible to people. Geertz said that the power of a text comes from its ability to move the reader, its horror as a lived case and the morality it carries (Geertz 1983, 36). Academic texts are not supposed to make you cry, organically scare you or psychologically disturb you! But it is precisely those pieces that are able to move us while at the same time bringing up the social dynamics in which we live that make us more critically engaged with these dynamics (Ellis 1997). Some scholars want to recuperate this evocative power, and this is where they locate the strength of the method (Ellis and Bochner 2006). For others, this evocative power has to be accompanied by a theoretical reflection that enables us to simultaneously construct and question our own meanings, as well as the problems they bring to light (Anderson 2006; Atkins 2006). The personal narrative layer is like a drawing in which you produce line upon line thus creating "layered accounts [which] leave traces of a play of differences for other selves who read to apprehend. This, in turn, makes it possible for selves to identify with other selves, bringing us closer together in the understanding that we are all the same, located in different

positions in the play of difference that is existence" (Ronai 2002, 123).

Supervisor: Well, you are not writing a novel here, but a piece of research. How will the committee evaluate it? Aesthetic qualities aside, a thesis is about research. We come back to the question of what counts as legitimate research and what are the means through which it can be evaluated.

Student: I have to say you struck a chord here. In spite of the case I am making for authoethnography, I am also ambivalent towards it. I think my ambivalence stems precisely from this problem of the evaluation: how can autoethnography be assessed? Particularly when I am in the position of the instructor, evaluating student assignments, the question of evaluation becomes more important. I am not sure why, but when I am the evaluator, I feel more compelled to reinforce the boundary between academic thinking as 'skilled research' and fiction (or any type of knowledge and writing not based primarily on empirical proof, logical arguments, and critical thinking). Now that I think of it, it is precisely this boundary between academic research and other forms of knowing and writing that gives me the authority to be an evaluator; and when I evaluate, I find myself espousing more strongly the regime of truth we were talking about earlier, because this is partly the source of

my authority!

Maybe I am a hypocrite because just the other day I was talking to a fellow doctoral student in political science and I was arguing for the need to have a clear and valid method of analysis. My colleague wanted to do a discourse analysis, and I was clearly advocating for an analytic method that will spell out in detail how the text was to be assessed, and based on what criteria. I was pushing for a design that was to be evaluated in terms of reliability and validity. When I disagreed with the interpretation of a certain phenomenon, I wanted to know how she has observed the phenomenon, what were the criteria she used in analyzing it. In retrospect, I realize that whenever one disagrees with a political position, questions of the validity of the analysis tool become foregrounded as more important.

Autoethnographers make the case that there are criteria that can be used for evaluation, even if they see the concept of 'criteria' as positivist, as something that is "beyond culture, beyond ourselves and our conventions, beyond human choice and interpretation" (Bochner 2002, 259). For instance, instead of looking for validity, reliability and generalizability, autoethnographers look for reflexivity, impactfulness, aesthetic merit, substantive contribution and degree to which the text clarifies a lived reality (Holt 2003). The merit of such a piece lies in the level of detail or "thick descrip-

tion", in the complexity of the writing and the emotional credibility and honesty of the author. I know we want to avoid simplistic descriptions and that we need to to question intuitive or ready-made explanations, but I think autoethnography allows for this in providing a space for our 'many selves' or contradictory selves to become visible in the text (Ellis 1997). Finally, autoethnography espouses a particular political goal, that of addressing inequalities and injustice. In this sense, its evaluation could consist of asking whether the narrative speaks about empowerment and resistance to oppressive norms (Bochner 2002).

So, a good autoethnography needs not indulge in the cozy space where the self thinks highly of her/himself (Sparkes 2002). A good autoethnography is one that contributes to understanding the society in which we live. Its value lies in the ability to render the complexity of issues and make it appealing to the reader, because the knowledge we gain through empathy is just as important as the knowledge we get from numbers. And a good autoethnography needs to be reflexive and to make us want to engage in the dialogue (Ellis 2004; Sparkes 2002).

Supervisor: How do these criteria measure up when you try to use them in evaluating student work?

Student: You are right, it's not very easy because whenever I try to evaluate such work, it is hard to escape my own feelings towards the piece. If I disagree with the interpretation, it becomes more difficult to evaluate it, and I find myself looking for the coherence of the argument, for the 'proof' provided by the author.

