



EMERALD POINTS

POSITIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

An Introduction to Theory and Practice

**FREDA GONOT-SCHOUPINSKY
CLAUDE-HÉLÈNE MAYER**



POSITIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

If the word “positive” in the book title drew you in, this is a good start. Stick with it and you will learn much about positive psychology, autoethnography, and positive autoethnography. This book reminds readers that all aspects of human experiences are worthy to be explored in autoethnography. Its theoretical and practical approach is accessible to all levels of autoethnographers.

—*Heewon Chang*, PhD, Professor and Chair, PhD in Organizational Leadership, Eastern University

Freda and Claude’s autoethnographies provide an intriguing background into the person behind the scholar. As scientists, we spend our lives trying to understand others and what makes them “tick”. In this invaluable volume, the lens is turned toward the scientists so we come to understand what makes them “tick”. I highly recommend this volume to all who are curious about the person behind the science.

—*Corey Keyes*, Emeritus Professor of Sociology and author of *Languishing: How To Feel Alive Again In A World That Wears Us Down* (2025, Crown Publishing)

In *Positive Autoethnography*, contributors trace the development and evolution of autoethnography, explore the connections between positive psychology and autoethnographic inquiry, and showcase work that prioritizes well-being and transformation. This collection will be of interest to psychologists, especially those trained in positivism, who seek to integrate personal experience into therapeutic and research practice.

—*Tony E. Adams*, Bradley University

Perusing the contents of the richly variegated but conceptually coherent contents of *Positive Autoethnography* stirred a sense of curiosity in me that blossomed slowly into fascination. As a theorist, therapist and researcher who approaches life-altering loss and grief as a quest for meaning, I found myself resonating to the call for an honest yet disciplined practice of narrative self-reflection, directed by the intention to find in the rubble of even shattering experiences something of value. Paraphrasing Thoreau nearly 200 years ago, I admire the contributors’ wish to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if they could not learn what it had to teach. I for one look

forward to learning along with the practitioners of this emerging genre of life writing that Gonot-Schoupinsky and Mayer are thoughtfully cultivating.

—*Robert A. Neimeyer*, PhD, Director, Portland Institute for Loss & Transition and author, *Living Beyond Loss: Questions & Answers about Grief and Bereavement*

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Practice

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emerald
PUBLISHING

United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India
Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL

First edition 2025

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80592-278-0 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-80592-277-3 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-80592-279-7 (Epub)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

We dedicate this book to our much-missed friend and colleague.

Paul T. P. Wong (1937–2024)

A pioneer in positive psychology.

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CONTENTS

<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
<i>Foreword, Heewon Chang</i>	xvii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xxiii
1. Introduction to Positive Autoethnography <i>Freda Gonot-Schoupinsky and Claude-Hélène Mayer</i>	1
2. Roots: The Journey to Contemporary Autoethnography <i>Freda Gonot-Schoupinsky</i>	9
3. History of Positive Psychology, Contemporary and Future Directions <i>Claude-Hélène Mayer</i>	27
4. The Theory of Positive Autoethnography and Some Insight Into Pragmatic Autoethnography <i>Freda Gonot-Schoupinsky</i>	41
5. Intercultural Positive Autoethnography (IcPosAE) <i>Claude-Hélène Mayer</i>	57
6. Positive Autoethnographic Case Studies <i>Freda Gonot-Schoupinsky</i>	73
7. Therapeutic Positive Autoethnography (ThePosAE) <i>Claude-Hélène Mayer</i>	87
8. Rocked Me Like a Hurricane! A Positive Autoethnography by Bruce Friesen <i>Bruce Friesen, Claude-Hélène Mayer and Freda Gonot-Schoupinsky</i>	115

