
Article

An Autoethnography on Learning About Autoethnography

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Abstract

Autoethnography is an emerging qualitative research method that allows the author to write in a highly personalized style, drawing on his or her experience to extend understanding about a societal phenomenon. Autoethnography is grounded in postmodern philosophy and is linked to growing debate about reflexivity and voice in social research. The intent of autoethnography is to acknowledge the inextricable link between the personal and the cultural and to make room for nontraditional forms of inquiry and expression. In this autoethnography, the author explores the state of understanding regarding autoethnography as a research method and describes the experience of an emerging qualitative researcher in learning about this new and ideologically challenging genre of inquiry.

Keywords: autoethnography, personal narrative, qualitative methods, self

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Introduction

I can write this down now. It has been swirling around in my head for a month, the readings mixing with my thoughts and reactions, but I did not know just how to put it down on paper. So much of what I want to say about autoethnography is about me, not it. I am surprised at the difficulty of this task. When I happened on a brief mention of autobiographical methods during the course of my regular reading, I realized that I wanted to know more about it. Quite unexpectedly, my curiosity turned into a foray into postmodern philosophy and critical theory, reflexivity and voice, various vague approaches to autobiographical inquiry, validity and acceptability, defences and criticisms, and a wide range of published personal narratives, the typical product of autoethnography. I was confronted, challenged, moved, and changed by what I learned. Therefore, in keeping with the essence of autoethnography, I finally came to the realization that I could share my experience of learning about autoethnography and, in the text, co-mingle me and it. Autoethnographies “are highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding” (Sparkes,

2000, p. 21). An autoethnography “lets you use yourself to get to culture” (Pelias, 2003, p. 372). My personal struggles and conclusions reflect the dynamics in the academic community as we seek to balance excellence in inquiry with constant growth and learning.

Philosophical and theoretical foundations for autobiographical methods

Traditional scientific approaches, still very much at play today, require researchers to minimize their selves, viewing self as a contaminant and attempting to transcend and deny it. The researcher ostensibly puts bias and subjectivity aside in the scientific research process by denying his or her identity. “Concerns about the situatedness of the knower, the context of discovery, and the relation of the knower to the subjects of her inquiry are demons at the door of positivist science. The production of [what has always been considered to be] ‘legitimate’ knowledge begins by slamming the door shut” (McCorkel & Myers, 2003, p. 200).

From a positivist perspective, there is only one way to “do science,” and any intellectual inquiry must conform to established research methods. Most people, like me, have grown up believing that positivism is science (Neuman, 1994). Without knowing about the alternatives, I have been socialized to believe that “real” science is quantitative, experimental, and understood by only a select and elite few (my earlier conception being that I might never become competent in such a difficult field). So strong is the positivist tradition that researchers who use even well-established qualitative research methods are continually asked to defend their research as valid science (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Ways of inquiry that connect with real people, their lives, and their issues are seen as soft and fluffy and, although nice, not valuable in the scientific community.

With the rise of postmodern philosophy and my awareness of it, this is changing, and I am able to learn to think differently about what constitutes knowing. The essence of postmodernism is that many ways of knowing and inquiring are legitimate and that no one way should be privileged. “It distrusts abstract explanation and holds that research can never do more than describe, with all descriptions equally valid . . . [Any] researcher can do no more than describe his or her personal experiences” (Neuman, 1994, p. 74). Several researchers have highlighted the presence of the researcher’s rhetoric, prejudice, and experience in the interpretation of observations and numbers and the way in which they simply construct one interpretation from among many that could be consistent with their numerical data analysis. They have also revealed how data can be socially constructed (see, for example, Bloor, Goldberg & Emslie, 1991; Garkinkel, 1967; Gephart, 1988; Knorr-Cetina, 1991). This has been important in breaking down the façade of objectivity and freedom from bias in the dominant positivist paradigm, lending support for research methods that rely more on subjectivity, such as qualitative methods as a whole. However, postmodernism creates a context of doubt, in which all methods are subject to critique but are not automatically rejected as false. The goal of postmodernism is not to eliminate the traditional scientific method but to question its dominance and to demonstrate that it is possible to gain and share knowledge in many ways. From a postmodern viewpoint, having a partial, local, and/or historical knowledge is still knowing (Richardson, 2000). All assumptions inherent in established research methods (both qualitative and quantitative) are questioned, and we are encouraged to “abandon all established and preconceived values, theories, perspectives . . . and prejudices as resources for . . . study” (Vidich & Lyman, 2000, p. 60).

The postmodern era has made it possible for critical theories to emerge and take hold in academic inquiry and to open up the possible range of research strategies. For example, feminist theory, and feminist research using multiple research techniques, has grown in reaction to the “male-oriented perspective that has predominated in the development of social science” (Neuman, 1994, p. 72). Many feminist writers now advocate for research that starts with one’s own experience (Ellis, 2004). In contrast to the dominant,

objective, competitive, logical male point of view, feminist researchers “emphasize the subjective, empathetic, process-oriented, and inclusive sides of social life” (Neuman, 1994, p. 72).

