

'Reflexive autoethnography': Subjectivity, emotion and multiple perspectives in conservation decision-making

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Abstract

In the day-to-day practice of conservators, involving deadlines, resource challenges and management demands, there are relatively few opportunities to compare the relationship of the profession to the changing social landscape. As conservation practice itself is relatively stable, the need to question assumptions raises the challenge of how to build this reflexive record constructively into a more diachronic social discourse. A radical reflexive approach to reviewing our own practice generates opportunities to question the way we account for what we experience and, by questioning claims, assumptions, knowledge, and beliefs, to make them more transparent. In this paper a technique of collaborative autoethnography is proposed. Its aim is to support professionals in their engagement in reflexive practice and thus better represent the continual process of connection and change between the cultural context and conservation practice. A case study from a recent conservation project is used to explore the potential of this methodology. Based on this experience we argue that the profession will become more sustainable by extending its practice beyond reflection, to acting with reflexivity.

INTRODUCTION

Conservation as a discipline has grown from the technical and craft sphere such that it utilises many of the tools common to other professions. Reflective practice has been a critical thinking tool in this evolution and features heavily in our professional guides (Icon 2020). Reflection helps practitioners evaluate and improve their practice and ensure that it is located squarely within cultural, social and professional norms.

Conservation is now self-consciously value-centred (Icon 2021), with only a small rump of practitioners and heritage scientists pretending to be value-free and ignorant of the value systems imposed by their focus and priorities. The tradition of multiple narratives is growing in museums (Faherty 2022), and it is important to investigate how subjectivity, emotionality and multi-vocality can be sustained and represented in conservation practice.

There are lively debates within the field of conservation about the skills needed to be a conservator, the assault on higher education, the crisis of research and the restricted opportunities for early-career conservators (Hölling 2017, Sloggett 2022). This has posed the question: 'What is conservation?' To be a sustainable profession, must we be able to answer this question? Autoethnography contributes to this debate by seeking to define the characteristics of conservation as a culture as opposed to attempting to create a more taxonomic approach to defining conservation, such as is often associated with scientific writing (E.C.C.O. 2011).

REFLECTION

Reflection in and on conservation is a lens through which we can examine our work. Reflection has become a staple part of a conservator's development, for example Icon Professional standard 5.3, 'Reflect on and learn from your practice', makes this an essential attribute of a conservator (Icon 2020). Reflection-in-action (Schön 2017) may take the form of adjusting the gloss of a coating because the current result is incongruous with the object's significance. Reflection-on-action takes place after the project is completed and might involve a reflective review, such as asking how you might approach the task differently if you were to start it again. We should also embrace reflection-for-action, which involves reflecting on our possible future actions with the intention of making improvements. This type of reflection requires conservators to utilise their knowledge,

past experiences and observations of context (Farrell 2013) to imagine outcomes and is sometimes known as 'prospective hindsight' (Mitchell et al. 1989). When reflection-for-action considers what might go wrong, it is also known as 'pre-mortem' questioning, a technique used to guide change prior to an imagined failure (Klein 1999). In this scenario the conservator says to themselves 'imagine this project has gone wrong' and then asks, 'how did it go wrong'. With the insights from the process, mitigations can be put in place. Sometimes reflection-for-action includes imagining positive outcomes, in which the conservator can also plan to reap all the gains available in the project.

FROM REFLECTION TO REFLEXION

The familiar concept of reflective practice – undertaking a systematic and rigorous process to develop self-awareness about our performance – is essential to professional growth and thus sustainability. Although it can be argued that conservators should utilise reflective practice, we propose a greater ambition, of operating a process of reflexive practice through which we examine our own perceptions and make them more widely available for scrutiny. The conservation profession has increasingly acknowledged the multiple possibilities in conservation outcomes generated by respecting stakeholder voices and priorities. While reflection has helped in the process of broader engagement, it tends to focus on internal experience and learning, allowing improvements in our practice (Olteanu 2017). As the heritage sector turns outwards and acknowledges its place in confronting greater social challenges, so too can conservation practice benefit from this outward focus.

Reflection is the process of making logical sense of the world, it leans on ideas of logic and rationality, with a sense of things being knowable. It is an active process that supports problem-solving in context. Reflection considers what we have done or plan to do whereas reflexivity asks us to examine what we believe and how that influences our responses. Despite aspirations to objectivity, we argue that our own context, behaviours and responses cannot be separated from our decisions, and so reflection cannot be truly objective. Reflexivity complements reflection as it acknowledges and centres it.

