



Book Review: Gonot-Schoupinsky, F., & Mayer, C.-H. (2025). *Positive autoethnography: An introduction to theory and practice*. Emerald Publishing Limited. ISBN: 978-1-80592-278-0 (Print); 978-1-80592-277-3 (Online)

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Toward a Reflexive Positivity: Reading Positive Autoethnography from the Global South

I came to this book having recently published a collaborative autoethnography on racial consciousness in South African higher education (Mapaling & Shabalala, 2025), already attuned to the generative possibilities of self-reflective narrative. Gonot-Schoupinsky and Mayer's (2025) *Positive Autoethnography: An Introduction to Theory and Practice* drew me in with a question that felt both personal and methodological: *what happens when we intentionally orient autoethnographic inquiry toward the positive?* The book, comprising twelve chapters (four led by contributing authors), introduces positive autoethnography (PosAE) as a methodology that marries autoethnographic reflexivity with the conceptual architecture of positive psychology. It is co-authored by Freda Gonot-Schoupinsky, a health psychologist at the University of Greater Manchester, and Claude-Hélène Mayer, a psychologist at the University of Johannesburg.

The opening chapters scaffold the approach. Chapter 2 traces autoethnography from the 1940s to fifteen contemporary forms. Chapter 3 reviews the three waves of positive psychology, noting the critique of overreliance on WEIRD populations. Chapter 4 introduces “positive reflexivity”: intentional positive thinking aimed at drawing meaning from lived experience. PosAE is not about excluding the negative, but about drawing insight from difficult experience for the benefit of writer, reader, and those involved.

The book is at its most alive in the applied chapters. Chapter 5, on Intercultural PosAE, includes a German-South African teenager navigating bicultural identity through the metaphor of Top Deck chocolate. Chapter 7, on Therapeutic PosAE, is perhaps the most significant contribution: Mayer presents clinical material in which intergenerational loss surfaces alongside the therapist's own reflexive process. For those of us trained where professional distance is emphasised, this is both provocative and promising, particularly in African contexts where relational orientations to healing are valued (Ratele, 2019). Chapter 6 includes a moving contribution from Paul Wong (1937–2024), whose narrative of surviving wartime displacement demonstrates how suffering can become the foundation of meaning. Worthington's account, linking

the murder of his mother to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, underscores PosAE's capacity to connect personal trauma with broader historical processes.

From a South African vantage point, there is much to commend. One co-author is based at a South African university, several accounts are set in African contexts, and the book engages with the Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) critique. Mayer's earlier work on identity in South Africa (Mayer, 2005) lends credibility, and the pragmatic stance that “what works best” should guide methodological choices aligns with calls for epistemic freedom in African scholarship (Ndlovu-Gatshehi, 2018). Chapter 9's collaborative autoethnography from Türkiye, using a low-cost laughter-based intervention for earthquake survivors, holds promise for under-resourced African settings. The writing is accessible, with useful visual models and a collaborative authorial voice that models the approach the book advocates.

However, I would be less than honest if I did not acknowledge certain tensions. The volume's engagement with African and Global South perspectives, while present, remains somewhat peripheral. The majority of the theoretical framework draws on Euro-American traditions, from William James's pragmatism to Seligman's Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment (PERMA) model. African philosophical traditions such as Ubuntu, indigenous healing practices, and communal narrative forms that might deepen and localise the PosAE framework are not substantively engaged. This is not a fatal weakness, given that the book is explicitly positioned as an introduction, but it does signal an opportunity for future development. For PosAE to take root meaningfully in African settings, it will need to be brought into conversation with African psychology (Ratele, 2019), communal and collectivist orientations to well-being, and the specific forms of suffering and resilience that characterise life in the Global South, including poverty, structural inequality, gender-based violence, and the aftermath of colonial and apartheid-era trauma. The individual-focused nature of autoethnography itself, with its emphasis on the “auto”, may need to be expanded to accommodate the more relational and communal



orientations to selfhood that are prevalent across much of Africa. The collaborative forms of PosAE described in the book, such as the positive collaborative autoethnography (PosCAE) from Türkiye on earthquake survivors (Chapter 9), point in this direction and could be developed further with African communities.

In sum, *Positive Autoethnography: An Introduction to Theory and Practice* is a well-conceived and timely contribution to autoethnographic methodology and positive psychology. It will be of value to qualitative researchers in African psychology, clinical psychology trainees navigating reflexivity and identity, and scholars interested in culturally responsive approaches to well-being. For readers in Africa, it offers both a promising methodology and a provocation: *what might PosAE look like when fully rooted in African epistemologies, languages, and communal values?* That the book does not answer this question is not a shortcoming. It is an invitation. And for those of us who believe that the personal is always political, and that narrative can be both a method of inquiry

and a means of transformation, it is an invitation worth accepting.

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