Other emancipatory theories, such as those aimed at addressing the power imbalances associated with race and class, also find a space in postmodernity. Academic writers are beginning to acknowledge the normative value of inquiry. Critics of scientific traditions have argued for the abandonment of rationality, objectivity, and truth to move social science beyond a focus on method, toward the power of social research to have a moral effect (Bochner, 2001). Stivers (1993) has stated that a vision of universal truth is really just a dream of power over others and that liberatory, emancipatory projects are better served by alternative knowledge production process.

This is the philosophical open door into which autoethnography creeps. The questioning of the dominant scientific paradigm, the making of room for other ways of knowing, and the growing emphasis on the power of research to change the world create a space for the sharing of unique, subjective, and evocative stories of experience that contribute to our understanding of the social world and allow us to reflect on what could be different because of what we have learned. As a woman in a man’s world, a nurse in a doctors’ world, and a qualitative researcher coming from a positivist discipline (health services research), I find that the relentless nudging of autoethnography against the world of traditional science holds wonderful, symbolic, emancipatory promise. It says that what I know matters. How much more promise could it hold for people far more marginalized than I? I am warming up to this method.

Reflexivity and voice

The research community is relatively comfortable with the concept of reflexivity, in which the researcher pauses for a moment to think about how his or her presence, standpoint, or characteristics might have influenced the outcome of the research process. However, new “methods” such as autoethnography, founded on postmodern ideas, challenge the value of token reflection that is often included as a paragraph in an otherwise neutral and objectively presented manuscript. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) have referred to this call to genuine reflexivity as the “crisis of representation” (p. 10), which began in the mid-1980s, with the appearance of a number of noted publications that questioned traditional notions of science.

As we are still dealing with this “crisis” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), it has become increasingly apparent that the studied world can be captured only from the perspective of the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). From the time that traditional ethnography was first criticized and experimental writing was first explored, “the question [has been] raised about political and cultural representation—not only about who should represent whom but what should be the forms of representation in relationship to hegemonic practices” (Clough, 2000, p. 283). In research that seeks to discover personal experience, there is a unique relationship between researcher and participant, and the issue of voice arises (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). It is suggested that the freedom of a researcher to speak as a player in a research project and to mingle his or her experience with the experience of those studied is precisely what is needed to move inquiry and knowledge further along. If a researcher’s voice is omitted from a text, the writing is reduced to a mere summary and interpretation of the works of others, with nothing new added (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). Taking the question of voice and representation a step further, we could argue that an individual is best situated to describe his or her own experience more accurately than anyone else. Ellis (1991), a strong advocate emotion-based, autobiographical inquiry, has suggested that a social scientist who has lived through an experience and has consuming, unanswered questions about it can use introspection as a data source and, following accepted practices of field research, study him- or herself as with any “n” of 1. “Experimental writing means re-thinking the condition of representation and therefore [engaging] with figures of subjectivity that do not depend on representation as it has been understood” (Clough, 2000, p. 286).

Although many qualitative researchers are now aware of the need for genuine and thorough reflection on the research process and their role in it, Pillow (2003) has been critical of reflexivity that merely acknowledges the researcher's perspective or attempts to convey a greater truthfulness or awareness of other. The emergence of autoethnography as a method of inquiry moves researchers' "use of self-observation as part of the situation studied to self-introspection or self-ethnography as a legitimate focus of study in and of itself" (Ellis, 1991, p. 30). New epistemologies (such as autoethnography) from previously silenced groups remove the risks inherent in the representation of others, allow for the production of new knowledge by a unique and uniquely situated researcher, and offer small-scale knowledge that can inform specific problems and specific situations (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Autoethnography also challenges traditional writing conventions that attempt to validate empirical science and uphold the power that accompanies scientific knowledge. In the traditional paradigm, research that has been conducted according to established methods must also be reported in a standardized format.

How we are expected to write affects what we can write about . . . The conventions hold tremendous material and symbolic power over [researchers]. Using them increases the probability of [acceptance] but they are not . . . evidence of greater—or lesser—truth value . . . than . . . writing using other conventions. (Richardson, 2000, p. 7)

What I see as most significant is that traditional research and writing conventions create only the illusion that the knowledge produced is more legitimate. As for me, I have been a blind follower of convention. When I wrote my first autoethnography, I asked my supervisor if I was "allowed" to write that kind of article, given that it was not research. Originally coauthored, that article was written in the first person plural, the use of "we" somehow symbolic of corroborated and therefore more legitimate knowledge than just something "I" had to share. This is the first article I have ever written in the first person, so difficult is it to break away from long-held beliefs about the legitimacy of what I know. Clearly, I am not alone in my uncertainty regarding my knowledge and its presentation. "For many, especially for women being educated as researchers, voice is an acknowledgment that they have something to say" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 423). The potential power of autoethnography to address unanswered questions and include the new and unique ideas of the researcher is inspiring to me as one who wishes to find my niche and make my own special contribution. Certainly my knowledge has jumped forward through my encounter with this emerging, unconventional method, in contrast with the slower, incremental growth that I have experienced in interacting with more traditional approaches and texts. I cannot deny that my conventional habits are challenged by this entirely new way of thinking, but I suspect it is precisely the fact that I am forced to bend in a new way that is the reason behind the growth I see in myself.

