

Overcoming Adverse Childhood Experiences Through Writing Autoethnography

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Abstract. A collaborative autoethnographic study was conducted to describe the authors' experiences in an attempt to reconcile with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). The participants of this research are the author, together with her elder brother. Data were gathered from online personal diaries through blogger, digital journals, participants' memories and writings regarding ACEs, of which analyzed in the form of narrative themes. The result shows that changes could happen if a person reflects on themselves and find meanings through their experiences even though ACEs indeed had negative impacts in adulthood. Various meanings obtained through events written in autoethnography which then brings the author to the process of awareness, whilst enabling her to understand ACEs from different perspectives and build a new motivation to make efforts of overcoming the side effects of her past traumatic experiences. The research can provide insights for mental health professionals to help adults dealing with past trauma. Aside from that, autoethnography is part of therapeutic tools which are effective not just for the authors, but also the readers who faced the same struggles as the author, in this context, make peace with ACEs. This enhances the importance of doing the research, not only to benefit practitioners, but also for future readers who experienced ACEs itself.

Keywords: adverse childhood experiences; autoethnography; parenting.

According to Ellis et al. (2011), Autoethnography is a research approach that aims to systematically describe and analyze personal experiences in order to understand cultural context. The author(s) places themselves as a research subject as well as a researcher at the same time to explain the subjective process related to past experiences which then shape the writer in the present. This writing discusses the author's attempt to reconcile with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2021), ACEs are preventable, potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0-17 years). ACEs cover a wide variety of events, including witnessing and experiencing physical and mental violence, neglect, domestic dysfunction, and other traumatic events.

Researchers in diverse countries have explored the prevalence of ACEs in their own domestic contexts and studied associations with various outcomes in adulthood. Research on high-income countries estimates that 4–16% of children experience severe parental violence, 10–20% of children witness interparental violence, 15–30% of girls and 5–15% of boys experienced sexual abuse during childhood (Gilbert et al., 2009). Whilst in

developing countries shows 75% of adult respondents had at least 1 exposure to ACEs, 9% had experienced 4 or more types of abuse and household dysfunctions (Ramiro et al., 2010). Based on the data it could be inferred that ACEs have become a global cultural problem.

ACEs can have both a physical and mental impact on an individual (CDC, 2021). In addition, long-term exposure to ACEs can cause toxic stress, namely long-term activation of the stress response system that can damage the nervous, endocrine and immune systems at the most basic level. This, in other words, alters brain development and affects attention, decision making, learning, and responses to stress. Children who grow up with toxic stress may have difficulty forming healthy and stable relationships (CDC, 2021). Toxic stress has an impact into adulthood which results in unstable work history, difficulties in managing finances, family, work, and depression which are then passed down to their children (Shonkoff et al., 2012; Metzler et al., 2017). In addition to that, a longitudinal survey shows ACE's strongly affect an individual's mental health during their early adulthood (Schilling et al., 2007). There was also a robust association between ACEs and poor outcomes in early adulthood, such as: greater levels of adversity were associated with poorer self-rated health and life satisfaction (Mersky et al., 2013). Greater levels of adversity would as well increase the potential in experiencing depressive symptoms, anxiety, tobacco use, alcohol use, and marijuana use (Mersky et al., 2013).

Based on the previous descriptions and research, it is clear that ACEs had negative impacts on individuals' futures. However the latest research mostly focuses on the negative effect it caused and lacks focus on the progress of healing and overcoming the ACEs in individuals. While its negative impact seems to persist in an individual's future, some people seem to have the ability to strive from the adverse effects and enhance their psychological well being. A study on 1871 college students across China shows that mindfulness was one of the strongest protective factors which help a person to pursue a high psychological well being (Huang et al., 2021). Previous studies also suggest a significant relationship between mindfulness and improvement in self-regulation function, mental health, and psychological well-being (Brown et al., 2007). Through the mindfulness process (such as "sitting with" one's experiences, even unpleasant ones, rather than avoiding them), one is thought to have a greater ability to tolerate a wide range of thoughts, emotions, and experiences (Brown et al., 2007; Shapiro et al., 2006). This has the potential to enable a person to expand his or her capacity to make peace with ACE's issues. Thus, Mindfulness as part of cognitive affective mechanism would enable someone to overcome ACE's negative effect on their life (Deshpande, 2017). It can be practiced through a variety of activities such as meditation, activities which are specifically designed for intervention, as well as informal self care activities like writing a journal (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Ma & Teasdale, 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

To conclude, ACEs had an impact on adult mental health. It doesn't have a single cause, and they can take several different forms. Despite the negative impacts, there are

several protective factors which would help individuals who experienced ACEs overcome their past traumas. One of the strongest is mindfulness as it could expand someone's mental capacity to make peace with his/her past. Mindfulness as part of cognitive affective mechanism can be practiced through various activities, one of which is through writing. It is believed that writing autoethnography would enable the author to reflect and examine her experiences using creative and evocative expression to show the meanings that are attached, then balance rigorous analysis with honest emotion and creativity. Thus, it is assumed that writing Autoethnography paper would provide a therapeutic cognitive affective mechanism which later lead to mindfulness practices to make peace with ACEs. With that in mind, despite the need for clear understanding to help those individuals in clinical settings, no studies ever highlighted the depth of the healing process in individuals who experience ACEs firsthand. To answer this, we conducted a study with the aim of describing the authors' in depth experiences to provide insights, as well as an effort to find meanings and make peace with ACEs using the autoethnography approach as a therapeutic writing tool. The research can provide insights for mental health professionals to help adults dealing with past trauma, especially due to ACEs. Aside from that, it is believed that the research would be effective not just for the authors, but also readers who faced the same struggles as the author, in this context, making peace with ACEs.

