
Using autoethnographic reflections to heal: Walking out of depression, anxiety and stress

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Abstract

Depression, anxiety and stress have been regarded as common symptoms of those who have been under severe pressure in careers. A long-term career pressure could result in professional's mental health and wellbeing. Motivated by a group of female life writing members, I have experimented myself in recollecting and recalling my negative and emotional experiences in a female migrant 'betweenner' journey. This explorative and reflective writing experience provided me with ample opportunities to reflect, ponder and mirror myself as a girl, female teacher and academic staff. In this paper, I explore how I use autoethnography as a research method to write about *myself* through expressing my anger, depression, anxiety and frustration, as a therapeutic method. Writing from the standpoint of a female academic who was suggested to visit career counsellor, I revisited my diaries and chose the diary excerpts upon my emotional moments, negative experiences and fear in my life, through the sharing with writing members. My experience could be informed as an evidence-based medical approach to provide the first-hand data for my career counsellor. As such, I use members' actual names, locations, and events in the article.

Keywords: Counselling, female migrant, auto-ethnography, psychology, reflexive enquiry, and writing therapy

Introduction

Reflective writing has gained increased attention in counselling, psychology and clinics as a way of therapy. This qualitative research method might challenge the western clinical treatments, but its legislative place has been gained in the mainstream of psychology theory, research, and practice (McIlveen, 2008). Researchers used their stories, experiences, and field notes as data in their therapy writing. Recent research articles have been published in psychological and counselling journals, such as *Frontiers in Psychology*, *The Counseling Psychologist*, *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, and *the Journal of Career Assessment*. Compared with the clinical protocols, this method helps vulnerable subjects to generate more details of their natural responses to the emotional events even if they were decades early (Levine & Pizarro, 2004).

In this auto-ethnography paper, I start to reflect on my own education in the early years, and then a pre-service teacher and finally an academic in early childhood education over three decades. After joining a group of Australian female writers, I decided to use *myself* as both 'insider' and 'outsider' to explore the innovative way to heal in the

immigrant journey. Though the reflective writing as a 'betweenner', I could find my 'emotional landscapes' (Sumsion, 2001, p. 195), and analyze emotional events. I revisited pictures, memoirs and diaries from my early life stage to recollect and present my unique story as a Chinese-American-Australian early childhood researcher, to provide an evocative space for early childhood teachers and researchers to reflect in a similar career stage and context. Meanwhile, the autoethnographic piece could help my career counselor to understand me in a better way. While writing my own experiences, I render an opportunity for myself to critically reflect on my own professional occupation.

Studies of writing therapy

Writing therapy has been defined as "client expressive and reflective writing, whether self-generated or suggested by a therapist/researcher" (Wright & Chung, 2001, p. 279). Writing about traumatic, stressful, or emotional events has been demonstrated to result in improvements in mental and physical health and psychological well-being in clinical and non-clinical populations (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005). In clinical settings, expressive writing has been regarded as a common way for people to engage in counselling or conventional

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psychotherapy (Mugerwa & Holden, 2012). This method was initially used for patients controlled in a clinical treatment (Pennebaker, 1997). For example, participants were required to write about their most traumatic thoughts and feelings related to a stressful event for up to 20 minutes over three or four writing sessions (Greenbaum & Javdani, 2017; McMillan & Ramirez, 2016; Mugerwa & Holden, 2012). Benefits of this writing therapy has been evidenced as cost-effective, safe and minimal distraction as it only requires clients to spend a small amount of time in directed writing (Wright & Chung, 2001). Therapeutic writing provides the freedom to express what clients feel without being judged. It's an opportunity to get everything out so that people can understand and see it.

Besides clinical treatments, settings and forms for a therapy writing have also been developed in the last decades. For example, distance clients would love to seek for online support and counselling (British Association for Counselling, 1999) and were suggested using chat rooms, or the Samaritans' e-mail support service (Baughan, 2000). These have already been discovered and are using writing as a self-help tool (Wright & Chung, 2001). For personal development and healing, Hunt and Sampson (1998) believed that "writing as what is generally called 'creative writing', rather than, 'report writing or clinical notes'" (p. 199). They have proposed that clients' writing would link autobiographical and expressive writing to personal development and healing. This writing method was also trialed by Bolton (1999) in the U.K. and she commented that "for patients and by them rather than being done to them. Too much medicine is diagnosis from the outside and having treatments done to the patient" (p. 5). In Bolton's book (1999) titled "The Therapeutic Potential of Creative Writing: Writing Myself", he showed a passion for writing and a range of experience of working with groups who report its physical and psychological benefits. Compared with direct guidance in a clinical setting, She believes that individual have different perceptions, emotional memories, and how people deal with them could lead them to be more balanced and happy individuals. In general, Bolton's stance draws on human creativity as a long-term therapeutic method.

