

Autoethnography in the modern workplace: a reflexive journey

Autoethnography
in the workplace

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Abstract

Purpose – This conceptual paper seeks to critically evaluate and illuminate the diverse autoethnographic methodologies that are pivotal for understanding the dynamics of contemporary workspaces. The objective is to contribute to the ongoing scholarly debate on the value of autoethnography in workplace research and explore how it can shed light on complex organizational phenomena.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper adopts a narrative literature review approach, focusing on four main forms of autoethnography: realist, impressionistic, expressionistic and conceptualistic autoethnographies. Each form is discussed and dissected, emphasizing their specific sub-forms and illustrating their application through representative examples. The paper engages in a critical debate on utilizing autoethnography in workplace research.

Findings – The findings illuminate how autoethnographic methods can be used to gain nuanced and complex understandings of personal experiences situated in workplace culture, as well as how broader social and cultural contexts shape these experiences. The study also highlights the potential of these methods to explore marginalized and silenced stories within workplaces and contribute to the knowledge on power dynamics, inequalities and injustices embedded in the organizational culture.

Practical implications – The following contribution discusses approaches for conducting autoethnographic explorations of selected work environments, offering researchers valuable insights into these methods' application. Through better comprehension and application of these methodologies, researchers can enhance their contribution toward cultivating more inclusive and equitable workplace environments.

Originality/value – The paper stands out in its extensive review and critical discussion of the autoethnographic methods as applied in workplace research. It expands upon individual autoethnographic studies by providing a comprehensive, multifaceted perspective, delving into the merits and limitations of these approaches in particular context of researching contemporary places of work.

Keywords Autoethnography, Workplace research, Reflexivity, Narrative

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1. Introduction

I took note of the gray cubicles and the non-ergonomic workstations, curious about how they influenced productivity. Watching the employees, while focusing on my own experience, I noticed the discomfort as we unconnectedly shifted in rigid chairs and contended with unforgiving desks, with our body language mutually signaling a struggle to adapt to the unyielding furniture. My back hurts, and there is no real alternative to move myself elsewhere or a manager around to complain to.

The lack of fresh air, sealed windows, and an insufficient air conditioning system contributed to a sense of stagnation in the atmosphere. While I felt unmotivated and rather dire, I wondered how this stale environment affected their physical and mental well-being. The open layout amplified distractions, with loud conversations and various office sounds easily traversing the space, creating a symphony of disruption for the workers trying to concentrate. How can this office play with my



senses so much? My work has been pushed to the side, counting down the hours when I am planning to clock out.

- *Diary entry 18, Observation Day 9.*

In the opening showcase vignette, the researcher reflects on the influence of physical workspace elements on employee productivity, well-being and ability to focus. The gray cubicles and non-ergonomic workstations appear to contribute to discomfort, as evidenced by the workers' body language and chair adjustments. The stale environment, characterized by a lack of fresh air, sealed windows and insufficient air conditioning, raises concerns about the potential adverse effects on employees' physical and mental well-being. The open layout of the workspace seemingly exacerbates distractions, with noise pollution creating a chaotic environment that hinders workers' ability to concentrate. A relevant analysis approach would likely point toward findings suggesting that workplace design and ergonomics directly impact productivity, as employees struggle to adapt to suboptimal furniture. Furthermore, poor indoor air quality and inadequate ventilation can lead to reduced cognitive functioning and increased stress levels. And finally, a specific office design can significantly impact researchers, and with that likely users' focus and overall performance. The vignette subtly points to the office's spatial and organizational problems that the researcher examined with self through a lived personal experience.

A preliminary reading of the vignette and subsequent findings may lead some, particularly those familiar with traditional methods, to believe that a conventional ethnographic participant observation approach has been used to delve into the studied workspace. However, there is a nuanced distinction to be emphasized here. While traditional ethnography primarily seeks to understand a culture or group via an external lens, autoethnography pivots toward the researcher's intimate experience, integrating both ethnography and autobiography into a unique narrative form (Adams and Holman Jones, 2018). The distinction is crucial: ethnography interprets others, whereas autoethnography prioritizes the researcher's experiences, making them a central pillar of the inquiry. Especially for those experienced in autoethnography research, the distinction becomes sharper when observing organizational contexts. In this vignette and the associated study on workspace design, the autoethnographic approach offers insights and weaves a reflective narrative on workspace design's profound influence on user experiences.

Autoethnography, a qualitative methodology emphasizing personal experiences as a lens into cultural phenomena (Ellis *et al.*, 2011), has grown notably in popularity. Its prowess in capturing genuine lived experiences, especially amidst modern disruptions, is widely recognized (King, 2019; Carroll, 2020). However, its potential in dissecting workplace environments from an insider perspective remains less charted in academia. This paper sets out to underscore autoethnography's applicability in exploring workplace dynamics, with a particular emphasis on the insights autoethnography can offer into specific workplace settings and experiences.