Methods

Participants

In order to describe personal experiences from different points of view, the study uses purposive sampling towards individuals who are willing to share their experiences of ACEs who were born and raised from the same parent. The participants are the researcher itself (the first author), together with her elder brother who experienced ACEs in their past. The first participant is a woman with Indonesian-Chinese ethnic descent whose family grew up in Minang's culture. She was 24 years old at the time the study started. The second participant is a 30-year-old man (alias Jim) who is the eldest child in the family and the author's elder brother. He currently lives on Sumatra island.

This paper was written from the participant's subjective point of view about situations that happened in their past. It could potentially affect individuals mentioned in the storyline as Autoethnography's biggest limitation is the inability to keep the author's personal data. Researchers had made some efforts to maintain the ethical concern for writing the paper. During the publication process of the manuscripts individuals referred to in this paper would use aliases. They would then be informed about the potential risks of publishing the paper, and then asked to fill out informed consent. Thus, the paper had been through the consent of all individuals mentioned in this paper.

Design

This study uses a qualitative approach in the form of collaborative autoethnography (CAE). In CAE, two or more researchers work together to share personal stories and interpret the pooled autoethnographic data, builds upon and extends the reach of autoethnography (Lapadat, 2017).

Procedure

Data was collected from participants' reflective memories and from personal writings of each participant related to their respective ACEs. Qualitative documents gathered through digital diaries written at multiple online platforms from the first participant's archives, such as: blogger, instagram feeds, digital journals saved in email drafts, and other related digital works. The data then pooled, coded, and analyzed in the form of narrative themes according to Creswell (2012) by the first, second, and third researchers. The steps are as follows (1) pooling all of the raw qualitative documents, (2) organizing and preparing data for analysis, (3) reading through all data, (4) coding the information obtained from the datas, (5) deriving themes from the pooled and coded data, (6) analyzing and interpreting datas, and (7) writing result.

As the process of obtaining meanings through writing autoethnography, every three months the first researcher (as well as the first participant) would revisit the manuscripts as part of self reflection and reanalyzing the data. Manuscripts then returned to the second participants via email for comment and correction. Along the process, the first researcher held frequent debriefing sessions with the second and third researcher as superiors to get evaluations, feedback, and to discuss the psychological progress experienced during writing autoethnography. The manuscript's writing starts in 2020 and finishes in 2022.

Result

Revisiting the Past: Family Cultural Background

I was born as the second child of 3 siblings, in a small city named Padang. Both of my parents are rooted from Chinese ethnicity. Padang is where my parents spent their entire childhood. They grew up in a small society as the Indonesian-Chinese community in Padang was quite exclusive. Growing up in this family, I used to communicate with the family members in many different languages, such as: Minang's, Hokkien, Indonesian, and English. Even though I was born in Padang, my family emigrated to Jakarta in 2003. I was 6 years old at that time, and raised in the society's culture eversince.

Father's figure

My Father is the 10th of 12 children in the family. Being the umpteenth child of many siblings, my father tends to feel inferior and invisible. Much of his childhood was spent in

the warehouse because that's where he was assigned to this family business; maintaining the warehouses and transporting stock items. My grandfather's strict upbringing made my father a tough, disciplined person, who upholds obedience. However, it affects his personality and emotional abilities. He tends to be temperamental and abusive. There have been times when I witnessed him as a horrifying father figure possessed by a bad temper. In those emotional moments, he could be very unpredictable. He has a solid body posture, and still looks burly even in his 50s. He's able to do everything by himself until now, such as repairing house damages, fixing vehicles, making furniture, renovating his own house, even unloading heavy objects from his truck alone. Seeing his body performance these days made me realize how strong my father's physical features were in the past.

He got married to my mother at a relatively young age, they were 20 years at the time. It brought shame to the family, as my mother was pregnant before marriage. As a consequence, my father had to bury his dream of pursuing engineering school for he must take a new role in his "new responsibility". With only a high school diploma, my father had to work and support the family. He never had a stable job. He worked for companies, such as insurance agents and salesmen. He had built his own businesses several times but most of them failed as he lacked financial management skills. He has worked as a retail tradesman since his 50's until now.

Mother's Figure

Unlike my father, my mother has a gentle personality. She is the eldest of 9 siblings. Based on what I heard, she was neglected by her biological parents, and raised by my great-grandmother since birth. Among her siblings, She is the most maternal, all her nieces and sisters call her "Mommy". She's also the only one who pursued higher education. Her dream of becoming a teacher makes her persevere in pursuing undergraduate study, even though she has to become a parent at that time.

Gentleness is one thing that stands out in her, but she also has shortcomings. She's reluctant to accept feedback and tends to be ignorant of some parenting responsibilities. Knowing that she has to become a parent at a relatively young age, I often feel like she wants to redeem her youth by dressing and acting like a teenager. She tends to be indecisive, less considerate, especially towards the long-term impacts, and tends to prioritize her own pleasure alone. This is in contrast to my father who's strict, temperamental, and always considers long-term potential. This contrasting nature then became one of the contributing factors which caused a lot of conflicts between mother and father.

