

## Doing (prison) Research Differently: Reflections on Autoethnography and 'Emotional Recall'

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### Abstract

This paper offers a reflection on both the family of methods called *autoethnography* and on the experience of doing autoethnography in practice as a follow-up to a prison ethnography. By engaging with the literature on autoethnography, it provides an overview of the methodology and focuses on one particular experience of *doing* (prison) research differently by adopting the notion of *emotional recall* as a heuristic tool. More specifically, this paper shows how emotional recall was vital to yielding a substantive research finding through autoethnographic re-engagement with data collected during an ethnography of prison officers' threat of the use of force in an Italian prison. Through autoethnography, prison officers' favouritism towards Mafioso was found to be a key aspect of officers' use of discretion in the prison setting.

### Key words

Qualitative methodology; emotional recall; discretion; prison officers; Mafioso; autoethnography

### Resumen

Este artículo ofrece una reflexión en torno a la familia de métodos llamada *autoetnografía*, así como a la experiencia de practicar la autoetnografía como continuación de una etnografía carcelaria. A través de una inmersión en la literatura sobre autoetnografía, proporciona un repaso de dicha metodología y se centra en una experiencia particular de *hacer* investigación (penitenciaria) de una forma diferente, a través del *recuerdo emocional* como instrumento heurístico. De forma más específica, el artículo muestra cómo el recuerdo emocional fue clave para un hallazgo investigativo sustancial mediante un nuevo análisis autoetnográfico de datos obtenidos durante una etnografía de la amenaza del uso de la fuerza por parte de los funcionarios en una prisión italiana. Mediante la autoetnografía, se descubrió que el favoritismo de los funcionarios hacia los mafiosos era un aspecto clave en el uso de la discreción por parte de los funcionarios.

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**Palabras clave**

Metodología cualitativa; recuerdo emocional; discreción; funcionarios de prisiones; mafioso; autoetnografía

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## 1. Introduction

Sir Social Science Rants: *Autoethnography isn't sufficiently realist or scientific; it's too aesthetic and literary. Your data aren't real data. Your approach is not rigorous. You provide no systematic analysis. Where's the theory? The literature review? The hypotheses? Science shouldn't be literary, aesthetic, emotional, or therapeutic. Autoethnography isn't legitimate social science. Besides, the kind of reflexivity you embrace is already part and parcel of realist ethnography (...).*

Madam Post-Structuralist Rants: *Autoethnography is too realist and linear. You autoethnographers are naïve realists who think you can reveal the secret self. The self is an illusion; it's unknowable. You need to problematize and destabilize the idea of the "real" self, make it performative, show how the self is a social construction. Be more critical! (...)*

Ms. Aesthetic Rants: *Autoethnography isn't sufficiently aesthetic and literary and it is too concerned with being science. You don't write well enough to carry off the aesthetic and literary goals of autoethnography. You're second-rate writers and poets confused about your project. (Ellis 2009, pp. 371-372; emphasis in original)*

This paper focuses on method (or rubric of methods) called "autoethnography" (Ellis *et al.* 2011, Holman Jones *et al.* 2013, Adams *et al.* 2015, Gariglio 2017, Gariglio and Ellis, forthcoming 2018). In the opening quote above, Ellis (2009) illustrates in a brilliant, hilarious, and clear way the gist of the critiques that this research approach has attracted over the recent years. Her paper *Fighting Back or Moving on: An Autoethnographic Response to Critics* is a key text, not only for readers interested in autoethnography, but also for those concerned with methodological disputes in the social sciences, and in ethnographic practice and reflexivity in particular.

Ellis embeds a quite novel way to address criticism in academia by adopting persuasive—yet quite unusual—language in mainstream sociology, at least in Italy. She defends *her* method by describing the high level of attention and criticism that autoethnography has attracted so far. In fact, she suggests that "[a]utoethnography is not being ignored; it has gained enough of a following that critics feel it is important to challenge it in order to hold onto the hegemony of their way of doing research" (Ellis 2009, 373; see also Gariglio and Ellis, forthcoming 2018). Although Ellis's argument here is debatable, it is noteworthy that, by "resisting the impulse to take a defensive or attacking posture against all these criticisms" (Ellis 2009, 372), she is able not only to tackle methodological orthodoxy, but also to propose a methodological pluralism, which is able to recognise the moral necessity "to find some way to live with these differences [in methodological approach] rather than [trying to] resolve them" (Ellis 2009, 373; see also Ellis and Bochner 2006).

I am, admittedly, a *realist* ethnographer (Gariglio 2016b, 2018a) and a photographer who is learning to use autoethnography; yet, my interest in autoethnography is much older. Despite the boundaries between autoethnography and ethnography being fuzzy and often contested (Denzin 2006, Ellis 2009, Gobo and Molle 2016, Gariglio and Ellis, forthcoming 2018), incorporating autoethnography into prison research has been challenging (see Gariglio 2018b). Endorsing a *critical* realist epistemology when doing ethnography, I initially judged autoethnography along the lines, to put it bluntly, of that proposed by *Sir Social Science* in Ellis's quote at the beginning of this paper; and yet, I was more accepting of it. I am particularly struck by Ellis's (2009) argumentation and appreciated how my personal approach to autoethnography was challenged. In this paper, I sketch how I employed autoethnography both as a means to further enhance my previous ethnographic findings (Gariglio 2018a) and to respond to an emergent research interest that was off my previous research agenda and was therefore not the main focus of any of the data I had collected before.

This paper is divided into four parts. Section 2 provides a brief introduction to autoethnography, focusing more in particular on Ellis's concept of "emotional recall". In the third part, I discuss the methodological path that led me from *doing* ethnography to also *doing* autoethnography. I then focus on the subjective

experience of adopting emotional recall as a heuristic tool, and lastly, conclude by outlining a key finding that emerged through the autoethnographic approach of emotional recall.

