

- Lecture Note -

Autoethnography: Unpacking a Method and Lived Experience(s) as Data

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Abstract

It is not unusual for new research tools and approaches to be viewed with some level of skepticism before their eventual acceptance, and popularity. Autoethnography, a qualitative research method, has found itself in similar quagmire as it presently struggles with the question of acceptance and popular usage, three decades after its introduction by Carolyn Ellis (1995). This worrisome attitude, to its use, most especially in studies where it is the most suitable (yet unused), underscores the need to revisit its nature and application. In this review, we examine the definitions of autoethnography, its strengths and limitations, and provide some guidelines to writing a good autoethnographic work, with the hope that more scholars will consider its use where it will be invaluable in knowledge production. .

Keywords: Autobiography, Autoethnography, Ethnography, Knowledge, Method.

Autoethnography, What Is It?

The term "autoethnography" was first coined by Carolyn Ellis in 1995. In her book, *Final Negotiations: A Story of Love, Loss, and Chronic Illness*, Ellis combined personal narrative and ethnographic observation to explore her experiences of living with a chronic illness. Ellis argued in the book that 'autoethnography could provide a valuable means of exploring personal experiences and cultural practices that might otherwise be overlooked in traditional research methods' (Ellis, 1995:21). Seen from this angle, autoethnography could be described as a research method that combines personal narrative and ethnographic observation to study a particular cultural

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phenomenon (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). To Walls (2008:8), autoethnography gives ‘voice to personal experience to advance sociological understanding’ as it involves the researcher’s ‘reflection on their personal experiences, observations, and interpretations of cultural practices, and how these experiences are shaped by broader social and cultural contexts’ (Cooper & Lilyen, 2022:57).

Autoethnography as a qualitative research method involves a deep exploration of personal experiences and cultural practices. It typically involves the researcher *using their own life story* ‘as a lens through which to understand the cultural phenomenon under investigation’ (Ellis, 2013:43). This may involve the researcher ‘reflecting on their own experiences and how they relate to broader social and cultural patterns’ (Anderson, 2020:16). The researcher may also incorporate elements of fiction, poetry, or other creative forms of expression to convey their insights. Viewed from these angles, autoethnography can be described ‘as a powerful tool for uncovering the underlying cultural and social influences that shape our individual experiences and identities’ (Chang, 2002:63).

Autoethnography is a ‘highly reflexive approach to research, as the researcher is both the subject and the object of study’ (Anderson, 2020:14). This can lead to a greater understanding of the complex ways in which personal experiences are shaped by cultural contexts and social structures, and can provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of people from different backgrounds and cultures.

Although Autoethnography has its roots in anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies, it emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a response to the limitations of traditional ethnographic research methods. Traditional ethnography is characterized by a focus on the study of cultures and societies that are different from the researcher’s own culture. In ethnography, the researcher’s role is typically that of an *outsider looking in*, and the goal is to provide an objective and comprehensive understanding of the culture being studied. Autoethnography, on the other hand, is focused on the researcher’s own culture and experiences. It is characterized by a more personal and subjective approach to research, with the researcher as both the subject and the object of study (Balogun, Esoo & Ademowo, 2020). Autoethnography therefore challenges traditional notions of objectivity and attempts to provide a more nuanced and contextualized understanding of the cultural and social phenomena being studied.

Key Concepts in Autoethnographic Study

There are five key concepts that are central to autoethnography; these include reflexivity, authenticity, self-awareness, storytelling and context (Reed-Danahay, 1997).

Writing a good autoethnography depends largely on how well one can manage these concepts.

Reflexivity refers to the process of reflecting on one's own experiences and understanding how they are shaped by larger cultural and social contexts. Ability to reflect also entails ability to carefully recall and isolate experiences where necessary. **Authenticity** is the ability to be true to oneself and one's experiences, without trying to conform to dominant cultural norms or expectations. This involves being focus and ability to identify and separate norms. **Self-awareness**, on the other hand, rests on authenticity as it entails the ability to recognize and understand one's own biases, assumptions, and values, and how they may influence one's research.

Another key concept in autoethnography is the idea of **storytelling**. Autoethnographic research often involves the use of personal narratives and storytelling as a means of exploring and understanding one's experiences. These narratives can take many different forms, including journals, diaries, memoirs, and creative writing.

Autoethnographic research also emphasizes the importance of **context**. It recognizes that individual experiences are shaped by larger cultural and social contexts, and that these contexts must be taken into account in order to fully understand and appreciate the significance of those experiences.

These five key concepts are vital not just in grasping the nature of autoethnography but the entire autoethnographic engagements rest on them.

Applications, Strengths and Weaknesses of Autoethnography

Autoethnography has been used in a wide range of fields of study, including anthropology, sociology, political science, education, communication, psychology, and health sciences.

