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Telling Sauna Stories:

A Role for Autoethnography in Systems Change Research

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Abstract

Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology that centers self in social and cultural analysis. Building on the emerging study of inner work in systems transformations, this article explores the potential contributions of auto-ethnography as a methodological companion to systems analysis. By layering excerpts from an autoethnography exploring my maternal family's history as Finnish immigrants to northern Ontario, Canada with conventional academic prose, I model what this approach might look like and discuss its relationship with established systems approaches. In writing this piece, my intentions are exploratory: what can we learn from those who study and practice systems change if they turned their gaze inward and revealed their journey for others to learn from? Using an autoethnographic approach, I surfaced nuanced under-standings of highly complex social and cultural processes. In particular, a previously unexamined connection to ancestry and cultural identity emerged through sauna stories told by female relatives and my own introspection into a life-long relationship with sauna bathing. The partial, dynamic narratives resulting from this work better match our incomplete understandings of complex systems and can even transform the lives of those engaged in systems change.

Keywords

systems change; inner work; autoethnography, complex-systems; Finnish-Canadian sauna

Introduction

The systems change field has grown alongside widespread efforts to grapple with the urgent need to build planetary resilience and address complex challenges (for example, Scharmer, 2018; Senge, 2006; Stroh, 2015; Westley et al., 2006). My introduction to this field was through the study of resilience in complex social-ecological systems and regime shifts to explain systemic change (Gunderson & Holling, 2002; Holling, 1973; Westley et al., 2006). I then turned to social innovation to explore emergent solutions to social problems that "ultimately shift resources and authority flows, social routines and cultural values of the social systems that created the problem in the first place." (Westley et al., 2017, p. 4). Propelled by the knowledge that transformative systems change was possible, I nonetheless felt that something was missing in how I understood systems change.

As the systems change field has grown, a tacit consensus has emerged around the need for inner work to effectively intervene in, and ultimately transform, complex systems. In a recent review of relevant literature, Steidle et al. (2021) concluded that "personal transformation creates positive conditions for the advancement of social change" and that it is "an integral part of most long-term, sustainable, positive social change" (p. 4). Similarly, Norris and Blakeman (2021) recently characterized social innovators as "being in the learning business" (p.2) and identified learning as the core activity in successful social change processes. This journal seeks to expand on research in this emerging field, introducing transformative practices and lifting-up processes of co-inquiry, thereby providing a space to explore how inner transformations relate to broader social change. Within both practitioner and academic circles, inner work is increasingly recognized as an important element in understanding and shifting social systems.

The subjective dimensions of self at work in systems change processes are, however, seldom revealed in our scholarly writing. First-person accounts demonstrating how inner work is connected to systems change are rare. Disciplinary conventions outlining acceptable forms of knowledge production and representation deter exploration beyond their borders (Guttorm et al., 2021). As Koenig et al. (2021) explain, dominant onto-epistemological positions and associated methodologies "stem from an overt western and colonializing focus on rational thought" (p. 2). Connecting how research is conducted to the way in which representations of lived experience are communicated, Yoo (2017) succinctly explains, "the way in which we present our research indicates the kinds of knowledge we value" (p. 2). My hunch that something was missing had thus turned into a moral imperative to change my research practice.

Systems change organizations are moving quickly to provide opportunities for changemakers to engage in inner work. These opportunities are often structured as facilitated learning journeys, immersive convenings, and engaged practitioner networks (for example, the Getting to Maybe Residency at the Banff Centre, the Presencing Institute's u.lab, and the Wolf Willow Institute's programming). Through various entry points, these programs support changemakers as they engage in inner work to enhance their ability to navigate complexity, develop systems leadership skills, and ultimately increase the impact of their change work.

As systems change researchers, we too should attend to the inter- and intra-personal scale by engaging in inner work. First, systems change researchers are often engaged scholars and our research is intimately tied to our practice. Accordingly, our scholarship will be more useful, relevant, and applicable if we actively engage in the field, including action and community-based research of inner work processes (Bradbury, 2015; Etmanski et al., 2014). Second, approaches to transformative systems change tend to focus attention on the global scale and, aside from the accounts of key actors, nuanced descriptions of intra- and inter-personal transformation processes are rare. With increasing interest in inner work across the field, this gap remains an important area of study.

This article explores autoethnography as a complementary methodology for systems change research. As the study of self (*auto*) in culture (*ethno*), the approach is a promising complement to the abundant work on macro-scale transformations dominating the literature. Diving deeper, the iterative shift between the personal and cultural, continual critical reflexivity, and focus on perspective and purpose within autoethnographic research resonates with several aspects of systems change research (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2004; Maydell, 2010). I offer the perspective of an emerging scholar entering autoethnography, my learnings to date, and an unexpected pathway to systems awareness that presented itself along the way. In doing so, I aim to contribute to the nascent body of literature exploring the role of individual transformation to social change at higher scales. Specifically, five learnings for systems change researchers will be discussed throughout the paper:

1. Autoethnography evokes inner work at every stage of the research process as both a method of inquiry and disciplined practice of introspection.