9. Supporting Earthquake Survivors With the Laughie: A Positive Collaborative Autoethnography From Türkiye <i>Gülcan Garip, Nilgün Kuru Alici, Besime Alpdoğan, Claude-Hélène Mayer and Freda Gonot-Schoupinsky</i>	129
10. Reflections on the Art and Practice of Joy: A Positive Collaborative Autoethnography <i>Ros Ben-Moshe, Joe Hoare, Claude-Hélène Mayer and Freda Gonot-Schoupinsky</i>	141
11. A Promising Partnership: Positive Psychology and Positive Autoethnography <i>Grant Rich, Claude-Hélène Mayer and Freda Gonot-Schoupinsky</i>	153
12. Horizons: Observations on the Role and Future of Positive Autoethnography <i>Freda Gonot-Schoupinsky and Claude-Hélène Mayer</i>	167
<i>Epilogue</i>	179
<i>About the Authors</i>	181
<i>Index</i>	185

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AE	Autoethnography
BPAE	Business Autoethnography (a PAE approach)
CAE	Collaborative Autoethnography
CPAE	Criminal Autoethnography (a PAE approach)
ICAE	Invited Collaborative Autoethnography
IcPosAE	Intercultural Positive Autoethnography
PAE	Pragmatic Autoethnography
PERMA	Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment
PosAE	Positive Autoethnography
PosAE CS	Positive Autoethnographic Case Studies
PosCAE	Positive Collaborative Autoethnography or Collaborative Positive Autoethnography
PosMAE	Positive Meta-Autoethnography
PP	Positive Psychology
PP1.0	First wave PP
PP2.0	Second wave PP
PP3.0	Third wave PP
PPI	Positive Psychology Intervention
ThePosAE	Therapeutic Positive Autoethnography

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PREFACE

Welcome to our book!

In this book, Claude and I present the background to, and the theory and practice of, positive autoethnography (PosAE). Throughout the book, we showcase multiple examples of PosAE, written and shared by academics and practitioners from diverse fields and backgrounds.

This book is designed to be particularly suited to academics active in the multidisciplinary fields of positive psychology (PP), autoethnography (AE) and those concerned with qualitative research methods. Nevertheless, we also provide extensive background information to render content suitable to readers new to these fields. Before we embark on the topic of PosAE, a brief introduction of AE is therefore pertinent. Very broadly, and the reader will learn more in the book, AE is an autobiographical, culturally framed, reflexive, experiential, narrative approach, that authors use to convey their personal experiences and sentiments.

Our overall purpose in writing and editing this book is to share our enthusiasm for PosAE and our excitement for what we see as the vast and varied potential of this new approach. We do this by conveying what PosAE is, why PosAE is needed, how PosAE is developing and how PosAE can be used, both from a theoretical and practical perspective, sharing diverse examples. Before we turn to a chapter-by-chapter content exploration, a few words on PosAE.

In the book, we learn what PosAE is and how it relates to AE overall and to pragmatic autoethnography (PAE), of which it is a subtype.

Let us start by stating, over five points, what PosAE is **not**, to gain some insight into what it is!

*First, PosAE is **not** a sugar-coated form of AE where the writer seeks to exclude negative experiences, negative thoughts or anything considered in any way to be negative.*

*Second, PosAE is **not** a backward-looking form of AE that reverts back to early twentieth century objectivist AE and forsakes constructivist thinking.*

Third, PosAE is not a single type of narrative approach that is judged on its stylistic content and whether the narration is seen as being “good” or “good enough.”

Fourth, PosAE is not an easy option that entails just writing down autobiographical experiences with a bit of cultural framing and adding in a bit of positive jargon.

And fifth, PosAE is not a superfluous addition to the autoethnographic family.

So, then, in reference to the above five points, what is PosAE!?

First, PosAE is an autoethnographic approach whereby the author employs positive reflexivity to intentionally draw out the positive in the narrative, for the benefit of their own well-being, and that of readers and any others involved in the process.

Second, PosAE is a pragmatic forward-looking form of AE that embraces a metamodernistic vision, where epistemological flexibility is encouraged according to the purpose of the author(s).

Third, PosAE is an approach that offers a range of subtypes that can be used in multiple ways, whereby the intended purpose of the author(s) and/or those guiding them and the eventual outcomes it produces are the most important aspects on which it can be judged.

Fourth, PosAE is an action-oriented approach, which can be very challenging for the author(s) as the active employment of positive reflexivity to work towards positive change and to achieve positive outcomes is not an easy option and can entail effort and research to gain psycho-cultural insight.

And fifth, PosAE responds to a perceived need for a discrete autoethnographic approach that is conceived to be logically consistent with the values of PP.