## 2. Autoethnography and emotional recall: a reflexive qualitative research approach

Autoethnography is best understood as *more* than a family of different qualitative “research methods and practices” (differing from autobiography) [Holman Jones *et al.* 2013, p. 17; see also Ellis and Bochner 2016]; it is an approach that unpacks the relationships between the researcher’s experience and embodied experience, on the one hand, and Culture and cultural practices, on the other; “autoethnographic texts typically feel more self and socially conscious than autobiographic works; the intent to describe cultural experience marks this difference” (Holman Jones *et al.* 2013, 23). This family of methods is relatively new in the social sciences (Douglas and Carless 2013). Following Chang (2008), I consider autoethnography to be both a research method and an approach by which a social scientist “interject[s] personal experience into ethnographic writing” (Reed-Danahay 1997, 2). Autoethnography is “an emerging qualitative research method that allows the author to write in a highly personalized style, drawing on his or her experience *to extend understanding about a societal phenomenon*” (Wall 2006, 146, emphasis added; see also Ellis 1999, 2008, Ellis and Bochner 2000, Spry 2011). Authoritatively, Ellis and Bochner describe (evocative) ethnography by writing:

Autoethnography shows struggles, passion, embodied life, and the collaborative creation of sense making in situations in which people have to cope with the circumstances and loss of meaning. Autoethnography wants the reader to care, to feel, to empathize, and to do something, to act (...) and it shouldn’t be used as a vehicle to produce distant theorizing. (Ellis and Bochner 2006, 433)

Then, Bochner adds: “We focus on aesthetics and our link to arts and humanities rather than Thruth claims and our link to science” (Ellis and Bochner 2006, 434).

Despite being relatively new, autoethnography “is now considered [by some qualitative social scientists] one of the most emergent and interesting research practices in the field of anthropology and sociology (...). It is a genre of research and writing that connects the personal to the cultural, placing the self within a social context and offering a deep understanding of it” (Gobo and Molle 2016, p. 66). However, there is only some agreement about what autoethnography as such should be (see Holman Jones *et al.* 2013). Instead, there is a plurality of ways of thinking and doing autoethnography *out there*. Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 739) offer a long list of “similarly situated terms” that fit within the broad rubric of autoethnography (see Ellis and Bochner 1996).

Anderson (2006) provides a dichotomy of approaches situated between two opposite types of autoethnography that, despite the critics it attracted (for one, see Ellis and Bochner 2006), still helps, in my opinion, to shape the autoethnographic field (*sensu* Bourdieu). On the one side, there is “analytic autoethnography”, which is “scholarly, with a more mainstream ethnographic understanding of self as connected to a particular ethnographic context rather than the focus of it” (Wall 2016, 2) [in general terms one might say it is the realists’, or *empiricists*’, kind of autoethnography]. In this approach, autoethnography seems to blur into more traditional ethnographic practices characterized by a strong emphasis on reflexivity and the researcher’s agency (Cardano 2009). Bochner is skeptical about analytic autoethnography, which he seems not to consider autoethnography at all; he defines it instead as “just another genre of realist ethnography”<sup>1</sup> (Ellis and Bochner 2006, 432). That blurred relationships between (analytic) autoethnography and ethnography was what

<sup>1</sup> Bochner had a suspicion that analytic autoethnography could have a hidden agenda. “I guess my fear is that analytic autoethnography may be an unconscious attempt by realists to appropriate autoethnography and turn it into mainstream ethnography” (Ellis and Bochner 2006, p. 433).

appealed me and made me think of experimenting with writing an autoethnography. Ellis is also unsure about Anderson's version of autoethnography; yet, I agree with her when she appreciates Anderson's capacity to build a bridge between (evocative) autoethnography and ethnography and by doing so, to allow for a greater cohesion of the autoethnographic and ethnographic fields; moreover she also appreciate Anderson's effort to expand autoethnography's audience.

According to Anderson, analytic autoethnography tends to focus both on the researcher's self, on crucial social problems, on analysis and theorization.<sup>2</sup> Here, the boundaries between ethnography and autoethnography blur into one another; the difference between the two remains ambiguous.<sup>3</sup> "For as autoethnographers, we are, first and foremost, ethnographers who recognize and honor our deep connections with, rather than separation from, the [ethnographic] communities of which we are part" (Anderson and Glass-Coffin 2013, 59).

On the other end of the continuum<sup>4</sup> is evocative autoethnography, which is characterized by a more evident late-modern approach and is often disseminated in varied, and sometimes innovative, textual formats, such as poems, films, and photo diaries (Chaplin 2011) as well as "news of the day (NEWSREEL) [...], historical advertisements, [and] maps" (Denzin 2006, 423). Evocative autoethnographic research is tends to be confessional, emotive, detailed, and very interested in the texts as such, and, more often than not, relays the researcher's experience and his or her emotions, or the research process, rather than dealing directly with social problems *out there*. Evocative autoethnography is thus "a form of ethnographic enquiry that maintains a strong focus upon the researcher's biographic and emotive self" (Wakeman 2014, 705). Ellis and Bochner performed and somewhat designed autoethnography as a way to challenge ethnography's detachment, in favour of a stronger researcher's engagement, involvement and participation. (Ellis and Bochner 2006).

From a critical realist standpoint, I am less attuned to perform the (more radical and innovative) evocative autoethnography, preferring instead analytic autoethnography. Analytic autoethnography focuses on substantive issues, rather than on stories; yet, by the way, it can also be evocative, at least in my opinion (cf. Bochner in Ellis and Bochner 2006; see Gariglio and Ellis, forthcoming 2018). On the same token, substantive issues, analysis and theorization can also be crucial, yet differently, to evocative autoethnographers who see texts as theory (personal communication: recorded interview with Carolyn Ellis, October 2017). In other words, Anderson distinction is far from being a dichotomy; rather it is a fuzzy and blurred.