2. Creative writing serves systems change research by enacting a commitment to communication and dialogue rather than expert-oriented knowledge production.

3. By capturing the full, messy complexity of lived experience through evocative narratives, readers can more readily convey the universal significance of their work.

4. Releasing the constraints of conventional academic prose enables humility, vulnerability, and empathy in our research, practice, and writing.

5. An iterative shift between the individual and macro scales of analysis cultivates a more nuanced understanding of complex social and cultural processes across scales.

This article includes excerpts from an autoethnography on my maternal family's history as Finnish immigrants to northern Ontario, Canada to model an autoethnographic approach. An unexpected outcome, recovering an ancestral connection to the Finnish sauna, emerged as a case in which autoethnography mirrored the results of engaging in inner work. This finding points to the need to further explore the role that autoethnography can play in systems change research.

Before proceeding, I must clarify that I have never visited Finland and my sauna knowledge comes primarily from the older women in my life: my mother and aunts. I write as a learner and claim no expertise in these areas aside from the knowledge of my own experience. I ask your forgiveness for any inaccuracies within, and patience with my attempt to provide a look into my early process. I offer this work with the hope that it is useful to those who are beginning to chart their own pathways to systems awareness and explore creative expressions of that journey.

Finnish Settlement in Northern Ontario, Canada

My mother's grandparents immigrated to Canada from Finland just before Finnish independence (1917), and the end of the First World War (1918). Like many Finnish immigrants of the time, they settled on Anishanaabe lands in the Robinson-Huron Treaty Area in Northern Ontario near *N'Swakamok* (Sudbury). My *Mummu* (Grandma), Raila[1], was born in Canada in 1918 to parents who were from southwestern Finland, likely near the town of Laitila. My *Pappa* (Grandpa), Antti, was born in 1919 to parents who were from northern Finland. Beyond this, I've struggled to find linkages to my maternal ancestors in Finland. Like many others, name changes at immigration entry points and spotty family history have made it difficult to trace anything beyond vague arrival dates, pieced together from birth order.

"Pappa was born here, but his sister was born in Finland," my aunties say.

When I first had the opportunity to visit southern Sweden – about 350km from Raila's parents' home – I came to understand why so many Finnish immigrants had settled in Northern Ontario. The landscapes were strikingly similar. The familiar granite outcroppings punctuating the boreal forest woven

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[1] Names changed to maintain anonymity.

between countless lakes, rivers, streams, and wetlands enabled Finnish settlers to successfully establish homesteads in the Sudbury area (Saarinen, 2013). In their history of a rural Finnish community on the outskirts of Sudbury, Tapper and Saarinen (1998) explain, "the desire to own land and to farm were strong motivating forces…empty-handed Finns mined the stumps and stones…for root crops and pasture to support dairy and beef herds" (p. 5). Putting myself into my great-grandparent's shoes, I imagined a similar feeling of familiarity – a continued rather than disrupted relationship with the land.

Approximately 20,700 Finnish immigrants arrived between 1901-1918, representing a third of the Finnish-Canadian population (Government of Canada, 2020). Like many others, my great-grandparents settled in a *pesdpäikat* (nesting places or Finntowns) along what would become known as the 'sauna belt' in northern Ontario around Lake Superior (Nordskog, 2010; Saarinen, 1999). Today, saunas are one of the most recognizable cultural symbols of Finland and their importance to rural Finnish-Canadian communities cannot be understated. Saarinen (1999) explains:

> For Finns in North America, no matter how poor they were or how humble the building, it was the sauna that gave them stability and a link with the past that was almost as necessary as food or shelter. In rural areas such as Beaver Lake and Wanup, it became part of a circular farmstead landscape featuring a house, barn, hayshed, ice shed, milk house, woodshed, tool/implement shed, root house, outhouse and garage. (p. 248)

Indoor plumbing and electricity were often slow to come to rural communities. Here, sauna was just as much about carrying on a cultural tradition as it was about practicality. One afternoon, my aunt described what saunas were like growing up in the 1950s and 60s.

"Mom [Raila] made a big meal and you sauna'd and had supper and the family got together," she said, "Till I was like, eight [late 1950s], we had no inside facilities. Dad built the house, but he was too busy working up [north], or he wasn't home, so he never put [plumbing] inside. So, other than a quick sponge bath, we washed in the sauna." (Personal communication, June 18, 2018). On further reflection, she described how the sauna was also a place for visiting and storytelling, explaining that "it was the thing to do when somebody put their sauna on… we sauna'd all over the place!" (Personal communication, June 18, 2018).

This is how I was introduced to sauna: as a social bathing practice shared among family and occasionally among friends. Through authoethnography, I realized that the ubiquity of saunas across North America – in health spas, hotels, gyms, etc. – had diluted my understanding of the ancestral bond I shared with the practice. Only through purposeful awareness well into adulthood did I come to recognize an unbroken link back through my maternal lineage to Finland. My perspective on sauna transformed from a very practical one – bathing – into a deeper understanding of how sauna had worked in my family as

a form of cultural continuity. These surfaced linkages are explored throughout the article as: a way to connect with the land; an embodied, spiritual practice; a routine bathing practice; a doorway to cultural roots and institutions; a space for cultivating inner wholeness; and a central figure in our family history.