More recently, autoethnography has been adopted as a way for female, migrants, vulnerable individuals as a way to reflect, revoke, and express their emotion. Particularly, female immigrants and refugees who have been bullied, abused, and experienced discriminations in a new environment. The autoethnographic writing form has been widely

accepted in occupational health and therapists in either treatments or professional reflections (Denshire, 2016; McMillan & Ramirez, 2016). Denshire (2015) commented that "practioners in this little known health profession explicitly attend to the meanings of activities in people's everyday lives and therapists may write down moments from a client's life narrative as part of their practice" (p. 832). More recently, Musgrave (2019) used an autoethnography as a methodology to offer a perspective that might help other researchers who would be interested in using this method to investigate their own creative careers and life experiences. In this regard, autoethnographic writing is essential for me to explore to see if it is a proper way to interrogate representations of my emotional events. In the following section, I will justify the adoption of using autoethnography as a research method in my writing.

Research method

Autoethnography offers a channel to develop ways to connect the "I" and "others" to acquire a unique perspective to understand individual responses to society and culture (Chang, 2008; Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010). Over the past ten years, this research method has been widely used to describe the challenges that researchers have faced in the past (Ai, 2015, 2019), struggles at work (Henderson, 2019), societal bias (Bitsch, 2018), and care for personal pain as psychotherapy (Răbu et al., 2019). Although the related research disciplines and kinds of autoethnographic work are varied, researchers agree that personal experience is not a fairy tale or a piece of fiction that can take the form of a personal story. In order to avoid writing autoethnographically and autoethnographic (Sparkes, 2020), Adams and Herrmann (2020, p. 2) state:

What makes a particular work an 'autoethnography'? 'Autoethnography' is comprised of three interrelated components: 'auto,' 'ethno,' and 'graphy.' Thus, autoethnographic projects use selfhood, subjectivity, and personal experience ('auto') to describe, interpret, and represent ('graphy') beliefs, practices, and identities of a group or culture ('ethno').

Based on my previous autoethnographic works, I (2018, 2019) believed that this research method would allow me to reflect upon my own cultural identity, experience of cultural shock, and cultural integration using my learning and teaching experiences and reconstruct my identity in my new space. In this autoethnography, I follow

Henderson's (2019) writing style to describe my early childhood years and use a performative method to offer food for critical thought. When compared to other ways of writing autoethnographic pieces, performative methods help us avoid "linear narratives in favor of fragmented and unresolved stories, the forces at work in a given context can be illustrated and their impact on the individual made visible" (Henderson, 2019, p. 33). In addition, I used a wide range of resources, including diaries, photos, pictures, documents, memoirs, statistics, and poetry. This permitted me to write my stories in a dynamic three-dimensional textual landscape with a discordant sound (Denzin, 2006, p. 433).

As Spry (2011) has observed, performative autoethnography is more "involved" others while constructing "I" in meaning making. She has emphasized that focusing only on the "I" is not enough when writing an autoethnography, as it is never simply a mirror of "your making." In one of her recent papers, she has pointed out that "to engage a selfless autoethnography is to focus on the relationality of 'we' through a reconceptualization of self as socio-culturally unsettled and Other as inappropriable. Rather than constructing identity, autoethnography is about articulating the relational effects of our differences" (Spry, 2017, p. 51). Accordingly, I have delineated the relationship between *I* and *others* using my early childhood diary entries and photos taken by my family members to ponder and reflect upon, question, and reimagine life events within the pertinent context.

Wright examined migration as a major life "transition" using autoethnographic vignettes (2009). She argues that the methodological dominance of "objectivist and positivist approaches to research in counseling and psychotherapy is critiqued alongside 'stages' theories of the experience of transition and loss" (Wright, 2009, p. 623). She reflected her own immigrant life and a therapist experience, advocating "autoethnographic vignettes as an alternative approach to representation and reflexivity in qualitative research" (Humphreys, 2005, p. 840).