I feel very ambivalent on autoethnography now. And I wonder if it has to do with the fact that I have to identify with the position of the evaluator. The pressures I face now are different: I want to ensure that the arguments and the ensuing knowledge they propose are indeed 'valid'. To consider them as such, I need to make sure they are based on a rigorous observation or logical argumentation. At the same time, I know that "in the social sciences, we have never overcome our insecurities about our scientific stature. In our hearts, if not in our minds, we know that the phenomena we study are messy, complicated, uncertain, and soft. Somewhere along the line, we became convinced that these qualities were signs of inferiority which we should not expose" (Bochner 2002, 258). When I do my own research, I feel more inclined to acknowledge this messiness and the results of my own position in filtering it. I think of this as reflexivity and I tell myself it is an important part of the critical interpretation (Richardson 2002). But when I evaluate other people's research, things are not always the same. Yes, I still ask questions around the position

of the researcher, but the way I ask such questions sounds more as if the researcher can get to the 'essence' of things if her own biases do not get in the way.

Supervisor: On the one hand, you are talking about criteria for evaluating autoethnographic work. On the other, you are talking about the politics of the profession. Let's get back to the question of the legitimacy of the method: it's hard to think of what counts as a method without considering the politics of the discipline in which you are writing. It matters a great deal if you are positivist or constructivist; if you are interested in causal relations and effects, or if you are more interested in understanding meaning-making practices. In terms of authority, if you are a famous scholar like Bruno Latour, presenting your theory by means of a funny dialogue between a student and a professor, you can say things in a quite different manner than if you are only a graduate student doing an autoethnographic dissertation[20]. Your future depends on how you are evaluated in the defense! The way in which you establish yourself as a scholar within a particular discipline and using a specific method will matter a lot in terms of what kind of departments will want to hire you and what research funds you can access.

Student: Maybe I am not thinking very strategically here. I see your point about legitimacy and the networks of power behind it. It makes me think that, to a certain extent, autoethnography is so appealing and yet so problematic precisely because it has not achieved full legitimacy. Its marginal position is both a promise of expanding what counts as academic research, and a threat to it. I can see how the whole discussion about criteria of evaluation is in fact one in which the boundary of academic work is both challenged and reinforced; for in order to legitimize autoethnography, I borrow from the vocabulary and tactics of the established methodological corpus, whether quantitative or qualitative (Ellis 1997; Ellis and Bochner 2006; Sparkes 2000). The discussion we have here is of a quite different nature from the act of reading autoethnographic pieces. In many published autoethnographies, the legitimacy of the method is not necessarily put under question, but performed by the fact that the pieces are published in academic outlets. In my case, I am doing an autoethnography from a different position: as a doctoral student, worried about my own defense; thus my choice of a method becomes crucial to my professional future. I need to be strategic here, not only on my method, but on my politics as well.

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The choice of autoethnography as a method is neither a simple nor a purely rational act. It involves

my worldview, my political commitments but also my position within the various networks of power permeating the process of academic research. Through the metalogue above, I wanted to reveal how this choice looks like from my perspective as a doctoral student and how, through my choice, I become the node where various lines of power intersect. The choice thus becomes the mechanism through which I claim my authority as an aspiring academic.

Because autoethnography is a method at the margins of academic research, constructing its legitimacy is a very important stage in this process of claiming authority. Autoethnography is a contested method not only from the vantage point of positivist methodologies, but also from within the qualitative paradigm. Thus, constructing its legitimacy needs to be done contextually and planned strategically. For example, by virtue of its full embrace of subjectivity, autoethnography clashes with methodologies that assume the separation between the scholar and the social world (Denzin & Lincoln 2002; Ellis 2004; Holt 2003; Sparkes 2000, 2002). In such cases, autoethnography may be evaluated through traditional positivist criteria, such as validity, reliability and generalizability (Neuendorf 2002, 11-13). As an author, I need to build the legitimacy of my autoethongraphic work in relation to the scientific paradigm,

largely defined along the lines of reason and demonstration (Fay 1996; Hamilton 1992). A leading figure of this paradigm, Francis Bacon once observed that "there are and can be only two ways of searching into and discovering the truth. The one flies from senses and particulars to the most general axioms [...]. The other derives axioms from sense and particulars, rising by a gradual and unbroken ascent, so that it arrives at the most general axioms last of all" (in Hollis 2002, 23). As Bacon tells us, there can only be two forms of scientific knowledge - induction and deduction. Thus, the question now becomes: where may autoethnography fit here and what elements can be of use in claiming legitimacy for this method?

As discussed above, there's also a need to construct the legitimacy of autoethnography in relation to constructivist paradigms. In such cases, autoethnography would rely on other type of 'criteria' like credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln 2002, 329) and on the intellectual frameworks provided by an array of critical theories such as feminism, post-modernism, post-structuralism and cultural studies. Interestingly enough, autoethnography's embrace of subjectivity is also a point of contention within the field of autoethnography, with some scholars trying to counter its emotional aspect with an emphasis on the analytical dimension (Anderson 2006; Atkins 2006).

