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Autoethnography: An introduction to the art of representing the author's voice and experience in social research

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Abstract

The present article is interested to reflect the ways and avenues of incorporating the voice of personal experiences of the researcher into her/his research for understanding cultural phenomena. In this entry, we have tried to open a discussion on the issue of 'self' and 'other' dichotomy as a discourse and its changing dimensions with the theoretical developments in social sciences. As a qualitative research method Autoethnography utilizes data about self and context to develop an understanding of the connectivity between 'self' and 'other' within the same context. Writing Autoethnography and experimenting with textual fragmentation and formatting might capable us to extend our understandings of personal emotions/feelings which is primarily underlined in personal experiences. We further, intend to focus on how to incorporate researcher's personal accounts into social research limiting our discussion to Autoethnography from the selected literatures.

Keywords: *Autoethnography, Qualitative Research, Self, Experience, Writing*

1. Introduction

Qualitative enquiries in social research stimulate and instigate the researcher to be aware about the 'self' in the research process for its own humanistic concern (Allender, 2007) [2]. At the same time, it seemed to be difficult to explain the presuppositions, preferences, choices and experiences of the researcher's own in the research due to the 'modern' scientific rigour towards narrating facts excluding the researcher's subjectivity that generally supposed to be methodologically uncontrollable (Mruck and Breuer, 2003) [18]. Inclusion of personal accounts of the researcher within the research became the major concern among the scholars of social sciences with the advent and development of postmodern philosophy (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang, 2010) [19]. The appearances of postmodernism gradually doubted the scope of securing authoritative knowledge of the social world by pointing any exacting method, like-ethnography (Holt, 2003; Richardson, 2000a; Agger, 1990) [14, 23, 1].

As a research strategy, ethnography developed lots of types, among which, autoethnography - involved extensively personal experiences of the researcher for grasping any particular discipline or culture (Holt, 2003; Van Manen, 1988) [14, 27]. The reflection and contextualization of writing with reference to the process of writing appears as a 'writing story' in autoethnography (Wall, 2008; Richardson, 1994) [28, 22]. The observations and opinions of the researcher's own about his/her socio-cultural setting instigate his/her audiences to understand 'human group life' through visible methodological orientations in autoethnography (Kleinknecht, 2007) [15], that fronts the auto-ethnographer's intersections between 'self' and 'society' (Ellis and Adams, 2014) [8].

2. Autoethnography: What it is?

Autoethnography is a term that has been in use for at least three decades and includes a wide range of research and writing approaches which connect the personal to the cultural (Ellis, 2004; Ellis and Bochner, 2000) [6, 7]. The term 'autoethnography' was first used by David Hayano in 1979 (Ellis and Bochner, 2000) [7]. He used the term to refer to the anthropologists involved in research of their 'own' people, where the researcher is a complete insider within the group being studied. Richardson (2000b) [24] says *auto-ethnographies are highly*

personalised, revealing texts in which authors tell stories about their own lived experiences, relating the personal to the cultural.

An individual learns to understand others by reflecting on the self, in social action with others. Thus, a person learns how they are defined by the world, and how to redefine themselves and their relationships with others through reflection on what people do with and to each other. C. Ellis and T. E. Adams (2014) [8] defined Autoethnography as a - ... *research, writing, stories, and methods that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political.* By nature, autoethnography is not only a modified device to include author's perspective in social research, rather is a movement and a reaction against colonialist orientations of ethnography that either purposively and/or authoritatively placed cultures to an uni-polar interpretation excluding their own cultural and methodological stance, and the opinions of their participants about the issue that the author is trying to portray on behalf of their participants (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2010) [9].

3. The Essence of Autoethnography

The nature of autoethnography may vary in terms of the research process (*graphy*), cultures (*ethnos*) and the reflection of the self (*auto*) into research (Holt, 2003; Reed-Danahay, 1997) [14, 21]. Despite the variation, the authors are expected to include their own understanding of 'self' and 'other' interactions more sensitively for understanding a cultural living or any specific issues concerned. Autoethnography as a research strategy under qualitative research came to be one of the driving ideology of interpreting cultures and livelihood shows a transitional course between two inter related onto-epistemological phenomena- 'triple crisis' and 'narrative turn' (Grant, Short and Turner, 2013) [12]. The phase of 'triple crisis' includes claims an objectivist's, and neutralist's stand to the study of social and cultural life; contrastingly, the era of 'narrative turn' accelerated the way towards pluralism in cultural interpretations (Grant, Short and Turner, 2013; Holman-Jones, 2005) [12, 3]. The pluralism in cultural interpretations led the question about the representations of power within writing about a culture that simultaneously became sceptical to the issues of identity subordination by dominant cultural meanings.