In my following reflective writing experts, I attempt to walk myself through anger in my education early years, work abuse in an Anglo environment and worries and anxieties in my research career. Guided by my peers in my writing group, I develop my personal writing therapy plan to know myself in the informal sessions. The organizer of the writing group who was an occupation therapist before retirement, invited me

to join in the Zoom meeting every Wednesday evening between 6pm to 8pm. I was able to drink and share with the topics on each session. All the members were females and want to develop themselves. I was able to use my own laptop, pens and notebooks to make comments and map out ideas. Also, I was able to stop joining in the session at any time of the meetings.

A Small Swallow during my childhood

A Small Swallow was one of the few children's songs that I learned during my childhood. This song served as a good imaginary tool that nurtured my explorative, communicative, and illustrative tendencies during my early years (Davies, 2013). I was born into a middle-class family living in the Yangtze River Delta in the central China. Because of inadequate nutrition and a premature delivery, my extended family members believed that I would not survive the difficult years in China. At the time, my grandmother used to take me to her damp and shabby apartment to look after me until I was strong enough (i.e., mid-1980s). Despite lacking the company and love of my parents, I believed that my early childhood years were full of happiness and joy. She often sang the song *A Small Swallow* to me with her gentle morning kisses and loving hugs. In the lyrics, the words "colorful clothes," "spring," and "beautiful" appealed to me and captured the imagination and dreams of three-year-old me. I often asked my grandmother if I, like the swallow, would be able to fly in the spring and how I could get a colorful dress like the ones the other girls wore. With a big sigh, she pointed me toward a big black-and-white picture on the wall and told me that our family may not be able to buy me beautiful dresses and toys because of the early death of my grandfather. I never got to meet my maternal grandfather because he had passed away before I was born. I was told that my family was significantly affected by the Chinese cultural revolution; therefore, my parents could not receive formal higher education. Consequently, my parents had to work many day and night shifts in a clothing factory.

As a child, I understood that I could not have a beautiful dress with black-and-white dots around the waist as the girls in my neighborhood did. My parents could not afford to purchase red ribbons to celebrate my birthday. Although they did not receive postgraduate education and could not afford to let me take private music lessons during my childhood, my parents had very high expectations of me. They told me that "studying hard is the only way to create a bright future" when I was only slightly older than three years. Before the

age of three, I was not allowed to go to any care centers because the teachers believed that I was too weak. At home, my grandmother trained me how to have a self-control in planning and scheduling my daily routine (e.g., time to wake up, eat lunch, read, and play). I was very happy and satisfied with my grandmother's apartment. However, my life changed after I was sent to kindergarten after my third birthday.

While looking through the old photos in my album (Figure 1), I remembered the following dialog between my mother and I:

My mother: Be quick! Otherwise, we will be late. I have a meeting in the morning.

Me: Mum . . . Mum . . . I do not want to go to kindergarten. [Begins to cry and yell]

My mother: No, you must go! Do you want to come to my bicycle yourself or be caught by daddy?

Me: [A louder yell] I do not want to . . . no kindergarten.

My mother could not wait for me anymore. She put my arms around her neck and put me on the rear seat. Even though I was bawling, she did not allow me to not attend kindergarten. There are no words that can describe how much I hated my parents at such moments. Indeed, I did not find any joy in going to kindergarten and did not make any friends there. My kindergarten timetable was as follows:

8:30–9 am: Children dropped off by their parents

9–10 am: Singing, dancing, and play time with other children

10:30–11 am: Lunch time

11 am–2 pm: Afternoon nap

2–3 pm: Dress up and wait for being picked up by parents

In kindergarten, all the children slept together. When I was three years old, I had to feed myself; otherwise, I would have to stay hungry the entire day. I had to sleep on the cot for four hours, even if I was not tired. I used to pray that I fall sick the next moment so that I would be sent back home. Once my teacher became extremely angry with me because I could not find my socks after my nap. She was afraid that my mother would find fault with her; therefore, she asked me to tell her that the socks had fallen into the toilet when I was playing with others. When I got back home, my parents warned me that if I acted naughty and they received complaints from my teachers again, I would be beaten hard. When I heard these remarks, I imagined myself as the little swallow in the song, which could fly away and find beautiful views in early spring.

