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Autoethnography: Engaging the Cusp of Praxis and Conjecture

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Abstract

Autoethnography is an ethnographic inquiry that utilizes the autobiographic materials of the researcher as the primary data. It is a method as well as a theory which can serve in data analysis as well as useful in situating a research within a paradigm. Although seemingly recent, and has been robustly criticized, the goal of autoethnography, goes beyond merely 'walking in the shoes' to 'engaging the shoe' and the putting up a narrative for the 'agent putting on the shoe'. Differing from other self-narrative writings such as autobiography and memoir, autoethnography emphasizes cultural analysis and interpretation of the researcher's behaviors, thoughts and experiences in relation to others in society. Autoethnography therefore seeks to be ethnographical in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation, and autobiographical in its content orientation. In this work, the authors revisited a review of the nature of this inquiry method, its characteristics and benefits, as well as what it takes to produce a truly scholarly autoethnography without forgetting to unpack some of the observed pitfalls to look out for when doing what we choose to tag 'good autoethnography'.

Keywords: ethnography, autobiography, self-narrative, cultural analysis, paradigm

Introduction: Revisiting a Challenged Definiendum

> Autobiography becomes ethnographic at the point where the film- or video-maker understands his or her personal history to be implicated in larger social formations and historical processes. Identity is no longer a transcendental or essential self that is revealed, but a 'staging of subjectivity' (Grant A, Short NP &Turner, 2013).

Autoethnography is an approach to "research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience" (Ellis 2011). Although it reflects the self of the researcher, his/her emotional experience, and her/his influence on the research (Reed-Danahay 1997: 9), her/his experience is less the focus than the way in which it can inform the stories of others (Ellis 2007). Autoethnography can also be described as a research method that foregrounds the researcher's personal experience (*auto*) as it is embedded within, and

informed by, cultural identities and con/texts (*ethno*) and as it is expressed through writing, performance, or other creative means (*graphy*).

Auto-ethnography, as explained by David Hayano, is a term first coined by Raymond Firth in his seminar in 1956 where he recounted the then famous story of an encounter and argument between L. S. B. Leakey and Jomo Kenyatta concerning some Kikuyu practices to which each man laid claims of inside knowledge as a "native" of the area. The idea of 'a native of the area' became a source of repudiating and rejection of the accounts put forward by the 'native'. The question of objectivity, to be precise, was the contention. However, the development of the genre, within the sociological and anthropological communities, was given considerable impetus during the 1980s by the engagement of some ethnographers in a fundamental questioning of the ways in which ethnographic accounts were constructed, and whether these constructions could be deemed 'objective' (Hayano, 1979; Ellis, 1997; Reed-Danahay, 1997;Van Maanen, 1995; Coffey, 1999; Sparkes, 2000). One of the consequences of this questioning, that was hanged on a 'crisis of representation and legitimation' sobriquet by Denzin & Lincoln (2000) has been the flourishing of autoethnography, where researchers explore different ways of undertaking and writing ethnography, and as a corollary seek alternative ways of legitimating this particular methodological and narrative form. Today, against all odds and rejections, autoethnography is flourishing and been found useful in providing commendable "unbiased" account.

Likened to the parable of the five blind men and an elephant, there have been and, indeed, are diverse perspectives on autoethnography in the academic circle today. Even the peace and non-violent conflict scholars who have found it useful in extrapolating facts of conflicts sources (in an unbiased fashion) have failed to lend strong voice to defending this enquiry method. To be sure, autoethnography is not giving to existential prejudicial validation, as it entails detailed analysis of oneself qua member of a social group or category. It is usually distinguished from autobiography by its particular forms of analysis and its emphasis on experiences within the writer's life which aim to illuminate wider cultural or subcultural aspects. The distinctiveness of autoethnography as an investigative process lies in its efforts to combine detailed fieldnotes, analysing the research 'field' with 'headnotes' (Sanjek, 1990), the researcher's actual experience of engaging with the phenomenon at hand. The self and the ethnographic field are then symbiotic, and in effect this combination forms the pivot of analysis (Coffey, 1999).

Analysed from the foregoing perspective, it becomes clearer that autoethnography is a method that blends the purposes, techniques, and theories of social research—primarily ethnography—with the purposes, techniques, and theories associated with genres of life writing, especially autobiography, memoir, and personal essay. One popular argument against autoethnography has been its personally evocative narratives that focus

on the ethnographer's personal and professional life, with little analysis or reference to other scholarly work (Ellis 2011); these are the types of autoethnographies that have been accused of being narcissistic or overly confessional.