Parental Relationships

My parents' relationship was almost never harmonious. According to my mother's diary, this has been going on since they were dating, which then increasingly worsened after

facing marriage and child-rearing responsibilities. As far as I can recall, every conflict would always end with violent manifestations, verbally and physically. Anyone who was involved could become a victim as their conflict arose. There was a series of periods when my mother couldn't stand her husband. She then fled to another city, taking me along with her. But it didn't take long for my father to find her and persuade mom to return. In 2001 there was a very great conflict and the physical abuse had gotten severe. Unable to bear the psychological pain, my mother fled further to the island of Java. She took me along and left my brother while he was at school. I was 5 years old at the time. We managed to live at peace for 1 whole year before my father discovered where we were and persuaded mom to start a new chapter somewhere else together. Since then, our family moved to Jakarta.

Aside from the abusive relationship my parents had, since childhood I have realized that they don't trust each other. I remember how each of them often took me to meet their new affair partner, as both of them always had someone else to flirt with. My mother always had secret savings just in case she had to escape from my father again. On the other hand, my father often stole from my mother's savings several times as he was in debt. Their communication was rarely effective to each other, and they used to tell each other drawbacks to me whenever they felt overloaded.

Violence in Parenting

My parents built their family on a sturdy foundation due to past mistakes, 6 months after their marriage, Jim, my older brother was born. As they faced new responsibilities as parents, a new problem arose. The short-tempered father cannot be patient with children. In addition, he gets easily annoyed by noises such as the cry or whining, in parenting he tends to react spontaneously based on his emotional impulses.

My father's failure to control his anger had caused many traumatic events in the household. A story my mother once told me in the past regarding my father's behavior towards his eldest son was when my brother Jim was an infant. One day he cried in the middle of the night relentlessly. Driven by his hatred of hearing the baby cry, my father became emotional that night and tried to drown him in the bathtub. That night, Jim, was almost not saved because he came out of the tub looking blue all over his body.

Things that triggered my father into explosive emotional outbursts were generally disobedience, or because the children made my mother complain, and it caused whining-like-noises which he found distressing. By the time my father starts to be abusive, my mother used to show dramatic responses. She would cry, yell for help, and defend her children excessively. These responses appeared "only" when my father was acting out of control. This pattern then creates three problematic reactions. The first one is, my father tends to become more emotional afterwards as it indirectly puts him as the "evil" one. So sometimes, she became the next victim of violence, as her dramatic reactions intensified his emotions.

Secondly, my mother put all the blame on her husband and refused to acknowledge her contribution to any problems. Thus, every problem was usually started and resolved in the same pattern. Lastly, her reaction also created another subjectivity for us children. In the past, we always thought of our father as a “monster” in the family. He is the one to be feared and not to be loved as he was always the perpetrator. The fact that my mother's act of defending the child too much had prevented us children from learning to self-introspect. We grew up to be individuals who find it difficult to find the faults in our behaviors, especially when faced with social related problems. Various negative impacts are piling up inside us. Growing up, problems in my family kept rolling like a snowball which got bigger and complicated. Together with my brothers, we try to describe our experiences respectively.

Jim's Experiences

Dealing with father's physical and verbal abuse

As far as I can recall, the only time I heard my father "communicate" with me was when he vented his anger with punches and kicks. One that I still remember vividly was in preschool, back in 1995. That night after finishing dinner, I saw an empty ice cube mold lying on the dining table. For some reason, I intended to help fill it back. At that point, Grandma tried to stop me as she worried about me spilling the water, to which I responded with a determined attempt. My father, who didn't like fuss and arguments, immediately grabbed my neck and beat me hard. I received fists, slaps, and other hard punches. What I can remember afterwards is that I spent half an hour in the toilet seats with my mother who could only cry in silence. The bathroom floor was covered in blood, as a result of my broken nose and vomited blood several times.

Perhaps it has become a common knowledge, both in the neighborhood and at school, that I was labeled as a child from a troubled family. All the neighbors knew that if there is a loud noise in the middle of the night accompanied by the sound of a child crying, it is definitely coming from my house. And so at school, it's not difficult to find me among the other students. Just observe the one whose face is covered with bruises, it would definitely be me. What I experienced from such an early age until the end of my teenage years made me grow up to be a person who found it difficult to develop social skills with others.

Depression, suicide attempts, and coming to therapy.

A personal struggle which I am aware of is that I often have difficulty understanding personal feelings, and hardly develop empathy for others. Apart from failing to develop social skills, on the other hand, all the insults, beatings, and knowing my mother left me whenever she ran away inevitably made an impact on me. I overreacted to all forms of rejection, and gave up more easily in many situations, all of which developed into depression. When I was in high school, my family found out about my suicide attempt.

This then led me to a session with a psychiatrist, which stopped only until the second session. The reason is because of constraints from both parents. I shared my feelings towards both parents during the session, which led to the therapist trying to invite both parents to counseling. Then the invitation was rejected as my mother felt lazy, after that the therapy was completely stopped because my father later refused to take me there.

Changes in perspective towards parents

The turning point which made changes in my perspective and ability to respect my parents with more affection, occurred at the end of 2017. At that time, the manifestation of past wounds had an effect on my mental health, which then harmed those whom I love. One of the biggest impacts was felt by my sister (the author). I realized in that moment I had subconsciously manifested the abusive behavior which I didn't like in my father to her. It led to a visit to the counseling center.

Maybe it's a blessing in disguise, my father who had not communicated with me for more than 8 years since I lived in the capital city, suddenly stopped by the city and stayed at my place. Based on the therapist's encouragement, this opportunity was used to invite my father to a counseling session together. I had the chance to express my feelings for a long time, as if my father considered me a burden and rejected me since I was born. He accepted my point of view and apologized for the mistakes he had made in the past. That moment of reconciliation became a catalyst for changing my point of view towards my parents. I learned to let go of the burden that had been buried for years. It also created a new space for me to make peace with myself. These days I live a steady life with full awareness to make peace with the past, and also learn to love myself.