The Sauna at Great Mountain

Antti was an avid moose hunter. As a young man, he hiked south from Lake Panage just west of Sudbury, Ontario after hearing about the good hunting there. On subsequent trips, Raila would accompany him to help prepare and pack out meat. In the late 1950s, with a dream and some savings, they decided to build a hunt camp in the remote area known as Great Mountain Lake. That winter, Antti skied to Great Mountain Lake and applied for a land use permit to build at the base of the mountain.

A small cabin was built first, by hand, from the towering white and red pines along the shoreline. During moose hunting season, they put up a temporary sauna using a plastic tarp to keep warm.

"That's how important sauna was to them" my aunt explained.

In later years, Antti and Raila built a larger camp to make space for their growing family. When the larger camp was finished, the original cabin was converted to a sauna. Antti still hunted in the fall, but the summer months made way for younger family members to experience camp life. Some would canoe in from the nearest lake with road access. A lucky few would evade the rough, full day of paddling and portaging by flying with supplies in a bush plane.

The camp itself was simple and functional: an aluminum-sided, one-room building built back from the lake with a wood cookstove, a few cupboards, kitchen table, and lots of open space. Foam pads, sleeping bags, clothes bags, and – depending on the year – a crib or two for babies and toddlers would fill-up the place.

"Up here" explains Wilkins (1997), "they're called camps" (p. 68). Describing Finnish camp life in Northern Ontario, Wilkins (1997) goes on:

> The place is a spit in the eye of the late 20th century. No electricity, no indoor facilities, no double glass. And yet in its Luddite charms—solitude, sauna, unviolated riverbank—…[the] family would seem to have found much of what they need to know of paradise. (p. 69)

And paradise it was. Our family camp sat about 100 meters in front of the stark, white, quartzite face of what we called Great Mountain. The 400m wall of rock reached up from clear, sapphire blue water like the mountain lakes of the Canadian Rockies.

The sauna building had two rooms – the sauna and the *pukuhuone* (dressing room). The *pukuhuone* was for changing, relaxing, and storing anything else that needed to stay by the lake, but away from the critters. It had a window into the

sauna, where a kerosene lamp would sit on the sill after the sun went down, shining light into both rooms. A door separated the *pukuhuone* from the sauna. Walking through, a long *penkki* (bench) spanned the width of the room about halfway up the wall. A second, lower *penkki* held the *tynnyrit* (wash basins) and enough space to sit if you wanted a gentler sauna. The *kiuas* (sauna stove) sat in the far corner with a large *tynnyri* attached for heating water. A window looked out to the lake across from the kiuas. Sitting on the top *penkki*, the rough, hand-hewn logs rub history against your back.

Together, the camp and sauna stood as proud but subtle representations of Finnish heritage in Northern Ontario. It was an intimate, family place connecting us to both to the land we know as home and the one my great-grandparents left behind.

Inner Work for Systems Researchers

Most social change training involves what Norris and Blakeman (2021) refer to as *informational* learning – introducing new tools, strategies, processes, or knowledge to improve a changemaker's practice. Emerging programs that invite practitioners to engage in inner work are responding to a growing understanding that complex systems thinking tools can be introduced in such a way that prompts a shift in one's modes of reasoning. From a transformative learning perspective, Mezirow (2012) defined this work as:

> …the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference[2]…to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (p. 75)

Similarly, Scharmer (2018) describes a problematic blind spot that, when left unexamined, hinders our ability to imagine new patterns across a system. In their examination of social innovations across history, Westley et al. (2017) describe a "sensitivity to initial conditions" (p.7). These starting conditions, which can include the inner condition of the innovator, have been called *prophetic*. The imprint of their influences can be traced throughout the trajectory of the innovation and continue to shape its future. As Westley et al. (2017) explain, "an innovation's basic DNA—the values and hopes of its earliest architects and advocates—may be easy to obscure but are very difficult to eradicate" (pp. 7–8). Awareness of our innermost selves not only illuminates our patterns of thought and behavior, it also guards against unwittingly seeding our change work with the DNA of the current system. Furthermore, while inner work may remedy the blind spot, applying these newfound understandings to guide

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[2] Mezirow describes frames of reference as the structures of belief, assumption, and/or expectation upon which our patters of thought and behaviour are based.

more productive and quality relationships, and ultimately the broader system, completes the approach (Scharmer, 2018; Stroh, 2015). Inner work for social change is therefore situated at the interface of transformative systems change and personal introspection – the vulnerable state of acknowledging, reflecting, and navigating the uncertainty of complex situations. This is an uncomfortable, yet productive, space for many changemakers.