The many demeaning qualifiers against autoethnographic narrative, like the foregoing, once choked a popular Sociologist, Sparkes as he describes how vulnerable and personally wounded he had felt when a colleague called the autoethnography of one of his students "selfindulgent." To him, he would have preferred such 'brilliant narrative' to be described as "self-knowing, self-respectful, self-sacrificing, or self-luminous?" (Sparkes 2002: 210), unfortunately, the far opposite was the case. What many find rather 'unacceptable' are the ideas that autoethnographers often take as their focus: their experiences with ***cultural identities, popular texts, and a community's attitudes, beliefs, and practices***. In most cases autoethnographers study these phenomena by doing fieldwork, which includes observing and interacting with others, conducting archival research, and directly participating in community life. They often take "field notes" of their experiences; consult with relevant research and theories about the identities, texts, attitudes, beliefs, and practices; and may interview members of the culture to inform their understandings.

Generally, autoethnography can range from research about personal experiences of a research process to parallel exploration of the researcher's and the participants' experiences and about the experience of the researcher while conducting a specific piece of research (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). The term also has a double sense referring either to the reflexive consideration of a group to which one belongs *as a native*, member or participant (ethnography of one's own group) or to the reflexive accounting of the narrator's subjective experience and subjectivity (autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest). This distinction, between subjective and reflective, can be very blurry in some research traditions. Auto-ethnography is sometimes made synonymous with self-ethnography, reflexive ethnography, performance ethnography and can be associated with narrative inquiry and autobiography.

It must be noted at this juncture that autoethnography broadly operationalises on three different conceptions of the ***self***: self as representative subject (as a member of a community or group) ***self as autonomous subject*** (as itself the object of inquiry, depicted in 'tales of the self') and other as ***autonomous self*** (the other as both object and subject of inquiry, speaking with their own voice). It also, within this context, displays three main intersecting qualitative research traditions: analytic, subjectivist experiential and poststructuralist/postmodern.

A. ***Analytic autoethnography*** is a subgenre of analytic ethnography as practised from realist or symbolic interactionist traditions. Here a researcher is personally engaged

in a social group, setting or culture as a full member and active participant but retains a distinct and highly visible identity as a self-aware scholar and social actor within the ethnographic text. It differs from analytical ethnography by its increased interrogation of the relationships between self and others and a developed awareness of reciprocal influences between ethnographers, their settings and informants. Researchers' own feelings and experiences are included in the ethnographic narrative, made visible and regarded as important data for understanding the social world observed, yielding both self and social knowledge.

B. ***Subjectivist experiential autoethnographic*** writing aims to account for the subjective density of ethnographic fieldwork, often in an expressive, emotional and existential way. Concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness and introspection shape interpretive 'tales of the self' where the narrators' subjective experience is the central focus of the ethnography. These tales are ideographic 'case studies' or life stories narrating the subjective meanings and human texture of lived experience, usually as first-person narratives by a common or ordinary member of a group or community.

Subjective experiential auto-ethnography investigates subjectivity as a distinct phenomenon, in all its emotional, cognitive and behavioral density. Personal stories are not a means to an end, as in the analytic tradition, but singular expressions of human life that fill and shape the text. The connection of the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social through "thick description" here has no explicit analytic commitment to generalization although revealing situated cultural influences and broader social relevance.

C. Finally, ***Postmodern/poststructuralist autoethnography*** represents a blurred genre of methodological creative practices, texts and autobiographical performances that turn inward and are waiting to be staged. These contribute to remaking self and identity as a site for the negotiation of social, cultural and political dialogue, often in a carnivalesque form. Autoethnography is here mostly evocative rather than expressive and its relevance is accomplished through a balancing act: aesthetic concerns are balanced with the sharing of experience, the fragmenting effects of dialogues based on identity, and the need to connect local action to larger social and even global contexts, spaces and locations. Social and cultural artifacts can be used as forms of autoethnography as they provide a form of self-reference for the members of a particular region or community. Traditional ethnography sees its task as the description, inscription and interpretation of culture, but from a postmodern perspective the professional ethnographer becomes redundant as everyday practices are increasingly pervaded by impulses for self-documentation and the reproduction of images of the self.

Viewed from the three foregoing traditions, autoethnography further confirms its complexities which are illuminated through the highlighted traditions.