Enabling one's own stories within the writing about others are not easier as it seemed to be apparently (Gannon, 2006) [10]. Pathak (2010) [20] pointed out four central ethical issues (mentioned by Gonzalez, 2003) [11] to be considered in an autoethnographic story- (a)*accountability*- the researchers should account for her/his own understanding of the phenomenon that supposed to be written in the light of another story, (b)*context*- is the environmental, physical, socio-political, and emotional surroundings or plot within which the story will be constructed and interpreted, (c)*truthfulness*- a process to analyze and scrutinize what is not been told or hidden behind the 'actual' saying by the author, and (d)*community*- autoethnographer's reflection of the 'self' in a relational way to her/his world.

The core essence of autoethnography involves being critical to the personal experiences about the issues or phenomena that are to be explored or investigated (Mendez, 2013; McIlveen, 2008) [17, 16]. As a unique mode of social science research autoethnography to Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang (2010) [19], stands with three distinctive features- qualitative,

self-focused and context-conscious. These three elements instigate an autoethnographer to reflect and write about the process of writing and the context or the plot in which the discussion emerged (Wall, 2008) [28].

4. Constructing the Writing: Practicing Autoethnography

A valuable use of auto ethnography is to allow others' experiences to inspire critical self reflection (Sparkes, 2002) [25] and to reveal one's experience to oneself and to understand the self and the environment of the self rather than to generalise. The notion of 'autoethnography' makes an open space to a self reflexive way of representation. While it's theoretical connection to ethnography might lead us to guess that this approach as grounded in anthropology, this is not only the case. Autoethnography moves beyond anthropology as one of the ways of breaking the constraints of the discipline as an emergent field of interest with no single paradigmatic authority places the relationship between knower and known at the centre of knowledge created and so moves beyond positivist assumptions by making evidence rather than finding facts for interpretations of interpretation but doesn't mean anything that makes explicit the relationship of author to knowledge. Autoethnography straddles a wide range of cultural disciplines and interests and encompasses a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches.

The fundamental nature of autoethnography is very subjective and is next to impossible to generalize the 'doings' autoethnography. Anderson (2006) [3] proposed five core factors to be kept in mind before one are just to write an autoethnography-

- Complete Member Researcher (CMR) Status*- the researcher's 'being there' stance to make a bridge between the researcher and her/his domain of study in the similar emotional and perceptive base line.
- Analytic Reflexivity*- researcher's consciousness about the situation under study and awareness about their effects on it.
- Narrative Visibility of Researcher's Self*- a process of narrating the self as present, active and living within the text, so that the readers can identify the author's orientations.
- Dialogue with Informants beyond the Self*- a process that calls for the inclusion of the 'other's' voice as dialogue instead of a self-indulged autobiography.
- Commitment to Theoretical Analysis*- transcending the empirical data in a relational way to the broader social perspectives.

The focal points of Anderson's discussions about analytic autoethnography neither inclined to represent a stereotypic guideline of practicing autoethnography, rather it hinted the conceptual framework about the core of autoethnographic research. Contrastingly, Ellis and Adams (2014) [8] pointed out two main theme of an autoethnography- the use of personal experiences and the familiarity with the existing researches. They have clued four ways to begin an autoethnographic project- from epiphanies or personal struggles, from common experiences, from dilemmas or complications in dealing traditional fieldwork and for the purpose of adding to the existing researches.

5. Limitations of Autoethnography: A Critical Note

Unlike positivistic writing, autoethnography uniquely resists grand theorizing research approach that 'decontextualizes' its

participants and contexts in narrating social reality (Spry, 2001) [26]. Getting into closer with one's meaning about his/her own writing is actually going beyond the established conventional, taken for granted and generalized quest of social science research (Ellis and Adams, 2014) [8]. In autoethnography, the researchers generally help their audiences to get intimate with the research by clarifying the logical ways for selecting the method and demonstrating the phenomena with its unique style that an autoethnographer inclines to represent (Duncan, 2004) [5]. Mendez (2013) [17] pointed out some crucial advantages of autoethnographic research, like- (a) it provides personal and rich narratives of the researcher's personal world that enables the researcher's voice to be heard and she/he is not an outsider from the concerned research (b) the accessibility of data in easier ways as the researcher is the primary source from where an investigation has started its root, (c) the data about the 'other's' lives is generally presented in an empathising mode, so that the narratives became reflexively meaningful, and (d) autoethnographic research is a process by which the 'colonized selves' became visible in research and may emancipate from their traditional colonial shackle.

Autoethnography is a significant turn in the history of social science research that is not free from controversies indeed. Delamont (2007) [4] severely criticised autoethnography in the claim that it cannot fight familiarity, it cannot published ethically, the mode of autoethnography is not analytical rather experiential, and more significantly the nature of most of the autoethnographies are like about personal 'anguish' that are deviated from the sociologist's claim for empirical orientations.

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