The Author's Experience

Living with Past Abuse and the Future Impacts

There were moments when I saw how horrible my father was when possessed by a bad temper. His eyes would glare in a pitch black color. It's terrifying for me, because he didn't look like himself. During these emotional moments he could do anything possible, such as: hitting, cursing, threatening to kill one of us, destroying the furniture, he did it all with his bare hands. Witnessing this reality in person, in fact, worse than any nightmare I've ever had.

Even though I tended to be more reserved as a child, there were times when I also got beaten by my father just because of small issues. I used to limit my affect as a way to survive when the conditions were heating up. This is because I have learned that producing a significant expression tends to intensify my father's aggression, especially when my father disciplined us. Had I cried during those moments, I would receive repeated slaps in the face, accompanied by loud verbal instructions to stop crying over and over. He wouldn't stop beating until I was completely still. As I grew up, I found it hard to produce less coherent affection whenever dealing with emotional situations.

During my teenage years, there were times when it was very hard for me to recognize my own emotions and express my feelings. I feel uneasy when stuck in conflicting situations, tend to withdraw, and run away from my problems.

The second “monster” who haunted me during childhood was my brother, Jim. I was often bullied by him physically and verbally. I can sense his jealousy because at some point, despite my Father’s aggressive behavior, my Father was still willing to spend quality time with his daughters, but not his son. On the other hand, my Mother was more caring to the smaller children. Jim often called me “the favorite child” and it gave another burden to me whenever my parents treated us differently. This burden eventually made me believe that I don’t deserve to be treated kindly. As his bullies got worse over the years, so did his words and physical aggression towards me. There were times where we had to live together in Jakarta separated from our parents, and he beat me many times over simple matters. I have to be extra careful to “babysit” his ego and temperament just to make sure I did not get any beatings that day.

The end of 2017 was the culmination of bullying that I received from Jim. As the beatings got worse, my feelings had gotten numb inside. Somehow, the fear that I felt for my brother also dissipated gradually. I became a person who was not afraid to face death, on the other hand, dared to face my brother and fight him. That day, we had an argument, he threatened to kill me many times before, and I dared him to do it for real. He then turned my body facing him, and grabbed my neck with one hand and a knife in his other hand. It's so strange that at that moment I didn't feel pressured, or scared at all. In my childhood, I used to be a coward and hypervigilant. Otherwise, I felt peaceful and liberated. I didn't feel like I was the victim either. The attempt was cancelled as someone saw us and separated me from Jim immediately. I believe that moment was the catalyst for me to overcome my own weakness, which was also the turning point for Jim as he tried to find professional help after the incident.

As all the male figures in my family were the scary and abusive ones, I realized though I made friends with men, I became fearful of entering a romantic committed relationship. I felt distrust for years until 2021 when I had to face the fear that’s been consuming me myself. That time I was preparing for my wedding. I felt unsure, and crippled by the feeling of inadequacy to maintain the relationship, doubtful, as well as fear of re-doing the same mistakes my parents have had in the past. It intensified on the night before the wedding day. I wrote a small note in a digital journal.

Figure 1.

The Author's Notes on February 2021

Journal 19 February 2020

While I'm on the verge of entering this new season of marriage, I feel very scared.
Although this might only be my assumption, maybe this is irrational, but I can't lie
to myself that this feeling of fear is there.
I fear I might not be happy, just like my parents.
I fear being a bad parent figure to my future children.
I am afraid that one day, my children would feel the same way I do for my parents.
In fact, what I learned from psychology has enabled me to empathize with dad and
mom.
But to think about the possibility of me doing the same thing towards my own child
unconsciously makes me feel so afraid to face my life after this marriage

Feeling Abandoned

Although I didn't experience much physical violence from my parents, the ACEs I felt from them were more related to the feelings of abandonment. One of the first experiences I remember happened when I was in preschool. Padang is a small city, the children are picked up by their parents as there is no shuttle service. That time, my parents had a miscommunication about fetching me from school. In my mother's mind, my father will pick me up, while he thought otherwise.

School finished at noon. As usual, I waited at the playground inside the school alone. Waiting for a long time to be picked had become a common thing for me. Even the teachers already knew so they didn't accompany me. I waited until the sun set. I felt tired, and also sad because no one was looking for me. At that time, a 2 years old child's thoughts crossed my mind "maybe my parents threw me away", considering the threats that they often said when I do something against their will.

Not long after that, I saw my mother across the school building. She seemed to be getting ready to take public transportation, quite far across the school gate. I shouted hysterically, in hope that my mother would hear me. Time seemed to be slowing down at that moment. I remember exactly what it felt like to call "mom" over and over again until I burst into tears. As my voice couldn't reach her ears, I slowly watched them leaving me behind. At that moment, I felt so afraid, abandoned, helpless, and hopeless.

I realize now that such carelessness was quite understandable, as the technology was not very advanced. But the incident left a deep impression on me. Every time I think about it I will be swept away, as if I could feel the sense of hopelessness and abandonment again. At the age of 2 I've learned not to depend completely on anyone.

Apart from that experience, growing up, I realized that I did not get meaningful guidance from my parents. This is because they were busy working, and spent more time conflicting with each other. As the middle child, I felt that my parents care more about my brother and sister, so I often spent time alone feeling lonely. What I understand was 'I'm the invisible child' at home. Through that loneliness I got fond of writing blogs to express my thoughts and feelings.

