

Chapter 18. Voicing Resilience: A Written Journey Through Infertility and IVF

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Every time I revisit these memories, I drown in sorrow. In my mourning, I find myself adrift in a realm where only the echoes of a dream linger. It's a place I frequent often, where those dreams still hold substance. Here, I cradle my children close, gazing into their eyes. But then the darkness descends, abruptly jolting me back to reality, to grieve anew. In an instant, I am consumed by a torrent of anger, my eyes wide open to the stark reality before me. I stare into the abyss, struggling to comprehend the chasm between where I stand and where I ache to be—with them. With their visage imprinted in my mind, I settle down and commit pen to paper. I pour out my grief, pain, frustration, and fury onto the page. Writing becomes my solace, the vessel through which I breathe life into my emotions. I write because the weight of silence is intolerable, and I refuse to let it keep its suffocating hold. I write because it is through writing that I can reconnect with those ephemeral dreams. I write because it is only through writing that I can reconnect with those ephemeral dreams—dreams that fade as the harsh light of reality inches ever closer. I write so that individuals like me may emerge from the shadows and be recognized. I write to challenge the silence that surrounds the struggles of infertility for so many. I write because, in the act of writing, I find a semblance of solace amidst the storm of emotions that rages within me. Simply put, I write.

Writing for Legitimacy: Charting the Path

To clarify, the writing I refer to here is a dissertation. In mine, I utilized autoethnography as a methodological framework to investigate my IVF (in vitro fertilization) journey, placing my personal experiences at the core of the study. Honestly, the thought of writing about them, the embryos which were a product of this whole ordeal, or even about myself, initially never crossed my mind. But before we delve into that, let's rewind to the beginning. It was in 2021 when I was confronted with the harsh reality of infertility. The diagnosis hit me like a tidal wave, leaving me to grapple with the weight of its implications. And soon after, I found myself staring down the bitter disappointment of a failed IVF attempt. In the aftermath, as I mourned what could have been, I was confronted with the profound absence of the children I had so fervently hoped for. Navigating the turbulent waters of infertility, I felt utterly adrift, engulfed by a silence that seemed impenetrable. In those moments, my hands were filled with cold, clinical facts and harsh truths delivered by medical professionals.

During these conversations, the same medical professionals outlined the meticulous process of IVF, breaking it down into its four stages: ovarian stimulation, egg retrieval, fertilization and embryo culture, and embryo transfer. During ovarian stimulation, a cocktail of medications is administered to coax the ovaries into producing an abundance of eggs for retrieval. Once mature, these eggs are harvested and fertilized in a laboratory setting. The resulting embryos may or may not undergo genetic testing to identify any abnormalities, with viable embryos then frozen for future use. Again, all of this was laid out before me in stark detail, each step a reminder of the clinical nature of my circumstances. Yet, amidst the sterile facts and figures, I found myself yearning for something more. I longed for a narrative that captured the raw, visceral experience of infertility—one that went beyond the confines of medical jargon and statistical data.

Soon, I came to a sobering realization: narratives like mine were glaringly absent from the academic discourse surrounding infertility. It then dawned on me that the only way to articulate the complexity of my emotions was to transcribe them onto paper. And so, I began to write. With each word, I sought to peel back the layers of silence that shrouded my experience, daring to confront the complexities of infertility with honesty and vulnerability. I found solace in writing as it became my refuge in the storm—a means of reclaiming agency and forging connection within the loneliness of infertility. And so, with trembling hands and a heavy heart, I embraced the daunting task of telling my story—one fraught with pain but also infused with resilience and hope.

By recounting my story, I stood as an eyewitness to these experiences. Enveloped within the sterile confines of medical examination rooms, I could speak to the probing scrutiny of doctors, who treated my reproductive system as if it were a machine in need of repair. Immersed in the arduous process of IVF, I found myself thrust into a battleground where my body became the unwilling participant in a perilous experiment. Despite the lack of guarantees, I remained present, fully immersed in the ordeal. To me, reducing these experiences to mere clinical facts fails to capture the true essence of the struggle. Simple words cannot convey the sheer terror of being informed that one's body does not conform to expectations. Statistics cannot encapsulate the profound grief of being confronted with the near impossibility of conceiving. The data remains stoic and unfeeling, indifferent to the emotional turmoil that accompanies the journey through IVF. It is but a facade, a veil drawn over the raw humanity that lies beneath. The information functions as a muzzle, stifling the tumultuous emotions that accompany infertility and IVF.