Chapter-by-Chapter Journey through the book

In Chapter 1, “Prelims,” Claude and I introduce ourselves, using a collaborative autoethnographic approach, hence our voices are distinguished. We then introduce PosAE and briefly contemplate its roots and association to PAE. Our aim here is to give some initial insight into PosAE and positive reflexivity and illustrate why PosAE can be of utility as a research methodology for PP and as a therapeutic intervention.

In Chapter 2, “Roots of AE,” I take a step back in time to contemplate AE’s origins in the field of anthropology and explore how it has evolved from an objective approach in the 1940s to a subjective approach today. I then briefly present 15 discrete autoethnographic approaches, including PosAE and PAE,

and propose a classification according to narrator mode and purpose. A word cloud generated from the Wikipedia entry for AE is also presented.

In Chapter 3, “An Overview of PP,” Claude introduces PP and traces its origins and its development over the three waves, known as PP1.0, PP2.0, PP3.0. We learn how PosAE can be interlinked with PP in the context of each of these three waves and overall. Claude describes how PosAE can be used to deepen and enlarge PP psychology research to expand thinking within the field. The potential of PosAE as a therapeutic approach is also considered.

In Chapter 4, “Theory of PosAE,” I describe its alignment to PAE, which is purpose-driven, experiential and action-oriented. I then outline why a discrete autoethnographic approach for PP was needed, before describing what PosAE is, how it fits in with AE, the 3 “Rs” of AE (Reflexivity, Research and Representation) and what is meant by positive reflexivity. Finally, I introduce five types of PosAE explored in this book.

In Chapter 5, “Intercultural Positive Autoethnography” (IcPosAE), Claude focuses on the PosAE subtype of IcPosAE. Two examples of IcPosAE are provided to showcase how IcPosAE can lead to increased self-understanding and reflection regarding self and culture. IcPosAE can be a way to address the positive in the context of identity construction and culture and in the transformation of painful or negative cultural experiences into positive ones.

In Chapter 6, “Positive Autoethnographic Case Studies,” I turn to the subtype of PosAE case studies. This approach enables a hybrid usage of PosAE, according to purpose and structure. The excerpts showcased come from a series of PosAE case studies published in *Mental Health and Social Inclusion*. The authors, who include Professors Everett Worthington, and the late Paul Wong narrate and reflect on aspects of their life story and academic research.

In Chapter 7, “Therapeutic Positive Autoethnography” (ThePosAE), Claude describes ThePosAE and its use as a meaningful intervention in the context of therapeutic work. We learn how Claude uses ThePosAE in her own work with her clients and how it can support savouring, reflection, personal growth and transformation in therapy. The chapter includes seven figures that illustrate different ways in which ThePosAE can be used to benefit the client–therapist relationship.

In Chapter 8, “Rocked Me Like a Hurricane,” we find a PosAE from Professor Bruce Friesen, Chair of Sociology at the University of Tampa, Florida. Bruce narrates his lived experiences of Hurricane Milton in October 2024, over nine stages: Denial, Resignation, Preparations, Acts of Desperation, The Hit, The Next Day, Aftermath, Relief and Lessons Learned.

His PosAE is filled with important life lessons, including the need to remind ourselves of how privileged we are.

In Chapter 9, “Earthquake Survivors and Laughter,” we visit the earthquake survivor camp in Hatay, Türkiye, constructed following the devastating earthquakes in 2023. In this Collaborative PosAE (PosCAE) led by Dr. Gülcan Garip, Besime Alpdoğan and Associate Professor Nilgün Kuru Alici, we hear about the urgent need for positive interventions and the research with the Laughie (Laugh Intentionally Everyday) one-minute laughter prescription.

In Chapter 10, “Joy,” we immerse ourselves in the topic of joy in a PosCAE undertaken by Ros Ben-Moshe and Joe Hoare, both laughter and Laughie practitioners, concerned with activating joy in their own lives and for their clients. The PosCAE explores their personal paths to everyday joy, joy and adversity and some cultural influences of joy. We learn that joy is a practice and a choice that requires focus, that is always within reach.