Depressions

All my life, I have struggled to love myself. During my teenage years, I started to lose my confidence. I had trust issues and felt bitter about almost everything. While it's easy to empathize with other people's problems, I realize that I had a hard time putting myself in my own shoes because I tend to feel unworthy of empathy. There were times when I felt that it was pointless to continue living as life feels so unfair. Although people often saw me as a wise and optimistic person, I couldn't deny the futility I felt at certain times. I wrote a note in 2020 when struggled with suicide ideations for months. It made me realize now, how rational the thought of suicide is for those who have lost their hope.

Figure 2.

Poem Nadir

12 February 2020

Nadir

When the self can't say a word
tired of being exposed to repeated dramas

The spirit of fighting to change the situation slowly eroded by the universe who does
not want to make a common cause

I wish I could run from the reality, running from this life

The proverb which said "only dead fish get carried away by the current", now sounds
cliché to my ears.

Can't I forget everything now? to breathe for a moment, or to feel my existence as a
human at least

passionated to change the world, but the fact is that even things smaller than the
whole world are not that easy to change

Life is unfair, why I'm not allowed to lament, people said.

Why? Why isn't other people's world this chaotic? have I not been grateful?

God is omniscient, there was never any evil intention in the depths of this heart. But
why must I take responsibility for things I didn't do?

maybe I cared too much, is this the cause for loving?

like being beaten repeatedly, this self can only lie still and droop. waiting for the
attacks to stop in time

I am nobody, I have limited knowledge and wisdom. All I knew now I felt fed up to
continue living. I'm tired of pretending as if nothing's wrong with me, with my life. I
even felt unable to speak up my mind.

Didn't want to be seen as a victim all the time, had troubled many people enough.
Guilty towards those who struggle to love this self.

Can't this be my last stop? Can I end everything now?

Maybe death could change the situation. The universe won't be disappointed or feel
sympathy for me anymore. Things could have gotten better. Even if it won't, at least
this soul could find it's rest.

Finding meaning through parental neglect

Despite the adversity, I came to realize that my parent's neglect had also brought advantages too. I have the privilege of freedom in choosing my own life, and pursuing aspirations accordingly. I'm capable of creating my own future, as long as it doesn't cause any burden on my parents. I also learned to be mature earlier than people of my age. Since the age of 14 I lived in boarding school, I've lived independently ever since. Aside from independence, I also had spent a lot of time alone exploring many things that I was curious about back then. I had chances to express myself through creativities such as music, drawing, painting, writing, singing and many other things which I learned autodidact. These experiences obtained as my parents never put me in any courses, or even burdened me with many agendas since childhood. I feel grateful because it made me understand that I had enough space which I can utilize and explore personally.

Changes in perspective of mother figure

Intense conflicts with my brother Jim in 2017 had made me aware of my own tendency to produce responses similar to my mother which were avoidance, ignorance, or withdrawal, especially when he became emotional. At first it was caused by fear, but then I felt a raging fire inside, as I realized that he has been treating me unfairly. Meanwhile, his reactions tend to imitate my father's abusive behavior. I realize now that there's a recurring pattern handed down from our past experiences with ACEs.

It opens the ability to empathize with my mother's past, especially in understanding how difficult it was to be a woman under the oppression of a man who always demands to dominate at home. My father failed his businesses several times before, he also had unstable jobs, sometimes unemployed. In order to meet the family needs, my mother had to work in several places at once. Despite her being the breadwinner back then, my father still demanded her to take care of the children, do the domestic work, and serve her husband. Even though it's unfair there are still people in my extended family who saw this as something normal, which a woman should be able to do for the family.

My mother came from a neglected background, that she was abandoned by her biological parents. This fact helps me understand that my mother might appear to be neglectful because maybe she never got a chance to see, experience, and got an adequate understanding of the parenting roles, as well as the roles of husbands and wives in marriage. Even so, she tried her best. These understandings thus resulted in a new meaning for me, that my mother is also a victim of unresolved ACEs.

Finding meaning through the feeling of regret

One of the hardest lessons I've learned was when I experienced deep regret. On the other hand, it opens a new door of understanding and meaning. Quinoa is the name of my pet rabbit. He's a white Holland lop, and has been living with me less than a month at the

time. He was just 3 months of age and had made a lot of mess by marking his urine everywhere. One day he repeatedly tried to escape outside. I was feeling distressed, seeing various mischief that Quinoa did the entire day made my emotions overflow. For the umpteenth time he managed to escape, the unstoppable impulses finally ignited a subconscious horrible reaction of mine. Overwhelmed by such a dominant emotion, within seconds I picked him up who was running outside, then slammed him to the ground. Shortly after, I watched him die. A sight that I won't ever forget.

For most people, this probably is very unlogical. Why can we hurt something innocent? Though I'm well aware that feeling distressed and carried away by emotions cannot justify this vile behavior, in those few seconds before the reaction occurred, I noticed many things happened inside me. There were feelings of hostility, anger, worry, stress, and anxiety all at once. Such a disgraceful act turns out to be something I will regret for the rest of my life. I started questioning myself, such as "why would I hurt such a helpless creature", "Was his wrongdoings even, that he deserved losing his life?", and "how could I do this subconsciously?" These questions arose as soon as my emotions subsided, at the same time putting myself on the corner into feelings of guilt and shame. I started judging myself. I am a killer.

Regret

"Why does regret exist in humanity?

In fact, only humans can feel this.

Is this a gift?

or the consequences of sin?

What is the purpose of regret?

Can it be fair to say that, it means God understands that humans make errors?

In other words, is human error justifiable?"