Such attempts make an explicit effort to justify this method by situating it within the tradition of symbolic interactionism and by distinguishing between evocative (concerned with producing compelling descriptions) and analytic forms of autoethnography. The latter are then positioned as the "viable and valuable" (Anderson 2006, 378) forms of this method. In this process, analytic autoethnography's subjectivity is being tamed and the method is made consistent with the 'regime of truth' of academic research: "the defining characteristic of analytic social science is to use empirical data to gain insight into some broader set of social phenomena than those provided by the data themselves" (Anderson 2006, 387). By espousing this analytic goal, subjectivity becomes enlisted under and reduced to "theoretical development, refinement, and extension" (ibid).

The shifts within the autoethnographic movement and its connections to other fields and power dynamics suggest that the legitimacy of a method is never a given thing. Instead, the process of choosing criteria of evaluation and intellectual legacies becomes a performance of legitimacy in itself, an act through which I establish myself as an authoritative speaker. As a student - and particularly in the context of a doctoral thesis - this performance is crucial: the method acts as a way of inserting myself within particular schools of thought and within particular disciplinary/ institutional networks of power. Drawing on multiple conversations and experiences as a doctoral student in the interdisciplinary field of communications, the metalogue above tries to capture the ways in which my position as an imagined student facing an imagined supervisor and an imagined doctoral committee becomes part and parcel of this negotiation of my authority as a speaker. As Crotty argues, at the same time, it is connected to my position within the academic system; a system that, implicitly or explicitly constructs legitimacy based on where you are located within the hierarchy, what type of research you are doing and who is reading your paper.

Last, but not least, the choice of a method and the ways in which the author may need to construct its legitimacy are also affected by the fact that this paper is a submission to a peer-review journal. Thus, through this paper, I enter into a relation with the potential reviewers, the institutional format of the journal and its take on academic writing. To what extent will the format of this paper will be accepted as a potential submission? Will it upset the imagined/ potential reviewers/ readers who, while sympathetic to autoethnography, may remain unconvinced about its scientific status or contribution (as Holt (2003) describes)? I would like to suggest that the autoethnographic nature of this paper and its metalogue format are soliciting the

reader to actively engage with the established norms and expectations of academic research. In fact, the compromise of this paper - part metalogue, part incipient analysis - reflects the ongoing exchange between the author and the (imagined and real) reviewers, who often require the re-writing of autoethnographic pieces so that they clearly outline these works' expected contribution to knowledge (Holt 2003; Sparkes 2000). By contrast, autoethnographic contributions by already established scholars are often published in dialogical or even poetic formats (e.g. Denzin 2006; Ellis and Bochner 2006; Pelias 2005).

These various dimensions of power networks are, of course, both contingent and contextual. But so is my own position on autoethnography. I have tried to capture this by referencing my own ambivalence towards autoethnography, an ambivalence that I link to my varied position within the academic system. On the one hand, I am not yet a legitimate member of this system. On the other hand, in certain roles (such as being an instructor or a reviewer), I am asked to act on behalf of the system. Doing an autoethnography may challenge the processes through which the boundary of the academic system (and particularly the boundary between academic knowledge and other forms of knowledge) is being maintained. What autoethnography seeks to do is precisely to create a "new quali-

tative research tradition" (Denzin 2006, 422) and to open a new space for analysis which is not tied to the explicit arguments, but rather stems from "how stories work" (ibid.).

This form of analysis resists reaching "some conclusion about the human condition or something that holds true for all people at all time" (Ellis and Bochner 2006, 438). Where does this leave my status, as an aspiring academic? While this intellectual effort of opening new spaces is appealing, its implications are also problematic. I am trying to enter this profession precisely because, in the end, I do espouse the Enlightenment's argument on reason as the means through which we can oppose dogmatism and taken-for-granted beliefs. While I find that our values and politics are always with us and therefore in our work, I also believe that there is a universal quality to reasoning that can transcend them. In particular instances, I do see that the methods of scientific inquiry are only one out of many possible modes of inquiry, "a rhetorical style" and that other forms of inquiry, focused on emphasizing the human dimension rather than causal logic, are also possible (Pelias 2006, 417-8). Yet, on the whole, I remain committed to forms of reasoning drawing from logic as well as from the ongoing questioning of the proof (Popper 1965).