To clarify, I possessed a basic understanding of the science behind IVF. However, what eluded me was the extent to which my body would be objectified and stripped of its intrinsic value. It was then I observed a notable absence in the discourse surrounding IVF treatment—the emotional toll, the profound sense of loss, and the isolation experienced by individuals undergoing this process were scarcely acknowledged. So, I sought out personal accounts of other women who

had traversed the path of IVF, hoping to find solace in shared experiences. As a Latina woman, I found myself starved for representation, yearning for narratives that reflected my reality. Yet, my search yielded very little, as the overwhelming majority of stories about IVF centered around white bodies, authored by individuals who did not share my lived experience.

Faced with this stark reality, I took it upon myself to fill the void. I wrote. I chronicled my experiences, shedding light on the ways in which IVF differed for individuals like me. I wrote until I had birthed a narrative that demanded to be heard. Again, though I never envisioned myself as the protagonist of my research narrative, I found myself thrust into that role. Initially, I grappled with fear and uncertainty. Would I be judged for sharing the intimate details of my struggle with infertility? Would I be perceived as a legitimate scholar if I dared to make myself the subject of my research? For so long, I had been conditioned to believe that scholarship necessitated detachment and objectivity. I had been led to believe that stories like mine could only be told from a third-party perspective to be deemed legitimate and authentic. These questions gnawed at me as I embarked on my journey into autoethnography. The very act of placing myself at the center of my research felt both empowering and precarious. In academia, where objectivity and detachment are often prized, my decision to weave personal narrative into scholarly discourse seemed daring, even subversive. Would my peers view my work as rigorous and scholarly, or dismiss it as overly subjective and self-indulgent? Could I navigate the fine line between vulnerability and academic rigor—between personal revelation and scholarly analysis?

These tensions were not just intellectual but deeply personal. They echoed my own struggles with identity and legitimacy—as a researcher, as a woman grappling with infertility, as someone daring to challenge the conventional boundaries of academic inquiry. Yet, amidst these doubts, I found resolve. My experiences were not just anecdotes; they were lenses through which broader societal issues could be examined and understood. By situating myself within the narrative, I aimed to illuminate the complexities of infertility, to give voice to those silenced by stigma, and to challenge the dominant narratives that exclude personal experience from scholarly discourse. In embracing autoethnography, I acknowledged the power dynamics inherent in research—the choices we make in how we position ourselves and our subjects, and the implications of those choices. My positionalities—as a researcher, as a woman, as someone who has experienced infertility—shaped the lens through which I viewed my research questions and interpreted my findings. Ultimately, the decision to make myself the subject of my research was not just an academic choice but a personal and ethical one. It required courage to confront the potential judgments and criticisms, but it also offered a path to authenticity and a deeper understanding of me and the world around me.

Realizing this led me to a discovery much more profound: Research feels. It feels deeply, resonating with the raw emotions that define the human experience. It transcends the sterile confines of statistical analysis, embracing the messy,

complex reality of the lived experience. Through my writing, I seek to contribute to a broader conversation about the legitimacy of personal narrative in academic research and the transformative potential of embracing our own stories as legitimate subjects of study. And so, I wrote. I wrote to reclaim my voice and to assert my presence within academic discourse. I wrote to challenge the prevailing narratives, to demand recognition for the myriad ways in which identity shapes our experiences. In doing so, I found not only validation but *liberation*. Liberation from the constraints of conventional scholarship, from the stifling expectation of objectivity. I found that my voice, my story, had the power to disrupt the status quo, to amplify voices that had long been silenced. And so, I wrote.

Dancing with Academia: The Balancing Act of Dissertation Writing

To put it mildly, writing a dissertation is no easy feat. This process is not merely an intellectual endeavor; it is an intricate dance between adhering to academic and institutional requirements while staying attuned to the self. This complex interplay often manifests as both a profound challenge and a transformative journey. The physical act of writing a dissertation demands long hours of focused work and extensive research, analysis, and synthesis of vast amounts of information—an effort that is often exhausting. The intellectual rigor required to produce original, coherent, and impactful scholarship can strain the mind and body, pushing the boundaries of endurance. Simultaneously, the emotional labor of writing a dissertation is profound, especially when the subject matter is as deeply personal as mine was. The act of reliving and documenting painful experiences requires immense emotional resilience and discipline. Each word penned is not just an academic exercise but also a piece of the heart and soul laid bare. The emotional toll is exacerbated by the need to balance vulnerability with the objective tone often demanded by academic conventions. The pressure to conform to academic expectations and standards can create a dissonance between the desire to convey the raw truth of personal experience and the necessity to fit within established scholarly frameworks. This dissonance forces a negotiation between authenticity and adherence to academic norms, often requiring creative solutions to bridge the gap.