Moreover, I am also intrigued as a reader and as a writer by the literary experiments conducted by evocative autoethnographers, as well as by the plurality of multisensory and multivoiced (Ellis *et al.* 2017) textual forms that autoethnography and ethnography can take. Concurrently I am also stimulated by the varying development of autoethnography; to cite but a few: *Global autoethnography, critical autoethnography* (Boylorn and Orbe 2014), and *EXO autoethnography* (Denejkina 2017).<sup>5</sup>

In sum, autoethnography is a method that still operates at the "frontiers" of the mainstream social science (Ellis 1999, Kane 2004, Wakeman 2014); it has been both stimulating and inspiring to me as a reader for quite some time, although I never

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<sup>2</sup> According to Bochner, Anderson's approach would result in an "aloof autoethnography" fixed to the empiricist agenda. On the contrary, according to Bochner, evocative autoethnographers would do analysis and theorizing differently, by working on the stories (Ellis and Bochner 2006, 436).

<sup>3</sup> I thank Mario Cardano who suggested that I make this point explicit.

<sup>4</sup> See also Ellis's *Chart of impressionist and Realist Ethnography* (Ellis 2004, pp. 359-363).

<sup>5</sup> The method of exo-autoethnographic research and writing has been developed for the qualitative study into transgenerational transmission of trauma, moving beyond the personal experience of the researcher. In this first and preliminary conception, the method aims to connect the present with a history of the other through transgenerational transmission of trauma and/or experiences of an upbringing influenced by parental trauma (Denejkina 2017, para. 1).

even imagined adopting it in my own research before. However, it remains true that there is still some suspicion among both sociologists (and criminologists), in Italy and beyond, about embracing such a method in terms of how it might weaken “the case for sociology [and criminology] as science” (Ellis 1991, 27).

The fuzzy and challenging relationship between art and science, which is one of the layers that form the backdrop of the debates around autoethnography *versus* ethnography has long interested me (Gariglio 2010) perhaps due to my background in photography, sociology (and the combination of the two), and visual research methods. Ellis (1999, 674) has reframed the relationship between art and science, suggesting: “[I]f you viewed your project as closer to art than science, then your goal would not be so much to portray the facts of what happened to you accurately but instead to convey the meanings you attached to the experience”. She has also reinterpreted the role of validity and generalizability, adapting them to autoethnography. Not only does Ellis (1999) challenge the existence of a “single standard truth” (a position emerged already in *writing culture debate*, post-structuralism, feminism, and so on), she also clearly shifts her argumentation toward creating research outputs based on verisimilitude rather than truth (which is also not particularly a new position). Moreover, Ellis suggests an interpretation of validity focused on the pragmatic effect the research would be able to produce in the real world, both on participants and on the researcher, rather than *only* within academic self-referential circles (Ellis 1999, 2008).

Ellis’s (1991) attention to the multifaceted, ambivalent and even contradictory nature of emotions is particularly important, especially in the context of my own ethnographic work in carceral environments. For the purposes of this paper, my primary focus is on her strategy of emotional recall (Ellis 1999) as a heuristic tool in constructing an autoethnographic account.<sup>6</sup> Ellis’s recognition of the complexity of emotions also ties into my work because I had already used emotion as a key component to construct my ethnographic account (Gariglio 2018a). I have therefore adopted—and adapted—her tool of emotional recall, which she describes as follows:

I use a process of emotional recall in which I imagine being back in the scene emotionally and physically. If you can revisit the scene emotionally, then you remember other details. The advantage of writing close to the time of the event is that it doesn’t take much effort to access lived emotions—they’re often there whether you want them to be or not. The disadvantage is that being so involved in the scene emotionally means that it’s difficult to get outside it to [analyse] from a cultural perspective. Yet, both of these processes, moving in and moving out, are necessary to produce an effective autoethnography. That’s why it’s good to write about an event while your feelings are still intense and then to go back to it when you’re emotionally distant. (Ellis 1999, 675)

Following Ellis’s description of the process of emotional recall, not only did I use what I had written, photographed, and video-recorded during fieldwork, but I also made an effort to *return* to the scene emotionally. By re-reading my field notes and, concurrently, by looking back at the images and video produced, I re-experienced differently what I had already experienced doing fieldwork, eventually free from the previous research agenda’s constraints. In so doing, I triggered new emotions as well as recollected older ones still in my memory (even though discerning between the two is not easy, if at all possible) about aspects of my experience which had not been in focus before. My process of emotional recall was facilitated by the large quantity of recorded visual material (photographs, video clips, and drawings) and video-recorded interviews that I had collected. These took me back into the ethnographic field as a way of eliciting and stimulating memories, emotions, and thoughts, which in turn were ready to be challenged by new research questions. Images worked better than written accounts in this process. Emotional recall was quite an intriguing and

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<sup>6</sup> It would also be possible and useful to focus on the use of emotional recall in doing ethnography reflexively.

unpredictable approach, which I would strongly recommend to any ethnographer who is interested in the study of emotions and is open to re-challenging, or just making more complex and multifaceted, his or her previous understanding and/or description of the field (Wakeman 2014). However, I would also advise researchers to be attentive to the challenges associated with this method. Doing emotional recall on sensitive issues can be daunting and draining for the researcher, and might initiate new stresses and strong emotions. Old trauma or unbearable experiences might re-emerge in different and unpredictable forms.

### 2.1 Autoethnography: advantages and criticism

There are different approaches to autoethnography identified in the literature as we already introduced above. All in all it is important to stress that, according to Holman Jones *et al.* (2013), the emergence of autoethnography as a whole was influenced by four factors: 1) a growing appreciation for qualitative inquiry and, concurrently, a growing scepticism towards scientific knowledge; 2) attention to the politics of research and its ethical dimension; 3) the so-called literary turn and the growing attention for emotion and the body; 4) attention to social identities. (see Holman Jones *et al.* 2013, pp. 25-32). The *Handbook of Autoethnography* describes five goals characterizing, to a greater or minor extent autoethnography: 1) Overcoming traditional method and forms of inquiry; 2) the importance of the ethnographic I and of Insider knowledge; 3) exposing the vulnerability of the researcher; 4) being normative and taking side; 5) disseminate knowledge outside of the academic elite.