REFLEXION

Reflexion can be understood to be cyclical in the embedding of change into practice which builds on reflection. It is a process that encourages practitioners to question their context and assumptions (including behaviours, beliefs and actions) and how these factors are situated in a social and political context. It encourages us to attend to the situatedness of knowledge and practices (Ripamonti et al. 2016) and in so doing expose those things we have taken for granted. In a profession that is comfortable with epistemological evidence, there is a danger that such forms of knowledge reduce the opportunities to explore ontological assumptions (Nadin and Cassell 2006). Reflexivity unsettles our perspectives, by exposing that the meanings we find in our work are situated within our 'own cultural historic and linguistic traditions' (Cunliffe 2003, 985), but this can be challenging for

those who believe in the pursuit of certainty. Reflexivity also encourages us to examine reality as we experience it and to question the neutrality of this reality and whether it is perceived in the same way by others.

AN INTRODUCTION TO AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

One form of research that engages with reflexion is reflexive ethnography, a form of qualitative research in which an author draws on their own experience to explore its connection to wider cultural, political and social meanings (Méndez 2013, Bochner and Ellis 2016, Stigter 2016). Autoethnography is a process to systematically describe and analyse our personal experience and thus examine broader cultural and social experiences (Cohen et al. 2018, 297). It transcends traditional aspects of arts and science in that it welcomes emotions and multiple perspectives yet opens its examination to scrutiny. Autoethnography firmly places the self in context and as such differs from autobiography, and it has a deliberate political agenda (Ibid). Current norms of what constitutes 'correct and valuable knowledge' imply that these aspects of knowledge are sought using currently acceptable techniques. However, this creates a narrow and selective version of correct knowledge – knowledge that is almost inevitably focused on that which is measurable, singular and certain. The creation of a set of correct ideologies, acceptable experts and preferred power relations will by default create a mirrored group of incorrect versions thereof. Using autoethnography to unsettle these assumptions may be one route to creating a space for traditionally excluded voices, perspectives and approaches.

Autoethnography is an opportunity to provide a witness to conservation practice in situations in which there is a danger that expert practitioners have become disconnected from their own thinking processes as their practice becomes intuitive. An example of this is the invisible or subtle hand of conservation that has been questioned as a possible component of faux neutrality (Sweetnam and Henderson 2022). Another is the sense that experienced practitioners inevitably consider more options than inexperienced ones. We believe that autoethnography is one route that established professionals can use to challenge their own actions and review their options and awareness.

COLLABORATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Having established the value of autoethnography, there remains a question of how it can be implemented in conservation. Conservators often quite reasonably say that they are interested in philosophy but are unsure how to incorporate it in their working life. Autoethnography encompasses skills common in conservation – the ability to show and tell stories, to engage others, to make accessible narratives about things – but it also involves skills that may not always be common in conservation. The witness testimony of autoethnography is often captured in rich writing (Poulos 2013, Stigter 2016) but this is not a pathway open to all. A mode of investigation is required for those who do not feel comfortable in academic or other forms of writing but who may benefit from the reflective and reflexive values of autoethnography. We propose a collaborative autoethnographic interview that leans on action-research and consists of a process in which

a supportive framework of close colleagues collaborate in developing 'a shared conceptual framework' that draws together 'discipline-based concepts, theories and methods to address a common problem' (Stokols 2006, 5), with the goal of generating 'new solutions to old, intractable problems' that 'can accommodate multiple ways of knowing' (Haeffner et al. 2022).

CRITIQUES OF AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Reflexivity is criticised for its abstraction and self-indulgent introspection (Cunliffe 2009). Autoethnography attracts similar critiques, i.e. that by abandoning objectivity as a goal and replacing it with subjectivity-as-method, with no attempt to interpret the data (Matthews 2022), it renders its outputs pointless. In autoethnography, the credibility and reliability of the subject can be questioned as can the value of the subjective assessment. To be valuable, autoethnography must also build-in a challenge to confirmation bias, which can be understood as 'an inclination to retain, or a disinclination to abandon, a favoured explanation' (McSweeney 2021).

The past does not often happen exactly as we remember it, and this is a limitation of how we utilise experience as a resource. Much like the materials conservators aim to preserve, memory can be impacted by neglect, nostalgia and narcissism. Memory is about encoding, storage and retrieval; it is influenced by differences in physical environments, self-views, concerns for behavioural and emotional regulation, socialisation and language (Ross and Wang 2010). Memory has a bidirectional relationship with culture, values, customs and rituals (Erlil et al. 2008). The benefit of a reflexive lens within an autoethnography approach is that it allows practitioners to consider how these influences impact what they 'know' (Spry 2009).