Given today's rapidly evolving workplaces and societal shifts, a deeper dive into professional spaces' organizational and spatial nuances becomes essential. Such research can unravel the myriad factors influencing employee well-being, productivity and overarching organizational culture, potentially heralding transformative, inclusive and efficient workspaces (Meyer and Allen, 1997; Lotfus and Higgs, 2010). Within this context, autoethnography emerges as a powerful tool that illustrates the intricate interplay between workplace design, human behavior and organizational dynamics. This paper aims to both present and critically discuss autoethnographic methods for workplace research, emphasizing their potential to shed light on complex dynamics within diverse organizational cultures.

2. Applying autoethnography in workplace research

At its core, autoethnography melds the self (“auto”) with the cultural backdrop (“ethno”), exploring this juxtaposition through a varied range of representations (“graphy”). As a research method, it underscores the individual within their sociocultural milieu, often swinging between evocative and analytical styles (Adams and Herrmann, 2020). This entails plunging into emotional terrains, self-contemplation and introspective evaluation, which are foundational to the autoethnographic approach (Anderson and Glass-Coffin, 2013). Such narratives transcend mere event recounting, embedding the tales with emotive richness (Bochner, 2012).

Venturing into the study of organizations, we find two distinguished methods: organizational ethnography and organizational autoethnography. The former dissects organizational settings through a systematic external lens, endeavoring to grasp the social essence that underpins organizing processes (Côté-Boileau *et al.*, 2020). This entails immersive fieldwork, encompassing participant observations, interviews and document analyses, striving for a holistic understanding of the organization’s dynamics (Dumont, 2023). Organizational autoethnography, conversely, pivots on introspection. Researchers harness their personal narratives, reflecting on their intrinsic organizational experiences, thus merging subjective insights with academic scrutiny (Kamsteeg *et al.*, 2021). While the ethnographic approach seeks objective patterns from an outsider’s viewpoint, the autoethnographic method delves into the experiential, capturing the intimate nuances of organizational life from an insider’s perspective.

Expanded upon, autoethnography surfaces as a seamless merger of personal narratives and academic inquiry, consequently yielding unique insights into myriad cultural elements, including race, gender, identity and social inclusion. Its strength lies in probing the depths of individual experiences, promoting empathy and enabling an emotive understanding. Generally, autoethnography sheds light on the complex sociopolitical, cultural and personal undercurrents of human existence, aspects often elusive to generalized information or statistical data (Lockford, 2017). When used to comprehend phenomena in a selected organization or organized environment, autoethnographic vignettes reveal hidden facets of organizations and their subtleties, such as contemporary places of work (Doloriert and Sambrook, 2012). The stories sculpted via this methodological form divulge the interaction of self and others within specific sociocultural contexts or lived experiences (Spry, 2001). In this process, researchers concurrently assume roles of observers and participants, co-creating and potentially contesting meanings in synergy with individuals or groups.

Autoethnographic vignettes mirror the subjective reflexive processes and self-identity evolution, underscoring these dynamics’ importance. In analyzing personal experiences within a particular work context, investigators can decode how the workplace has molded them and, conversely, how they have influenced the workplace. Autoethnographic vignettes serve as a powerful tool to explore these complex dynamics, intertwining the personal and the academic in a holistic exploration (Humphreys, 2005). During this process, researchers typically navigate between the four broader approaches of realism, impressionism, expressionism and conceptualism, with the most prevalent analytic and evocative perspectives (Adams *et al.*, 2015). As such, autoethnography emerges as a potent tool, shedding light on the complexities of human interaction within organizational cultures (Doloriert and Sambrook, 2012).

At this stage of our debate, it is rather crucial to note that the autoethnography, by its nature, is inherently subjective and rooted in personal interpretation, which can introduce bias into the findings (Anderson, 2006). The researcher’s personal experiences, emotions and perspectives may influence the analysis, potentially obfuscating the broader cultural phenomena under study (Allen-Collinson, 2013; Marx *et al.*, 2017). Despite these limitations, autoethnography has been steadily gaining popularity when it comes to studying

organizational settings and with contemporary places of work, with especially one form being based on focusing researcher's experience within an organizational context.

Organizational autoethnography, a progressive subfield of autoethnographic research, illuminates the complexities and diversities inherent within workplace experiences. Grounded in the fusion of self and culture, this methodology has been extensively applied across diverse sectors (Doloriert and Sambrook, 2012; Herrmann, 2020). The approach has been efficaciously employed to investigate a broad spectrum of experiences and positionalities within organizational settings as it can be a tool for gaining a deeper understanding of specific organizational phenomena, such as a process, occurrence or specific situation in a contemporary place of work. Notable instances include Hunnicutt's (2017) exploration of gender dynamics through the lens of a female soldier in boot camp, Denker's (2017) critical dissection of exploitation within the bartending industry and Sambrook and Herrmann's (2018) examination of Australian construction organization from within. However, despite the growth and development of organizational autoethnography, its adoption as a primary mode of data inquiry within the academic realm remains limited. While several studies have incorporated this approach within their research frameworks, its adoption within academia has been comparatively slower. Yet, those studies that have integrated this approach have yielded insightful results.