Of a Work and its Characteristics

Without prejudice to the issues discussed thus far, it is pertinent that we pause and attempt a review of the key characteristics often shared by most autoethnographic researcher, or that guide an autoethnographic research. Let us carpet this factually by putting it on record that these characteristics are many a time both a source of its appreciation and also its condemnation.

(A) To start with, autoethnographers assume that culture flows through the self; the personal, the particular, and the local are inseparably constituted and infused by others as well as by popular texts, beliefs, and practices. As Fiske (2001) notes, "any personal negotiation of our immediate social relations is a necessary part of our larger politics—the micro-political is where the macro-politics of the social structure are made concrete in the practices of everyday life" (Fiske. 2007). Ron Pelias makes a similar observation about personal experience, noting that we are each "situated within an historical and cultural context," and, as such, ideology drapes our "every utterance". To be an autoethnographer and to do autoethnography therefore means recognizing that personal experience cannot be easily or definitively separated from social and relational contexts. In this way, personal experience becomes a valid, viable, and vital kind of data from which to make meaning and use in research.

(B) Second, autoethnographers engage in laborious, honest, and nuanced self-reflection—often referred to as "reflexivity"—in an attempt to "explore and interrogate sociocultural forces and discursive practices" that inform personal experience and the research process. More specifically, reflexivity allows autoethnographers to identify, interrogate, and make explicit the persistent interplay between personal-cultural experiences; consider their roles in doing research and creating a research account; and hold themselves responsible for their mistakes or errors in judgment in a research project (Ellis,2007). Given the use of reflexivity, autoethnography stands in stark contrast to traditional social scientific studies in the sense that terms such as "objectivity," "researcher neutrality," and "stable meaning" are eschewed in favor of understanding the researcher's careful and thoughtful interpretation of lived experience and the research process.

(C) Third, autoethnographers tend to write about life-changing epiphanies (Denzin, 2000); difficult and perhaps repetitious encounters (Boylorn, 1998); insights about, and dilemmas in, doing and writing up research; mundane but notable interactions and

events and experiences about which they felt shame, confusion, and/or despair (Herrmann, 2000). As Ellis eloquently notes, "I write when my world falls apart or the meaning I have constructed for myself is in danger of doing so" (Ellis, 2007). Tami Spry makes a similar observation: "After years of moving through pain with pen and paper," she writes, "asking the nurse for these tools in the morning after losing our son in childbirth was the only thing I could make my body do" (Spry, 2005). Autoethnographers write about these often-private experiences not only to better understand those events themselves, but also to show others how they make sense of and learn lessons from them.

The characteristics outlined and discussed above depicted the crux of autoethnographic writing. However, despite most of autoethnographic works are often classified based on their orientational foundation (or the orientation that informed the writings of the autoethnographer).

The Autoethnographers and their Orientations

Most, if not all, autoethnographic writings can be grouped into three distinct orientations: social-scientific autoethnography, interpretive-humanistic autoethnography and critical autoethnography.

The commonest of the orientations is the ***social-scientific autoethnography***, sometimes referred to as analytic autoethnography (Anderson and Glass-Coffin, 2001). This orientation involves a combination of fieldwork, interpretive qualitative data, systematic data analysis, and personal experience to describe the experiences of being in, or a part of, a community. Some social-scientific autoethnographies foreground the researcher's experiences but most tend to treat personal experience as secondary to a more-traditional appearing qualitative research report. A social-scientific orientation to autoethnography requires the use of personal experience that accompanies autoethnography and is seen by some as threatening to social scientific desires for objectivity and researcher neutrality. On the contrary, we believe that social science scholarship that uses autoethnography allows for lucid interpretations of research findings as readers are connected to vivid accounts of lived experience and this is quite at home with the nuances of the qualitative research tradition.

An orientation that will probably feel more familiar to many who study popular culture—especially because of its heavy focus on cultural description and analysis—is ***interpretive-humanistic autoethnography***. This approach to autoethnography typically involves fieldwork, the use of extant research and theories, and the researcher's personal experiences and perspectives. At the heart of this orientation is "thick description," the principle of recording personal and cultural experiences in descriptive, thoughtful, and illuminating ways (Geertz, 1976). Although some interpretive-humanistic

autoethnographers use ethnographic research methods such as participant observation, interviews, and/or archival research, many choose to make the thick description of personal experience the primary focus of a project.

The other most common orientation for popular culture autoethnography is ***critical autoethnography***. Similar to other methods that involve critical approaches, these autoethnographies use personal experience to identify harmful abuses of power, structures that cultivate and perpetuate oppression, instances of inequality, and unjust cultural values and practices. Critical autoethnographies often call attention to harmful cultural assumptions about race, gender equality, sexuality, social class and colonialism.