The kindergarten I attended did not offer me any positive experiences. I was treated like a “passive vein” (Reynolds, 2018), and I was forced to perform tasks that I did not like. This passive learning experience among Chinese children has been examined by researchers over the last few decades. Cross and Hitchcock (2007) have observed that “Chinese learners were obedient to authority, passive, or lacking in critical thinking, this applying particularly to the younger pupils who were exposed to more ‘progressive’ pedagogical approaches” (p. 4). They explored whether Chinese students who had come to the United Kingdom to study could change their learning styles. They found that there was a significant mismatch between teacher and student expectations. Unfortunately, the students reported that educational practices in the United Kingdom were completely different from what they had experienced in China. Other scholars (Gieve & Clark, 2005) have challenged the conceptualization of Chinese students as a homogeneous group because it entails the risk of characterizing Chinese students as a reluctant group. Typically, I was reluctant, but my teachers believed that I should be more involved in my peer group.

Reflecting upon my experiences in kindergarten, I realize that the mismatch between teachers and students may be attributable to two possible factors, which have been underscored by recent findings: Confucianism (Lu, 2018, 2019) and collectivism (Liu & Tobin, 2018). Confucianism is closely related to Chinese social culture and children's learning performance, and requires teachers to follow the teachings of Confucius and his disciples in the classroom (Lin, 2010). Confucianists believe that “there is only one world in which humans live as and with *wanshiwanwu* (万事万物, all nature) and directly experience living in this world” (You, 2020, p. 73). Hence, he “shunt[s] aside questions which requir[e] him to go beyond empirical understanding and carefully limit[s] his discussions to those things within the bounds of immediate experience” (Hall & Ames, 1987, p. 196). The core values of the Chinese cultural system is derived from Confucian ideas (Chan, 1986), which have significantly influenced teaching and learning practices in China for many years. Students are taught to maintain harmonious relationships with others, adhere to hierarchical structures, and work hard (Lin, 2010). It is generally believed that “Confucian teaching emphasized personal morality, correctness of social behavior, and harmony of interpersonal relationships” (Lin, 2010, p. 307). Accordingly, Yu (2020) has argued that

“Confucianism does not really expect everyone to participate in public affairs” (p. 20). The hierarchal levels are rigid, and only by following them can the obedience of the masses be achieved. Because Confucianism, Chinese culture, and Confucian ideas are interlinked, Yu (2008) has stated that “Confucianism does represent Chinese culture, Confucian moral tradition represents Chinese moral tradition and education in Chinese tradition necessarily means education in the Confucian tradition” (p. 122)

Chinese collectivism is another important factor that influences the student-teacher mismatch in kindergartens. The arrangement of student beds in a row and the use of a timetable that stipulates when students should nap, eat lunch, and play underscore the fact that Chinese children are raised and disciplined in groups within early education environments. Collectivism emphasizes that students should respond to teachers, family members, peers, and community members as per rigid norms. Thus, serving the “collective good is the ultimate purpose of individual development; all individuals should aim for the flourishing of the collective whole, that is, the family, the state and the world, whereas individual needs, interests and desires come second” (Qu, 2019, p. 357). Collectivism, like Confucianism, is also regarded as a unique cultural dimension among Chinese learners who move to the West. Consistent with the cultural conflict between individualism and collectivism, Oyserman and Lee (2008) have confirmed that cultural factors influence how we behave and think. Thus, when a child is unable to integrate into a new context, they may be highly marginalized by peers and teachers with the same cultural background.

The act of imagining myself as a small swallow can be explained using the two discourses presented in the preceding sections. During the daytime, it was extremely difficult to practice self-discipline (e.g., dressing up, taking naps, and having lunch). There was no expression of affection between my teachers and I or my parents and I. Because of a lack of affection from adults, I created my own imaginary world. Instead of regarding such behaviors as harmful, researchers have noted that the very word *kindergarten* comes from the phrase “children’s garden,” which is reminiscent of a natural child-centered environment that involves play. However, for me, imagination bring me hopes, wishes, and energy as I felt as I was too small to change the social cultural context. This place is like ‘a third space’ (Ai, 2015), where he described his helpless situation like an orphan in China. This

space also fostered a sense of security and peace in me because of the absence of blame, chaos, and dishonesty. After many years, I spoke to my mother about my teacher’s dishonesty; instead of being surprised, she tried persuading me to forget this unpleasant memory. However, she could not understand how deeply these negative experiences had been imprinted in my mind.