In Chapter 11, “PosAE and PP,” Dr. Grant Rich, an early advocate for the use of AE in PP, contemplates how PP can benefit from PosAE. Grant raises several issues and concludes that PosAE is valuable, indeed essential, as a PP approach. One that can enable us to deepen exploration and understanding when sensibly applied. He also considers that PosAE can serve as a bridge between the social sciences and the humanities.

In Chapter 12, “Conclusions,” Claude and I share our observations on PosAE and its future potential. We reflect on the aims, applications and prospective outcomes of using PosAE and the 18 PosAE examples shared in the book. Thoughts on PosAE from the late Paul Wong and Ryan Niemiec are also shared. We conclude that PosAE can enjoy a bright future, but that its success will be determined by its ability to meet its various pragmatic aims.

We hope you enjoy this book and look forward to your feedback!
Freda Gonot-Schoupinsky and Claude-Hélène Mayer

FOREWORD

by Heewon Chang

When I was asked to write a foreword for this book, my gaze immediately landed on the word “positive” in the book title. I personally like words with positive vibes, such as positive thinking, optimism, appreciation, flourishing, blessings and redemption. At the same time, I was suspicious if this word in the title was simply another trendy modifier for Autoethnography (AE). A series of questions raised their heads. Does Positive Autoethnography (PosAE) contain only positive elements of life? Is it possible to isolate the positives from the rest of one’s life experiences as if lab scientists could isolate a certain element for close observation? Even if positives could be separated from negatives, how could only cherry-picked partial fragments help construct a full picture of someone’s life? Is this new book implicitly critiquing contemporary AEs that seem to be dominated by negative, traumatic and tragic life events, illness narratives and problematic social ills?

Despite my initial questions, my personal leaning on positives compelled me to accept the invitation to write the foreword. I believe that I am fundamentally an optimist, a positive thinker and a justice-seeker. My upbeat outlook of life and belief in others’ goodwill generally help me engage in collaborative work with others and advocacy for collective thriving and flourishing. My general gratefulness, I believe, is anchored on my Christian faith that calls me to act not for my selfish gains but for the common good of all. My positive-thinking and constructive-thinking may have grown in my familial and spiritual context despite many sociopolitical upheavals of Korea where I spent my childhood and young adult life. I have tended to prefer books and movies that have redemptive endings and positive messages. Particularly, two books influenced my young minds: Victor E. Frankl’s autobiographical book *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1959/2026) and Eleanor H. Porter’s classic novel *Pollyanna* (1913). Frankl’s book chronicled the Jewish psychiatrist’s dehumanizing experiences in Auschwitz, one of the most devastating Nazi concentration camps. He attributed his survival from this extreme situation to his drive to keep the hope for his life’s meaning. Porter’s book on Pollyanna is

similarly uplifting in that an orphan transcended her life's misery with hopefulness and positivity. The translated books from the West reinforced my positive-thinking when I was growing up in the East. Perhaps it was not an accident that my recent re-reading of Frankl's book rekindled my conviction of the power of positive-thinking and helped me accept the invitation to write the foreword for the book that has the word "positive" in the title.

The value of the book, however, lies beyond the title itself. The table of contents attests to it. The book provides valuable information about PosAE in four groups. Chapter 3 and 11 introduce Positive Psychology (PP) informatively and concisely. Chapter 2 provides a refreshing overview of contemporary AEs. Chapters 1, 4, 11 and 12 explain tenets of PosAE. Six chapters (5 through 10) showcase various PosAE examples. To a novice scholar of PP, like myself, Chapters 3 and 11 are particularly helpful because these chapters provide a historical overview of PP, the root of PosAE. Three waves of thoughts in PP grounded my understanding of this subdiscipline of psychology. According to the authors of the chapters, the first wave focused on studying the positive concepts of life (e.g., happiness, thriving, flourishing, etc.), the second wave drew the positive meaning from both positive and negative life experiences and the third wave adopted the systemic approach in interpreting all aspects of life experiences within their contexts. With this understanding of PP, I have been able to construct my own perspectives about the compatibility between AE and PP. I suggest that readers read on to learn about what the authors of other chapters offer about the theories and practices of PosAE.