Understanding the autobiographical method

Ironically, perhaps, my use of the term autoethnography is a nod to a dominant claim related to this emerging method. Ellis and Bochner (2000) have listed almost a page of terms that have been attached to autobiographical research and argued that

it seems appropriate now to include under the broad rubric of autoethnography those studies that have been referred to by other similarly situated terms, such as personal narratives . . . lived experience, critical autobiography . . . evocative narratives . . . reflexive ethnography . . . ethnographic autobiography . . . autobiographical ethnography, personal sociology . . . [and] autoanthropology. (pp. 739-740)

They noted, however, that the term autoethnography has been in use for more than 20 years (originated by Hayano, 1979) and has become the term of choice in describing studies of a personal nature (Ellis, 2004;

Ellis & Bochner, 2000). I can see that there is value in the standardization of terminology with respect to this method, as it would allow for unified advances in using, appreciating, and understanding this method. “Autoethnography” builds on a familiar qualitative research term while introducing a whole new way of pursuing social knowledge. However, given that there have been and are many other terms in circulation, I would like to discuss the method as it is put forward by researchers who use differing terms. Moustakas (1990), writing from as early as the late 1960s, labeled the method heuristic inquiry. Ellis and Bochner, as noted, have referred to the method as autoethnography, and a number of authors simply present the method and its product as personal narrative.

First, heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990) has arisen from the phenomenological tradition and began with a question that has been a personal challenge for the researcher. The aim is to “awaken and inspire researchers to make contact with and respect their own questions and problems, to suggest a process that affirms imagination, intuition, self-reflection, and the tacit dimension as valid ways in the search for knowledge and understanding” (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 40). The basic design of a heuristic research project involves six steps: initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and culmination in a creative synthesis (Moustakas, 1990). Initial engagement with a research topic occurs with the discovery of an intense interest, a passionate concern that is not only personally meaningful but has broader social implications. In this phase, intense introspection allows a question to emerge. Immersion involves sustained focus and total concentration on the question and a deep exploration of the researcher’s tacit knowledge of the topic. On the other hand, the incubation phase is a period of retreat from thought related to the question. The purpose of this phase is to focus on unrelated distractions that leave the research topic to percolate in the subconscious. During this time, new ideas form in much the same way as a forgotten name suddenly comes to mind when we are thinking about something else. The phase of illumination appears to be a mysterious phase in which something completely new is seen in something familiar. The way in which the researcher causes illumination to occur is not clearly specified by Moustakas but appears to result from genuine openness to unique possibilities. In explication, the researcher develops a comprehensive depiction of the core themes. The major components of the phenomenon are explicated through the researcher’s self-awareness as well as through conversations with others. In the final stage, creative synthesis takes place, in which the researcher presents the meanings and themes associated with the question in the form of a narrative (with verbatim material and examples), poem, drawing, painting, or other creative form.

Although these phases, as described by Moustakas (1990), strike me as quite idealistic and abstract, they do set the tone for a very nontraditional form of study that “engages one’s total self and evokes a personal and passionate involvement and active participation in the [research] process” (p. 42). As Moustakas continued his discussion, he offered some more concrete details regarding the techniques that can be used but acknowledged that “methods of heuristic inquiry are open-ended [with] each research process unfold[ing] in its own way” (p. 43). He also noted that heuristic inquiry methods should reveal the nature of a phenomenon more completely than would ordinary experience, which suggests a process that is characterized by some degree of rigor and systematicity. Moustakas suggested that heuristic researchers work with other researchers and seek research participants, so that a personal topic can be illuminated by a variety of perspectives. Likely sources of data include personal documents such as notes or journals, interview notes and transcripts, poems, and/or artwork. Data analysis consists of thorough discussion, introspection, and thought (immersion and incubation) until themes and meanings emerge. Ultimately, heuristic research is similar to more familiar forms of qualitative research, in that it focuses on experience and meaning and uses similar data sets and analysis techniques. However, it is intensely personal and introspective and, as Moustakas describes it, almost obsessive in its depth and rigor.