As much as I may protest against some of the totalizing aspects of the established 'regime of truth', I am

not entirely against it. Indeed, I am part of it. Thus, when I have to act as an evaluator of academic work, for instance, my ambivalence to autoethnography is heightened. This ambivalence has also been noted by previous autoethnographers, particularly in instances where they realized that their own defense of the legitimacy of the method borrows from the established norms of academic argumentation (e.g. Ellis and Bochner 2006; Holt 2003). In my case, I try to rationalize it as an indicator that the 'regime of truth'- or the hegemonic claim over what can constitute knowledge - is never fully dominant, but also resisted. In my case, I both challenge and internalize and use it to establish myself as an authoritative speaker. Therefore, this 'regime of truth, which supported the various lines of power exposed in the metalogue, should not be understood simply through the conceptual binary 'enforcement'/ 'submission', but as a node through which power flows which involves processes of internalization and resistance (Foucault 1977/1980). Ironically, it is in those nodes that the hegemony of the 'regime of truth' is being both re-established and contested, keeping this regime flexible enough to be able to deal with new contingencies, contexts and positions. Choosing a method is not merely a logical deduction from the research question I am asking; it involves a negotiation of what counts as a legitimate method for my proj-

ect, a negotiation that brings together my values and my position within the academic system, as well as the networks of power within which I am trying to insert myself.

Endnotes

[1] Other qualitative methods also bring the researcher to the forefront of the research process, retaining this commitment to reflexivity and critical engagement. In the case of feminist inspired reflexive ethnographies, Suki Ali notes that researchers have to be reflexive not only in terms of how their identity comes to intersect with the research process, but also in terms of how "that relates to issues of power, and impacts on research and respondents" (2006: 476). However, unlike autoethnography, they are still using other people's experiences as data.

[2] Other prominent advocates of autoethnography are sociologists Laurel Richardson and Norman Denzin. The latter is an important figure in the legitimation of autoethnography as a qualitative method through his work on qualitative methodology in social sciences (see for instance Denzin and Lincoln 2002).

[3] The 'politics of the method' refer to the argument that methods cannot be separated from particular worldviews - or discourses, in Foucault's formulation - which are part of the social distribution of power. Foucault argued that some scientific methods (such as those characterizing medicine or psychology) are an intrinsic part of the modern forms of social control (Frank 1982, 66). Similarly, Clifford and Marcus (1986) have discussed the impossibility of separating ethnography, as a method, from interpretation. The latter always implies our position and worldview.

[4] The two characters presented here (the

supervisor and the student) are both reflections of my own persona. They do not represent any specific people; they grew out of my own struggles with academic work. I should point out that my own doctoral project is not an autoethnographic one, although I have been using autoethnography in a collaborative project (detailed in Dumitrica and Gaden 2009).

[5] I am thinking here of theories such as post-structuralism or post-modernism, which cannot be confined to disciplinary boundaries. Similarly, feminist or post-colonial epistemologies are often used to formulate research projects in specific disciplines. For a more detailed discussion of meta-theory in social sciences see Delanty (2000).

[6] I have been introduced to autoethnography within the context of a course on research methods in communication studies. Within this disciplinary field, autoethnography may be seen as a means to access meaning-making processes. This marks autoethnography as a method able to address concerns specific to communication scholars (such as how we make sense of the world around us). For example, my colleague and I have used autoethnography as a method of research in virtual worlds. We argued that this method allows us to tackle the dynamics of online gender construction and performance, and we made a case for its legitimacy by using both feminist theories and previous work on gender in virtual worlds (see Dumitrica and Gaden 2009).

[7] Qualitative methodologists talk about the relation between the researcher and his/her work (see for instance Denzin and Lincoln 2002; Seale 2004). However, there are also many methodology textbooks still presenting the process of selecting a method as a logical one, deriving from the type of the research question asked.

[8] In fairness, a certain degree of reflection on how researchers become inserted into the research process has always been present, even in quantitative methods. For instance, concepts such as 'nation', 'ethnicity' or 'identity' have always been recognized as connected to the researchers' personal values and political commitments. Nevertheless, this did not prevent scholars from trying to develop models that would limit the subjective aspect of these concepts and provide an objective definition that would make them amenable to 'proper' inquiry (see for instance Karl Deutsch's attempt to build a scientific model of nationalism, modelled after cybernetic theory). However, for the purposes of this argument, I have not engaged with this problematic here.

[9] Andrew C. Sparkes describes these hardships in two different settings: in the defense of an autoethnographic thesis (Sparkes 2002) and in the review of an autoethnographic journal article (Sparkes 2000). For Sparkes, the question of how to judge a piece that does not fall within the traditional boundaries of academic work needs to be accompanied by an awareness and willingness on the part of reviewers/ defense committee to move outside their "own particular paradigmatic position" (Sparkes 2000, 29).

[10] I am refering to the section in Latour's book Reassembling the Social (2005), where a student meets a professor to talk about doing an actor-network research project.

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