– poem September 2020

Flashbacks of Quinoa's dying moments kept replaying in my mind again and again for a few days after his death. "If only I could go back in time, and do what it's supposed to do; react appropriately, or at least try to take him to the vet". I said to myself. Back to the moment, I felt frantic, surprised by my own response. My body trembled not knowing what to do, my hands were shaking and couldn't even tell whether he was still breathing or not, as far as I knew, I had never exhibited this behavior before. Quinoa's death left me deeply grieved. For a few days I spent hours crying, often I felt empty. Regrets arose which then led to self-blame. Many times I questioned my conscience towards the disgraceful act. That event had opened my eyes to see there was something wrong inside me.

Two weeks have passed since the tragic incident. A friend sent me video links about a murder case, in which, a man killed his pregnant wife, as well as his own two

biological daughters. In the video, it is told that his wife and children love the perpetrator very much. But after killing them, he didn't seem to look guilty or sorry at all. This case made me think deeper about the context of regret. In my perspective, the story has similarities with this new sin of mine. I feel that what I did to Quinoa was similar to the perpetrator contextually, the difference is only the number and type of the victim, and severity it caused. The only thing that sets us apart is the response of each other's conscience. The perpetrator who didn't seem sorry made me look at this heart of mine. On the other hand, it made me appreciate the feeling of regret as something valuable.

Regret prompted me to start fighting to manage my own temper. The feelings also made me realize a new urgency to immediately break these ACEs chain. It's a very expensive lesson, because the price is the life of a lovely creature. Eventually I learned to be grateful for this incident, as it put me into the process of healing, before I actually become a mother one day. Maybe regret is a gift. The goal is to prevent making the same mistakes, so that I can live up to being a person of compassion, and have a conscience that is always concerned for others.

To be in Father's shoes

ACEs had some impacts of which I was not aware of. I had no idea that the timid, reserved, and nonviolent me would produce the same kind of response, which was as horrifying as my fathers'. The automatic reaction I manifested on Quinoa had led me to experience my Father's shoes. After the emotional outburst subsided, guilt had started to rise. This made me realize that, there were times when my father might have felt sorry for his actions, but he was also aware of the "monster" label which had been attached to him for a long time. Ironically the label was put by his own family members.

Just as I tried hard to manage my emotions whenever dealing with Quinoa, during those stressful times my father might have tried to control himself, but somehow failed to control his emotions. Moreover, he had no place to pour out his heart content and unravel his thoughts as he had never been taught the importance of being aware of his own mental processes. He barely knew how to validate feelings. He was hated by his own family, even his children considered him a horrible human being who did not deserve to be loved.

As the family leader, he was required to provide for people who would not repay him. Coming from a low educational background, means my father has to work twice as hard to support three children. He has always been looked down upon by his siblings, he has no friends to comfort and support him. He only has a wife and children, who in the end only saw him as someone to avoid. I realized now that all this time my father had struggled alone. The bitterness of life made him learn to survive the hard way. I am well aware now that it must be very difficult and depressing to imagine living in dad's 'shoes' all these years. Hence, my father is a victim of unresolved ACEs as well as my Mother. This then created a lot of difficulties in their life, specially in managing the family in a

proper manner. Though ACEs had created negative impacts on my life now, I also felt gratitude for it made me able to understand my background better.

Discussion

This research highlighted the process of healing from ACE's through therapeutic writing in two persons who were born and raised as Chinese immigrants in Indonesia. Chinese parenting styles had been known to be similar across many geographical diversities (Barber, 2002). Generally Chinese parents are often known for their authoritarian parenting that upholds obedience and discipline (Smetana, 2017). It's also known as intrusive parenting, which refers to manipulative and inhibiting parental behaviors that negatively affect children's healthy development (Barber, 2002).

These parenting styles had somehow become a culture, especially in Asia for many generations. According to Wang and Supple (2010) it is believed for many years that by being strict as a parent could help children to have a strong mental capacity. Children then would excel and be able to compete as an adult, hence becoming successful human beings. However these strict upbringing then made the parents feel like having the needs to show abusive behaviors in order to achieve the latter goals. Authoritarian parents may use fear to elicit obedience and compliance in children, these include using emotional and physical abuse to their children (Darling & Steinberg, 1993).

The paradigm about raising children with a strict manner however was not bound by subculture variables such as socioeconomic status. Based on a meta-analysis of 47 studies found in English- and Chinese-language peer-reviewed journals that involved general populations of Chinese students or residents reporting child abuse prior to age 18 despite their socioeconomic status (Ji & Finkelhor, 2015). A research conducted to 1019 Chinese high school graduates from three different provinces of China shows the most prevalent ACEs were physical abuse (52.3 %) and domestic violence (43.2 %), prolonged parental absence (37.4 %), and parental gambling problems (19.7 %) in Chinese families (Zhang et al., 2020). Despite these variables, and with few exceptions, most studies in China indicate that the proportion of adults with one or more ACEs ranges from 45 % to 77 % (Zhang et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2021). In addition another study conducted among 13.512 Chinese students shows neither poor material conditions of family life nor family member's adversity contribute significantly to the risk of ACE's (Xing et al., 2010). To conclude, no matter high, middle, or low income family socioeconomic status were from, ACEs would likely happen to any children. In this context, especially highlighting the ones that are raised by Chinese parents.