Critical autoethnographies also make arguments about what texts, attitudes, beliefs, and practices that should and should not exist in social life, and, as such, are not concerned about objectivity and researcher neutrality.

Doing Autoethnography: A Peep into Benefits

There are diverse benefits derivable from doing autoethnography; our hope is that by making these benefits explicit, scholars will gain both a better understanding of how they can use autoethnography in their work as well as be able to justify that work to others who might not be familiar with autoethnography.

The benefits of 'doing' autoethnography include the ability for researchers to:

1) use personal experience to write alongside popular culture theories and texts, especially to show how personal experiences resemble or are informed by popular culture;
2) use personal experience to criticize, write against, and talk back to popular culture texts, especially texts that do not match their personal experiences or that espouse harmful messages;
3) describe how they personally act as audience members, specifically how they use, engage, and relate to popular texts, events, and/or celebrities;
4) describe the processes that contribute to the production of popular culture texts; and
5) create accessible research texts that can be understood by a variety of audiences.

First, autoethnographers can use personal experience to write alongside popular culture theories and texts and, more specifically, show how their experiences resemble or are informed by those same theories and texts. In this way, autoethnography can be used to illustrate the importance of theories and texts for particular audiences. As Hall writes, "It is only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that we come to know how we are constituted and who we are"

Second, autoethnographers can use personal experience to criticize, write against, and talk back to popular culture texts, especially texts that do not match their personal experiences or that espouse harmful messages.

Third, the method can show how researchers serve as audiences of particular texts as Berry autoethnography can provide more complex insider accounts about how people use media – specifically how they engage and relate to popular texts, events, and/or celebrities. Such a shift also allows for the dominant research focus on media or popular culture effects to expand to consider how affect circulates in relation to some aspect of popular culture. That is, the autoethnographer can consider complex historical, emotional, and embodied responses as they are constitutive of popular culture and lived experience.

Fourth, autoethnographers can use personal experience to describe the processes that contribute to the production of cultural texts. Thinking of popular culture as an industry—an industry that produces everyday pleasures, values, and texts consumed and appreciated by many people—requires thinking about its numerous gatekeepers.

Fifth, autoethnography allows popular culture scholars the opportunity to create and disseminate accessible and relatable research. As an interdisciplinary field, popular culture studies has excelled at making its work accessible to others while still making sure it exemplifies academic rigor and merit.

Given autoethnography's ties to genres of life writing, particularly uses of storytelling and personal experience, the method often results in texts that are both interesting and accessible. Such accessibility can ground dense theories and concepts in lived experience; allow readers to gain an intimate understanding of how those theories and concepts look and feel; and allow scholars to serve more in the role of "public intellectual".

Pathways and the Writing of an Autoethnography

> Something I remember about the past is cleaning the house, which was not easy because sometimes we had to clean when our friends were playing in the street. We were not allowed to play in the street and when we did, we received punishment. When reflecting now, I realise that mentoring is a relationship between two people where the one person guides the other in life and work. At the time, I did not understand the reason why we were not allowed to play when everybody in our street was playing in the street. When I reflect now, I understand that my mother was trying to protect us from many things that were happening around us. As I grow older, I realise I was fortunate to grow up with my siblings and my niece who lived with us because we shared food, school uniforms, and clothes. Sharing is a skill I also learned from my cousins and friends because even when we were going out with friends, if there was someone who needed clothes we would share with one another. I was also fortunate to study at a university that was far from my home because I learned to share with my friends if somebody

> did not have money or was waiting for parents to receive a salary at the end of the month. I cherish the value of sharing because if you share with other people you receive help everywhere you travel- Makhanya, 2016

From the extract above, it is glaring that personal experiences and emotions inevitably seep into research, consciously or unconsciously shaping it – directing questions, attracting or repelling informants, determining what matters. Ethnographic research and training similarly impact one's personal life, helping to interpret life events and experiences through the lens of anthropological training. How one uses these experiences and insights in one's work and life will vary with circumstances and perceived necessity, and can hardly be prescribed. The extent to which past experiences and training will be more or less directed to better understanding one's research and work as opposed to achieving greater self-understanding will also vary with the researcher, the time and the context. Each direction will involve some degree of self-exploration and follow any of the possible pathways.