Numerous studies have served as pivotal examples in our discussion, further contextualizing the diverse applications of autoethnography in workplace research. Miller (2002) focused on the emotional labor of academic professionals, while Riad (2007) explored the complex intersections of motherhood and an academic career. Cohen *et al.* (2009) critically engaged with the prevailing metaphor of work-life balance in an autoethnographic conversation between three scholars, whereas Kempster and Stewart (2010) delved into leadership dynamics within academia. Cullen (2011) broached the topic of workplace spiritualization, Sobre-Denton (2012) examined systematic discrimination and workplace bullying and Van Amsterdam (2015) highlighted the oft-ignored intersection of motherhood and academic work. Further expanding the scope of autoethnographic workplace research, Sambrook *et al.* (2014) deviated from traditional methodologies to examine employee engagement from a more interpretive angle. Pheko (2018) probed into the darker aspects of academia, studying the experiences of academic mobbing within the power structures of academic institutions. Popova (2018) conducted an autoethnographic reflection on her sexuality and decade-long employment in an LGBT-inclusive organization, offering insights into the role of inclusive practices in organizational culture. Bohonos (2021) used "nightmarish" autoethnography to prompt discussions about racially abusive language in the workplace, capturing the propagation of hateful language and its impact on creating hostile environments for people of color. Working under a pseudonym, Van de Berg (2022) utilized autoethnography to grapple with the trauma of her husband's infidelity and its impact on her emotional recovery and academic identity, shedding light on the significant role of the academic workplace in her recovery process.

The breadth of studies covering various focus areas, from aspects of gender and sexuality to nuances of leadership and power dynamics, illuminates the potential of autoethnography to provide nuanced and deeply personal perspectives on contemporary workplaces. These studies, whether opting for an analytical stance or leaning toward a more evocative narrative, underscore the predilection toward the organizational dimension of autoethnography when exploring workplace-related phenomena. That said, it is somewhat vital to recognize that autoethnography, when employed in an organizational context, may not universally fit all research questions or environments. Therefore, it is incumbent upon researchers to critically appraise its appropriateness for their line of investigation. Given this complexity, it is worth noting that autoethnography can manifest in multiple forms, namely realist, expressionist, impressionist and conceptualist.

The diversification of autoethnography into distinct subsets and methodologies equips scholars with the versatility and adaptability to address specific workplace-related concerns differently. Various autoethnographic approaches become imperative, especially when contemplating contemporary workspaces, which often manifest as organizational and spatial hybrids. These varied methodological forms allow for the nuanced exploration of the dynamics within these spaces, understanding the interplay between their unique structural and cultural elements and their subsequent impact on occupants' experiences. This paves the way for a more comprehensive grasp of modern workplaces' organizational and spatial peculiarities, offering deeper, contextually grounded insights.

3. Typology of autoethnographic representation

The profound work of [Adams *et al.* \(2015\)](#) provides a comprehensive delineation of the variegated forms of autoethnographic representation. These are meticulously classified into four distinct yet interconnected categories: realist, impressionist, expressionist and conceptualist autoethnographic methodological forms. Each category reflects a unique perspective and representation mode, enriching autoethnographic research's overall breadth and depth.

To start, realist autoethnographies are fundamentally rooted in the concept of verisimilitude, striving to create a convincing illusion of reality. This approach leverages personal experiences as a gateway into the realm of cultural understanding, aiming to describe the cultural milieu as evocatively as possible. The resultant narrative, often rich in detail and depth, is known as a "thick description" of cultural life, something that [Geertz \(1973, pp. 5\)](#) would define as "essentially a rendering of what goes on, what it is like from the native's point of view, or how they experience his or her world." The inherent realism of these autoethnographies imbues them with a sense of authenticity and groundedness, enabling readers to connect with the experiences depicted in a deeply personal manner, with the thick description underlining the detailed and nuanced representation of the (cultural) phenomenon. At the core of the realist autoethnographic approach is the intricate coupling of theoretical frameworks with documented personal narratives – a process that heavily leans on individual experiences to clarify and understand theoretical precepts ([Lofland, 1995](#); [Anderson, 2006](#)). The practice around the latter fosters an enriched understanding of theoretical paradigms and offers a potent means to communicate scholarly findings to a wider audience ([Doloriert and Sambrook, 2012](#)). Therefore, the subsets of organizational and analytic autoethnography, previously discussed briefly in the backdrop of exemplifying past scholarly work that employed autoethnography to comprehend the workplace, can be aptly categorized under the ambit of realist autoethnography.