As an AE methodologist, I soon discovered, from reading the book, that PosAE, as the result of the marriage between PP and AE, makes great sense. AE, as a qualitative research method, uses the researchers' personal life experiences holistically, contextually and interpretively. Namely, autoethnographers (i.e., the researchers of AE) interpret their diverse life experiences in relation to their sociocultural contexts in order to generate sociocultural understandings out of their personal life experiences. Let me unpack these aspects of AE a bit more to offer insights about how each emphasis of AE is aligned with the inclinations of PP.

Firstly, from the perspective of **holistic** inclusion of diverse life experiences, autoethnographers treat their life experiences, whether positive or negative, holistically. Although certain AEs appear to focus on the researchers' negative experiences, they do not single out only negatives to force out the artificial critiques of other individuals, organizations or society. In similar manners, any positive experiences included in AEs are not to unnaturally praise certain individuals and propagate and advocate certain groups. Autoethnographers use their individual life experiences as a window for a critical as well as

appreciative understanding of their sociocultural reality where their experiences took place. Therefore, the holistic inclusion of diverse data about both positive and negative life experiences is the materials that autoethnographers work with to create a fuller picture of the sociocultural phenomena under study. Therefore, the second way of PP – utilizing both positive and negative experiences – would cohere with autoethnographic endeavours.

Secondly, from the perspective of **contextualizing** life experiences, autoethnographers treat contextual data as importantly as personal experiential data. The contextual data refer to information about the sociocultural, geopolitical and relational context of their life experiences. When the researchers gather memory data about their life experiences pertaining to their research topics, it is inevitable that their life stories contain the information about what happened. It includes who was involved, what the main focus was, when it happened, where it took place, why it became an issue and how it has evolved to this point. The explicit and implicit clues showing up in their recollected data lead to the further investigation of the physical, relational and temporal backgrounds of the experiential data. By exploring the relationship between individual experiences and their contextual peculiarities with the systems-thinking approach, autoethnographers are able to offer better insights about why and how they experienced their life events in such a way and how their sociocultural environment influenced their lived experience. Therefore, AE is aligned well with the second and third waves of PP.

Lastly, from the perspective of **interpreting** meanings, autoethnographers do not intend to merely describe personal experiences as their ultimate goal. Instead, they strive to offer interpretive insights about the sociocultural meaning of their life experiences. Denzin (2013), for example, emphasized the criticality of interpretation in AE-making. Autoethnographers engage various interpretive lenses in their autoethnographic process. For example, critical AE uses critical lenses to identify sociocultural ills embedded in their lived experiences (Boylorn & Orbe, 2020); transformative AE employs the transformative framework in improving themselves and their environments (Hernandez et al., 2022); queering AE brings to the fore the historically marginalized and discriminated life experiences of those in same-sex relationships for a new understanding and appreciation (Holman Jones & Harris, 2013); and PosAE, presented in this book, adds the positive interpretive lens that allows the researchers to focus on drawing positive meanings from both negative and positive life events. Freda Gonot-Schoupinsky in Chapter 2 identifies additional interpretive lenses highlighted in therapeutic AE, symbiotic AE and meta-AE (i.e., revisionistic AE). In addition, AEs have been adopted in a wide range of academic disciplines that have also infused their distinctive disciplinary interest

and interpretive frameworks. In addition to the disciplines that the author-editors of this book have listed, I have also written about the adaptability of AE in various social science research (Chang, 2021), organizational leadership research (Chang & Bilgen, 2020), healthcare research (Chang, 2016a) and spirituality research (Chang, 2016b). The beauty of diversity among AEs comes with the interpretive licence that their researchers have brought to the field. For this, AE works well with all waves of PP.