Second, autobiographical research methods have become increasingly known as “autoethnography” and have been promoted, influenced, and developed by Ellis and Bochner (1999, 2000). As with personal research labeled “heuristic research,” the autobiographical genre here referred to as “autoethnography”

has been further advanced by the postmodern challenge, reiterated by Ellis and Bochner, to infuse social science with the emotions and person of the researcher. Unfortunately, however, these authors' discussions of this method are, like Moustakas's, very philosophical and abstract, and somewhat lacking in concrete information about the method and how someone new to it might proceed. In a lengthy book chapter (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), information about the method is presented, in part, in the form of a story about a particular graduate student interested in an autoethnographic dissertation. In this story, autoethnography is accomplished through the use of personal writing and reflection, the stories of others (gathered through a series of highly interactive and even therapeutic interviews with individuals and groups), personal poetry, and an understanding of the relevant literature (especially knowledge of the gaps in the literature that can be answered only through personally focused inquiry). The use of autoethnography alongside other well-known qualitative research methods is suggested. Autoethnography is referred to as "action research for the individual" (p. 754), and it is suggested to the graduate student in the story that she might do a "straight grounded theory analysis" (p. 757). Not unlike more familiar approaches to qualitative research, common products of autoethnographic research can include "short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose" (p. 739). In the case of a dissertation, it appears that the form can be very fluid and evolving, and include personal stories and excerpts from interviews, possibly accompanied by other more standard components of this type of research presentation. Ellis (2004), in a methodological novel about autoethnography, restated a number of the methodological points she put forward with Bochner (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). She acknowledged that "autoethnography does not proceed linearly" (p. 119), is complex, is not conducted according to a special formula, and can be likened to being sent "into the woods without a compass" (p. 120). However, she encouraged autoethnographers to deal with the uncertainty of the process so that adequate time is taken to "wander around a bit and [get] the lay of the land" (p. 120).

Muncey (2005) added some concrete assistance to the question of "how to do" autoethnography. She suggested the use of snapshots, artifacts/documents, metaphor, and psychological and literal journeys as techniques for reflecting on and conveying a "patchwork of feelings, experiences, emotions, and behaviors that portray a more complete view of . . . life" (p. 10). Overall, however, discussions of autoethnography leave many questions regarding the method. What is presented, though, is an inspiring and compelling argument for the methodological possibilities that exist when the researcher is a full study participant.

A third widely discussed approach to the researcher's use of self is personal narrative. Personal narrative is often presented as a typical product of autoethnography but is also proposed as a method unto itself. Noting that her perspective is contrary to convention in qualitative inquiry, Richardson (1994) purported that writing is a

method of inquiry, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic. Although we usually think about writing as a form of "telling" about the social world . . . writing is also a way of "knowing"—a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable (p. 516, italics in original).

Historically, writing has been divided into two genres: literary and scientific. The goal of personal narrative as research is to fuse the form with the content and the literary with the scientific, to create a social scientific art form, thereby revealing the hand of the researcher/author who created the work and demonstrating explicitly the expertise of the author rather than constructing his or her absence (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Richardson, 2000). Autoethnographically based personal narratives are

highly personalized, revealing texts in which authors tell stories about their own lived experience, relating the personal to the cultural . . . In telling the story, the writer calls upon . . . fiction-writing techniques. Through these techniques, the writing constructs a sequence of events . . . holding back on interpretation, asking the reader to emotionally “relive” the events with the writer. (Richardson, 2000, p. 11)

What can be learned about method in autoethnography is that it varies widely, from the highly introspective, through more familiar approaches connected to qualitative research, to somewhat experimental literary methods, experimental, at least, in terms of thinking of writing as research.

During this learning process, I was disappointed to find that much of what was written on autoethnography (or otherwise labeled autobiographical research) was highly abstract and lacking in specificity. I came to wonder whether autoethnography is less of a method and more of a philosophy, theoretical underpinning, or paradigm, aimed at restoring and acknowledging the presence of the researcher/author in research, the validity of personal knowing, and the social and scientific value of the pursuit of personal questions. This seems to be of concern for many others who debate the theory/method divide. Nevertheless, my need to have something concrete to learn was unsatisfied by my general reading on autoethnography as a method. Fortunately, I managed to find several examples of autoethnography that provided excellent insights into the use of self in research and the ways in which it might be accomplished.

Understanding autoethnography by example

As I have noted, there is considerable latitude with respect to how autoethnography is conducted and what product results. Autoethnographers tend to vary in their emphasis on auto- (self), -ethno- (the cultural link), and -graphy (the application of a research process) (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, paraphrasing Reed-Danahay, 1997). This variable emphasis on the separate dimensions of autoethnography results in the production of manuscripts that differ significantly in tone, structure, and intent. It must also be noted that some authors who have pursued autobiographical inquiry have not referred to their written products as autoethnographies. However, in keeping with the way in which Ellis and Bochner subsumed other labels under autoethnography, the contemporary term of choice, I will bring a number of articles into the discussion that, although their authors used various labels, can also be thought of as autoethnographies. In other words, to adapt a well-known axiom, an autoethnography by any other name is still an autoethnography. By considering these examples together, we can gather helpful information on the practical aspects of using this type of inquiry.