Figure 1. Beds in the kindergarten for napping

Teaching practices in the West

I retained my Chinese identity for many years, even after I secured rights to reside in the West. My skin complexion and hair color readily reveal my cultural background. After the 9/11 attack, I had to seriously reconsider where to pursue my postgraduate education. My parents asked me if I would like to continue my postgraduate education in a big or small city. I did not have any right to make any decision even when I was perceived as an adult in the eyes of my parents. Therefore, when I received an offer from Q University—a leading institute in the United States of America (USA)—my parents were more excited than I was. From my early years to the time I was pursuing my postgraduate education, my parents made decisions for me, and I could not say “no” to them. Unsurprisingly, Q University was satisfied with the expectations that my parents had set for me. However, the teachers’ observations and the two practice sessions, which were compulsory for my last course, made me feel restless and uneasy. Before moving to the USA, I imagined American preschools to be like mini-zoos or be filled with Barbies in the play area. Teachers would use their professional skills to help children improve their various skills (e.g., literacy, numeracy, and communication). On my first day in kindergarten in a small preschool in C town, Midwestern USA, I felt blue and exhausted.

Diary excerpt 1:

I greeted Mrs. Lai politely and asked her if her daughter had had a good day in the center. She

stared at me with confused eyes and asked, "Are you new here?" I thought she wanted to chat and pleasantly replied, "Yes, this is my first day." She proceeded to ask, "Can you speak Mandarin or Cantonese?" "Of course, Mandarin is my mother tongue, and I can understand Cantonese quite well," I replied. Suddenly, she raised her voice, "You can speak Chinese; then, why did you speak in English to my daughter and me?" I suddenly lost my ability to speak; I did not foresee that she would ask me this question, and I was left feeling embarrassed. After a few minutes, I gently explained to her that, although this preschool was run by Chinese individuals and some materials in the pictures included text in both languages, I was required to speak to everyone in English. I had to speak to everyone in English, irrespective of their background. She did not wait to hear any further explanation. She felt offended and raised her voice again to criticize my behavior. She complained that the advertisement was misleading and had influenced them to send their daughter to this center. While arguing, the manager came to me and asked me what was happening. Then, the mother and her daughter were invited to discuss this issue in the manager's office.

After they left the preschool, the manager unleashed her anger and asked me to discuss this issue in the office. Instead of comforting me, she blamed me and said that I was as stupid as a donkey. I was told that, in such a situation, instead of challenging Mrs. Lai, I should have been patient and helped her calm down by providing some tea and fruits. I insisted that I was right and that the position required teachers to speak in English in the workplace. The manager retorted, "Do not argue! Do you know how many Chinese migrants reside in this area? We cannot displease them. If no one else is around, you can speak in Chinese with them if they want to."

My gosh! I could not believe that quality and policy could so easily be ignored, simply because the group was strongly supportive of the business. I understood that this preschool was close to the Chinese town, but there were still a few children with other cultural backgrounds. I could not tell if I was lucky or unlucky to be a teacher in this center for a short time. (March 6, 2006)

A cultural mismatch between students and teachers arises when one of the two parties is not from the dominant culture. Jahng (2014) has described her painful identity struggles as follows:

Of course, that was not the first time; I had already had that sort of disappointing occurrence repeated over and over in the preschool. And I

thought that she was not respecting me only because I was not a white teacher and my English had a strong Korean accent. It was inexplicably hard to realize that I was incapable of disciplining them as I wanted – correcting their disorderly behavior and making them listen to me. This instantly drove me into the state of hurt, despair, anger, and sadness. (p. 577)

Jahng and I were both distressed because of our identities. It is interesting that her struggles pertained to speaking English with a non-native accent (i.e., influenced by her mother tongue), whereas my challenges included being blamed for not using my mother tongue to please parents. Though our challenges are different, we demonstrated poor adjustment, adaptation, and responses to the new cultural context. I was aware of my identity as a Chinese person who could speak Mandarin, English, and Cantonese with community members as well as my Chinese-American identity, but my parents misunderstood me in preschool. These challenges and confusion about identity are not the same as the life experiences described by Ai (2015). Ai's challenges were situated in a white work environment and living context because he had not been granted the permanent residency right in Australia, had a high workload, and experienced uncertainty about his career. All these struggles led him to reshape his identity while living in Australia and, subsequently, return to his motherland.