Despite the benefits, barriers abound for social innovation researchers looking to engage in inner work. Perhaps most apparent is that the academic life rarely affords the time (or funding) to engage in multi-day retreats. Moreover, inner work retreats are generally targeted at practitioners rather than academics, often carry hefty price tags, and are highly competitive. For many graduate students and early career researchers, the added cost of therapy or coaching to guide inner work is financially inaccessible on top of tuition and student debt. Additional barriers include taking time away from demanding research and course schedules and overcoming the stigma of accessing mental health services (Forrester, 2021). The question becomes, how do we weave inner work into our research practice?

Autoethnography: A Methodological Companion for Systems Change Researchers

Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology that centers self in social and cultural analysis. Just as inner work responds to the gap in understanding the self in systems change work, autoethnography fills the gap left by the erasure of personal identity, voice, and experience from dominant research conventions (Douglas & Carless, 2013; Ellis et al., 2011). Many autoethnographers employ the method to investigate what Ellis et al. (2011) refer to as an *epiphany*, moments that interrupt life's expected path and force us to re-assess how we make sense of the world. These are the "events after which life does not seem quite the same" (Ellis et al., 2011, Chapter 2, para. 2) and can also be viewed as the *disruptive dilemmas* Mezirow (2012) identified as initiating a transformative learning process. Similarly, useful insights may emerge by applying an autoethnographic lens to the personal transformations that can occur while engaging in social change.

The history of autoethnography is generally discussed in the context of an increasing interest in, and appreciation for, personal narrative and reflexivity as part of an ethical, politically and historically situated, subjective, research practice (Adams et al., 2015; Douglas & Carless, 2013; Ellis et al., 2011). Disrupting the long-standing dichotomy between art and science, autoethnographers embrace storytelling, use literary and narrative techniques, and draw attention to the aesthetics to create evocative narratives (Adams et al. 2015; Ellis et al. 2011). Autoethnographers also attend to the relational aspects embodied by the method, particularly between researcher and reader (Ellis et al., 2011). Adams and Manning (2015) identify the primary assumption of

autoethnography: "(general) culture flows through the (specific) self … writing about the self is simultaneously writing about cultural values, practices, and experiences" (p. 352). Therefore, an autoethnographic approach generates a comprehensive understanding of the self in relation to the social and cultural at multiple scales for both narrator and reader.

Describing her process for coming to know autoethnography, Scott-Hoy (Ellis & Scott-Hoy, 2012) explains:

> I become sensitive to the social tones, the moods and feelings that colored daily life, the worldview and cosmos that shaped action and interaction. I begin to look at myself, to try and take off my "colored" glasses and observe the impact different personal and cultural lenses have on what we see. (p. 352)

Through the autoethnographic gaze, the particularities and nuance of an event are analyzed in all their complexity through a practice that sparks critical reflection, evokes connection, advances social justice, and contributes to well-being. In so doing, the tangled inner worlds is surfaced in service of cultivating a more equitable, just, and sustainable outer world. As Ellis and Bochner (2000) explain:

> Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. (p. 739)

Autoethnographers often use a process of systematic sociological introspection (Ellis, 1991, 2008) to examine one's own lived experience and construct autoethnographies. The approach engages sociological and cultural analysis to bring meaning to events by way of articulating a narrative truth. Readers experience the authoethnography and relate it to their own lives *as if it were true*. This disciplined practice of introspection in relation to social and cultural forces gestures toward a resonance between established autoethnographic and emerging inner work approaches. Thus, an invitation surfaces for social change researchers to consider adding the method to their suite of systems approaches.

Bricolage for Recovering Wholeness

During my graduate career, I began to think seriously about my audience and representation. Who will read my work? How am I representing people (and myself) in my research? How does my communication style influence my potential contributions to the world? So-called soft skills – including empathy, vulnerability, and communication – are increasingly acknowledged as necessary to produce effective contributions and support impactful change work. However, there is very little scholarly discussion (in journals or the hallways) devoted to

cultivating these skills, as described by Scott-Hoy (as quoted in Ellis & Scott-Hoy, 2012).

> I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to explore the wonderful literature available and to share others' theories and ideas and those ideas have enriched my thought processes. But I feel sad that some people may have been put off by the jargon and complexity. What have we as feeling and thinking members of communities missed out on, because we have alienated others who wanted to contribute? (p. 139)

My first autoethnographic study, of which excerpts are included in this paper, explores my maternal family's history as Finnish immigrants to Northern Ontario, Canada. After struggling to write amidst an unfamiliar metropolitan landscape in southern Ontario for some months, I craved connection to a place where I could be in relation to my Finnish heritage. In June of that year, I secluded myself at a remote, water-access camp on the shores of Lake Penage outside of Sudbury, Ontario. Separated from the familiar comforts of daily life and brought into the new routines necessitated by limited solar power, no running water, and patchy cell service, I found it easier to also separate myself from my usual writing habits. I made a point to sauna every day to further immerse myself in my early memories.

Chopping and carrying firewood, tending the fire in the *kiuas* (stove), enjoying the *löyly* (steam), and jumping in the lake layered an embodied, spiritual aspect to my day. I allowed myself to experiment with a different approach to writing: from memory, with the voices of my family recounting events. I drew upon both historical facts and anecdotes absorbed by growing up in northern Ontario.