Sparkes (1996) offered an excellent example of autoethnography, as well as a very helpful expository on the process of writing and publishing the resulting narrative (2000). (He described his original article as a “narrative” but referred to it in his later analysis as an “autoethnography.”) His work “The Fatal Flaw: A Narrative of the Fragile Body-Self” (1996), nicely balances the auto-, -ethno-, and -graphy components of this method, as in it, he described his personal journey from elite athlete to a man who is forced to face an “interrupted body project” (p. 463) when inflammatory back disease became a permanent part of his life and interfered with his participation in sport and, indeed, many activities of his ordinary daily life.

Sparkes (1996) aligned himself philosophically with autoethnography and connected the personal with the cultural when he said, “I . . . attempt to take you as the reader into the intimacies of my world. I hope to do this in such a way that you are stimulated to reflect upon your own life in relation to mine” (p. 467). As a professor, he described how the early stages of his autoethnographic writing were shaped by his assumptions about what constituted proper academic work and how he “felt the need to add something to the story to signal it as scholarship” (2000, p. 28). His original draft contained a personal story framed by solid sections of theory to support the presentation of his experience, but as he became more confident in

the value of sharing his story, he began to focus more on telling his story and weaving theoretical content into it where needed. The published version reads as an intelligent, personal, emotional story that is, I feel, reassuringly supported by previously held sociological knowledge. Sparkes bolstered his story by incorporating other data sources, such as medical diagnostic test reports, reconstructions of conversations with others, selections from newspapers reporting on his athletic accomplishments, and excerpts from his personal diary. In his later analysis (2000), he presented the comments of the various reviewers of his submitted manuscript, revealing a wide range of reaction to this genre of research, from those rejecting it as scholarship to those calling for less theory and more pure story. The report of his experiences as he endeavored to interject a personal narrative into traditional academia demonstrates the readiness of scholars to accept this method and offers future autoethnographers some insights into successfully attempting autoethnography.

Holt (2001) published an autoethnography that is similar in approach to Sparkes's (1996), although it deals with a very different topic. Holt told his story about becoming a graduate teaching assistant in a university and using a three-level reflection strategy to refine his teaching methods. He used his practical background to generate questions and implications for the future development of the graduate teaching assistant role, thereby linking his personal experience to issues in his social situation. He incorporated previous research and existing models of teaching into his work by contrasting his personal ideology and past experience with the expectations of the new university setting in which he took up a teaching assignment. He used a 2-year reflective logbook as the primary data source for his study. Like Sparkes (2000), Holt offered a very helpful and insightful article (2003) in which he told the story of his struggles to have his autoethnography accepted and published. Presenting the story as hypothetical discussions between him and various reviewers, he deconstructed his reviewers' feedback, ranging from the sympathetic to the skeptical, in an effort to inform future autoethnographers about the difficulties associated with work of this type. He encouraged future researchers to be persistent and resilient, to continue to "develop new avenues of criticism and support for such work" (2003, p. 6), and to pursue publication in mainstream journals to enhance the profile of autoethnography.

An autoethnographic study by Duncan (2004) is an excellent example of a methodologically rigorous study that "could possibly be placed at the conservative end of the continuum of autoethnographic reporting" (p. 8). Duncan introduces the skeptic to this method in a more gradual, comfortable way. Her research demonstrates explicitly how autoethnography can assist in answering otherwise unanswerable questions. As a multimedia/hypermedia designer (involving the design of computer assisted learning applications in which users navigate the program content according to individual needs), she wanted to evaluate and improve her practice. The novelty of this type of medium and the delay in receiving feedback from end users necessitated a personal, reflective approach for timely practice evaluation. To Duncan, autoethnography was a method of inquiry in which the inner dialogue of the researcher was considered valid, that encouraged systematic reflection, offered an organized and traceable means of data analysis and resulted in a scholarly account (p. 3). Rigor in the research process ("-graphy") is emphasized by Duncan.

[T]his research tradition does more than just tell stories. It provides reports that are scholarly and justifiable interpretations . . . [that] do not consist solely of the researcher's opinions but are also supported by other data that can confirm or triangulate those opinions. Methods of collecting data include participant observation, reflective writing, interviewing, and gathering documents and artifacts. (p. 5)

The main data source in this study was a reflective journal, kept over a 1-year period, consisting of handwritten entries created twice weekly and averaging two pages in length. Entries were numbered and indexed, and supported by other documents such as e-mails, memos and letters, storyboard and graphic sketches, computer screen images, notes to self and from other design team members, government

documents, and technical logs. Following data collection, Duncan began the process of categorization and theming, and the construction of meaning that provided the basis for theory development. In conclusion, she charged “those engaged in this emerging art . . . to include in the research report adequate justification for the choice of this method and [a] demonstration of how appropriate evaluation criteria might be applied” (p. 12). Despite her conservative approach to the method, in contrast to Sparkes (1996) and Holt (2001), Duncan raised similar issues in the acceptability of autoethnography by the wider research community and suggested similar strategies for promoting understanding.