When I was a preschool teacher, I tried my best to follow their policies and obey their rules because I knew that this was the only way to adapt to the new context. However, I often found myself wondering, "Am I Chinese or American?" I speak English, and I live and study with people with multicultural and multilingual backgrounds. I was glad to be integrated into the new cultural context, but I felt that I belonged to neither the place from which I came nor the place where I was residing (Meijering & Lager, 2014). On one hand, I was proud to be recognized as a member of a cultural-ethnic group in which all members had the same cultural background (Tartakovsky, 2013). On the other hand, I was extremely troubled by the fact that these Chinese immigrant parents identified with only a small ethnic group and required me (a preschool teacher) to speak to them in Mandarin.

Betweenness in Australia

I returned to Australia to start a research project as an early childhood researcher during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the lockdown period, I communicated with my extended family members in the USA, China, and Australia through WeChat,

which is a social media platform used in China. My extended family members sent me their best wishes and questions in nursing children. One of their common concerns about children pertained to their wellbeing and education at this challenging time.

Diary excerpt 2:

My uncle asked me to persuade my niece (Xia) and nephew (Jun) to study hard through online learning. They considered me to be an EC expert and believed that the children would listen to my suggestions. He told me that because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the two children had been at home all day. Because my cousin was too busy to help Xia and Jun with their assignments, she had employed private tutors who attended to them. However, the children refused to communicate with the private tutors and skipped their lessons. Subsequently, they were found on the terrace staring hopelessly at the sky.

I had to speak with Xia and Jun through WeChat in the afternoon. When the video camera was turned on, Jun could not wait to start complaining. "Auntie, I did not want to have extra work. My mother asked me to learn," he exclaimed. Before he could finish the sentence, Xia grabbed the phone and turned the camera toward her and shouted at the wall, "No, I want my doll." I was about to ask what the doll was. Then, I heard Xia begin to cry and say, "That is my doll, give to me!" I suddenly realized that the two children were completely out of control and must have been creating a lot of trouble for my big uncle. I asked them where their grandfather was. Jun answered that he was in the kitchen. My uncle might have heard the chaos. He picked up the phone and spoke to me. I asked my uncle to comfort Jun and Xia first and find a protective cover for the camera in case the children dropped it. First, I asked Jun to speak to me, while Xia waited in the kitchen.

Helen: Junjun (Jun's nickname), tell me, please, why did you cry?

Jun: Auntie, my mum forced me to learn advanced mathematics online. She told me that, if I do not learn online, I will not catch up with others.

Helen: Did your classmates learn advanced maths online?

Jun: Not everyone, but, if my mum finds out that someone has started, she will enroll me. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, she took me out more, but now she told me that all children were studying at home and learning through private lessons. If I do not do the same, I may be left behind when school reopens.

[He asked me to not tell his father about this;

otherwise, he would be beaten hard. He told me that his father was stricter than his mum; therefore, he was afraid of being close to his dad. Then, I asked him to ask his little sister, Xia, to talk to me.]

Helen: Xiaxia (Xia's nick name), are you happy to stay with Jun and grandfather at home?

Xia: No, I want to play with Nana and Pan in kindergarten. I want my mum and dad to buy dolls for me.

[While speaking to me, she looked out of the window. I asked her if she had learned new songs in kindergarten before the COVID-19 pandemic.]

Xia: Yes [She started to sing *A Small Swallow*. Auntie, do you know it?

Helen: Of course. When I was in kindergarten, I learned it too.

[We sang together in front of the camera.]

At this time, Jun and Xia's mother, Yin, returned home. I clearly heard her first question to the two children: "Did you finish your mathematics quizzes online?" She suddenly realized that I was talking to her children. She smiled politely and embarrassedly told me that it was time for her children to play their musical instruments. She said that she would like to talk to me later when I was free

Two weeks later, Yin stated that she was still busy and did not know how to communicate with the children when they were studying from home. She felt very helpless because she knew that Jun did not like learning advanced mathematics and completing extra assignments online. She told me that Xia wanted to play with her peers who lived in the neighborhood. However, in Jun's class, most of the Chinese parents had enrolled their children in online private classes out of fear that their children would be left behind in the future. To protect Xia from contracting COVID-19, Yin urged her to not venture out of the building. Like any other woman, she needed to work and balance her family life as well. Fortunately, my uncle had retired and was helping her look after her children during the daytime. It appeared that an excessive workload had prevented her from spending time with her children at home.