It was during that trip that I first read Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner's chapter on autoethnography in the *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods* (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). An unsettling barrage of thoughts and feelings followed - excitement, doubt, relief, fear. Thankfully, I wrote through the discomfort and, in doing so, had initiated a necessary bricolage that continues today.

Bricolage is a process whereby previously disconnected elements are brought into relationship to form something new. Westley et al. (2017) describe the process of bricolage as essential to successful social innovations that can create a "coherent, consistent, and stable pattern of interaction" (p. 7) – a new, stable system state. I observed a process of bricolage occurring in real time as elements from my own life crashed together: culture, family, narrative, research, systems change, and more. Through autoethnography, I had stumbled into a sense of wholeness that had irrevocably changed my perception of the outer world and a deeper awareness from which I could ground my perspective. This interplay between iterative transformations of self and broader system change is at the heart of nascent inner work for changemakers.

Doing Autoethnography

Creative Writing

Although often solely conceptualized as a research product, the writing process is recognized as a qualitative methodology in its own right (Colyar, 2009; Richardson, 2000; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Approaching creative writing as a method of qualitative inquiry involves "discovery, a way of finding out about yourself and your world…a way of nurturing our own individuality [giving] us authority over our understanding of our own lives" (Richardson, 2000 p. 35). Creative writing draws attention to the relational aspects of the writing process, both with others and within oneself. By attending to form and the final written product as a means of communication, the gaze turns outward to the relationship with the reader and their important role in meaning-making. From this perspective, *how* something is written is a fundamental consideration in communicating research (Yoo, 2017).

Creative writing also turns the mind inward and can help develop a deeper relationship with oneself (Colyar, 2009). As Richardson (2000) explains, "what you write about and how you write it shapes your life, shapes who you become" (p. 36). Specifically, creative non-fiction provides a structure for developing one's voice outside the homogenizing influence of traditional academic discourses, avoiding the tendency of conventional academic discourse "that snaps us back towards writing as a means to an end, towards finalizing the text to meet the deadline, to signing off and letting go" (Dewsbury, 2013, p. 150).

Creative non-fiction, and autoethnography more broadly, attract criticism from those who remain deeply committed to the norms of academic writing (Sinner, 2013). As Smith et al. (2016) explain, "when the word fiction is linked in any way to the word research the work in some quarters may struggle for legitimacy" (p. 64). When evaluated against conventional criteria, creative non-fiction has been met with "suspicion, even hostility, and questions are raised as to whether it constitutes proper research" (Smith et al., 2016, p. 64). Writing against these norms from an autoethnographic perspective, Art Bochner (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) explains, "I would be pleased if we understood our whole endeavor as a search for better conversation in the face of all the barriers and boundaries that make conversation difficult" (p. 748). These perspectives highlight yet another alignment between systems thinking and autoethnography; systems change research is ultimately about the potential for change brought on through communication and dialogue rather than expert-oriented knowledge production.

I first experimented with creative writing after going sauna (Figure 2). I was curious about what would happen if I purposefully abandoned the artificial boundaries between myself and my writing. I was inspired by the anthology of sauna stories submitted in a writing competition to the Thunder Bay Finnish Canadian Historical Society compiled by Warkentin et al. (2005). Reading the

submissions, recognizing my own experiences in texts, and then reading the editors' scholarly analysis, I was struck by the richness within.

> She grasped the thick door handle and gave it a firm tug. The door snapped open and the room flooded with heat. She took a deep breath, carefully filling her nostrils with the sweet scent of cedar. Climbing up to the top *penkki*, her skin tingled as her pores began to open. The room was small, with the *kiuas* in one corner, a shower in the other. It was a barrel sauna, the curved walls encouraging air flow and movement.
>
> She took the ladle in her hand, scooping water from the cedar sauna bucket. Using the long handle, she poured the water over the rocks resting on top of the *kiuas*. The water cracked and hissed as it hit the rocks. A deep rumble came from the heart of the *kiuas*. She sat back, waiting for the *löyly* to roll off the roof and towards her body. Taking a deep breath, the *löyly* showered her in silky heat, slowly wrapping itself around and releasing sweat from within. She shut her eyes, feeling the heat and relaxing into its embrace. She sat like this for several minutes. And then she reached for the ladle again.

Figure 1: Creative writing excerpt: going into the sauna.

Casting a broader net around the messy complexity of lived experience through creative non-fiction calls writers to attune to emotion in their work and invites readers to draw meaning from their own perspectives. The adventurous aspects of creative writing allow a certain freedom from rigid disciplinary discourse and, in doing so, introduces humility, vulnerability, and empathy to our writing. Although my journey to this style has been – and continues to be – uncomfortable, I believe it is more suitable for the systems stories I seek to tell by offering a narrative, rather than literal, truth as described by Bochner and Ellis (2016).