So far I have offered my perspective, from the AE's standpoint, why AE works well with PP and why PP adds value to the field of AE. I hope that my perspective from the AE's end complements the work done by the authors of Chapter 11, Grant Rich, Claude-Hélène Mayer and Freda Gonot-Schoupinsky, which focuses on the compatibility between two fields from the perspective of PP. By the end of reading the book, I have become convinced of not only the compatibility between AE and PP, but also the power of PosAE in expanding opportunities for some scholars and practitioners. I am particularly thinking about those who feel that their life is devoid of dramatic stories to tell or those who have already resolved their negative experiences with positive-thinking. They may think that there's not much room for their "bland" life stories in AEs. I could relate to them well because I once thought that way. Compared to my mother's, I felt my life stories were plain because they did not contain lived experiences with the cultural and linguistic genocide of Japanese colonizers, religious persecution by communists, a poverty-stricken refugee life during the Korean War and gender discrimination during her professional life. I have not personally experienced sexual violence, domestic violence, loss of young adult children, single-motherhood, adoption and devastating mental health that my family members and close friends had experienced. Therefore, I felt that my life stories seemed pale compared to other AE-worthy stories. Although some may believe that dramatic life stories are more worthy for AEs, PosAE reminds us that this misconception is indeed incorrect and that AE welcomes all life stories, negative and positive. Autoethnographers may try this brand of AE with confidence that any of their life stories is important to their AE and they need to take an interpretive licence to draw appropriate socio-cultural meanings out of their life's materials.

For this reason, I strongly recommend readers to read the book and expand their understanding of AE as a research method and practical application. Particularly scholars may feel encouraged to engage PosAE because it is okay to write about positive life experiences in an AE, draw positive meanings out of personally traumatic experiences and hope for optimistic trajectories in life without fearing for the potential peer criticism of deficient critical thinking or scholarly naiveté. Practitioners who strive for wholesome healing and positive development in life may use PosAE to accomplish the goal for themselves and

others. Both scholars and practitioners of PosAE may find ways for self-healing, self-growth and self-empowerment through this book.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people deserve to be acknowledged for this book, as it builds on so many ideas and insights of others, both living and deceased.

Everyone mentioned and cited in the book deserves recognition!

A particular acknowledgement is due to our colleagues Professor Jerome Carson and Dr. Mark Weeks, who co-developed positive autoethnography in 2022 and 2023.

We are also grateful to Dr. Mark Weeks and Mrs. Ruth Coetzee for their editing expertise.

Finally, we have chosen to acknowledge three “greats,” long since gone, who have inspired our work in positive autoethnography: William James, Alfred Kroeber and Carl G. Jung.

*Pragmatism is willing
to take anything, to
follow either logic or
the senses and to
count the humblest
and most personal
experiences.*

William James, 1907

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INTRODUCTION TO POSITIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

FREDA GONOT-SCHOUPINSKY AND CLAUDE-HÉLÈNE MAYER

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors introduce themselves and contextualize why they wrote this book. A collaborative autoethnographic approach is employed, whereby the authors' voices are distinguished. The authors then introduce positive autoethnography (PosAE) and briefly contemplate its roots and association to pragmatic autoethnography (PAE), and why it can be of utility as a research methodology in positive psychology (PP) and beyond, including as a therapeutic intervention.

Keywords: Positive autoethnography; pragmatic autoethnography; positive psychology; positive reflexivity; cultural research

1. WHO ARE WE, AND WHY ARE WE WRITING A BOOK ON POSITIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY (PosAE)?

1.1 Freda Gonot-Schoupinsky

My affiliation to the fields of positive psychology (PP) and autoethnography was cemented during my PhD with Jerome Carson, at the University of Bolton, now rebranded as the University of Greater Manchester. As a mixed methods health researcher, I am involved with the conception and testing of accessible health and well-being interventions, such as my one-minute laughter prescription recently used with earthquake survivors (Kuru Alici et al., 2024). I am also deeply interested in investigating how we respond to existential issues

such as despair, suffering and disappointment. For this, the fields of PP and autoethnography offer us many perspectives.

While writing this, bleak images of the incomprehensible destruction of the Los Angeles fires flicker on the television, and I hear Mel Gibson react to seeing his house reduced to ash: “*I look at it as a strange mixture of sadness and almost a kind of an elation. . . I count my blessings. . . these are things, they may or may not be replaceable, but they’re only things. . .*” What seems indisputable is the power of words to influence and change feelings and thoughts, by conveying hope and meaning. Addressing the Royal College of Surgeons in 1923, Rudyard Kipling went further: “*Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind*” (Handler et al., 2017, p. 11). As an *apprehensive optimist* (my term, yet in recognition of René Dubos), and more a “the glass is half empty” person, I am not wedded to PP. Yet, I am invested in finding ways to “replenish the glass.” PP offers avenues that can improve lives. So too does autoethnography. My theorizing mind was intrigued if such relevant, yet divergent, fields could usefully be conceptually linked. PP is grounded in positivism, a realist and objective paradigm, while autoethnography is employed in the relativist, subjective and socially constructed paradigms of constructivism, social constructionism and interpretivism (e.g. Pretorius, 2024).