The adoption of autoethnography in prison research is far from new; Jewkes (2011), for instance, discusses using autoethnography in prison research and focuses on the role of the ethnographer's emotions and research experience, which, according to her, is too often neglected in mainstream publications. In *Autoethnography and Emotion as Intellectual Resources: Doing Prison Research Differently*, she suggests that "an acknowledgment that subjective experience and emotional responsiveness can play a role in the formulation of knowledge would deepen our understanding of the people and contexts we study" (Jewkes 2011, 72). Other scholars are more skeptical and criticize autoethnography more or less openly. In a recent article entitled *Masculinity, Emotion and Prison Research*, Crewe (2014, 401), responding to Jewkes, critically observes that "[o]ften, as researchers, we cannot see what is placed before our eyes, focusing too closely to catch the detail of the very things we want to see". Yet other critics contest the very nature (or specificity) of the different approaches to autoethnography, considering them simply as another version of ethnography. For instance, Denzin (2006, 421) has contested analytic autoethnography, arguing that "[g]ood ethnographers [adopting an interactionist perspective] have always believed in documenting and analysing [a social setting, a social group, or a social problem] for fellow scholars. They have gone for the best data, never losing sight of their research focus, even when studying insider meanings, including their own! [Just as autoethnography does]".

Although I agree with Jewkes's emphasis on researchers' own selves and emotions, Crewe makes a crucial point when he argues that focusing only or mainly on the research subject and his or her emotions—like some evocative autoethnography suggests doing—rather than on the substantive issues at stake *out there*, can reduce the scope of autoethnography. It is thus important to keep the specificities of autoethnography in mind, which distinguishes this approach from the many versions of ethnography. In this respect, Ellis's call for methodological pluralism, reciprocal respect, and mutual recognition is especially cogent.

Just as the notion of reflexivity has gained acceptance in most mainstream ethnographic approaches, it is likely that the visibility of autoethnographic approaches will grow as well. Autoethnography is certainly not a one-size-fits-all approach; neither are ethnography or any other social research methods. Collaboration between ethnographers and autoethnographer is not only possible but



also preferable in some occasions, Ellis told me in a recent interview (Gariglio and Ellis, forthcoming 2018).

Critics argue that autoethnography has only limited applicability due to its emphasis on the author and the apparent disappearance of the substantive research topic—although as we have seen above, this applies mainly to evocative ethnography. Common criticisms of autoethnography include (a) solipsism and narcissism, (b) the absence of results and theorization, and (c) the problem of being immune to peers' critiques (see Ploder and Stadlbauer 2016). However, in the extant literature on autoethnography, these criticisms are not always in focus. Moreover, if plausible, such concerns would also apply to some versions of ethnography too. Despite Charmaz's (2006, p. 397) apt observation that "[w]hat stands as autoethnography remains unclear and contested", it may be useful to *see* and *tell* the same thing differently; that is, autoethnography—either combined with ethnography or on its own—is an emergent, hybrid, intrinsically interdisciplinary *bricolage* of methods,<sup>7</sup> which all together are capable of linking the social sciences and the humanities in new and often unexpected and unpredictable ways.

While it may be the case that, on the one side, some autoethnographers are keen to experiment with language rather than focusing on a particular *social* research topic and, on the other side, other autoethnographers focus instead on the social settings, social groups, or social problems they study, this polarization within the method (and I do not touch on what occurs within the continuum in between one *extreme* and the other) is characteristic (albeit in different ways) in both autoethnography and ethnography. Therefore, it is strange that autoethnography is attacked on this basis—and even more so when done by ethnographers.

### 3. 'Doing' autoethnography through emotional recall

Cognizant of both the advantages and disadvantages of the broad rubric of autoethnography introduced above, as well as my propensity for a critical realist ethnographic approach, I experimented with the use of an analytic autoethnography. In what follows, I describe my approach, which involved staying more towards the analytical pole and not only (or mainly) focusing on myself and my emotions as such, but, more importantly, expanding the previous research finding in a new direction *ex post* and reconsidering that ethnographic experience by adopting new lens: emotional recall. Like Wall (2016, 8), "I believe in autoethnography, which uses 'the power of one' to explore and critically analyse the complexity of social events or topics for the purpose of transformation and social justice". Consequently, I began to tackle the topic of favouritism in prison, which was a marginal topic in my ethnography, by (re)constructing new data and adopting different and more in-depth interpretations. In fact, for this paper, the autoethnographic approach enabled me to recall old memories, emotions, and thoughts more freely, which may relate to my experiences back *in the field* as well as to how I feel and think about those past experiences in the present.

Despite its apparent *easiness*, writing autoethnography is not an easy task (Wall 2008) and neither is it the best option when one needs a paper to be accepted quickly for publication.

In his autoethnography of memory, Poulos (2016) interrogates himself on his own practice of writing an autoethnography using his memory and lyrics. He raises a number of important questions necessary for challenging myself and the reader on the logic and the legitimacy of following such a contested social scientific approach in an effort to contribute to the collective construction of academic truths about discretion in prison settings.

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<sup>7</sup> I also consider my ethnographic approach as a bricolage (Gariglio 2018a).

How does memory serve the larger project of human Being? How does writing my way through these random memories build its way into connective bridges that span the gaps between me and you, between past and present, between what was then and what comes next, between self and world (...), between events and emotions? Where would I be without my memories? Where am I *with* them, with these particular memories? How do they all link up? What could it all mean? (...). (Poulos 2016, pp. 556–557)

Poulos (2016) does not seem have any clear answers to these puzzling questions and neither do I. Yet, these questions have challenged me to move beyond the practice of doing ethnography *as usual*. By taking my memories into account, and considering how I translated them, I aimed to address this topic autoethnographically by experimenting with emotional recall.