Despite the fact that the Chinese have to bear abuse in their childhood, many researches have shown how misleading this parenting culture has become. It limits children's healthy autonomy development, intrusive parenting has been linked to children's maladjustment, including higher internalizing problems (Grolnick &

Pomerantz, 2009; Soenens et al., 2012), higher externalizing problems (Rathert et al., 2011), lower self-esteem (Nguyen, 2008), and lower academic achievement (Chen et al., 1997). Parents with multiple ACEs are at risk for mental health and substance use problems, disrupted social networks, and limited educational attainment (Shonkoff et al., 2012). The weight of these problems combined with the stresses of economic disadvantage as immigrants make it difficult for them to provide a supportive, nurturing environment for the children, which can lead to an intergenerational cycle of ACEs and chronic stress (Bridgett et al., 2015).

The author's grandparents are Chinese immigrants who came to Indonesia due to war which happened in the 19th century. Aside from that, Indonesia provides promising opportunities to start a business. Wibisono (2020) explains that the history of the Chinese ethnicity in Indonesia stems from the wave of migration of the Chinese in the 18th-19th centuries due to promising job opportunities in Indonesia. Like Chinese parents in general, the strict upbringing of the author's grandfather made her father a person with the same value. This inline with the study conducted by Yu et al., (2016), that more acculturated immigrant parents engage in higher levels of authoritative parenting practices.

The parenting of ethnic Chinese-indonesian culture has an influence on the way the author's parents build their households. This then causes various problems in the family which impact on the children experiencing ACEs. It affected and shaped their personality in the present, they tend to repeat the same pattern as the parents did. This finding is inline with Bridgett et al. (2015) paper about the intergenerational cycle of ACEs. Realizing the emergence of this behavior also creates a new understanding, as well as empathy from the author. Nonetheless, various meanings obtained have also produced a major realization: each of the family members are individuals who were wounded due to personal ACEs. In other words, most of us are victims of something that has become a hereditary cultural system. Woods-Jaeger et al. (2018) describe there are potentials which ACEs could result in intergenerational cycle had the society refuses to focus on implementing the key factors to break the cycle.

An interesting finding from the current research shows how each individual with ACEs can manifest identical, as well as different forms of tendencies at the same time. Some that were found similar are: the inability or difficulty to recognize one's own feelings, intrapersonal difficulties, and a tendency to experience depression as well as, imitate the same adverse behavior in adulthood. According to Merrick et al. (2017) ACEs had an impact on adult mental health. It increasing the likelihood of moderate to heavy drinking, drug use, depressed affect, increasing the risk for depression and suicide attempts in adulthood. Longitudinal studies about the long term effect of ACE in Chinese populations shows exposure to ACEs physically could increase negative self-cognition, the likelihood of a behavioral response that exacerbates a threat in the environment, and negative beliefs about self-worth, affecting coping strategies for stressful life events. From

a biological point of view, exposure to ACEs (and even prenatal stress exposure) may permanently alter biological systems, including brain functioning, endocrine, and immune systems, and these changes can exert long-term effects on later mental health. ACEs could increase the risk of developing unhealthy behaviors, including drug and alcohol use, negative eating patterns, and avoidance of stressful experiences, people, and situations. Finally, ACEs are associated with decreased adaptive coping skills (i.e., active coping, emotional support, planning, and reframing). These psychosocial, behavioral, and biological factors then work independently and interactively to increase the risk of depressive symptoms (Li et al., 2022).

Other than the negative tendencies shown above, there are some studies that show how people with ACEs are able to strive and overcome their adversity. Some of the key factors are by promoting mindfulness and resilience to break the cycle. Research conducted by Webb et al. (2013) shows that mindfulness is positively correlated with forgiveness of self, others, and situations with physical health status, somatic symptoms, mental health, and psychological distress. In other words, mindfulness works as a buffer towards psychological adversity and helps the individuals to make peace, and overcome their past. Despite the negative impacts each participant had experienced, this research also shows how individuals have the capacity to self-reflect and find meaning even if they have been in many aversive situations in their childhood. One of the most significant factors which distinguish the final outcome of the individuals is the ability to be aware of a choice to prevent repeating the same patterns. Realizing that humans are capable of making decisions in their own life. In addition, mental health professionals can design various mindfulness-based programs to assist individuals with ACEs. It is important to highlight Autoethnography as one of the mindfulness-based tools which is effective enough to help the author obtain meanings through writing. As a methodological approach, Autoethnography is relatively new to psychology, despite having been developed and used extensively within the field of sociology (Kracen & Baird, 2018). As O’Riordan (2014, p.3) describes as below.

“Its main purpose is to link the micro and the meta (Boyle & Parry, 2007); more specifically, it is used to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno) (Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005). As such, it involves the production of highly personalised accounts in which authors draw on their own experiences to extend the understanding of a particular culture (Reed-Danahay, 1997).”

According to Ellis et al. (2011) Autoethnography is part of therapeutic tools which are effective not just for the authors, but also the readers who faced the same struggles as the author. This enhances the importance of doing the research, not only to benefit practitioners, but also for readers who experienced ACEs. The current study shows how writing the family’s history using an autoethnography approach had made the author learn to see ACEs on a helicopter view and find meaning through the pooled analyzed

data. According to Deitering (2017) writing autoethnography would help the author to reflexively examine their experiences using creative and evocative expressions to show the meanings that are attached to experience. Thus, it balances rigorous analysis with honest emotion and creativity. In addition, Autoethnography is a style of research which strikes a chord in readers, it may change them, and the direction of change can't be predicted. A lot depends on the reader's subjectivity and emotions (Ellis & Bochner, 1996).