But, as I said before, research feels. Allowing oneself to feel and process emotions in research can lead to more authentic and impactful scholarship. The integration of external constraints and inner needs involves finding a rhythm that respects both. For me, this meant allowing my personal narrative to guide my research while ensuring that it met academic standards. It required a delicate balance of vulnerability and rigor, of sharing my truth without compromising scholarly integrity. This balance was not easy to achieve, but it was necessary for producing work that was both personally meaningful and academically valid. Through this process, I learned that research is as much about personal growth as

it is about scholarly contribution. By embracing both the external constraints and the inner needs, researchers can create narratives that are authentic, impactful, and true to their experiences. And so, I wrote some more.

Writing the Untold: My Story, Our Voice

In writing, I poured out my experiences, encapsulating every moment of my infertility and IVF journey. I embarked on a fervent quest to unveil why my narrative seemed to vanish amidst the clinical data, IVF pamphlets, and medical reports. Then, I understood that the true essence of my story lay hidden within the moments of clinical indifference, crushed beneath surgical reports and DNA profiles that obscured my lived reality. Quickly, exhaustion set in as I navigated through an overwhelming sea of information, bearing the weight of my memories and emotions. My exhaustion soon morphed into anger as I contemplated the notion of someone else co-opting my story and molding it into something detached from my essence. How could anyone tell my story authentically without intimately knowing the depths of my experience?

The answer became abundantly clear—no one could authentically tell my story but me. My identity shapes my worldview, endowing me with a perspective that is wholly unique. Negotiating the relationship between my identity as a Latina woman and my academic inclinations became imperative as I sought to navigate both realms while retaining credibility in each. Thus, as a researcher and participant in my own PhD dissertation, I wove together my lived experiences, crafting a narrative that remained grounded in factual data while retaining its humanity. The process was anything but easy; I became my own confidant and adversary, grappling with the delicate balance of what I wished to reveal to the world. As both a researcher and participant, I straddled the line between outsider and insider, bridging the gap between scholarly research, cultural significance, and personal awareness. Without me, this story would cease to exist, devoid of the human connection that lies at the core of all research. Research must acknowledge the humanity that resides beneath the veneer of data and structure. To reveal who I am and the journey I endured, to forge the connection between myself and academic research, I wrote.

Conclusion

While certainly not an endeavor for the faint of heart, I made the conscious decision to harness my story for the greater good. I embarked on the challenging task of crafting an autoethnographic account of infertility and IVF as my dissertation study. As I penned my dissertation, drawing upon my own experiences with IVF, it felt as though I was reliving my journey all over again. Tears welled in my eyes as I poured my heart onto the page, pushing myself to the brink of endurance. In a way, I laid bare my soul within those pages, revealing to my readers the gaps that

persist in infertility research and treatment for Latinas. Yet, I didn't stop there. I endeavored to show my readers why these gaps mattered. I recounted what I had endured, how it had felt, what I had witnessed and heard. Through the raw honesty of my words, I invited them into the darkest corners of my life, allowing them to glimpse the profound impact of medical and social exclusion on women like me. I made a human connection by laying bare my story, my struggles, and my fervent desire to support others facing similar challenges in communities that may not fully understand or accept them.

In conclusion, I harbor no shame in admitting that I channeled my pain into a creation that I hope will resonate with countless individuals. I aimed to be a beacon of solidarity for those navigating similar journeys, providing a lifeline amid the vast sea of impartiality that often characterizes academic discourse. Our stories are vanishing amidst the pursuit of legitimacy, risking exclusion from ongoing conversations. We cannot allow our voices to fade into obscurity in the name of scholarly validation. As I've emphasized before, research is imbued with emotion, and we must not be complicit in stifling the potential for understanding and connection. For me, this meant crafting an autoethnographic account of my encounter with infertility. For you, it may take a different form. Yet, I implore you to share your story, to illuminate the richness of your experiences and teach others through your insights. I write, and now, I urge you to do the same.