A year and a half or so after I concluded my fieldwork, I am still psychologically affected by it. The experience of imprisonment is simply too heavy to bear even if only vicariously whilst doing research. Despite my will and wish to do so, I have not been able to move on from these experiences. In the process of writing this article, my memory has urged me to go back and forth, time and again, to a few episodes and stories of the use of discretion by prison officers. However, my renewed focus on these episodes has developed slowly and progressively, which seems characteristic of this methodological approach. In doing so, new questions have emerged: Why was favouritism barely visible to me before? To what extent were those episodes as important back then as they seem to be now? Why did I look at something else instead? Were those episodes really outside of my research questions or what else explains this lapse?

Through reading and re-reading my field notes and consulting other data I collected during my ethnography as part of the process of emotional recall, many episodes are now relevant that did not appear so at the time of the fieldwork or immediately afterwards, when writing it up. These episodes hardly entered my research archive and neither were they included in my ethnographic reports. During my fieldwork, not only was I focused on something else, but such episodes (from my critical realist ethnographic position) also appeared too personal and limited in number to be worth any consideration from the perspective I adopted back then. However, it worth noting, following Ellis (1991, 29), that “autoethnography and sociological introspection<sup>8</sup> are no more mediated or retrospective than any other method (...). We cannot study ‘unmediated’ pure thought using any method. All reflection is of the past”.

Referring to my ethnographic fieldwork, prison officers’ violation of human rights was definitely *not* the focus of my ethnography; nor is it now in this methods paper. As noted above, my ethnography was in fact concerned with the observation of prison officers’ lawful practices following a so-called critical event. Towards the end of the ethnography, however, I started to deepen my interest in prison officers’ use of discretion—an emergent research finding that I only touched in that work and I am developing more now. I was puzzled by what I had experienced and wanted to focus on it by sociological introspection (see also Ellis 2008). My ethnographic *dataset* was not sufficient to study officers’ use of discretion ethnographically as the topic was not a key focus of my ethnography. To explore the issue further, I decided to move forward and look for a feasible solution, which I found using the autoethnographic process of emotional recall.

The first step was to return to what I had already written and to re-read whilst adopting a different standpoint and then, more importantly, to return to the empirical

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<sup>8</sup> Ellis (1991, pp. 28-29) views sociological introspection as “a social process as well as a psychological one. It is active thinking about one’s thoughts and feelings; it emerges from social interaction; it occurs in response to bodily sensations, mental processes and external stimuli as well as affecting these same processes. It is not just listening to one voice arising alone in one’s head; usually, it consists of interacting voices, which are products of social forces and roles”.

*raw* material I had in my ethnographic dataset. Unfortunately, I hardly found anything directly linked to the emerging topics of discretion embedded in prison officers' practices. I had almost not touched on such issues in my field notes and nor were these issues discussed at any length in the interviews. In other words, despite my emerging interest in discretion, I had hardly any ethnographic data to actually study either of them by simply adopting my ethnographic perspective.

In order to address this situation, I returned to all of the material I had collected for the ethnography to reconsider it thoroughly. I wanted to try re-working the data from a different angle. Eventually, I re-encountered a video clip in which I had recorded myself talking in front of a mirror in a prison toilet. That toilet was located next to Gino's<sup>9</sup> office. Gino was a social worker that I was interviewing before I broke down in tears and rushed from his office into that toilet to hide myself. I recorded that video clip immediately after the emotional crisis I experienced, which urged me to stop interviewing Gino. In that video clip, I say:

I just had a nervous crisis. [2 second pause] I felt hysterical. I suddenly felt very bad and got worried about myself. Now I'm leaving the prison and going downtown. It's two o'clock. I must stop interviewing... eh... be... because... Andrea [a prisoner] died this morning, and I just experienced a prison officer's assault. I can't stand it all. It is overwhelming. The social worker just told me not to come back anytime soon, at least for few weeks. (Verbatim transcript of the video clip; my translation)

In re-watching this video clip, I could remember clearly what occurred back then. I was also able to remember that I recorded that video in order to fix my thoughts with the intention of transcribing it afterwards. I used the camera to 'scribble' my thoughts because I was feeling unable to use my pen and paper notebook due to my emotional state of mind and my shaking hands. After a short period of time, once I regained control of my emotions, I recorded those few words. The clip is dated 24 December 2014, at 11:34, and is only 26 seconds long. It simply consists of me talking to myself in front of the mirror.

This short video clip remained hidden in my ethnography's archive, amongst a lot of other visual material, for almost two years. Afterwards, I realised that not only is it the lone video clip produced as a substitute for a written note on paper, but also that I never returned to that clip during the analysis; it seems that I had removed it from my memory. Unexpectedly, I *discovered* the clip again when re-examining the available empirical material as a means to consider those data differently. By watching the short video clip, I experienced for the first time what Ellis (1999) calls a "process of emotional recall", albeit an unintended one. This unpredictable encounter with myself talking to the mirror is a case of serendipity, one which allowed me to consider a new way to approach the ethnographic data.

#### **4. 'Doing' emotional recall: a personal experience into (auto)ethnographic writing**

By following the process of emotional recall, I revisited the field and many memories and emotions came back to my mind. I felt the need to re-think what occurred in my *failed* interview with Gino.