1. **Anthropology:** autoethnography has been used by anthropologists who want to explore their own experiences and biases while conducting fieldwork in a different cultural context.
2. **Sociology:** autoethnography has been used by sociologists who want to understand the lived experiences of marginalized communities, and how social structures and power dynamics shape these experiences.
3. **Political Science:** autoethnography has been of advantage to political scientists who seek to test political theory (in a socio-cultural context) or understand the

realities of political life via their personal (lived) experience by standing/contesting for elections or working as political appointees.

4. **Psychology:** autoethnography has been used by psychologists who want to explore their own personal experiences and how these experiences shape their professional work with clients.
5. **Education:** autoethnography has been useful to educators who want to understand their own teaching practices, as well as how cultural and social contexts impact their students' learning experiences.
6. **Communication Studies:** autoethnography has been used by communication scholars who want to understand the ways in which personal experiences shape communication practices and how communication practices are shaped by larger cultural contexts.
7. **In Health Sciences,** autoethnography has been used to explore issues such as patient experiences, the impact of illness on families, and the experiences of healthcare professionals.

In all these fields, autoethnography has been used to provide 'insights into the lived experiences of individuals and the socio-cultural practices that shape those experiences' (Coia & Taylor, 2006:23).

Autoethnography has several strengths as a research method. One of the main strengths is its ability to provide a deep exploration of personal experiences and cultural practices as it allows researchers to 'examine how personal experiences are shaped by cultural contexts and social structures, and how individuals navigate these contexts in their everyday lives' (Carano, 2013:212). Again, autoethnography has the ability to provide a rich and nuanced understanding of the complexity of cultural practices. Autoethnography also allows researchers to explore the 'meanings and significance of cultural practices from the perspective of individuals who are embedded in those practices' (Butz & Besio, 2004:17). Premised on the outlined strengths above, autoethnography has the following advantages:

- a) **Personal involvement:** Autoethnography allows the researcher to bring their personal experiences and perspectives to the research process, which can create a more intimate understanding of the topic being studied.
- b) **Reflexivity:** Autoethnography encourages researchers to reflect on their own experiences and biases, which can enhance the rigor of the research process.

- c) **Cultural understanding:** Autoethnography can provide insights into the cultural practices and experiences of particular groups of people, which can help to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions.
- d) **Narrative approach:** Autoethnography uses storytelling as a means of conveying research findings, which can make the research more engaging and accessible to a wider audience.
- e) **Intersectionality:** Autoethnography can explore the intersections of different aspects of identity, such as race, gender, and class, which can provide a more nuanced understanding of the topic being studied.

Overall, autoethnography can be a powerful tool for researchers who are interested in understanding the experiences and perspectives of particular groups of people or exploring their own experiences in relation to broader cultural practices and beliefs (Ellis, 2004).

However, autoethnography also has several limitations as a research method. One of the main limitations is its potential for subjectivity and bias. Autoethnography involves the researcher's 'personal experiences and interpretations, which can be influenced by their own biases and assumptions' (Ellis & Bochner, 2000:21). This can make it difficult to generalize findings from autoethnographic research to broader populations.

Another limitation of autoethnography is its potential for self-indulgence. Autoethnography involves the exploration of personal experiences, which can lead to self-centeredness and a lack of focus on broader social and cultural issues. The disadvantages can be summed below:

- a) **Subjectivity:** Autoethnography is subjective, and therefore the researcher's interpretations of their experiences may not be generalisable to other individuals or contexts.
- b) **Ethical considerations:** Autoethnography can raise ethical concerns regarding the use of personal stories, including issues of consent, confidentiality, and privacy.
- c) **Bias:** Autoethnography can be influenced by the researcher's biases and assumptions, which can limit the validity and reliability of the research.

- d) Validity and reliability: Autoethnography lacks the rigor and consistency of traditional quantitative research methods, which can limit the validity and reliability of the research findings

Theoretical Underpinnings of Autoethnography

Autoethnography is also grounded in a number of theoretical perspectives, especially postmodernism, critical race theory, feminist theory, and reflexive ethnography. These theoretical perspectives provide a framework for understanding the social and cultural context in which the researcher is situated and help to guide the research process.

1. Postmodernism is a theoretical perspective that challenges the idea of objective truth and emphasizes the importance of multiple perspectives. Postmodernism recognizes the role of power in shaping our understanding of the world and argues that dominant narratives are often used to reinforce existing power structures. Autoethnography draws on postmodernism by recognizing the subjective nature of personal experience and by valuing the diverse perspectives of those who are traditionally excluded from research.
2. Critical race theory is a theoretical perspective that focuses on the ways in which race and racism are embedded in social structures and institutions. Critical race theory argues that race is not a natural or biological category but rather a socially constructed category that is used to justify power and inequality. Autoethnography draws on critical race theory by acknowledging the role of race in shaping personal experience and by seeking to understand the ways in which race intersects with other social categories such as gender, class, and sexuality.
3. Feminist theory is a theoretical perspective that emphasizes the importance of gender and the ways in which gender shapes our experiences and understanding of the world. Feminist theory argues that gender is not a natural or biological category but rather a socially constructed category that is used to justify power and inequality. Autoethnography draws on feminist theory by recognizing the role of gender in shaping personal experience and by seeking to understand the ways in which gender intersects with other social categories.
4. Reflexive ethnography is a theoretical perspective that emphasizes the importance of reflexivity in the research process. Reflexivity refers to the researcher's awareness of their own role in shaping the research process and the ways in which their personal experiences and biases influence their understanding of the data. Autoethnography draws on reflexive ethnography by

