

Autoethnography: Introductory conceptual framework

ชาติพันธุ์วรรณาเชิงอัตชีวประวัติ: กรอบแนวคิดเบื้องต้น

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Abstract

The author was impressed with the application of ethnographic research as a writing approach of her doctoral dissertation. To get insight and a deeper sense of the world of expertise in lived experiences, the author, as a researcher, thus decided to explore the issue further regarding introductory conceptual framework of autoethnographic writing and autoethnography. The paper is presented into two sections: theory and practice. In the first, it described definitions, crisis representation of autoethnographic studies and the fifth moment. The second part then discussed the roles, the strengths and the limitations of autoethnographic writing research methodology. The paper ended with reflections on autoethnographic experiences. The author's major assertion was that autoethnography is of important for expressing voices, liberating writing and strengthening relationship between readers and writers. The author strongly contended that if the ethnographer has any expertise, it is the expertise that comes from subjective experience and implicit knowledge.

Keywords: ethnography, autoethnography, autoethnographic writing, crisis representation

บทคัดย่อ

ผู้เขียนมีความประทับใจการประยุกต์ใช้แนวคิดของการวิจัยแนวชาติพันธุ์วรรณา มาเป็นแนวทางหนึ่งในการเขียนวิทยานิพนธ์ปริญญาเอก จากประสบการณ์ของกระบวนการเขียนดังกล่าว ผู้เขียนเกิดความสนใจที่จะศึกษาเพิ่มเติมเกี่ยวกับกรอบแนวคิดเบื้องต้นของแนวคิดชาติพันธุ์วรรณาเชิงอัตชีวประวัติ และการเขียนแนวชาติพันธุ์นิพนธ์ปัจเจกชน เพื่อที่จะเข้าใจโลกของการเขียนจากประสบการณ์ของผู้เชี่ยวชาญให้ดีขึ้น บทความนี้แบ่งเนื้อหาเป็นสองตอนคือ ภาควิชาและภาคของการประยุกต์ใช้ ตอนแรกผู้เขียน อธิบายคำนิยาม วิฤติการนำเสนอของการศึกษาชาติพันธุ์วรรณาเชิงอัตชีวประวัติ และหวังคำนึงครั้งที่ห้า ตอนที่สองกล่าวถึง

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บทบาท จุดแข็งและข้อจำกัดของการวิจัยแนวชาติพันธุ์พินธีเชิงอัตชีวประวัติ บทความจบลงด้วยการนำเสนอบทสะท้อนของประสบการณ์ชาติพันธุ์วรรณนาเชิงอัตชีวประวัติ จุดยืนที่สำคัญที่ผู้เขียนนำเสนอในบทความนี้ คือแนวคิดที่ว่าชาติพันธุ์วรรณนาเชิงอัตประวัติมีความสำคัญต่อการแสดงออกตัวตน ปลดปล่อยนักเขียนให้เป็นอิสระและกระชับความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างผู้อ่านและผู้เขียน ท้ายที่สุดผู้เขียนนำเสนอว่าความเชี่ยวชาญของนักชาติพันธุ์วรรณนาเป็นความเชี่ยวชาญที่มามีผลเฉพาะจากประสบการณ์และความรู้อันแท้จริงที่มาจากข้างใน

คำสำคัญ: ชาติพันธุ์วรรณนา ชาติพันธุ์วรรณนาเชิงอัตชีวประวัติ การเขียนแนวชาติพันธุ์วรรณนาเชิงอัตชีวประวัติ วิกฤตการนำเสนอ

Introduction

This paper addresses an overview of autoethnographic writing. The experience in writing my dissertation with this genre provides me a comfort zone. Autoethnographic narrative research has inspired me to explore this issue. The paper is aimed to shed light on a conceptual framework of autoethnographic writing which might offer graduate students and researchers a new venue to write up research papers or academic articles in a narrative tone. The paper is divided into two sections: theory and practice. In the first, it addresses the roles, the strengths and the limitations of autoethnographic writing research approach. The following section presents the reflections on autoethnographic experiences. Finally, the paper concludes with my central argument that autoethnography is suitable for expressing writer identities, liberating voices and strengthening relationship between readers and writers. In this respect, if the ethnographer has any expertise, it is the expertise that comes from subjective experience and implicit knowledge.

This paper is a starting point that allows me to acquire a license to the autoethnographic world- the world of expertise in lived experiences, multiple selves, and fragmented identities. As Russell (1999) stated, “Throughout the various autobiographical writing, a sense of the self emerges that is thoroughly grounded in experience and observation” (p. 275).

Autoethnographic Research: Theory

1.1 Autoethnography: Definitions

The term, autoethnography, has been in use since the 1970s to represent a variety of genre that combines ethnography and autobiography and is normally credited to David Hayano (Ellis & Bocher, 2000). Autoethnography, according to Ellis & Bochner (2000), is “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural.” (p. 739). Ronai (1996) added a layered account to the definition of autoethnography. She defined it as “a narrative form designed to loosely represent to, as well as produce for, the reader, a continuous dialectic of experience, emerging from the multitude of reflexive voices that simultaneously produce and interpret a text” (p. 396). Autoethnography is self reflective, introspective, observant, and self-questioning in ethnography of the self. The researcher, too, becomes subject, turning our observations back on ourselves (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 747).

