



# Autoethnography as a research method: Advantages, limitations and criticisms

## La autoetnografía como un método de investigación: ventajas, limitaciones y críticas

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### Abstract

The aim of this article is to review the literature on autoethnography as a research method. It will first describe what is meant by autoethnography, or evocative narratives, and consider the particular features of this type of method. The paper will go on to explore the advantages, limitations and criticisms this research method has endured since its emergence during the 1980s. Finally, the different approaches to the evaluation of autoethnography will be reviewed.

*Keywords:* Autoethnography, Research methods, Narrative writing

### Resumen

El propósito de este artículo es analizar la literatura sobre autoetnografía como método de investigación. Primero se describirá lo que significa el término autoetnografía o narrativa evocativa, y se analizarán las características principales de este método de investigación. Posteriormente el artículo explora las ventajas, limitaciones y críticas que este método ha enfrentado desde su surgimiento durante la época de los 80s. Finalmente, los diferentes enfoques utilizados para evaluar una autoetnografía serán examinados.

*Palabras clave:* Autoetnografía, Métodos de investigación, Escritura Narrativa

### Résumé

Cet article se donne pour objectif de réviser la littérature sur l'utilisation de l'autoethnographie comme une méthodologie de recherche. Dans la première partie il décrit qu'est-ce que c'est l'autoethnographie, ou bien les récits évocateurs, en considérant les particularités de cette méthode. Postérieurement, l'article explore les avantages, les limitations et les critiques que cette méthodologie a endurée depuis son apparition dans les années 80. Il conclut avec la révision de différentes approches pour l'évaluation de l'autoethnographie.

*Mots-clés:* Auto-ethnographie, Méthodes de recherche, L'écriture narrative

## Introduction

I conducted a qualitative study in order to understand students' everyday language learning emotions and their influence on their motivation in 2009. In particular, I wanted to examine how students react to emotional events in classrooms and how these reactions affect their motivational behaviour in

daily classes. A qualitative method of inquiry which helped me in this purpose is narrative writing, because it focuses on researching "...into an experience..." (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 50). According to Clandinin and Connelly, narrative writing allows researchers to question internal conditions such as



feelings and emotions, external conditions such as the environment and the temporal dimensions of past, present and future. Thus, autoethnography was first used to explore my emotional experiences in my language learning history in order sensitise myself to the topic of my investigation and also to find out about participants' motivation and the way emotional experiences shaped it (Méndez 2012; Méndez and Peña, 2013). Autoethnographies or personal narratives have been used in language classrooms to find out about future teachers identity, self-concept and motivation (Macalister, 2012; Masako, 2013; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013). Although autoethnography as a research method was an unknown and difficult tool for me to use, understanding my own experience was a stage of the research process that later allowed me to interpret my participants experiences and represent them through writing. As pointed out by Kyratzis and Green (1997):

...narrative research entails a double narrative process, one that includes the narratives generated by those participating in the research, and one that represents the voice of the researcher as narrator of those narratives (p. 17).

## Autoethnography as a research method

The underlying assumption of qualitative research is that reality and truth are constructed and shaped through the interaction between people and the environment in which they live (Silverman, 2000; Freebody, 2003). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000) "...qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them" (p. 3). Although a qualitative approach opposes the positivist standpoint that assumes that reality is objective and independent from the researcher, it has been accepted as a valuable practice of research. Qualitative research employs a variety of methods which imply a humanistic stance in which

phenomena under investigation are examined through the eyes and experiences of individual participants (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). It is because of this particular approach to inquiry that personal narratives, experiences and opinions are valuable data which provide researchers with tools to find those tentative answers they are looking for (Marshall and Rossman, 1999).

Qualitative research has historically developed over time (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). In the traditional period (the early 1900s), researchers aimed at presenting an objective account of their field experiences. The modernist period (from the post-war years to the 1970s) was characterised by researchers' concerns about formalising qualitative research to be as rigorous as quantitative research. The period of blurred genres (1970-1986) was characterised by the diverse research strategies and formats used by qualitative researchers. During the 'crisis of representation' period (the mid-1980s), autoethnography emerged due to "the calls to place greater emphasis on the ways in which the ethnographer interacts with the culture being researched" (Holt, 2003, p. 18). Thus, autoethnography allows researchers to draw on their own experiences to understand a particular phenomenon or culture. As mentioned before my own autoethnography was the first instrument I used in order to understand my participants' personal narratives about their emotions and motivation to learn a foreign language. Telling my personal story made me reflect on my language learning history and empathise with my students' emotional experiences and reactions. As emphasised by Barkhuizen and Wette (2008)

In telling their stories of experience teachers necessarily reflect on those experiences and thus make meaning of them; that is, they gain an understanding of their teaching knowledge and practice. (p. 374)

Autoethnography is a useful qualitative research method used to analyse people's lives, a tool



that Ellis and Bochner (2000) define as "...an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 739). There are different uses of the term and it varies according to the relations between the researcher's personal experience and the phenomenon under investigation (Foster et al., 2006). 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, Maso, 2001).