North of Italy, 24 December 2014. I have been working inside this f\*\*\*\*\*g wing for male adults for some months, mainly working side-by-side with officers in just one wing for many hours a day. I have been following their interventions after so-called critical events time and again. I'm starting to feel that it's too much. Situations start to become disgusting —or boring— and occasionally annoying. Many routines and interactions, even heavy or violent ones, start to appear like *déjà vu*. Sometimes, even officers' and prisoners' small talk becomes disturbing. I simply need a break, I'm starting to feel almost anesthetized as well as, concurrently, vulnerable, traumatized, and unsure. Can I bear all of this? Everything happening in front of me

<sup>9</sup> All names in this paper are pseudonyms.

seems kind of the same, and I cannot distinguish what's right or wrong anymore; I need to quit the field for some time. On occasion I cannot refrain from crying and that's not normal at all to me. I don't feel that crying is appropriate in here. I am afraid of my tears; they are unacceptable to me. I am not used to crying; I am kind of proud to be considered (and to consider myself) to be kind of cynical most of the time. However, slowly, slowly, I feel I am changing; now I'm starting to feel differently and I'm beginning to dislike it. (Vignette 1. Ex-post reconstruction of my thoughts and emotions after an interview with a prison social worker)

The narrative above (Vignette 1) is a possible reconstruction of what I now remember and how I feel about the time when I broke down in tears in front of Gino. It is a partial outcome of only a short cross-section of emotions, which emerged through the process of emotional recall while looking at the video clip introduced above. Many more sequences of emotion and thoughts emerged by interrogating myself using the large research archive material of that field, which cannot be discussed here due to space constraints.

However, another pertinent question is whether my ideas about, and my performance of, masculinity within such a masculine and (almost exclusively) male world influenced my own reaction to my tears. What would have happened if I had a more 'feminine' attitude or if I was in a mixed-gender context or in a female prison? Despite being attentive to gendered modes of behaviour of the research participants, do I still incorporate and reproduce masculine codes to such an extent as to not be able to accept the display of any weakness of mine under any circumstance? Or was I simply worried about losing my research access by showing my emotional side to the officers, thereby undermining my reputation of toughness, which allowed me to participate in emergency interventions in the prison? How can I try to describe the complexity of these emotions? To what extent does what I am feeling now relate to what I felt back then? I currently do not have clear answers to these questions. For now, employing an autoethnographic method enables me to assess these experiences and emotions and disclose them publicly, through this process of writing autoethnography. It is not that much, yet it feels like a first step in a good direction.

Interestingly, despite forgetting for quite some time that critical interview with Gino that ended in tears, I have continued to remember several short, violent critical episodes that preceded that interview and which likely influenced what occurred. Prior to the interview, I was following one officer who was escorting a group of prisoners to exercise in the yard. Returning to the wing from the yard about an hour and a half later with the same officer and group of inmates, I was involved in a critical event in which a prisoner assaulted the escorting officer. In this event, one prisoner hit the officer on his face in an unpredictable and unprovoked attack. This all occurred just a few steps from me. The incident took place on the stairs when the officer, the prisoner, and I were about to enter the wing. A prisoner also unintentionally pushed me to the ground during the incident. I fell to the floor without any physical consequence, although I did feel strong emotions, temporary pain, and fear. That same morning, a few hours before the assault, I had been surprised by the news of the death of a prisoner on *my* wing who I had both photographed and interviewed before. Furthermore, I had also observed a Mafioso with *attitude* behave very badly and violently towards other prisoners without consequence. Despite the assault, and with the prisoner's death clearly fixed in my memory, no trace of that *failed interview* or of that Mafioso's violent behaviour were incorporated into any of my field notes; these events re-emerged through the process of emotional recall.

Through this analysis, questions emerge as to why (or how) these episodes were (temporarily) deleted from my active memory, and why, at the time, I considered them marginal within the ethnography rather than crucial. In addition, what, if anything, can these experiences tell us about my relationships in the field and about my research agenda? What about my research practice? Can it help to disclose any hidden, unconscious, political dimensions in my practice?

While this is not the place to debate the merits or limitations of human memory, the crucial point here is methodological. If memory itself is a selective construction, what about the thoughts and emotions constructed by the process of emotional recall? To consider this question, I dug deeply into myself, challenging my understanding of what I experienced retrospectively, rather than accepting, forgetting, or even denying what I remember I had experienced or have been told. It is challenging to adopt autoethnography whilst using such a heterogeneous set of empirical material mediated by memory and emotions. It can only lead to open reflections and uncertain depictions.

I now turn to introduce the issue of prison officers' discretion and their response to *critical events*. In conclusion, I introduce the gist of the main finding of my autoethnography: prison officers' favouritism towards inmates belonging to one organized crime group in a wing governed under an ordinary prison regime.<sup>10</sup>

## 5. Prison officers' discretion and their response to 'critical events'

Within Italian prisons and custodial institutions, critical events can be understood as social constructions that can justify prison officers' use of force against one or more inmates (Gariglio 2016a). Critical events can be any event occurring inside the prison walls that are formally constructed as such by the prison rules and consequently reported on the appropriate critical event register, if available. However, any event can also be either *informally* constructed as a critical event, or left unnoticed by officers patrolling the prison wing (Gariglio 2018a). Each prison officer on duty on the wing is continuously involved in potentially disturbing, annoying, dangerous, and/or violent situations and can respond to each and every one of those occurrences by either turning a blind eye or adopting various "means of influence" (Kauffman 1988) such as negotiation, persuasion, inducement, rewards, manipulation (see also Crewe 2009), and threats (Gariglio 2018a).

The construction of a critical event is far from a neutral process and involves a set of personal, professional, and social values, norms, and routines imbued in prison officers' cultures and connected to a set of formal and informal routines. The likelihood that a particular occurrence is transformed into a critical event relates not only to its damaging effect or intrinsic violence, but rather is also linked to other factors such as the prisoner's status and reputation, the previous chains of interaction in which a particular prisoner and a particular officer have been involved, personal idiosyncrasies, and so on (Gariglio 2018a). Any violent behaviour, annoying attitude, bullying or even minor sign of protest is therefore more or less likely to be constructed as a critical event at a one time or another. Prison officers' discretion plays therefore a crucial role in that process.