METHODOLOGY

The collaborative autoethnography process utilising a group interview is an attempt to create a pathway to autoethnography for conservators that also increases the scope for examination, scrutiny and challenge. We believe that the proposed method can be adopted by practicing conservators as part of their professional development, especially those working with an identifiable team or social network.

ESTABLISHING THE INTERVENTION

The three participants in this project were operating in the same workplace, with significant intellectual and physical overlap in their working patterns. The exercise consisted of a collaborative autoethnography process examining a single conservation event, as a focus to examine the practices of all three participants. To begin, Participant 1 selected a project of interest, and the initial elaboration of the narrative (creating a rich account) was supported by Participants 2 and 3 through prepared questions and interview.

The choice of an object was important. There was a deliberate exclusion of 'star' objects with questionable colonial pathways to the participants' conservation labs, to avoid the authoritative and self-indulgent exploitation of 'the exotic'. The object selected was one being worked on for a private

client and it was not under a specific timeline. The object was something that Participant 1 liked as it related to their own personal interests.

STRUCTURE OF THE INTERVIEW

The concept of a structured interview is informed by the work of Ripamonti et al. (2016), in their discussion of how to move action research towards reflexive practice. In the authors' approach, the aim is to expand reflections on one's own beliefs and actions and those of others and to examine how both are shaped and influenced (Ibid.). The proposed framework was adapted for a more specific conservation context. Tables 1 and 2 list some questions developed for this study. The overall aim of the exercise was to elicit a well-rounded discussion of the project in a collective autoethnographic context.

Table 1. Extract of questions asked in the first part of the interview

Column 1 Conservation event	Column 2 Elaboration questions	Column 3 Expansion question
Who else is important in this project and context?	Are there any other individuals, communities, groups or institutions that should be considered?	What is your relationship with these people and organisations?
What research did you undertake to prepare for this project?	How did you assess the proficiency of your skills and knowledge for this treatment? Did you identify any gaps in your knowledge?	Can you characterise what aspects of your decision making were influenced by theoretical knowledge versus your own empirical practice?
How did you feel about the project and did your feelings change during the project?	Do you think your emotional response towards the project has shifted over time?	Can you expand a little on the feelings you mentioned – what sits behind them?

Participant 1 led on the conservation project and was provided with a series of traditional conservation questions in advance to help all participants build a rich account and examine their perspectives on a critical event (in this case the conservation project). This started with 'Describe a conservation project task or activity that you would like to examine through this process' and moved on to ask about the intervention's context and the choice of approach. Additional questions were available for use during the interview (see examples in Table 1, Column 2) to prompt a full and self-aware account of what is known, how judgements were made and the impact of contextual influences, with the aim of elucidating a richer reflective account from Participant 1. Once a full account was produced with the support of all participants, the conversation became more reflective, using the expansion questions in Column 3. These questions, regarding interpretive memory, seek to identify influences on the conservation process and to begin to make emotions and assumptions explicit.

The above process took two and a half hours, much to the surprise of all participants, especially Participant 1, who observed that they had not realised just how much they had thought and felt about the project.

COLLECTIVE REFLEXION

Following the initial interview and discussion, the conversation broadened from a single subject to a group evaluation. Within a well-established relationship of trust, each participant embraced the shared opportunity to

engage in reflexion, culminating in conclusions and action. Participants 2 and 3 responded to the questions in Table 2, Column 1. Following this exercise, all three participants responded to questions from Columns 2 and 3. The questions in Column 2 led to more spontaneous responses and perhaps to the most insight. Dealing with Table 2 took a further two hours. The final conclusions and action points are summarised in the discussion below.

Table 2. Extract of questions used to expand understanding and share reflections

Column 1 Reflection for participants 2 & 3	Column 2 Collaborative reflexion	Column 3 Group conclusions and action planning
What opportunities do we recognise that we have that others do not?		
Is there anyone who may have a view that was not sought?	What are the intellectual and practical reasons for the selection or omission of consultation?	Have we omitted to consider the views of others where we don't perceive their utility?
Were there any power relationships in the project?	Upon reflecting on the project do you believe there were any other power dynamics present?	Has this project shifted any power dynamics for you professionally?
What events in your past does this project elicit?	Have you gained any personal insights from this process?	What are you going to explore further now?