Spanning the theoretical and the literary, Pelias (2003) shared some of his personal observations in “The Academic Tourist: An Autoethnography.” This is a short, humorous, but insightful offering that gives the reader a look into the daily habits and demands of academic life. It is characterized most obviously by long, run-on sentences that leave the reader feeling the monotony and endlessness of the obligations of an academic career but, at the same time, reveal the expertise and cultural familiarity of the author. The academic is metaphorically compared to a tour guide who knows his part, recites his lines, and fulfills the expectations on him. References to theory and other authors writing about autoethnography are included as a half-hearted nod to tradition.

On the other end of the continuum are a number of examples of personal narrative that rely almost exclusively on a highly personal, evocative writing style, focusing on the auto-, omitting any reference to research conventions, and leaving the reader to make his or her own societal or cultural applications. An essay called “A Choice for K’aila” (Paulette, 1993) is a mother’s story about her decision not to permit her infant son, with terminal liver disease, to have a liver transplant. It is the story of a parent who resolved a difficult dilemma (with her husband) about her child’s future, based on her faith and beliefs and an informed understanding of the anticipated life course of a liver transplant recipient. This narrative recounts a unique and rare experience and, in doing so, gives voice to a seldom-noticed perspective.

Clarke (1992), inspired by her daughter’s award-winning essay about being asthmatic, shared her experience as the parent of an asthmatic child. She referred to her work as phenomenology, but given that it uses self as subject, it can be considered to be autoethnographic (Ellis, 2004). Clarke incorporated the text of her daughter’s essay and wove in the poetry of others to illustrate her message. Her style is very poetic, and the article is organized in short, dramatic sections that recount specific instances, some very profound and evocative. Some theory is included, but this piece is very much an artful communication of what it feels like to live with asthma.

As these examples attest, the range of autoethnographic writings is vast and includes everything from the conservative, methodologically rigorous study (Duncan, 2004), the personal but theoretically supported (Sparkes, 1996, and, to a slightly lesser extent, Holt, 2001, and Pelias, 2003), and the highly literary and evocative (Clarke, 1992; Paulette, 1993). These examples provoked quite different responses from me that, as I came to learn, reflect precisely the range of responses from the academic community at large. Each prompts concerns in different ways, but all of them represent a genre that is still struggling for acceptance.

Criticisms, defenses, and validity

Judging by my reactions as I read these selected autoethnographies, I was not surprised to learn that there are still many who are not ready to give themselves over to this avant-garde method. Criticisms abound, and the debate rages. “The emergence of autoethnography and narratives of self . . . has not been trouble-free, and their status as proper research remains problematic” (Sparkes, 2000, p. 22). Expert knowledge is socially sanctioned in a way that commonsense or personal knowledge is not. As well, how knowledge is produced and who produces it are important in how status is attributed to knowledge (Muncey, 2005).

Despite the influence of postmodern thought, the academic conventions are powerful, and there is resistance to the intrusion of autobiographical approaches to knowledge production and sharing.

Despite their wide-ranging characteristics, autoethnographic writings all begin with the researcher's use of the subjective self. By using self as a source of data, perhaps the only source, autoethnography has been criticized for being self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective, and individualized (Atkinson, 1997; Sparkes, 2000). The focus on biography rather than formality is a concern for some, because personal experiences are placed on a pedestal and separated from other discourses in their contexts. "The narratives seem to float in a social vacuum. The voices echo in an otherwise empty world. There is an extraordinary absence of social context, social action, and social interaction" (Atkinson, 1997, p. 339). A focus on a single, subjective subject lacks genuinely thick description and threatens to substitute a psychotherapeutic for a sociological view of life.

Lack of systematicity and methodological rigor is also noted as a barrier to the acceptance of autoethnography. Sparkes (2000) and Holt (2003) both described reviewers of their manuscripts who wished to see adherence to traditional scientific tenets. Grounding in a theoretical framework, overtly described methodological and data analysis procedures, an audit trail and replicability were cited as important in judging the value of their submissions, despite the obvious difficulties in applying these to autoethnography. Even for those open to qualitative inquiry, traditional criteria such as credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness can be important, although not always easily applied to autoethnography (Holt, 2003). Duncan (2004), herself an autoethnographer (as discussed previously), has noted that criticisms have been leveled at the "more experimental forms of autoethnography in which the boundaries of scholarship are merged with artistic expression as a way of challenging the limitations of what is normally accepted as knowledge in academic contexts" (p. 11). She criticized evocative personal writing that relies on a direct emotional response from a reader rather than offering analysis, grounding in theory, and methodological rigor.