### 5.1. About discretion

From its outset, prison ethnography touched on the central role of prison officers' discretion (Sykes 1958). Nowadays, most prison sociologists share the assumption that prison officers have to resort to de facto discretionary decisions continuously as they go about their job in order to be able to translate the law into practice (Liebling 2000). Liebling's (2000) article *Prison officers, policing and the use of discretion* was among the first contributions to address head-on the issue of discretion in contemporary prison studies.

Following Hawkins (1992, 11, cited in Liebling *et al.* 2011, 121), discretion is inevitable because the translation of rule into action, the process by which abstraction becomes actuality, involves people in interpretation and choice. Law is essentially an interpretative enterprise in which discretionary behaviour is compelled by "(...) the

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<sup>10</sup> A different story might emerge from studying those prisoners or prison wings ruled by the so-called *41 bis prison regime* in which only upper-hierarchy Mafioso are kept in custody under strict surveillance that many define as inhuman (see De Carolis 2012, Siino 2015, Puma 2016, Kalica 2016).

vagary of language, the diversity of circumstances, and the indeterminacy of official purposes”.

Lipsky (2010, p. xi) offers a liminal sociological interpretation of discretion, arguing that in street-level bureaucracies—particularly so with “nonvoluntary clients” held in coercive public agencies such as prisons or police departments— “workers interact and have wide discretion over the dispensation of benefits or the allocation of public sanction”. He demonstrates that discretion is necessarily a structural dimension of decision-making for any “street-level” staff member working in a bureaucratic organization (Lipsky 2010). First, lower-level staff enjoy a relative autonomy from the organizational authority. Second, there are some structural differences between street-level bureaucrats and managers. Lastly, low-level workers always have some resources of resistance with which they can decide to what extent to comply with high-hierarchical decisions, rules, and orders (Lipsky 2010). However, the fact that discretion is necessarily a structural dimension of decision-making, does not imply that it is unproblematic. On the contrary, its unintended effect ought to be studied carefully. This autoethnography is an effort to do so.

Another crucial contribution on discretion is Dworkin’s<sup>11</sup> (1977) book *Taking Rights Seriously*, which analyses the concept of discretion from a liberal theory of law perspective. In order to illustrate his own interpretation of discretion, Dworkin (1977, 31) adopts a very clear metaphor: “Discretion, like the hole in the doughnut, does not exist except as an area left open by a surrounding belt of restriction”. This metaphor clearly expresses the way in which discretion depends on the context in which it takes place. Moreover, Dworkin presents a distinction between discretion used in a weak sense and discretion used in a strong sense. Discretion is used in a weak sense when it simply implies that to apply a rule, a subordinate is required to use his or her judgment. In other words, rules cannot be simply applied mechanically, but need to be translated into practice. Discretion is used in a strong sense when an individual “is simply not bound by standards set by the authority in question” (Dworkin 1977, 32). Rather, the “strong sense of discretion is not tantamount to licence, and does not exclude criticism. Almost any situation in which a person acts (...) makes relevant certain standards of rationality, fairness, and effectiveness” (Dworkin 1977, 33).

Following Dworkin, discretion may be inevitable but in custodial settings, strong discretion can affect prisoners’ human rights and introduce either favouritism against particular groups of prisoners (or discrimination against others). This danger is particularly high whenever discretion—even discretion intended in the weak sense—that is embedded in an officer’s decision is not compensated adequately by open accountability procedures and public control, and whenever officers’ practices are *de facto* invisible.

In Italy, despite the recent introduction of a national ombudsperson, the monitoring role of non-governmental organizations such as Antigone,<sup>12</sup> and the formal duty of the *surveillance judge*<sup>13</sup> to monitor prisons, prison officers’ accountability is still *de facto*, if not *de jure*, insufficient, according to many Italian activists and critical scholars (Chiarelli 2011, Gonnella 2013a, 2013b, Siino 2015, Torrente 2016).<sup>14</sup> I now

<sup>11</sup> I thank Joane Martel for suggesting this book to me.

<sup>12</sup> Antigone is an Italian NGO created in 1991 to deal with human rights protections in the Italian penal system. Antigone works on public opinion through campaigns, education, media, publications, and the thrice annual academic review *Antigone*. See Antigone n.d.

<sup>13</sup> In Italy, so-called *surveillance judges* (*giudici di sorveglianza*) are mandated with the legal supervision of prisons and prisoners.

<sup>14</sup> It has been argued that prison officers can also be *victims* of their working environments (Gariglio 2018a, see also Fassin 2017). More specifically, it is worth remembering that officers’ behaviours and styles of interaction, as well as their “spoiled identities” (Arnold 2005, Crawley 2013), can be affected by the institutional regime and culture in which they work, which, in turn, can negatively affect prisoners’ lives (Liebling 2004).

turn to introduce the gist of the main finding of my prison autoethnography: prison officers' favouritism towards Mafioso prisoners.

### 5.2. Reframing Mafioso favourably as 'gentlemen'

Some researchers agree that discretion is not applied randomly; on the contrary, the race, ethnicity, and gender of both prisoners and officers impact officers' discretion in relation to how they implement a particular rule on a particular occasion in a particular way with a particular human being (see Phillips 2012, Phillips and Webster 2013). For these researchers, prison officers' discretion is linked to discrimination. Relatedly, my interest here is to consider prison officers' apparent *favouritism* by looking at officers' discretionary attitudes toward organized crime prisoners held in a regular prison,<sup>15</sup> which was the site of my fieldwork. The case study presented below is one extreme example of favouritism embedded in both weak and strong forms of discretion.<sup>16</sup> Being focused on methods, this paper only introduces this example to support the plausibility and the utility of the autoethnographic method.

Umberto is a prisoner kept on the wing. He is in his cell alone —on a wing that holds 37 prisoners in a total of 25 cells— and he is looking aloof as he usually does. He is often quite rude with other prisoners; yet, he seems to be respected by most of them. If compared with his fellow prisoners, he shows a different self-confidence by staring at others directly into their eyes, often gazing provocatively. Yet, he is treated with an extraordinary level of respect by his peers most of the time. Frequently, the prison officers appear to respect him too; rarely do they challenge his ideas or conduct in front of other prisoners (I have never witnessed it). However, Umberto shows no gratitude for this undeserved treatment.

