



Autoethnography

IIQM Webinar Series

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Presentation Overview

This is an introductory overview of autoethnography

- Origins and definitions
- Methodological approaches
- Examples
- Controversies and the future of autoethnography
- Questions from participants

My Autoethnographic Work

- Adoptive motherhood
- Transdisciplinary education
- Learning theory
- Methodological papers
- Also, as editor of IJQM – see a lot of submissions about autoethnography

An Increasingly Popular Method

- Simple literature search using keyword “autoethnography”
 - 1990-2002 – about 5-10/year
 - 2003 on – about 35/year (Muncey, 2010)
- My own search this week:
 - Sociological Abstracts (scholarly journals, English)
 - 2000-2009 – 110
 - 2010-2014 – 114
- Topics: Gender, sexuality, race, discrimination, sport, illness, death, pregnancy, family, getting a PhD, work processes...

Origins of Autoethnography

- Term “autoethnography” in use for 35 years – introduced by Hayano but...
- “I also acknowledge but disregard studies...which analyze one's own life through the procedures of ethnography. These studies are not only autoethnographic, they are self-ethnographic, but it is not immediately shown how they are applicable to other cultural members” (Hayano, 1979, p. 103)

What is Autoethnography?

- Nevertheless, Ellis & Bochner use the term to describe exactly such “self-ethnographic” work
- 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)

Names

- “Autoethnography” also known as:
 - personal narrative
 - critical autobiography
 - evocative narrative
 - reflexive ethnography
 - ethnographic autobiography
 - autobiographical ethnography
 - personal sociology
 - auto-anthropology... (Ellis & Bochner, 2000)
- Basically, same work done under different labels

Underlying Values

- Many ways of knowing and inquiring are legitimate and no one way should be privileged
- Supports normative, emancipatory, transformative knowledge production
- Gives voice to vulnerable, marginalized, those with unique experiences – challenges “author-evacuated texts”

How does one do it?

- Much of what has been written on autoethnography is abstract, philosophical, and lacking in specificity
- Some good methodological articles and some recent books are helpful (list at end)

Data Sources

- Photographs, video, artwork
- Artifacts
- Writing – journals, poetry, scribblings
- Self-observational data
- Social maps
- Official documents – e.g. school or medical records, policies, meeting minutes
- Memory
- Interviews – actors in your story or participants with similar experience

Data Analysis (Chang, 2008)

- Search for recurring topics
- Look for cultural themes
- Identify exceptional occurrences
- Analyze inclusion and omission
- Connect present with the past
- Analyze relationships between self and others
- Compare cases
- Contextualize broadly
- Compare with social science constructs
- Frame with theories

Products of Autoethnography

- Can include:
 - short stories
 - poetry
 - fiction/novels
 - photographic essays
 - personal essays
 - fragmented and layered writing
 - social science prose

Autoethnographic Styles

- Autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on auto- (self), -ethno- (the cultural link), and -graphy (the application of a research process) (Ellis & Bochner, 2000 citing Reed-Danahay, 1997)
- Evocative – confessional, emotional, therapeutic, creative, unconventional
- Analytic – descriptive, realistic, “accurate,” academic

Learning by Example: Analytic

- Sparkes, 1996, *The fatal flaw: A narrative of the fragile body-self*
 - Personal journey – elite athlete to man with chronic disease
 - Conventional data sources, incorporates theory, reads like academic paper
- Wall, 2012a, *Ethics and the Socio-political Context of International Adoption*; Wall, 2012b, *Re-Thinking Motherhood and Kinship in International Adoption*
 - Unique perspective on international adoption
 - “Dispassionate,” theoretical, social science prose
- Mischenko, 2005, *Exhausting management work: Conflicting identities*
 - Critical exploration of healthcare managers’ work experience
 - Some unconventional aspects – e.g. poetry – but is very theoretical

Learning by Example: Evocative; Creative

- Pelias, 2003, *The academic tourist: An autoethnography*
 - A short, funny piece about academic life
 - Long run-on sentences, half-hearted citations
- Larrison, 2010, *Gratitude*
 - Poem; abstract is almost as long as the poem itself (which is 148 words)
 - Reflection on experience in graduate qualitative methods course

Controversies: Criticisms

- Self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective, individualized and removed from context
- Substitutes psychotherapy for social science
- Lack of systematicity and methodological rigour

Defences

- More authentic, voice of insider more “true” than voice of outsider
- Meanings of events and relationships more likely to be told than inferred
- Should not be judged using traditional criteria but should be judged using literary criteria; reader determines value

Ethical Questions

- Teller of story has power
- One person's story includes other people – central, peripheral, oppositional characters
- Protecting privacy of others (and self) is difficult
- Society has “perverse curiosity about the private, peeking in on damaged selves” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 749)
- Not just telling story but *respecting* it (Frank, 2002)
- Respect readers and their responses
- Respect academic community

Controversies

Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 35(4), August, 2006

Question: Analytic Autoethnography – Dead or Alive?

Analytic Autoethnography is Alive

Leon Anderson:

“Autoethnography loses its sociological promise when it devolves into self-absorption” (p. 385)

Paul Atkinson:

“...the goals of analysis and theorizing are too often lost to sight in contemporary fashions for subjective and evocative ethnographic work” (p. 400)

Analytic Autoethnography is Dead

Carolyn Ellis & Art Bochner:

“Leon wants to take autoethnography which, as a mode of inquiry, was designed to be unruly, dangerous, vulnerable, rebellious, and creative and bring it under the control of reason, logic, and analysis” (p. 433)

“Autoethnography shows struggle, passion, embodied life, and the collaborative creation of sense-making in situations in which people have to cope with dire circumstances and loss of meaning” (p. 433)

As an Editor and Reviewer: Issues and Future Directions

- High potential approach to knowledge development
- Appropriate applications
- Therapy vs. sociological contribution
- Narrative vs. analysis
- Ethics – representation of others, limits to self-disclosure
- Defensive ranting vs. well-considered advocacy for method
- In general, why is there such an explosion of popularity with this method?

Methodological Resources

○ Books:

- Heewon Chang (2008), *Autoethnography as Method*
- Tessa Muncey (2010), *Creating Autoethnographies*
- Carolyn Ellis (2004), *The Ethnographic I*
- Chapters in Denzin & Lincoln's *Handbook of Qualitative Research* 2000, 2005
- Holman-Jones et al. (2013), *Handbook of Autoethnography*
- Sage series, *Autoethnography*, edited by Pat Sikes

○ Methodological articles:

- Muncey, T. (2005). Doing autoethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 4(3), Article 5.
- Duncan, M. (2004). Autoethnography: Critical appreciation of an emerging art. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 3(4), Article 3.
- Sparkes, A. C. (2000). Autoethnography and narratives of self: Reflections on criteria in action. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 17, 21-43.
- Wall, S. (2006). An autoethnography on learning about autoethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(2), Article 9.
- Wall, S. (2008). Easier said than done: Writing an autoethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 7(1), 38-53.
- Holt, N. (2005). Representation, legitimation, and autoethnography: An autoethnographic writing story. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2(1), Article 2.
- Johnston, D. & Strong, T. (2008). Reconciling voices in an autoethnographic thesis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 7(3), 47-61.