DISCUSSION

The details of the chosen project are not relayed in this paper as they are less relevant than the resulting reflexive understanding and commitments. Our core conclusions and actions are captured in four thematic areas. As might be expected from a reflexive account, those areas do not focus on the traditionally described conservation options and considerations. Instead, the lessons learned from each one look outwards, to how our practice is connected to relationships, social meanings and cultural context. The four thematic areas are: the role of emotion in conservation practice; how our relationships shape our practice; how privilege shapes our options and outcomes; and, finally, our reflections on the process itself and our experience of it.

The role of emotion in conservation practice

- The large role played by emotional human relationships in a conservation project that from the outset looks like a purely technical one should be recognised.
- In developing treatment goals, we should identify what we are looking for personally from a project. These goals may be subconscious and can be very impactful.
- Imposter syndrome can be both internally as well as externally created.
- The multiple possible options in conservation can make us vulnerable to criticism.

The influence of relationships on conservation practice

- Recognising that some of our feedback loops are damaged challenges us to ask how do we enable others to give us meaningful feedback?

- Our relationship with those who instigate projects has an impact on more aspects than we realise.
- We must identify participants' need for and entitlement to privacy even as we seek accountability and engagement.

The impact of privilege

- We should vocalise the advantages that we have when we describe our work. We should note that we may be able to feel more confident in the validity of our work because we have had the resources to investigate certain aspects of it. This could easily be understood as an assumption of superior practice when it in fact represents more opportunities.
- Conservation practice should be underlined by rights, power and security; conservators who have them should use their position to support others.
- Agency and personal motivations are connected; where there is more agency, there is more possibility to choose future gains.

Reflection on the process

- We wondered if common themes could be generated by looking at many projects.
- We talked about other contexts in which we could utilise all or part of this process.
- We were surprised by which questions generated powerful responses.
- The process was very tiring and draining and took a lot of emotional energy, whether in relating an account or having empathy with the person providing the account.
- This project has become collectively meaningful, affecting all of us, as the meaning has grown beyond what are largely considered to be conservation priorities.

The experience was hard but positive work. Participant 1 used the word 'comforting' to describe the process. They valued the discussion and especially the validation that the thoughts that were in their head made sense, but they also looked at things from a new angle. Participants 2 and 3 felt an enriched sense of engagement in the specific project but also welcomed the opportunity to rethink aspects of their work impacted by the points above. For example, one participant expressed frustration with institutional approaches to feedback that are more tied to performance metrics than to quality improvements. Gaining the confidence to break out of that circle was a positive outcome. Being accountable for our emotions and subjective decisions ultimately allows for a more empowered conservation practice. The discussion on how our advantages in terms of access to books, papers, equipment and networks of colleagues can help us to appear highly ethical or professionally informed served as a reminder of the need to acknowledge this privilege.

We believe that, despite the time investment, the process is simple enough and has sufficient prompts that it can be used by many conservators as

an autoethnography process to examine and reflect on practice as part of their CPD, as a team review exercise or to prepare for accreditation.

CONCLUSION

Autoethnography is a useful tool for conservators, but many conservators may struggle to undertake it in the most common form: producing a written account of practice that moves beyond the technical and connects to broader issues. The proposed use of a team to discuss observations can foster a shift from a singular perspective and avoid narcissism.

Autoethnography challenges and provides an alternative model to authoritatively exploiting the knowledge and wisdom of others. It rejects both singular narratives and the dominance of facts and apparent correctness over emotions and perspectives. Autoethnography enables us to question the canonical stories that are commonly used to describe how conservation decisions are supposedly made. We think that these traditional descriptions of conservation decision-making in fact correspond to a fantasy of what constitutes correct decision-making and poorly describe what happens in practice.

Autoethnography helps conservators acknowledge that there is never one best method of practice. Once this certainty is removed, we can accept and acknowledge multiple options and recognise who they are 'best' for. This may reduce the emotional and intellectual burden of conservation decision-making. To embrace ontological uncertainty to our best advantage, we must strive to shine a light on the biases and assumptions that are framed by our often-unacknowledged working and cultural contexts. Reflexive practice utilising collective autoethnography offers a tool with which to revise and revisit our internal perspectives. This examination and the alignment with the changing world are one way to contribute to a process of a constant remaking of ourselves as professionals. This evolution, shaped by approaches to adapt and reconfigure our embodied practice, is critical to our sustainability as a profession.

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