Umberto is even allowed by officers to be offensive towards other prisoners and on occasion toward low-ranking staff and rookies. Prison officers come to him and ask what he needs each and every time the Mafioso requests it. If Umberto were another prisoner displaying this manner, he would be treated differently indeed. Inexplicably, he is always treated nicely, independently of his often unbearable behaviour. A justification is always available to mitigate the possible consequences of Umberto's wrongdoing. He is not just any type of prisoner, he is a Mafioso. As such, he apparently deserves respect. (Vignette 2)

Vignette 2 is one ex-post narrative reconstruction that shows the gist of other possible similar situations. Such behaviours and interactions did not attract my attention during much of the ethnography, particularly as I was focused on the threat of the use of force. If this had attracted me, I would have collected more ethnographic data on the topic. What I recall now—and now forms the *data* of this autoethnography—is that persons convicted for organized crime were often treated favourably on the wing. They were consistently treated respectfully by both other convicts and the prison officers. None of the Mafiosos' problematic behaviours or acts of resistance, which were quite rare but still did occur, were labelled either formally or informally as a critical event in my presence. None, therefore, ever triggered the threat of the use of force. The use of force was commonly threatened in front of me to all sorts of prisoners *except* Mafioso. With them, a high degree of tolerance, negotiation, and inducement were commonly used instead. Requests and complaints by Mafioso were dealt with consistently and efficiently by the staff. Likewise, comments made by Mafioso about staff were typically more formal and respectful than those of other prisoners, but not always, as the example above of Umberto shows.

<sup>15</sup> As noted in footnote 10, the special punitive regime, the so-called 41 *bis* that has been implemented in special prisons for particularly dangerous inmates convicted of organized crime, is a completely different story. Some NGOs and one political party (Partito Radicale) are fighting politically for the abolition of this alleged inhuman regime, the so-called *carcere duro* (hard prison regime).

<sup>16</sup> At the other extreme, discretion often manifested as discrimination, which I observed directly primarily towards prisoners from the travelling community.

The unfair favouring of Mafioso (which was only a portion of the Mafioso-officers relationships) either at the expense of other prisoners or not, was not clearly visible to me during the fieldwork. Such favouritism was in fact the result of something (a critical event) that would not occur—or, more accurately, would not be constructed as such by officers—rather than occurring too frequently. This is one of the reasons why such interactions between Mafioso and prison staff only emerged afterwards by emotional recall when it became evident that force was neither threatened nor used with Mafioso at any time in front of me. I had not such a clear awareness of it before adopting emotional recall. This is not to say that Mafioso could do whatever they wished on the wing. In fact, they were locked in their cells most of the time and did not have any right to access the normal yards, being sent instead to special concrete yards with nothing in them except for a few fellow prisoners. My finding here is that Mafioso tended to be treated with more respect, independently of their behaviour or misbehaviour, compared to other less respected groups of prisoners, at least when I was present.

## 6. Concluding reflections

This methods paper is a personal examination of autoethnography conducted by a critical realist ethnographer who experimented for the first time with autoethnography by adopting Ellis's "emotional recall" (see also Wall 2006). It is the account of a researcher who learned that by *doing* autoethnography, it is possible to develop ethnography to a new level, thereby unmasking new findings from an empirical context and/or challenging or enhancing old ones.

By adopting autoethnography as a research method, reflexivity, the researcher's experience, and the research process can be put in focus without 'forgetting' social phenomena and social actors *out there*. As shown, I have approached this autoethnography by placing the method between two versions: (a) analytic autoethnography, which is focused firmly also on the ethnographic context in study, and (b) evocative autoethnography, which is particularly characterized by the use of innovative textual formats.

Some qualitative social scientists (Gobo and Molle 2016) consider autoethnography as one of the most emergent and interesting research practices in the field of anthropology and sociology. Yet, as Ellis illustrates in the quote at the beginning of this paper, autoethnography is criticised from different points of view and for different reasons, some of which contradict each other. Critics challenge autoethnography on the basis of, firstly, solipsism and narcissism; secondly, the absence of *sound* results and theorization; and, finally, the problem of being immune to peers' critiques.

I challenge these criticisms in two ways. First, most criticisms of autoethnography are, in fact, directed towards evocative autoethnography, which is seen to neglect (from critics' point of view) the ethnographic context, the research findings, and the process of peer review. Second, there are versions of late-modern ethnography that could be subjected to the same critiques. There are some interesting overlaps between autoethnography and ethnography as Ellis suggested recently (Gariglio and Ellis, forthcoming 2018); the boundaries between one another are fuzzy and may relate more to self-identity and belonging, rather than contrasting methodological perspectives.

Following Ellis (2009), I propose moving toward a less muscular and masculine confrontation between schools of thought and scholars vying to delegitimize one another. I appreciate the heuristic contributions of autoethnography on my ethnographic findings and the so far underestimated and unexplored potentials of so doing. A more useful methodological approach involves working towards a future in which the many versions of autoethnography, and the many versions of ethnography, will start (or continue) to learn and cooperate with one another whilst contributing to the development of a plural, multifaceted set of thick descriptions of the research context and the research practice. By so doing, researchers and the research



processes will not only engage more reflexively with research method and subject, but also be more open to new avenues of study among more traditional ones.

In conclusion, in an effort to defend and develop an autoethnographic approach from my ethnographer's point of view, it is important to stress the fact that by doing emotional recall, I have been able to address a crucial topic of my ethnographic study, which has retroactively influenced my previous ethnographic understanding of the ethnographic field. The findings that have emerged through the autoethnographic method, in fact, has opened up a new research agenda: what I call prison officers' favouritism towards Mafioso.

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