There are three possible pathways for integrating autobiography and ethnography within one's work and life. Each approach varies in focus and the degree to which personal exploration by the ethnographer is deliberately sought. The pathways include:

(1) Exploring the influence of personal life on research. This includes the selective sharing of one's life experiences in research and writing, as well as the unconscious ways in which they may affect that work;

(2) Exploring the influence of research on personal life. Such an approach results from the reflexive use of insights from research and anthropological training both in the subsequent work setting as well as in making sense of one's life and one's research and other professional work; and

(3) Using ethnography as self-exploration. This is a continuation of the previous approaches, but explicitly foregrounds and deliberately addresses the issue of self-exploration through the tools of ethnography.

Whichever of the pathways is explored will often dictate the extent, nature and the quality of the autoethnographic piece. Again, regardless of the pathways, two essential qualities should be present in all autoethnographic piece.

First, any work labeled "autoethnography" should include personal experience and demonstrate, through thoughtful analysis, why the experience is meaningful and culturally significant. Any supposed autoethnography that does not use or describe the importance of personal experience in a cultural context should not be considered an autoethnography.

Second, this personal experience must be reflexively considered through the use of extant theory, other scholarly writings about the topic, fieldwork observations, analysis of artifacts (e.g., photographs), and/or involvement with others (e.g., interviews). If many of these elements are not evident, then a project should also not be considered an autoethnography.

Beyond these core two criteria, the orientation of the autoethnographer should also be 'visible to the brail user' (hermeneutical unearthing of the writings should reveal this). For example, those using a social-scientific orientation should be concerned about evaluative criteria such as the soundness of data collection, the development of good research questions, and the validity and transferability of the data. Autoethnographers who approach autoethnography from an interpretive humanistic, critical, or creative-artistic orientation are not going to be as concerned about those criteria. Rather, researchers working within these orientations are going to be focused more on providing coherent stories with details that help readers clearly envision a setting, the people and feelings involved, as well as the actions that occurred (Bochner, 1997).

Those approaching autoethnography from a creative-artistic orientation must especially consider the aesthetic aspects of the research text, including the use of narrative voice, development of characters/people, and dramatic tension or emotional resonance. However, creative-artistic autoethnographers might also find themselves subject to some of the critiques that accompany different art forms, e.g., creative writing ability

It is pertinent at this point to we sound a very vital note of warning: although the stories included in an autoethnography do not have to be fantastic, unusual, or even particularly unique—in fact, some of the best autoethnographies happen when the researcher reflects on seemingly mundane practices—***there must be some interesting sense-making or theoretical development in the text***. Reed-Danahay (1997) opines that what is important to look out for are three key pointers:

(1) The role of the autoethnographer in the narrative (is the autoethnographer an insider or an outsider of the phenomenon being described?);
(2) Whose voice is being heard: who is speaking, the people under investigation or the researcher?;
(3) Cultural displacement: some realities are being described by people who have been displaced from their natural environment due to political or social issues.

To Reed-Danahay, if these three pointers can guide the writer of an autoethnographic writing, such persons will have much to gain, as opposed to lose!

Conclusion: The Imperative of a Good Autoethnography

In all, to us, an illuminative autoethnography happens when the researcher has something deeper to say about an experience, and that something deeper should go beyond simply pointing out how personal experience aligns with or defies a theory or common research finding. The autoethnographic work needs to teach, inspire, and/or inform. Asking why an experience or story is important, what it might suggest about social interaction and cultural life, and what it suggests about ourselves, is valuable for ensuring the worth of an autoethnography. These questions can often be answered or explored through theoretical reflection, examining the existing research about a topic, and/or by talking with others as part of the project. Autoethnographers can also use various techniques to facilitate their recalling, organize memories, and compose field texts as data, the following will be invaluable: (1) using visual tools such as free drawings of significant places, "kinsgrams," and "culturegrams"; (2) inventorying people, artifacts, familial and societal values and proverbs, mentors, cross-cultural experiences, and favorite/disliked activities; (3) chronicling the autoethnographer's educational history, typical day and week, and annual life cycle; (4) reading and responding to other autoethnographies and self-narratives; and (5) collecting other field texts such as stories of others, "storied poems," personal journals, field notes, letters, conversation, interviews with significant others, family stories, documents, photographs, memory boxes, personal-family-social artifacts, and life experiences (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). On our part, and as a concluding submission, we align with Ellis (2007) position which states that, 'doing autoethnography involves a back-and-forth movement between experiencing and examining a vulnerable self, (while) observing and revealing the broader context of that experience. To us, without this 'back-and-forth' shifts, the goals and objectives of autoethnographing might not be achieved.

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