McIlveen (2008) states that the core feature of autoethnography '...entails the scientist or practitioner performing narrative analysis pertaining to himself or herself as intimately related to a particular phenomenon' (p. 3). Thus, it is not just writing about oneself, it is about being critical about personal experiences in the development of the research being undertaken, or about experiences of the topic being investigated. Reed-Danahay (Reed-Danahay, 1997, pp. 3-4) assigns three main characteristics to autoethnography: (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. Although autoethnography can be approached with different focuses, I would like to adhere to the description given by Ellis (2007), who states that, 'Doing autoethnography involves a back-and-forth movement between experiencing and examining a vulnerable self and observing and revealing the broader context of that experience (p. 14).

The data resulting from using this type of introspection on our personal lives and experiences can be in the form of a poem, a narrative or a story (Denzin, 1989; Connelly and Clandinin, 1999; Nekvapil, 2003). It is because of this that rhetorical structure is varied in autoethnography, from formal literary texts to more informal accounts or stories. Some authors feel that researchers need to be storytellers (Wolcott, 1994). For others autoethnography should be able to capture readers' minds and hearts (Ellis, 2000). It seems that there are no formal regulations regarding the writing of an autoethnographic account since it is the meaning that is important, not the production of a highly academic text.

In an attempt to draw researchers' attention to the different practice of what is named 'evocative or emotional autoethnography', Anderson (2006) makes a distinction between *analytic and evocative autoethnography*. He proposed a more analytic form of autoethnography

...in which the researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in published texts, and (3) committed to developing theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena (p. 373).

Thus, analytic autoethnography is directed towards objective writing and analysis of a particular group, whereas evocative autoethnography aims toward researchers' introspection on a particular topic to allow readers to make a connection with the researchers' feelings and experiences. In a different vein, Foley (2002) advocates more reflexive epistemological and narrative practices, as he considers that they would make autoethnographies a more engaging and common genre which could contribute to bridging the gap between researchers and ordinary people. As Bochner and Ellis (1996) suggest, "On the whole, autoethnographers don't want you to sit back as spectators; they want readers to feel and care and desire" (p. 24). It seems that evocative or emotional autoethnography is gaining ground in researchers'



practice because of the connection it allows readers to their own lives. However, in addition to its advantages as a research method, there are also limitations and criticisms which need to be explored.

## Advantages and limitations of autoethnography

One of the main advantages of personal narratives is that they give us access into learners' private worlds and provide rich data (Pavlenko, 2002, 2007). Another advantage is the ease of access to data since the researcher calls on his or her own experiences as the source from which to investigate a particular phenomenon. It is this advantage that also entails a limitation as, by subscribing analysis to a personal narrative, the research is also limited in its conclusions. However, Bochner and Ellis (1996) consider that this limitation on the self is not valid, since, "If culture circulates through all of us, how can autoethnography be free of connection to a world beyond the self?" (p. 24).

An important advantage, I believe, is the potential of autoethnography to contribute to others' lives by making them reflect on and empathise with the narratives presented. Through reading a cultural or social account of an experience, some may become aware of realities that have not been thought of before, which makes autoethnography a valuable form of inquiry. Personally, I consider that any piece of research should have a beneficial or practical goal for all the people involved in it. The purposes of autoethnography may be as varied as the topics it deals with. However, writing accounts of research should always have the goal of informing and educating others, which is an objective that autoethnographies might accomplish through making connections with personal experiences of readers. As emphasised by Plummer (2001), 'What matters is the way in which the story enables the reader to enter the subjective world of the teller –to see the world from her or his point of view, even if this world does not

'match reality'(p.401). Another advantage of writing autoethnographically is that it allows the researcher to write first person accounts which enable his or her voice to be heard, and thus provide him or her with a transition from being an outsider to an insider in the research (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995).

Another advantage is acknowledged by Richards (2008), who sees autoethnography as emancipatory discourse since "...those being emancipated are representing themselves, instead of being colonized by others and subjected to their agendas or relegated to the role of second-class citizens" (p. 1724). Thus, autoethnography represents for many the right to tell their truth as experienced without waiting for others to express what they really want to be known and understood.