Both Yin and my mother love their children and are great mothers. However, they have high expectations of their children, even though they are employed and live overseas. High expectations among Chinese immigrants influence not only their academic performance but also their choices regarding their future careers (Cheng & Koblinsky, 2009; Li, 2004; Zou, Anderson, & Tsey, 2013). Some scholars have noted that parental expectations regarding their children's education is higher among

Chinese parents than their western counterparts because of Chinese cultural values (Leung, Hou, Gati, & Li, 2011; Lu, 2019). Confucianism encourages “individuals, especially young people, to fulfill their parents’ expectations and obey their wishes, show respect to parental figures, and maintain interpersonal harmony through their choices and actions.” In contrast, Western cultural values “often encourage individuals to be independent in their thinking, judgment, and choices, and to pursue personal goals and career fulfillment” (Leung et al., 2011, p. 12). Further, Confucianism emphasizes competition at an early age rather than collaboration in schools (Brunn, Byrd, Brunn-Bevel, & Carons, 2013). In my recent publications (Lu, 2018, 2019), I have delineated the influence of Confucianism on Chinese students’ development of self-discipline, moral values, and cultural identity in their life trajectories. Furthermore, Maoist values also influence Chinese immigrant parents’ expectations regarding their children’s education. For example, slogans such as “To love Chairman Mao, love labor, and, above all, serve the people” are very popular among Chinese families (Sidel, 1982, p. 78). Even though my mother had retired and was living with me in Australia, she often asked me to help the people who are in the labor force market. Moreover, my uncle taught Jun and Xia to be humble and polite. Indeed, as the Maoists believe, “Humility can make people progress.” In this regard, even though Chinese children may live and study overseas, their early learning practices continue to be significantly influenced by Chinese sociocultural values, both at home and in school.

Short discussion and conclusion

Autoethnography is commonly used for individuals to describe their life experience and show cultural nuances in a narrative inquiry. My autoethnographic reflection challenges the conventional method used in career counselling. Rather than being suggested in an autoethnographic writing, I would be required to join in sequel sessions that I might feel not comfortable to expose my stories and frustration to someone that I have not build trust with. In recent years, these issues were also noticed by general practitioners (Mugerwa & Holden, 2012), female counsellors and therapists (McMillan & Ramirez, 2016). I began my autoethnographic writing first as a female bilingual migrant in 2015 as a vulnerable individual in an Anglo academic context. Since then, I became a life writing member and academic in Australia, China and Europe. Reflectively, I have

found that my research colleagues, participants and myself all feel interested in expanding this research method in benefiting their mental health.

However, as I am in a marginalised position, the research method would not be the first choice for our counsellors, and research colleagues. I decided to use this opportunity for experimenting this method as an exploration to expressing my negative experience, frustration, and cultural identity to examine if it would be potential to apply to the practice in counselling service, and how it would be beneficial for participants to a large extent (Buckley, 2016). In the process, we could prepare for our project by seeking for creative potentiality in using autoethnography as a research method (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2013).

In the previous auto-ethnographic works, I focused on my life experience on my bilingual learning trajectory from China to the USA and early career life between China and Australia (Lu, 2018, 2019, 2020). Writing this article has provided me with an opportunity to talk with counsellors in a virtual space during Covid-19 as a female immigrant, teacher and an academic researcher. My cultural identity was shifted in hybrid spaces (Meredith, 1998) which could assist me to understand myself in a better way.

Limitation and future research direction

Autoethnographic reflective writing as a therapy is still an explorative method for career counsellors. I used it as an experimental way for improving understanding of my own cultural identity, negative experience and depression.

In this paper, I used my own story to show my early learning experiences as the first-generation migrant, and the education of the second generation of migrants experienced in my extended family. These negative learning experiences helped me to recollect the data, recall the emotional moments, and try to walk myself out of the darkness. With a purpose of enhancing the self-therapeutic way through auto-ethnographic writing, I would encourage members of my audience to reflect on their own emotional life experiences of educational and cultural adaption and their connected, underlying cultural associations, utterances, and life experiences in a comparative context.

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