Memory Work

Memory plays a central role in the autoethnographic research process. Bochner and Ellis (2016) refer to the systematic examination of memory as memory work and describe the active and ongoing nature of the method:

> …it is personal, political, emotional, and relational…a destination, a place we inhabit or revisit in order to question and reflect on the meaning of the past…My research into the past requires me to dwell awhile in the space of memory, urging memory to speak. (p. 252)

Memories point towards the broader socio-cultural themes ripe for analysis in autoethnography and ethnographic studies more broadly. They stand as

gateways to understanding our lived experience and can help point us to a broader understanding of how and why we live the way we do.

Some personal memory data collection exercises are recorded as text in straightforward ways. For example, Chang (2016 recommends developing an autobiographical timeline to chronologically represent the major events that occurred throughout the course of the study period. Similarly, Chang (2016 also recommends recording annual, seasonal, weekly, or daily routines as these routines often yield insight into the socio-cultural contexts within which they are practiced.

I tested Chang's method one afternoon while on my writing retreat. I took notes on an activity I had done countless times before: starting the sauna (see Figure 2). Upon reflection, the exercise revealed several layers suitable for further analysis. First, I used Finnish words for the sauna stove (*kiuas*) and water barrels (*tynnyri*). My mother's first language was Finnish and she passed on several words, especially sauna words, through everyday use. I also noticed that my notes occasionally employ a shorthand like that used by my older Finnish relatives and neighbors (ex. I put gloves). I grew up surrounded by people whose first language was Finnish and now notice parts of their speech patterns in my own casual writing. Engaging various autoethnographic research methods revealed a rich Finnish cultural background that I embodied but did not actively engage with.

12 noon - Sauna goes on

1. Go in the wood shed, avoid the spiders – I put gloves.

2. Little bit of kindling, little bit of birch bark, one big log. All dry. Mix of soft and hardwoods to start.

3. Into the *kiuas*, light it up. Stove pipe damper open, *kiuas* damper halfway.

4. First light doesn't take, didn't put enough birch bark. Try again.

5. Fill-up the *tynnyri*, make sure the window is open a crack.

6. Wait 15 minutes and check to make sure the fire's caught...

Figure 2: Field notes on a routine: starting the sauna on a day in June.

Other forms of memory work focus on recovering what Bochner and Ellis (2016) refer to as emotional truths. This type of memory work can lead the researcher to vulnerable, emotional spaces and are often experienced as strong memories. Strong memories are experienced in the present *as if* they were happening in the present. And yet, over time, "memory selects, shapes, limits, and distorts the past" (Chang, 2016, p. 72). Herein lies a key take away: while we

can record our memory as it is now, "it is knowledge *from* the past and not necessarily knowledge *about* the past" (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 253). Memories are constantly in flux and often reflect both the context and motivations that prompt remembering (Bochner & Ellis, 2016).

Sauna Stories for Systems Awareness

A full account of Finnish-Canadian sauna culture, history, and contemporary practice is well beyond the scope of this work (as a start, I recommend Warkentin et al.,2005). In this section, I offer a brief overview of Finnish-Canadian sauna practices and a glimpse into my own emerging understandings.

One of the first lessons I learned was that, as the descendant of Finnish immigrants in Northern Ontario, my sauna experiences are quite different from those practiced in Finland today. However, the fundamentals remain roughly the same: rocks are heated on a stove (often heated by wood) in a small room with good ventilation to a temperature of between 80-100 C. *Penkkis* are arranged in two or more levels to suit the various comfort levels of sauna bathers, with the top *penkki* being the hottest. The traditional Finnish sauna is a 'wet' sauna, as opposed to the more popular 'dry' saunas found in health spas, swimming pools, or gyms that often carry the warning – *do not throw water on the rocks!* Instead, the very essence of Finnish sauna is *löyly*, the water vapor that rises from the *kiuas* when water is thrown on the rocks (Warkentin et al., 2005; Kailo, 2020, Kaitila & Saarinen, 2004; Nordskog, 2010). Time spent in the sauna ranges significantly between individuals, but an average session (or round) lasts 5-20 minutes. Rounds are interspersed by quickly cooling off with a swim, shower, or simply at room temperature. In the winter, some sauna bathers will roll around in fresh snow or dip into a lake through a hole in the ice!

I have also come to understand that some of our rules around sauna are much more relaxed than in Finland and humor is often woven into the experience, particularly when introducing non-Finns to sauna (Warkentin et al., 2005). The popular plaque that hangs in our family sauna – as it does in many others – is written in Finglish, a combination of Finnish and English adopted by many Finns in the sauna belt. The last line is one of my favorites:

If yuu ket tuu hot, ko chump in ta lake!

Unique construction techniques (particularly of the sauna *kiuas*) are also common. Where rounded rocks are typically preferred for use in the sauna (Warkentin et al., 2005), my aunt and uncle sourced drill cores from local mines for their *kiuas*. My uncle welded the *kiuas* himself with the drill cores in mind. When it was ready, he packed the drill cores tight around the fire box, thinking that the greater surface area would give them more *löyly*. It remains the hottest sauna I've ever been in.