Despite the advantages of autoethnography as a method of research mentioned above, there are also some limitations which need to be borne in mind. For example, the feelings evoked in readers may be unpleasant since the connections readers make to narratives cannot be predicted (Bochner and Ellis, 1996). Another limitation is the exposure it implies of the researcher's inner feelings and thoughts, which require honesty and willingness to self-disclose. This limitation also entails many ethical questions which sometimes may be very difficult for the researcher to answer, making autoethnographies a complicated method to follow.

## Ethical considerations

One of the main features of autoethnography is its emphasis on the self and it is this specific feature that entails the problematic ethical considerations of the method (Ellis, 2007). As a personal narrative is developed, the context and people interacting with the subject start to emerge in the reflexive practice (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). It is at this point when the problem of obtaining or not obtaining consent to be included in the narrative has to be considered (Miller and Bell, 2002). Evocative autoethnography includes



the description of periods of researchers' lives that involve sensitive issues with regard to the researcher and the people around him or her (Wall, 2008). Due to this, special considerations have to be taken into account when referring to loved ones, such as family members, partners or close friends.

Evocative autoethnographies may be written in the first or third person. For some, using the third person gives a sense of distance from the events and the people being referred to. As explained in Ellis et al. (2007) in a statement by Denzin (1997), "I was just going to disguise myself because I still didn't have the freedom to – I hadn't given myself the freedom to – write that narrative in the first person" (p. 317). For others, the first person seems to be the only way to be completely explicit about the events being analysed. In a reflection on a narrative he wrote, Wyatt (2006) admits changing some parts of his narrative from first to third person because it gives him a certain distance. For autoethnographers, Wyatt says, the first ethical principle should be, "...how close we choose to position our readers"(p. 814). The second principle is the one of consent. In describing critical periods of our lives it may be very difficult to ask the people involved in these narratives to give consent to their publication. However, it seems that getting formal consent does not help researchers deal with the feelings of guilt and harm they may have when writing autoethnographic accounts (Ellis, 2007; Wall, 2008). Ellis (2007) adds a dimension to ethics in autoethnography: *relational ethics*, which refers to the ethics involved in writings about personal experiences where intimate others are included. Should we ask consent from the people involved in autoethnographic narratives? It seems that there are no straightforward responses to this or to other ethical questions that may arise when engaged in autoethnography. As Ellis (2007) puts it:

The bad news is that there are no definitive rules or universal principles that can tell you precisely what to do in every situation or relationship you may encounter, other than the vague and generic "do no harm" (p. 6).

This generic rule of no harm was not clear enough in its application for Wall (2008), who, in spite of having consent from her family to write about her experience as an adoptive mother, was not free from feelings of guilt, as she expresses:

I had a persistent and significant sense of anxiety about the tension between proceeding with an academic project and telling a story about my life that was inextricably intertwined with my son's (p. 49).

Along the same lines, Megford (2006) felt hurt when reading an autoethnographic account which erased her and made a part of her life that had some value for her disappear. She states:

...when writing autoethnographically, we are forced to hold a critical mirror to our lives, and sometimes looking in that mirror by candlelight is more flattering than looking into the mirror in broad daylight. (p. 859)

Although there are many issues to consider when engaging in autoethnography, I agree with Ellis (2007) who considers that the main criterion to bear in mind is that "...autoethnography itself is an ethical practice" (p. 26). Writing autoethnographically entails being ethical and honest about the events described as well as the content of words expressed by all the people involved in these events.

## Criticisms of the method

As Sparkes (2000) has stated, "The emergence of autoethnography and narratives of self...has not been trouble-free, and their status as proper research remains problematic" (p. 22). The most recurrent criticism of autoethnography is of its strong emphasis on self, which is at the core of the resistance to accepting autoethnography as a valuable research method. Thus, autoethnographies have been criticised for being self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective and individualised (Atkinson, 1997; Coffey, 1999).



Another criticism is of the reality personal narratives or autoethnographies represent, or, as Walford (2004) puts it, "If people wish to write fiction, they have every right to do so, but not every right to call it research" (p. 411). This criticism originates from a statement by Ellis and Bochner (2000), conceiving autoethnography as a narrative that, "...is always a story about the past and not the past itself" (p. 745). An opposite view is that of Walford (2004), who asserts that "...the aim of research is surely to reduce the distortion as much as possible" (p. 411). Walford's concerns are focused on how much of the accounts presented as autoethnographies represent real conversations or events as they happened, and how much they are just inventions of the authors.