On the other hand, we have impressionistic autoethnographies predicated on capturing an overall experience in its fullest essence. This approach strives to portray detailed representations of the researcher's surroundings or the examined context. The autoethnographer seeks to immerse readers in the experience presented by crafting impressionist text, aiming to foster an enriched understanding of the phenomenon at hand. This immersion engenders a sense of shared experience, blurring the boundaries between the reader and the researched. Several key characteristics distinguish impressionistic autoethnography from realist and other autoethnographic methodological approaches, which we will discuss shortly. First, impressionistic autoethnographers employ their personal experiences as the primary data source ([Ellis, 2004](#)). They construct a narrative of their lived experience by drawing from their memories, thoughts and emotions. Second, impressionistic autoethnographers harness literary devices to generate a sense of immediacy and engagement for the reader ([Chang, 2008](#)). Autoethnographers tend to infuse their experiences with life and dynamism by employing methodological forms such as metaphor, simile and vivid, lively imagery. Last but not least, impressionistic autoethnographers

emphasize the subjective, personal and emotional aspects of their experiences (Jones *et al.*, 2016). Rather than aiming for a detached, objective account of their experiences, these researchers endeavor to share their stories authentically and evocatively.

Next, expressionistic autoethnographies deviate from the objective, factual stance commonly associated with traditional research methodologies. Instead, they lean heavily toward evoking moods and expressing the researcher's internal feelings and emotions (Adams *et al.*, 2015). The expressionistic approach validates the essential role of personal and subjective experience mainly by deviating from traditional objectivity and detachment and by its innovative use of language, paired with crafting imagery and symbolism. Using the latter enables the autoethnographer to construct a more robust and nuanced depiction of human experiences (Sughrua, 2020). For example, in a recent work by Rafi (2021), the author uses expressionistic autoethnography to process and define the personal spiritual beliefs of researcher's religious journey from Islam, through atheism, to religious mysticism. With that in mind, expressionistic autoethnographies serve as a conduit for the visceral, emotional aspects of experience, offering a unique and deeply personal insight into the culture or the cultural situation being studied.

Conceptualist autoethnographies, the fourth category identified by Adams *et al.* (2015), represent a distinct form of research method that sets out to contest widely accepted norms and assumptions. With it, autoethnographers seek to navigate and question the taken-for-granted constructs within societal and cultural life, inviting critical discourse into the research process. Here, personal narratives are positioned as more than just episodic anecdotes. These narratives, replete with authentic experiences and memories, transform into tools of potent conveyance, highlighting cultural experiences and breaking down the barriers of silence that often surround the intricacies of cultural existence. Personal stories are leveraged to illuminate and expose, often challenging the silence enveloping controversial, unexplored or misunderstood aspects of our shared cultural life (Wall, 2006; Ellis *et al.*, 2011). Conceptualist autoethnographers engage in a nuanced dance of interpretation and comprehension. They unveil the intricate intersections and interactions between the personal and the cultural, emphasizing how individuals are shaped by the culture they inhabit and, reciprocally, how their actions mold that very culture (Ellis *et al.*, 2011). In its audacious challenge to assumptions and its boundary-pushing nature, conceptualist autoethnography reveals the elaborate network of connections linking individual experiences with broader cultural dynamics, providing a unique lens to perceive the complexities of human cultural life. The latter is predominantly done through critical autoethnographic representation, emphasizing identifying and addressing biases, power imbalances and injustices inherent in these experiences (Adams, 2017).

The paper's representative examples have been meticulously chosen based on criteria ensuring their alignment with the methodological approaches presented. Emphasizing relevance and clarity, each example illuminates the methodology in question while showcasing both its common and unique facets, selected for robustness, diversity and comprehensive explanatory ability. This systematic selection not only guarantees validity but also enriches our understanding. As we articulate these interconnected autoethnographic approaches, it becomes evident how these varied methodological approaches offer a more nuanced perspective on the workplace. Therefore, we will further explore these sub-forms of autoethnography and their profound implications within workplace research.

4. Autoethnographic forms for workplace exploration

4.1 Realist autoethnographic forms for workplace research

With a focus on workplace environments and the very nature of work, we delve into specific autoethnographic subtypes that prove exceptionally valuable for such inquiries.

Within the realm of realist autoethnography, three distinct subtypes surface as particularly pertinent for examining the workplace. Among them, *analytic autoethnography*, originally proposed as an adjunct to the more traditional evocative approach, espouses a realist or analytic tradition that proves beneficial to researchers (Pace, 2012). This approach provides an avenue for weaving personal experiences into broader sociocultural and political narratives, enabling researchers to critique and dissect prevalent discourses within cultural contexts in the quest for transformative change in a manner that Wall (2016) would call doing a “moderate” autoethnography. The application of ethnographic strategies within this framework requires a meticulous research approach, often involving the researcher as a full-fledged member of the study group or setting, transparency about this role in the resulting publications and a profound commitment to evolving theoretical comprehension of broader phenomena (Anderson, 2006). As applied to the workplace, analytic autoethnography allows researchers to plumb their personal experiences and observations within an organization, offering novel insights into the cultural underpinnings, power dynamics and social constructs of the workplace, and the researcher’s unique position within these structures (O’Neil, 2018). To illustrate, a researcher may leverage analytic autoethnography to unpack their experiences as budding employees within a large corporation, exploring how the company’s culture and power dynamics shaped their work and colleague interactions. This perspective promotes a deeper understanding of overarching social phenomena within the organization, such as the ramifications of corporate culture on employee well-being and productivity. It expands the theoretical comprehension of the phenomena under study.