Pragmatism is my favoured paradigm, as it is concerned with “what works” and thus supports ontological and epistemological flexibility (e.g. Pretorius, 2024). Motivated by my interest in developing practical, accessible and useful methodological approaches (e.g. Gonot-Schoupinsky, 2025), I proposed pragmatic autoethnography (PAE) as a needed, in my view, discrete autoethnographic approach in 2022 (Gonot-Schoupinsky, 2022). Shortly thereafter, the conception of PosAE as a subtype of PAE followed with Dr. Mark Weeks, a cultural studies scholar, and inspired by Carson (Gonot-Schoupinsky et al., 2023). My hope for PosAE is that it is developed and used in and beyond the field of PP to benefit those writing, those written about, and those supporting and reading the autoethnography. Collaborations such as those with Everett Worthington, Paul Wong, and Ryan Niemiec (Niemiec & Gonot-Schoupinsky, 2025; Wong & Gonot-Schoupinsky, 2025; Worthington & Gonot-Schoupinsky, 2025), and the providential co-authorship of this book with Claude-Hélène Mayer, are moving this vision forward.

It may be relevant to emphasize, including for readers critical of PP, that much of the thinking associated with PP predates PP by thousands of years, and does not “belong” to any one culture, religion, belief system or academic

field. For example, the notion that positive thinking, as a dynamic process, can positively impact our thought processes and actions is hardly new unsurprisingly, positive thinking is valued in PP (e.g. Baourda et al., 2024). Alongside my Catholic faith, I find cultivating an internal positive narrative helpful to navigate a world in which we can feel that *homo homini lupus est* (man is a wolf to man). By intentionally seeking the good in people and situations, finding positive solutions to challenges, and acting on them – a process I call *positive reflexivity* (Gonot-Schoupinsky et al., 2024, p. 88), and one that is intertwined with PosAE – it can be easier to traverse many of the challenging situations we all are confronted with.

1.2 Claude-Hélène Mayer in a Nutshell

Since my childhood, I have been interested in the topics of mental health and well-being in combination with the question of who we are within our sociocultural contexts, how we define ourselves and how we are defined by others. The complexity of our existence became a topic that I delved into by reading especially existentialist philosophies and literature; however, I could not overcome the feeling that these philosophies were lacking a positive approach to our existence: I felt that they declared our world to be “absurd” (Albert Camus), that the individual existed without meaning within a godless, unfaithful, evil and senseless universe (Jean-Paul Sartre). I believed that the quest for radical individual responsibility, the choice of one’s own freedom and the question of how to handle the ethics of ambiguity between the free choices of their destinies and the sociocultural, historical determined facticity (Simone de Beauvoir) were intimidating.

During my time studying at a German university in the 1990s, I explored how narratives, ethnography and autoethnography could contribute to improving the understanding of individuals, their existential questioning and their identity formations within their culture-specific contexts (especially in East and Southern Africa). I aimed to explore further how humans, as socioculturally influenced beings, respond to the challenges of life and existence in context-specific ways.

I realized that, across cultures, individuals have found different ways to respond to existential questions through thoughts, feelings and behaviour. I found that some of these responses seemed to be healthier for the mind and psyche than others. I moved deeper into exploring which constructs within the existential realms seemed to be positive for the individuals and collectives across cultures and which helped to resolve intra- and interpersonal conflicts.

During these reflections, I started to explore PP and its movements. Only a few years later, I became friends with Paul T.P. Wong (1937–2024), a Canadian clinical psychologist and professor, who developed mainly the second wave of PP (PP2.0). I visited him and his wife twice in Toronto, and on several occasions, we worked together on articles, discussed concepts at conferences and wrote about suffering, pain, shame and love. We were interested in how such experiences could transform individuals, leading to both individual and collective growth and development (e.g. Mayer et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024; Wong & Mayer, 2023).