According to Ellis and Bochner (2000), recreating the past in a narrative way represents an "...existential struggle to move life forward" (p. 746). For them, the subjectivity of the researcher is assumed and accepted as the value of autoethnography. Bochner and Ellis (1996) consider that a useful aim of personal narratives "... is to allow another person's world of experience to inspire critical reflection on your own" (p. 22). Thus, the aim of autoethnography is to recreate the researcher's experience in a reflexive way, aiming at making a connection to the reader which can help him or her to think and reflect about his or her own experiences. This has led to the criticism of considering the main goal of autoethnography as therapeutic rather than analytic (Atkinson, 1997). Indeed, Walford (2004) sees no value in this type of autoethnography, since a social research report should aim at presenting organised, logical claims supported by empirical data. It is perhaps the closeness of the author to the phenomenon under investigation that causes such criticism. If researchers are supposed to be as distant as possible from the research in order to present as objective a truth as possible, how can this be accomplished by autoethnography? However, as Denzin and Lincoln (2000) state, "Objective reality can never be captured. We can know a thing only through its representations" (p. 5). Thus, the richness of autoethnography is in those realities that emerge from the interaction between the self and its own

experiences that reflect the cultural and social context in which those events took place. It is through this representation that understanding of a particular phenomenon is accomplished.

## Evaluation of autoethnography

The problem of evaluating qualitative research has been a perennial struggle for those engaged in these practices. Autoethnography has no specific rules or criteria to adhere to since it can be approached using diverse types of genre. Due to the particular characteristics of autoethnography, the reactions to a personal narrative cannot be foreseen and the interpretation may be varied (Bochner and Ellis, 1996). Thus, the subjective interpretations that may arise from personal narratives oppose the positivist view of research which aims at presenting an objective account of the truth. In addition, the personal and emotional involvement of the researcher in autoethnography contrasts with the distant and objective role of researchers' goals in a positivist stance. It is because of this that evaluating autoethnography is not a straightforward task and it seems that a general consensus has not been reached. As Richardson (2000b) suggests, "Although we are all roughly categorized as 'poststructural ethnographers', we have different takes on the ethnographic project" (p. 252).

However, we can find some guidelines for an evaluation of an autoethnographic account. For Megford (2006), the only criteria should be "...the criteria by which we evaluate ourselves as we write" (p. 861). Since there are no criteria to evaluate autoethnography, and what is presented as truth can encompass some omissions or changes, Megford (2006) proposes that *the primary ethical standard* against which any autoethnography should be evaluated is 'an ethic of accountability' in which the writer should write his or her truth as if all the people involved in those events were listening to him or her. In doing this, Megford (2006) suggests writers should be aware that:



Our subjects might disagree with our representation of shared experiences or they might question our decision to write about an experience in the first place, but we should be willing to confront these issues, even when avoiding them by quietly publishing our work in academic journals/texts is a viable alternative (p. 862).

Richardson (2000a, p. 254) suggests that autoethnography should be evaluated as science and as art, and proposes five criteria against which to evaluate any autoethnography: substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, the impact the narrative causes the reader, and how much the narrative expresses a reality. It is important to note that Richardson's criteria refer to all types of ethnography including autoethnography, so it may be that some of the criteria proposed are not applicable to all types of autoethnography, which takes diverse forms and genres. For Ellis (2000), a good autoethnographic narrative should be able to engage your feeling and thinking capacities at the same time as generating in the reader questions regarding the experience, the position of the author, how the reader may have experienced the event described, or what the reader may have learned.

For me, autoethnography is educational research since, as expressed by Bochner and Ellis (2006), it "... show(s) people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live and what their struggles mean" (p. 111). In doing so, people are not only building meaning in their lives, but through these evocative narratives others may be able to reflect on similar experiences and then be able to do something beneficial for themselves and for others (Ellis, 2004).

## Conclusion

The purpose of qualitative research is to examine any social phenomenon by enabling the researcher to go into the participants' naturalistic setting and try to get a comprehensive understanding of it (Bryman, 2008). Autoethnography, as with all research methods,

has advantages and disadvantages. Although autoethnography as a research method can be an unknown and difficult tool for novice researchers to use, it is an instrument through which researchers can explore and portray the culture where a phenomenon is being experienced. This cultural knowledge can help in the understanding of the interpretation derived from participants' accounts and the 'reality' presented in studies where this approach is used. Although presenting the 'real' truth is something that I consider we cannot fully accomplish, because we are all actors in the society in which we live and interact, I do believe that qualitative methods can help us to better understand a phenomenon in a given community or setting, since research findings are inevitably influenced by the socio-cultural background of participants (Flick, 2002).

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