In response, those who support autobiographical inquiry have argued that autoethnography is more authentic than traditional research approaches, precisely because of the researcher's use of self, the voice of the insider being more true than that of the outsider (Reed-Danahay, 1997). "Autobiographies . . . and life stories are likely to present fuller pictures [thick description], ones in which the meanings of events and relationships are more likely to be told than inferred" (Laslett, 1999, p. 391, italics added). The sensibility of the use of self in research was revealed by Ellis when she asked, "Who would make a better subject than a researcher consumed by wanting to figure it all out?" (1991, p. 30). Her frequent collaborator, Bochner (2001), objected to the assertion that a focus on self is decontextualized. Those who complain that personal narratives emphasize a single, speaking subject fail to realize that no individual voice speaks apart from a societal framework of co-constructed meaning. There is a direct and inextricable link between the personal and the cultural. Thus, rich meaning, culturally relevant personal experience, and an intense motivation to know are what typify and strengthen autoethnography.

Some proponents of autoethnography and personal narrative acknowledge methodological issues associated with technique. "[T]hat we have to take precautions in interpreting, generalizing, and eliminating bias here the same as we do with any data we collect is assumed" (Ellis, 1991, p. 30). As we have seen, Duncan (2004) represented a response to these issues in which autoethnography is approached not for its poetic license but for its usefulness in explicating tacit knowledge and improving practice. She used self as subject but took precautions by adhering closely to accepted research conventions.

Others, perhaps tending toward the more experimental forms of autoethnography than Duncan (2004) did, have argued that traditional criteria for judging validity cannot be and need not be applied to autoethnographic writing.

The word criteria is a term that separates modernists from postmodernists . . . empiricists from interpretivists . . . Both [sides] agree that inevitably they make choices about what is good, what is useful, and what is not. The difference is that one side believes that “objective” methods and procedures can be applied to determine the choices we make, whereas the other side believes these choices are ultimately and inextricably tied to our values and our subjectivities. (Bochner, 2000, p. 266)

Because different epistemological and ontological assumptions inform autoethnographic inquiry, it makes no sense to impose traditional criteria in judging the value of a personal text (Sparkes, 2000). It is suggested that rigorous methodology and generalizability are not necessarily that which we should attain. “Think of the life being expressed [in a narrative] not merely as data to be analyzed and categorized but as a story to be respected and engaged . . . we shouldn’t prematurely brush aside the particulars to get to the general” (Bochner, 2001, p. 132). Frank (2000) noted that those who criticize the rigor of personal narrative are missing the point. “Maybe the point is not to engage [narrative] systematically but to engage it personally” (p. 355). In judging narratives, then, we should “seek to meet literary criteria of coherence, verisimilitude, and interest” (Richardson, 2000, p. 11). In other words, “Does this account work for us? Do we find it to be believable and evocative on the basis of our own experiences?” (Garratt & Hodkinson, cited in Sparkes, 2000, p. 29).

This is, finally, where anyone who, like me, first encounters autoethnography is faced with a choice. Having considered the epistemological and ontological assumptions and the methodological approaches, familiarized myself with a number of examples of autoethnography, and absorbed the arguments on both sides of the credibility/validity debate, I must now decide whether I am inclined to reject, tolerate, accept, defend, or even embrace this challenging genre of research and writing.

I believe that I am forever called to be a moderate. Postmodern ideology appeals to me because it exposes the flaws in our traditional reliance on neutrality and objectivity. It says that we cannot separate ourselves from what we do. It breaks down dominant structures that seek to exclude the contributions of others. I like that. Yet, I still believe that some things are right and some are wrong, that some things are real, and that truth can sometimes be known the same way by all people.

Methodology arises out of philosophy. I am solidly committed to qualitative research, itself a subjugated field of inquiry, because the aim of qualitative inquiry is to connect with people on the level of human meaning. Although I value quantitative research and admire those who excel at it, I am not interested in disembodied research that aims to speak neutrally for everyone. However, I like structure, and I believe that rigor is possible and necessary in qualitative research. Using self as subject is not a problem for me, but how self is used is very important.

Each of the examples I read, several of which have been discussed in this article, resonated with me and made a contribution to my personal body of knowledge. Sparkes’s (1996) piece balanced academic tradition with personal expression in a way that was very comfortable for me. His judicious use of theory helped me to interpret his personal experiences and to apply the concepts he presented to me. Clough (2000) supported this theory-based approach, with which I am at ease, by arguing that “staying close to theory allows experimental writing to be a vehicle for thinking new sociological subjects, new parameters of the social” (p. 290). Although, of course, I am a woman who has never been an elite athlete, I am a recreational runner who has often felt disappointment that my body cannot do what I so wish it would. Sparkes’s story transferred in many ways to my life.