It is mentioned that writing autoethnography could become a part of therapeutic tools, which enables the writer to examine their experiences and find meaning to it. In her reflection about the process she's been through in the course of writing Autoethnography, the author describes the process as a unique experience, challenging, as well as life changing. For her, to be able to fully recover from past traumas using autoethnography alone is obviously impossible, as it takes a lifetime to overcome. Therefore, it is important to always be aware of addressing personal issues constantly. But at least by writing an autoethnography she was empowered to get meanings from past experiences which then made her more able to empathize with the family members and accept ACEs as part of something which shaped her today. There is also a sense of gratitude that arises after that. By writing autoethnography, she learned to sharpen her ability to be mindful (as a cognitive-affective process), so that made her able to expand the capacity for acceptance through the meanings she obtained during the writing process. As she quoted.

"Through these meanings I learned to forgive things that hurt me in the past and strive to become a better person. In addition, I am also aware that the willingness to continue to strive for recovery from past wounds increases after I gain much insights from reading other researches about the impact of ACEs in adulthood and throughout generations from previous studies. This also created a new urgency inside me to immediately break the chain, starting from myself".

Smyth et al. (2001) describe the effects of writing about adverse experiences as the act of converting emotions and images into words changes the way the person organizes and thinks about the trauma. By integrating thoughts and feelings, the person can more easily construct a coherent narrative of the experience. Once in narrative formation, the event can be summarized, stored, and assimilated more efficiently, thereby reducing the distress associated with the traumatic experience (Smyth et al., 2001). Several studies have shown that writing autoethnography can help individuals dealing with aversive experiences such as; trauma and grief (McMillan & Ramirez, 2016; McKenzie, 2015; Dwayne, 2022).

As a therapeutic tool, autoethnography helps the writer reflect on their experiences in objective and subjective manners. This is inline with (Bartlett, 2014) which describes writing autoethnography may promote the ability to process aversive memories cognitively and affectively, which then leads to enhancing one's ability to be mindful and opens a new door to forgiveness and acceptance (Bartlett, 2014). Farb et al. (2007) discover the effect of mindfulness in human's neural mechanism, that mindfulness changed the

connection between the right insular and pre cortex (PFC), areas involved in attention and self referencing, producing a more detached and frontal objective way of viewing the self as opposed to negative ruminating or catastrophizing. Mindfulness practices allow the brain to recruit the regions involved in regulating emotions and cognitive control, decreasing DMN activity, and thereby reducing distress (Farb et al., 2010; Zeidan et al., 2014). Moreover its benefits are not just for the writer, but also therapeutic for the reader as well (Ellis et al., 2011). It shows how this approach has a positive potential towards collective healing.

Even so, as humans are dynamic in their own complexities, the meaning obtained from writing the autoethnography itself is something that is unpredictable, neither for the writer nor the reader. Despite the positive outcomes shown in the current study, the course of change always depends on each individual involved in it (the writer and reader). Writing has become one of the author's coping strategies for a long time. Although this is the first time the author tried to write using this approach, the fact that her fondness in writing could be one of the biggest factors which cause the current study's positive result. However, writing a paper which requires the author to be vulnerable to share her personal experiences, and becoming a researcher at the same time creates another level of internal process. There was a time when the author felt reluctant to complete the research as it was challenging to deal with her personal issues. Like a 2-edged sword, autoethnography seems to be able to extend perspectives wider, whilst narrowing the author's focus to internal processes. Another important aspect we would like to highlight is, Even though the author has come to make peace in the present, it is crucial to spend a lifetime to continuously make peace with ACEs, for healing is a constant battle. Thus, getting better is a choice that can be made for the good of oneself and others.

The limitations are as follows: The researchers had discussed many adverse events in this study, but might not fully explain the situation comprehensively due to manuscript and word limitations. According to CDC (2021), ACEs cover a wide range of experiences, this then led to difficulties in sorting out which experiences to be described. This research covers stories from participants that are raised from the same parents. There are possibilities that some stories were not relatable to some cultures and individuals whose parents had different parenting styles than the author. For future research, it is advisable to gather participants that are from different parenting style backgrounds. Future research may as well incorporate a wider range of cultural factors, including Chinese values such as Confucianism and filial piety, to better understand links between parents' cultural orientations and parenting behaviors.

Conclusion

This study aims to describe authors' experiences as an effort to find meanings and make peace with ACEs using autoethnography as a therapeutic writing tool. The result shows that changes could happen if children reflect on themselves and find meanings through their experiences even though ACEs indeed had negative impacts on children's future. Various meanings obtained through events written in autoethnography which then brings the author to the process of awareness, whilst enabling her to understand ACEs from different perspectives and build a new motivation to make efforts of overcoming the side effects of her past traumatic experiences. The research can provide insights for mental health professionals to help adults dealing with past trauma. Aside from that, autoethnography is part of therapeutic tools which are effective not just for the authors, but also the readers who faced the same struggles as the author, in this context, make peace with ACEs. This enhances the importance of doing the research, not only to benefit practitioners, but also for future readers who experienced ACEs itself.

Suggestion

This study shows how individuals could find meanings and make peace with their past after living with ACEs through therapeutic writings such as, autoethnography. Further research is needed on the dynamics of the experience of ACEs from different cultural backgrounds and parenting styles to see the use of autoethnography as a means of therapeutic writing. The results of this study can also help clinicians to develop appropriate intervention methods and counseling designs for individuals experiencing ACEs in Indonesia. What is unique in this research is the importance of managing awareness of social support, mindful parenting, and efforts to make peace with ACEs collectively.

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Authors' Contribution

The process of writing this research was carried out by FG under the guidance of WWDM and EH. All authors discussed the result and contributed to the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

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