Two other types of realist autoethnographies described by Adams *et al.* (2015) could be deemed highly suitable for workplace research – both exhibit suitability when studying workplace environments and dynamics. *Reflexive interviews* empower researchers to document and explore their personal experiences, facilitating a rich augmentation of fieldwork, particularly valuable for capturing the researcher’s unique perspective, thereby leading to a deeper understanding of cultural phenomena within a given context. Applying this approach to workplace research permits a thorough exploration of interviewees’ experiences and perceptions, illuminating the organizational culture, power dynamics and societal structures underpinning the workplace. For instance, a researcher may delve into employees’ experiences within a specific workplace through reflexive interviews, concentrating on their views of the organization’s culture and dynamics. This methodology enhances the understanding of individual workers’ experiences within the organization and unravels how larger societal phenomena influence these experiences. Reflexive interviews also pave the way for critical self-analysis, yielding a more self-aware research approach (Lear *et al.*, 2018). With that, this approach can empower researchers to engage with interviewees as reflective subjects, thereby fostering a more collaborative and ethical research process.

In contrast, *layered accounts* illuminate the interplay between personal experiences and collated data’s ensuing interpretation and analysis. This method acknowledges the strata of consciousness and reflexivity that pervade a researcher’s account of personal experiences contextualized within a cultural milieu (Esgalhado, 2003). Layered accounts encapsulate the researcher’s personal experiences, reflections on overarching social and cultural contexts shaping these experiences and, significantly, the perspectives and experiences of others involved, such as colleagues or community members (Ellis *et al.*, 2018). Applying layered accounts to workplace research, a researcher could weave together personal experiences as an employee with reflections on the organizational culture, power dynamics and societal structures of the workplace, thereby providing a more multifaceted and nuanced narrative. The inclusion of colleagues’ perspectives and experiences further enriches the account,

yielding a broader, more comprehensive view of the workplace experience. See [Table 1](#) for the summary of realist autoethnographies.

4.2 Impressionistic autoethnographic forms for workplace research

Impressionistic autoethnography blends vivid descriptive language with an artistic writing approach to artistically convey the researcher's subjective experiences, emotions and sensory nuances, rooted in personal storytelling and detailed narrative representations of their observations, memories and emotions ([Islam, 2015](#)). Within this context, [Adams et al. \(2015\)](#) highlight three sub-forums that are especially advantageous for researching workplace settings. First, *collaborative autoethnography* arises as a valuable method for examining personal experiences and perspectives through a collaborative, reflexive lens to generate a shared narrative encompassing group members' myriad perspectives and experiences. This approach underscores collaboration, reflexivity and dialogue, endeavoring to create a comprehensive account that faithfully mirrors the heterogeneity of group members' perspectives and experiences ([Lapadat, 2017](#)).

With that being said, collaborative autoethnography shows promise in dissecting complex and sensitive issues, facilitating a more nuanced, layered understanding of personal experiences embedded within culture ([Malorni et al., 2023](#)). To illustrate, a cadre of researchers might employ collaborative autoethnography to delve into their collective experiences within a specific organization, giving special attention to the organizational culture, power dynamics and social constructs shaping the workplace. This approach can cultivate a more comprehensive and diverse understanding of the workplace and illuminate how personal experiences are situated within broader sociocultural contexts ([Doloriert and Sambrook, 2012](#)). In doing so, the research group could, for instance, unearth the unspoken norms shaping team dynamics or shed light on systemic issues impacting worker well-being, thereby contributing significantly to the body of knowledge surrounding organizational culture and behavior.

Two additional sub-forums come to the fore when facilitating a deeper understanding of the workplace, whether as a physical entity or an organizational body. On one side, sensory and physical accounts offer a unique perspective in autoethnographic research, enabling the exploration of personal and cultural experiences through the prism of sensory perception, physical embodiment and the passage of time ([Adams et al., 2015](#)). Such an approach entails a

Realist autoethnographic form	Definition	Workplace research example
Analytic autoethnography	Weaves personal experiences into broader sociocultural and political narratives, aiming for transformative change	A researcher analyzing personal experiences as a new employee within a large corporation to understand company culture and power dynamics
Reflexive interviews	Documents and explores personal experiences, leading to a deeper understanding of cultural phenomena within a given context	A researcher using reflexive interviews to explore employees' views of organizational culture and dynamics
Layered accounts	Demonstrates the relationship between personal experiences, reflections on social/cultural contexts, and the perspectives of others	A researcher combining personal experiences as an employee with reflections on organizational culture and the inclusion of colleagues' perspectives

Source(s): Authors' work

Table 1.
Realist autoethnographic forms

heightened awareness of sensory and physical facets of personal experiences, encompassing visual impressions, auditory cues, olfactory stimuli, gustatory experiences and corporeal sensations linked to the researched phenomenon (McLveen, 2008; Uotinen, 2011). For instance, in a workplace-focused autoethnographic study, sensory and physical accounts could capture the researcher’s interactions with the physical environment, such as the spatial layout, ambient lighting and thermal conditions. The sensory undercurrents of work could also be delved into, for example, documenting the sounds and scents characteristic of a specific working environment.