As I am a doctoral student, Holt’s (2001) description of adapting to a new university culture and learning to teach undergraduate students resonated with my experience. His use of self as data source was framed within an established framework of reflective practice, giving his story structure and equipping me as a

reader with a new tool to apply in my reflective practice. Ellis (2000) suggested a number of questions that can be asked to judge the value of a story, including “Can the author legitimately make these claims for his story? Did the author learn anything new about himself? . . . Will this story help others cope with or better understand their worlds?” (p. 275). In reading Holt’s story (autoethnography), I was certain that the answers to these questions were affirmative.

Duncan’s (2004) work allows a gentle step into the world of autoethnography. I have to admit that the realist inside of me was comforted by her rigorous methodological approach, and I felt very confident that I could trust her findings and conclusions. Although Duncan’s writing is much more conventional than evocative, she conveyed legitimacy and usefulness in her use of a method that is “a new way to twist the familiar” (Ellis, 2000, p. 275).

Ironically, perhaps, the unstructured, more literary personal narratives were also wonderful to experience as a reader. Paulette’s story (1993) of letting her child go was easy to connect with. I read the whole story, lingering on points that called forth my experience, thoughts, and beliefs, the sign of a reading that Ellis (2000) has claimed to be worthy because it has evoked something in me (p. 274). Paulette described what I have often felt and what Illich (1976) so aptly stated, that “the medical establishment has become a major threat to health” (p. 3). Paulette’s story is an important one for people in a dominant culture to hear. She made a holistic health decision for her child, resting on her faith, her family, and the sufficiency of her knowledge to come to a conclusion.

Clarke’s (1992) phenomenological dialogue on asthma was a stretch for me. Although it was beautifully written, I found it hard to engage fully with her message. Perhaps I am a philistine, but I did not always understand the meaning of the poetry she included and found the general presentation a little bit esoteric. Nevertheless, I have to admit that there were parts of it to which I could directly relate and from which I could take a new insight. Clarke managed to accomplish what Ellis (2000) strongly values: She painted vivid pictures, conveyed intense feeling, and demonstrated tremendous literary sensitivity. As well, Clarke’s thematically organized presentation is a powerful approach to sharing memories that can be fragmentary and elusive (Muncey, 2005).

Finally, I just simply enjoyed Pelias’s (2003) autoethnographic story. Having been in the world of academia for only 2 years, I can already see how his description of the life academic is accurate. His words give me pause as I plan for my future, but his writing is lighthearted enough for me to see that, despite its shortcomings, people still choose an academic career and become comfortable in it. This story captured my imagination, entertained me, and taught me something rich and new about the world of the author, a success by Ellis’s (2000) standards.

I have lived long enough to have learned that when I am thinking something, I know someone else is, too. Other readers will have different reactions to these (and other) examples of autoethnography, but overall, I know that what attracts me to autoethnography and what concerns me about it are felt by others. My inner process and reactions connect to the experiences of others in the world beyond me. My personal experiences link to the cultural.

In my opinion, all of these examples, as different as they are, have something important to offer. They are the sharing of new and unique knowledge that is useful and applicable in a broader context. Still, there is one final rub for me. Are they research?

As we seek the answer, “there’s a lot of room to do interesting and innovative work on both sides of the divide, and there doesn’t have to be this winner-take-all mentality” (Bochner, 2001, p. 134). Knowledge

does not have to result from research to be worthwhile, and personal stories should have their place alongside research in contribution to what we know about the world in which we live.

Certainly, I have taken some liberties in classifying several examples as autoethnography, even when the authors do not. However, as I mentioned, this reflects the confusing nomenclature that exists in relation to what is increasingly referred to as autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Some authors, such as Sparkes (1996, 2000) began a personal narrative not referring to it as an autoethnography. Others have subsumed a tremendous range of writing styles under the heading “autoethnography” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). If we intend to unify our labels with the term autoethnography, I think we have to decide what we will put into that category. I see autoethnography as a research method that is part of, but delineated from, the broader realm of autobiography. By conceptualizing it this way, we can use self in a methodologically rigorous way, but personal stories can coexist with autoethnographic research.

There does seem to be a distinction emerging, along methodological lines, between the works that are specifically referred to as autoethnographies (Duncan, 2004; Holt, 2001; Pelias, 2003; Sparkes, 1996) and those that might, according to some, fit into the category but are not labeled thus (Clarke, 1992; Paulette, 1993). Ultimately, using self as subject is a way of acknowledging the self that was always there anyway and of exploring personal connections to our culture. We must be cautious, though, that we do not adopt new approaches in an uncritical fashion and that we make principled, disciplined choices about how we will understand and write about the social world (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). We live in a time of great possibility; let us proceed wisely.

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