Many still look to sauna for deeper meaning. Kailo (2020) describes its value as a "spiritual matrix of healthy, connected living" (p. 141) and a potential antidote to the current ecological crises. In this way, sauna holds value as a

pathway for developing and maintaining a connection to the land. The four elements – earth (firewood), air (*löyly*), fire (in the *kiuas*), and water (thrown from a dipper) – are all present in the sauna and help to reinforce sauna as a holistic experience through embodied interconnectedness. Furthermore, preparing a traditional wood-burning sauna, especially at a camp, requires very direct land-based activities – cutting firewood, fetching water, lighting the *kiuas*, and tending to the fire. These all work in consort to shape a direct connection with the land.

The sauna is also viewed as a restorative place that promotes holistic well-being. This is perhaps best understood through *löyly*, the steam or vapor that rises from the *kiuas* when water is thrown on the hot rocks. Warkentin et al. (2005) explain that *löyly* is far more than the thermodynamic reaction transforming liquid to vapor. Although directly translated to "steam" or "heat", *löyly* is etymologically related to the words spirit, life, breath, and soul (Warkentin et al., 2005, p. 13). Kailo (2020) describes a common practice that has persisted through time in which sauna bathers throw *löyly* with "our hopes at the same time, or throw a message to ancestors or deceased relatives and friends" (p. 149). From a physiological standpoint, a regular sauna regime has been shown to reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, stroke, high blood pressure, neurocognitive diseases and even eases symptoms of the common flu, rheumatic arthritis, and headaches (Laukkanen et al., 2018).

Growing up, we didn't discuss the spiritual, cultural, or even health aspects of sauna. But, thinking back, these things were always present. Whether it was my dad throwing a big *löyly* for our recently deceased neighbor, cutting and gathering firewood for the sauna as a family, or learning Finnish sauna words when I was young. It was as if these clues were left as a trail for me to follow if and how I needed them.

By examining my family's history through autoethnography, I realized that sauna is not only a place for washing – though it is! – or something that makes you feel good – though it does! It can also be a practice for cultivating systems awareness. Purposefully engaging in sauna as a reflective practice, I am developing a deeper understanding of myself in relation to family, place, and cultural experience. The familiar rituals relax my mind and open space to attune to the broader system. In the language of awareness-based systems change, I surfaced a culturally-grounded practice for cultivating deep awareness that, in turn, has increased my ability to better relate to the social field. What follows are the immediate ways in which this deeper understanding of self has shown up in my systems work.

Autoethnography for Systems Change Research

> Our writing as qualitative researchers, particularly those writing from subjective, transdisciplinary spaces, need not be as restrictive as academic conventions dictate. It need not contribute to the further contraction of our creative spirit. I've begun to ask myself, what would an academic paper look like if it were written from the heart? Will I lose legitimacy as a scholar if began to report my findings with love? With honesty? With creativity?

Figure 3: Journal entry.

When I read that Ellis and Bochner (2000) describe autoethnography as "action research for the individual" (p. 754), resonance with my experience leapt from the page. Through my exploration of the method, I uncovered ways that *I already knew to* "…know and feel the complexities of the concrete moments of lived experience…" (Ellis & Scott-Hoy, 2012, p. 128). Looking inward, I was able to access the deeply personal experiences that gave rise to nuanced understandings of highly complex social and cultural processes at work. I now have a sense of ancestry and cultural identity – previously unexamined – from which to ground my perspective.

Claims of narcissism and self-indulgence are perhaps the most common critiques of autoethnography (for example, Anderson, 2006; Freeman, 2015). In the face of the undeniable need for action across a range of complex issues, passionate changemakers need a solid rationale for expending scarce time, energy, and resources on inner work. Within the field of systems change, practitioner engagement and philanthropic investment backed by mounting research are pointing towards inner work as a crucial practice to develop. For example, the Wellbeing Project – co-created with Ashoka, Esalen Institute, Porticus, Impact Hub, Skoll Foundation and Synergos Institute – defined wellbeing as "an ongoing personal journey towards wholeness and connection," (Severns-Guntzel t al., 2020, p. 22) and concluded that attention to inner wellbeing carried tangible increases in changemaker efficacy at the individual, organizational, and sectoral scales. Woiwode et al. (2021) describe the need to explore the inner dimensions of sustainability transformations as akin to examining mindsets and paradigms, one of the strongest leverage points from which to affect systems change (Meadows, 2008). When left unexamined, our uncritically patterns of thought and behaviour act as barriers to seeing and sensing novel patterns across a system (Scharmer, 2018). The individual work of shifting consciousness can seem trivial when confronted with the challenges of our time. However, I found the paradox of slowing down in the face of such urgency much easier to reconcile once I had experienced a shift in my own research practice as a result.

Cultivating Deep Systems Awareness

> We sat in the sauna at Great Mountain. My cousin leaned against the arm rest in front of the *kiuas*. I sat beside him on the *penkki*. Surrounded by hand hewn logs, our shared history was laid bare.
>
> "We can actually sit in a sauna built by our Pappa," he said. "I want to come back and take my kids".

Figure 4: Journal entry.