Second, impressionistic *narratives of space and place* offer invaluable insight into how spaces and places imprint upon and shape identities. Essentially, these narratives are woven from the impressions that chosen spaces and places leave on the researcher (Adams *et al.*, 2015). Through these accounts, researchers can scrutinize how their personal experiences are molded by the physical and social milieus within which they unfold and the reciprocal influence they exert on these environments (Olmos-López and Tusting, 2020). In the context of a workplace-focused study, this could entail exploring the researcher’s personal experiences of their workplace’s physical and social terrain. Complementing this, the researcher could attain a more tangible and experiential understanding of their workplace and elucidate the contextual factors that frame personal experiences. For example, Winkler’s (2018) work serves as an instructive exemplar of this approach, where he weaves a compelling autoethnographic narrative elucidating the relationship between his personal journey of learning Danish and his workplace’s physical and social context.

As projected in Table 2, these impressionistic narratives of space and place can illuminate a more nuanced and layered understanding of personal experiences within a cultural context, particularly within a workplace environment. However, fully engaging with these experiences’ emotive dimensions requires shifting toward expressionistic autoethnographies.

4.3 Expressionistic autoethnographic forms for workplace research

Navigating further into expressionistic autoethnographies, we encounter sub-forms that emphasize the creation of aesthetic and evocative narratives. These narratives are designed to vividly represent the thoughts, emotions and actions of the individuals involved, enabling readers to resonate with, or gain an empathetic understanding of, the depicted experiences. Distinguished by its accent on evoking emotions and fostering active reader engagement, evocative autoethnography is less about imparting information and instigating a dialogue.

Impressionistic autoethnographic form	Definition	Workplace research example
Collaborative autoethnography	Shared narrative of group members’ perspectives in a reflexive manner	A research group exploring organizational culture, power dynamics and workplace social constructs
Sensory and physical accounts	Exploring experiences through sensory perception and physical embodiment	Documenting physical interactions with workspace, including ambient conditions and sensory stimuli of a specific work environment
Narratives of space and place	Exploring impressions left by spaces/places on a researcher	Study of personal experiences within the workplace’s physical and social environment, like the relationship between learning a language and the workplace context

Source(s): Authors’ work

Table 2.
Impressionistic autoethnographic forms

The narrative, written predominantly in the first-person, is intended to provoke an emotional response, often unveiling intimate aspects of personal life, and foregrounding emotive experiences. Presented in various formats such as poetry, short stories, fiction, novels or photographic essays, evocative autoethnography can facilitate a comprehensive exploration of varied facets of a researched workplace, especially from an insider's perspective (Faulkner, 2017).

The first exemplar of this expressionistic approach that would fit the context of workplace research is the sub-form of *emotional renderings*, which zeroes in on the researcher's exploration and articulation of their emotional responses and affective experiences in connection with their personal journey situated within a cultural milieu. Emotional renderings can foster a nuanced, multifaceted understanding of personal experiences and how they are enmeshed within broader social and cultural constructs (Adams *et al.*, 2015; Lee, 2022; Akehurst and Scott, 2023). For instance, in an autoethnographic study centered around a workplace, emotional renderings could encapsulate the researcher's experiences of work-induced stress, anxiety or fulfillment. The researcher could introspect on their work environment's emotional toll or boon on their overall well-being and the influence exerted by the workplace's organizational culture and power dynamics on their emotional landscape. Through this lens, the researcher could attain a more embodied, experiential understanding of their workplace, and the contextual factors that embed personal experiences within broader social and cultural realms.

As we venture further into the domain of expressionistic autoethnographies, we come across the realm of *confessional research accounts*. These accounts, a characteristic of autoethnographic research, encompass the researcher's exploration and articulation of their deeply personal experiences and emotions in a profoundly intimate and candid manner (Kennedy, 2020). This modality involves the researcher divulging private aspects of their personal experiences, often adopting a confessional or cathartic style, intending to expand understanding of a specific culture, discipline or phenomenon (Merchant and Garza, 2015).