recognizing the importance of the researcher's personal experience and by acknowledging the ways in which the researcher's personal experience shapes their understanding of the data.

How to Conduct and Write an Autoethnographic Work

Autoethnographic research can take many different forms, depending on the research questions and the researcher's personal experiences and interests. However, there are some general guidelines that can be followed when conducting and writing a good autoethnographic work.

First, it is important to identify a research question or topic of interest that is related to one's personal experiences. This may involve exploring how one's experiences are shaped by larger cultural and social contexts, or examining the ways in which one's experiences challenge or reinforce dominant cultural norms and expectations.

Second, it is important to engage in a process of self-reflection and self-exploration. This may involve keeping a journal or diary to record one's thoughts and experiences, or engaging in other forms of creative expression such as art or music.

Third, it is important to engage in a process of data collection and analysis. This may involve reviewing one's personal narratives and reflecting on how they relate to larger cultural and social phenomena. It may also involve conducting interviews with others who have had similar experiences, or conducting a review of relevant literature.

Fourth, it is important to consider the ethical implications of one's research. Autoethnographic research can be highly personal and emotional, and it is important to ensure that the researcher manages his or her bias and be focused on narration and cultural analysis rather than allow emotion to dominate and affect data therefrom.

Finally, in writing up a good autoethnographic essay, the entire five key concepts earlier discussed, namely, reflexivity, self-awareness, authenticity, storytelling and the context, must be kept in focus. The reason for this is that the concepts guide and ensure that the work or essay turns out to be truly autoethnographic.

Autoethnographic Writing: Some Samples

The writing style of autoethnography can vary widely, as it depends on the individual researcher's approach and their chosen topic. However, here are a few examples of writing samples that illustrate different aspects of autoethnography.

In this example, the researcher writes about her experience of attending a traditional wedding ceremony in a foreign country using *reflexive account of a cultural Experience*. The researcher uses her own personal experiences and reflections to explore the cultural practices and traditions of the wedding, and how they related to the broader cultural context of the country.

I was struck by the beauty of the traditional dress worn by the bride and groom, with its intricate embroidery and bright colors. As I watched the ceremony unfold, I couldn't help but feel a sense of awe at the deep cultural significance of the event. It was clear that this was not just a wedding, but a ritual that embodied the cultural values and beliefs of the community. As I reflect on my experience, I am struck by the ways in which this wedding both challenged and reinforced my own cultural assumptions and biases.

In this second example, the researcher used the *narrative account of a personal experience* to write about his own personal experience of growing up in a particular cultural context, and the ways in which that experience shaped his identity and worldview. The researcher uses his own personal narrative to explore the complex interplay between culture, identity, and personal experience.

I grew up in a small town in rural America, where the dominant culture was one of conservatism and traditional values. As a young person, I felt deeply conflicted between the cultural expectations of my community and my own emerging sense of identity. I struggled to reconcile my own values and beliefs with the dominant cultural norms, and often felt isolated and misunderstood. It wasn't until later in life that I began to understand the ways in which my cultural context had shaped my own sense of self, and to embrace the complexity of my own identity.

In this third example, the researcher used the *analytical account of a cultural phenomenon* to write about a particular cultural phenomenon, such as a social movement or political event, and uses his own personal experiences and observations to analyze the broader cultural context in which it occurs. The researcher draws on a range of sources, including personal interviews, media reports, and academic research, to provide a nuanced and multi-layered analysis of the phenomenon.

I have been following the Black Lives Matter movement since its inception, and have been struck by the ways in which it has both challenged and transformed the cultural landscape of the United States. Through my own personal observations and conversations with activists

and community organizers, I have come to understand the deep historical roots of racism and inequality in this country, and the urgent need for systemic change. At the same time, I have been heartened by the resilience and creativity of the movement, and its ability to inspire and mobilize people from all walks of life. As I reflect on the ongoing struggle for racial justice, I am reminded of the power of culture to shape our collective beliefs and actions, and the vital role that personal experience can play in understanding and transforming that culture.

Conclusion

There is no gainsaying the fact that autoethnography has alluring and endearing attributes as a qualitative research method. Although it has disadvantages that might have prevented some scholars from using it as much as they should; that notwithstanding, we hope our engagement in this work has further reechoed and called attention to its positive sides.

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