The turning point in my research came when sauna surfaced as a central character in our family history. As Warkentin et al. (2005) explain, "[Sauna] is a quasi-religious bond between the old and young generations and even the future generations" (p. 5). It is, put simply, a "symbol of belonging" (Warkentin et al., 2005, p. 5). This process of seeking belonging, or coming to belong, can be understood in relation to the process of introspection described in both the autoethnography and awareness-based systems change literatures (Ellis, 1991, 2008; Scharmer, 2018). Reflecting on his own introspective journey into his past, place scholar Yi-Fu Tuan (1999) explains,

> The search for ancestors and the old homestead, for cultural heritage, for things that are reassuringly fixed because they belong to the past, becomes a hobby as well as a serious attempt at discovering one's identity; this is so not only with the old and the middle aged but even with the young. (p. 5)

Bringing about these insights required cultivating a space to open myself to a deep awareness; a space where I could work on upgrading my "skills to sense and to see" (Scharmer as quoted in Goodchild, 2021, p. 88). For me, this space opened when I was attuning to place, ritual, food, the land, family, and season, all working together to cultivate a multi-sensory sauna experience. In this way, understanding sauna as a practice to cultivate deep awareness is a continuation of a long cultural history of bring greater well-being into our lives.

A Settler's Relationship to the Land

> "I've felt a pull to visit Great Mountain" I told my friend, "where my mom's family spent a lot of time when she was younger. I grew up hearing their stories and I've always wanted to go back as an adult. It's almost like I need to go back".

> "It sounds like your ancestors are calling you" said my friend. Her words gave me pause—my ancestors. I had never thought about my ancestors, not really. I had always thought about ancestors as something other people had, not me. I'm too disconnected, too far removed from the people and places that make up my history. I didn't even know my great-grandparents names.

Figure 5: Journal entry.

I have had the profound honor and opportunity of learning from and with Indigenous colleagues from across Turtle Island in what is now known as Canada. I believe part of why I have been able to develop and maintain close relationships, engage in ceremonies, and speak candidly about my relationship with the land is the cultural background that grounds my relations. Writing about the similarities between Finnish sauna and Indigenous sweat lodge ceremonies, Kailo (2020) shared advice she received from several Elders in her work with the Cree, Abenaki, Ojibway, Montagnais and Mi'kmaq Nations:

> the only way to avoid the pitfalls of cultural appropriation and the tendency to project ideas of exotic otherness onto Indigenous groups was to be grounded in one's own culture—to feel pride about one's own far-reaching cultural roots and institutions. (p. 141)

This journey opened a doorway to my cultural roots and institutions, with sauna as my entry point.

As I write this, I hold a tension that continues to surface discomfort. I am the descendent of Finnish (maternal) and Ukrainian (paternal) immigrants to Turtle Island. My great-grandparents, and all who came after, benefitted from broken treaty promises, legislated racial discrimination, and cultural genocide implemented through Canadian government policies. The saunas that I hold so dear were built on Indigenous lands. As I reclaim my cultural identity, I simultaneously work with Indigenous colleagues to ensure the continuity of Indigenous languages, cultures, and self-determination in the face of ongoing colonial violence. Holding this tension is a reminder that there is always another scale of analysis for systems thinkers to consider. My story exists in relationship with all others.

Conclusion

This article explores autoethnography as a complementary methodology for systems change research. Responding to the need for first-person accounts of transformation at the individual scale, this work contributes to the nascent body of literature illuminating the role of inner work in systems change at higher scales. While acknowledging barriers and critiques that question the validity and value of both inner and creative work in the face of urgent challenges, purposeful

explorations of the subjective dimensions of self are surfacing important insights for systems change processes.

As a methodological approach, autoethnography evokes elements of inner work at every stage of the research process, introducing a disciplined practice of systemic introspection. Relinquishing the constraints of conventional academic prose and introducing creative writing enacts a commitment to communication and dialogue rather than expert-oriented knowledge production. It follows that the humility, vulnerability, and empathy required in creative writing may also inform how systems change research is conducted, contributing to "the need to transform science and social science itself" (Koenig et al., 2021, p. 2). The iterative shift between the individual and macro scales of analysis coupled with evocative narratives that convey the messy complexity of lived experience work to cultivate a more nuanced understanding of complex social and cultural processes at higher scales.

Bochner (Bochner & Ellis, 2016) summarizes the challenge for autoethnographers: "Our writing is not simply academic; it's personal and artistic too…our goal is to extend the borders of legitimate scholarship to matters of practical, moral, aesthetic, and emotional importance to human well-being" (p. 80). Beyond this, several interrelated arguments exist for bringing creative writing, particularly creative non-fiction, into our practices, including generating accessible texts, opening novel entry points for reflection and dialogue, and inviting a broad readership into relationship with the research. Furthermore, the ways in which autoethnography can mirror inner work processes carry important implications for systems change researchers for whom costly retreats, coaches, therapists, or other engagements are inaccessible. Finally, the practice of creating partial, dynamic narratives of the research process not only aligns with our incomplete understandings of complex, adaptive systems, but the practice itself can prompt a transformation in the lives of those who engage in the approach.

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