Take, for example, an autoethnographic study of a workplace. Here, confessional research accounts could encompass the researcher's experiences of stress, anxiety or satisfaction tied to their professional roles and their struggles navigating power dynamics or organizational culture within the workplace. This approach allows the researcher to attain a more embodied and experiential comprehension of their professional environment and insight into how personal experiences are positioned within broader social and cultural contexts. Through this lens, the researcher is a participant and a narrator, providing a human dimension and emotional depth to the portrayal of the workplace environment. The researcher allows readers to empathize with their journey by revealing the raw nerves of their experiences, fostering empathy, understanding and a feeling of our common humanity.

Third, there is the approach of producing *devotional texts*. Devotional texts encompass the researcher's exploration and articulation of personal experiences and emotions connected to their spiritual or religious beliefs and practices. The implementation of this approach includes the researcher divulging intimate aspects of their spiritual or religious experiences, often adopting a confessional or cathartic style, to expand understanding of a specific culture, discipline or phenomenon (Zubko, 2006; Milner-Thornton, 2007).

Picture, for instance, an autoethnographic study conducted within a religious or spiritual community. In this setting, devotional texts may detail the researcher's experiences with prayer, meditation or other spiritual practices, and their personal struggles with faith or belief within the community. This approach empowers the researcher to attain a more embodied and experiential comprehension of their spiritual or religious community and insight into how personal experiences are situated within broader social and cultural contexts. In the workplace context, devotional texts may be particularly insightful if religious or spiritual values influence the place of work, or if the researcher's religious or spiritual beliefs influence

their perceptions and experiences of the workplace. For example, a researcher could explore how their religious beliefs influence their perceptions of teamwork and leadership within their organization, or how a Catholic hospital’s mission and values influence the practices and interactions within the workplace. This evocative approach, thus, provides a rich and multilayered understanding of the workplace, shedding light on often unexplored spiritual or religious dimensions.

Lastly, we delve into the realm of collaborative witnessing. This approach paves the way for researchers to place their focus on the lives of others, recounting them in an evocative manner through shared storytelling and conversation. Collaborative witnessing intertwines the roles of the storyteller and the listener, fostering a joint narrative in which both parties participate equally, reciprocally engaged in an enduring relationship and dialogic exchange (Adams *et al.*, 2015). In workplace research, collaborative witnessing invites multiple researchers (or individuals who are not necessarily researchers) to share their experiences and interpretations of the collective autoethnographic data (Ellis and Rawicki, 2013). This strategy can unfold a nuanced and multifaceted understanding of personal experiences in the workplace culture and how broader social and cultural contexts shape these experiences.

Collaborative witnessing could prove particularly insightful in examining the collaborative nature of knowledge-based work. Imagine, for instance, a group of researchers working in a technology startup. They can weave together their individual experiences and perceptions of the company’s dynamic and fast-paced work environment, shedding light on the challenges and triumphs of innovation and team synergy. Collaborative witnessing can be used when individuals share their past experiences with the clear aim of developing committed relationships with one another. This approach could also elucidate the importance of the physical and spatial aspects of the workplace in supporting collaboration performance. For instance, the researchers could reflect on how the open-plan design of the office, the availability of shared workspaces and the use of technology-enabled meeting rooms affect them personally and subsequently shape their collaboration and communication practices. In this manner, collaborative witnessing can provide a rich, multilayered and collaborative understanding of the workplace environment. See Table 3 for exemplified expressionistic autoethnographies.

Expressionistic autoethnographic form	Definition	Workplace research examples
Emotional renderings	Emphasizes researcher’s emotional responses and experiences within cultural contexts	A researcher’s exploration of work-induced stress and the influence of organizational culture on emotions
Confessional research accounts	Personal and intimate explorations of researcher’s experiences and emotions	A researcher’s journey navigating power dynamics and organizational culture, revealing personal challenges
Devotional texts	Exploration of personal experiences tied to spiritual or religious beliefs	Researcher’s perceptions of teamwork influenced by their religious beliefs or a Catholic hospital’s mission/values on practices
Collaborative witnessing	Shared storytelling and dialogic exchanges focusing on shared experiences	Multiple researchers in a tech start-up sharing experiences of innovation challenges and team dynamics, or reflections on workplace design and collaboration practices

Table 3.
Expressionistic autoethnographic forms

Source(s): Authors’ work

4.4 Conceptualist autoethnographic forms for workplace research

Transitioning to the final cluster and informed by the categorization by [Adams et al. \(2015\)](#), we examine the types of conceptualist autoethnographies that can be of value when researching workspaces.

Leading off with *critical autoethnography*, this approach emphasizes the critical analysis of personal experiences in conjunction with the social and cultural construction of identities. It involves researchers introspectively engaging with their personal experiences, and then using the lens of critical theory to scrutinize and interpret these experiences in the wider backdrop of social and cultural contexts. The goal of critical autoethnography is to act as a catalyst for personal and societal emancipatory changes by pinpointing and challenging deeply entrenched power dynamics, inequities and social injustices ([Jensen-Hart and Williams, 2010](#); [Marx et al., 2017](#)).