Over the years, I became increasingly interested in how to respond in positive, transformational ways to existential life questions, as well as how to transform negative, painful thoughts, feelings and behaviour into personal growth and development. I explored these transformations at personal and individual levels, as well as within counselling and therapeutic contexts. In many intercultural research projects, I used autoethnographic, autobiographical and narrative approaches to find out how individuals managed to comprehend the world and themselves, how they managed life and work challenges by activating their resources and how they attempted to turn their experiences into meaningful and coherent experiences and life stories. I believed that especially descriptions through autobiographic and autoethnographic perspectives helped to understand the individual in their contexts. I further found that when reading through autoethnographic experiences of others, I learnt a lot about the individual psyche, the meaning-making in context and the influence of the sociocultural contexts on the individual and vice versa.

When Freda approached me in 2023 to write a positive autoethnographic article with her (Mayer & Gonot-Schoupinsky, 2024), I was thrilled: since Freda had already combined my own interests in autoethnographic approaches and positive and transformational sciences towards a new theory in PosAE, I was delighted to work with her. I soon set out with Freda on our journey of authoring this book.

2. BRIEFLY: WHY WAS PosAE CONCEIVED?

We discuss the roots of, and history of, autoethnography in Chapter 2. For now, suffice to say it is a term that has been variously defined, and sometimes contentiously. Generally, it is now considered a subjective self-reflexive qualitative research methodology that centres on the self, using reflexivity, (“auto”), within an ethnographic sociocultural framing (“ethno”), to convey a

personal narrative (“graphy”) (e.g. Adams & Herrmann, 2023). Autoethnography is viewed as both a product and a process to convey autobiographical accounts that dissect lived experiences within a contextualized cultural environment (e.g. Ellis & Adams, 2014). The first reference of the term I, Freda, could find dates to 1947, when “auto-ethnographer” was used to characterize how Native Americans described their cultural practices (Gonot-Schoupinsky et al., 2023). By the late 1970s, with increased interest in the objective/subjective polarity in collecting, interpreting and reporting anthropological information, the term was linked to researchers or ethnographers who studied their own cultural identity (Hayano, 1979).

As autoethnography became associated to the subjective study of the self, definitions and rules as to how it should, and should not, be used, began to proliferate, expanding horizons, yet restricting others. Autoethnography as a reflexive methodology offers, I believe, enormous potential as a strong foundation for development, including as a therapeutic approach. However, particularly for therapeutic purposes, reflexivity can be intentionally channelled and hence the emphasis on positive reflexivity in PosAE. In order to fully embrace its potential and application in PP, PosAE is aligned to pragmatic thinking to enable flexibility, as discussed in Chapter 4, and is adapted to the needs of the field of PP. As such, PosAE is a subtype of PAE.

3. IN SHORT: WHAT IS PosAE?

PosAE, allied to PAE, embraces positive thinking, PP constructs and multiple world views including epistemological flexibility. Its purpose is the generation and dissemination of knowledge that can result in positive actions and positive outcomes. In PosAE narrative, an authentic positive trajectory is sought to benefit the writer, those written about, those involved in the writing and the readers. PosAE involves intentional positive reflexivity to inspire positive thinking with the aim of drawing out positive experiences, positive actions and positive outcomes. As a type of PAE, PosAE is also purpose-driven, experiential and action-oriented as will be described in Chapter 4.

4. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Here, we introduce our book which explores PosAE, over 12 chapters, four of which are led by other scholars. A brief chapter-by-chapter description of the

book can be found in the Preface. PosAE offers a pragmatic autoethnographic approach that embraces positive reflexivity. For the field of autoethnography, PosAE provides an alternative approach that can acknowledge its original roots in objective cultural research. For the field of PP, PosAE can offer a new qualitative approach adapted and suited to the values of the field. Intentional use of positive reflexivity in PosAE aims to benefit the well-being of writers, readers and others involved in the process. PosAE is a research methodology that can be explored and applied as both a methodology and a therapeutic intervention.

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