When applied to the exploration of work environments, critical autoethnography can be an impactful tool for deep understanding of personal experiences nested in cultural contexts, especially within the intricacies of multidisciplinary teams or complex sociocultural settings. Here, critical autoethnography hones in on the thorough analysis of personal experiences and the social and cultural development of identities within the workplace. It may be used to identify and address power disparities, injustices and inequities intricately woven within organizational culture. Another instance of how critical autoethnography may illuminate underrepresented or vulnerable groups in a particular environment is the experiences of women, people of color and LGBTQIA+ persons (e.g. [Lynch et al., 2022](#); [Moosavi, 2022](#)). To set an example; a researcher might critically explore their experiences as a member of a marginalized group in the workplace, focusing on the challenges they face and the strategies they employ to navigate them. Through this approach, the researcher can offer insights into the lived experiences of marginalized groups, providing a foundation for more inclusive and equitable workplace practices.

Advancing to the next conceptualistic approach, we encounter “*insider texts*.” This method leverages personal experiences and insider knowledge of marginalized groups to shed light on power dynamics, often revealing inaccuracies and harms of past research, thus casting fresh perspectives on cultural practices and experiences ([Adams et al., 2015](#)). For instance, insider texts can provide valuable insights into phenomena such as workplace bullying, exploring its prevalence, consequences and mechanisms. What is more, these texts could offer an enriched perspective on the influence of managerial coaching on the well-being of subordinates within the workplace.

Last, but certainly not least, are *community autoethnographies*. This approach invites researchers to collaborate with community members to investigate and address specific issues. These autoethnographies provide a platform for narratives often silenced or overlooked, illuminating life’s everyday neglected and distorted aspects ([Toyosaki et al., 2009](#)). They also open avenues for cooperative research in selected organizational settings, mainly to uncover workplace-related issues that would otherwise remain uncovered. Take, for instance, the environment of a coworking space. Here, researchers could partner with community members to delve into the dynamics of the work community, unveiling issues like subtle bullying or systemic racism that might lurk beneath the surface. Researchers can delve deeper into organizational contexts through such a collaborative and co-produced autoethnographic approach, shedding light on intricate dynamics that inform the broader workplace culture. See [Table 4](#) for the summarized examples.

5. Concluding debate: Autoethnography’s role in workplace research

This paper accentuates the potential of autoethnography as a methodological paradigm for deciphering the complexities of workplace dynamics and organizational cultures.

Recognizing autoethnography’s immersive perspective – rooted in the lived experiences of individuals within their professional realms – this methodological paradigm moves beyond mere personal narratives. This paper delves into various autoethnographic methodologies structured around Adams *et al.*’s (2015) framework, each offering distinctive attributes that collectively paint a comprehensive picture of organizational landscapes and the varied ways individuals traverse these realms.

Engaging in a lively debate about applying autoethnography in workplace research unveils its exceptional aptitude to bring subtle and often concealed facets of organizational life to light. Elements like the sensory, physical and emotional dimensions, the nuanced influence of spaces and places on identities, the dynamics of power and even spiritual experiences within the workplace are not usually the subject of conventional organizational studies. Autoethnography, emphasizing subjective experiences and narratives, invites these elements to take center stage, thus endowing a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of professional life. Consequently, this exploration underscores autoethnography’s capability to penetrate the depths of contemporary workplaces, enriching our understanding of these multifaceted, ever-evolving spaces.

However, exploring such personal and intimate experiences also raises important ethical considerations. Exposing personal and potentially sensitive information requires rigorous attention to consent, confidentiality and potential harm. Furthermore, the inherent subjectivity of autoethnography prompts debates around reliability, validity and generalizability. Can personal narratives be accepted as valid insights into broader organizational dynamics? How can these narratives’ inherently unique and contextual nature be reconciled with the scientific pursuit of generalizable knowledge? Rather than undermining the value of autoethnography, these debates can be viewed as an invitation for researchers to continue innovating in this field. For instance, strategies such as collaborative autoethnography, insider texts and community autoethnographies help address these issues by incorporating multiple perspectives and deeply involving those being studied in the research process.

Finally, using autoethnography in workplace research is more than just a methodological choice; it is a commitment to humanize the workplace, validate workers’ lived experiences and stimulate conversations that could lead to more inclusive, empathetic and effective organizations. The further exploration, adaptation and integration of these approaches in organizational studies promise a future of research that is not just about organizations, but also for them and the people within them.

Conceptualist autoethnographic form	Definition	Workplace research examples
Critical autoethnography	Analysis of personal experiences with cultural identity constructions	Investigating inequities faced by marginalized groups in multidisciplinary teams
Insider texts	Uses insider knowledge to highlight power dynamics	Studying workplace bullying and impacts of managerial coaching
Community autoethnographies	Collaborative research with community members	Exploring coworking space dynamics like subtle bullying or systemic racism

Source(s): Authors’ work

Table 4.
Conceptualist autoethnographic forms

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