Autoethnography is “a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. It is both a method and a text” (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 9). In this work, Reed-Danahay combined autobiography, the story of one’s own life, with ethnography, the study of a particular social group and argued that autobiography is a postmodernist construct. The root of this concept traces back to the postmodern “crisis of representation” in anthropological writing (Behar & Gordon, 1995). In this regard, autoethnography is a radical reaction to realist agendas in ethnography and sociology “ which privilege the research over the subject, method over subject matter, and maintain commitments to outmoded conceptions of validity, truth, and generalizability” (Denzin, 1992, p. 20). Autoethnography has been referred to by such diverse terms as: personal experience narratives (Denzin, 1997), personal ethnography (Crawford, 1996), lived experience and self-ethnography (Van Maanen, 1988), reflexive ethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 1996), experiential texts (Denzin, 1997), and autobiographical ethnography (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Overall, there are approximately 40 different terms that suggest variations of autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). All forms, however, share a focus on the personal and autobiographical meaning.

1.2 Autoethnography: Crisis Representation

During the last two decades, emerging theories in qualitative research influenced by postmodernism, poststructuralism, feminism, and post colonial theory have drawn attention to the complexities embedded in the process through which research is conducted (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Denzin and Lincoln (1994) described key “moments” in the history of qualitative research. The fifth moment concerns experimental and participatory research. Two crucial issues associated with the fourth moment of qualitative research are the dual crises of representation and legitimacy. The crisis of this matter raises a question of traditional criteria used for evaluating and interpreting qualitative research, involving a rethinking of terms such as validity, reliability, and objectivity.

In this respect, research can no longer be regarded as an unproblematic, objective, value-free enterprise where a world is neutrally and naturally collected and interpreted. Rather, research has become a problematized and contested landscape depicting a double crisis of representation and legitimization (Lincoln & Denzin, 1994). Hence, autoethnography can and often does challenge the epistemological position of positivist research. It relies, instead, on the postmodern ontological position that the nature of reality is local, co-constructed, and that truths cannot be known with any certainty. It holds no pretense of objectivity, of omniscience; nor does it claim the apprehension of reality or truth (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By this way, the writing of the ethnographic text is a move of the field from the text to the reader.

Traditionally, mainstream researchers have avoided expressing emotions in writing, and even when they use their own experiences, they do so in a separated way (Ellis, 1997). Recently, however, narratives of the self that involves feelings are increasingly practiced (Richardson, 1994). A paradigm shift toward qualitative research is observable in the appearance of new journals and new or expanded professional associations with an emphasis on qualitative inquiry. Books and journal articles containing experimental forms of writing are appearing in increasing numbers. The crisis of representation provoked by the postmodern ideology challenges some of strong beliefs rooted in scientific knowledge and truth (Ellis, 1997). It has resulted in a loss of faith in the theory of language as a clear and concise economy of writing on which scientific inquiry has been based. Lincoln and Denzin (2003) attributed the changes to a challenge to the

western and masculine viewpoint of research, where indigenous, feminism and border voice engaged in multiple discourses. They also referred to the challenge of a “god’s-eye view of enquiry” (p. 3) with the emerging discourse surrounding the self as researcher and the researcher as self resulting in the new genre of autoethnography.

1.3 Autoethnography: the Fifth Moment

Autoethnography is part of the methodological trend that is regarded as the fifth moment in the history of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Essentially, the difference between ethnography and autoethnography is that in an autoethnography, the researcher is not trying to become an insider in the research setting. As the insider, the researcher has his own context. Therefore, through autoethnography, those marginalized individuals who might typically have the exotic subject of more traditional ethnographies have the chance to tell their own stories (Russell, 1998).

The fifth moment promotes experimental alternatives to traditional writing. These experiments open a new area of expressions and new spaces of relationship. Brochner and Ellis (2002) take different stances toward readers, describing them in a new ways, calling into being alternative possibilities for going on together. As an autobiographical genre, autoethnography is often written in the first person, may appear in various forms (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), and focuses on the self-narrative (Gergen & Gergen, 1997), or autobiographical voice, within the social context (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Besides, autoethnography allows researchers to integrate their personal, professional, and political voice. It also provides an opportunity for researchers to discover the culture of self, or of others through self. Goodall (2000) calls this the “new ethnography” which is “shaped out of a writer’s personal experience within a culture” (p. 9). Besides, autoethnographic writing takes an overt stance against silent authorship and its implication of objectivity (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Its purpose is evident in its roots: auto meaning directed from within; ethno meaning race, people, culture, and graphy as the written or pictorial representation of the research. Besides, this genre facilitates the researcher to use his own experience as a topic of investigation in its own right rather than regarding it as if it is written from nowhere by nobody. In a process of writing, autoethnographers are asked to delve into their stories and to become “co-participants, engaging the storyline

morally, emotionally, aesthetically and intellectually” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 745). In this way, autoethnography gradually transforms a researcher from a novice researcher into a full insider by virtue of being a native. Yet in this regard, Reed-Danahay (1997) argues the autoethnographers are not completely comfortable within their cultural identity. Neither insider nor outsider, they are positioned both within the culture and as an external observer, which then raises the question of truth within their research.

In sum, in the fifth moment, ethnographic approaches are being adopted and acculturated into a postmodern academic world. The narrative approach typical of ethnography is now changing to facilitate a more personal point of view by emphasizing reflexivity and personal voice and recognizing the researcher as representative of a multilayered lived world. In this regard, autoethnographic texts which are in a variety of forms such as personal essays, poetry, short stories, journals, stream of consciousness, detailed unstructured interview narratives and other forms of fragmented writing, inspire readers to reflect critically upon their own life experience, their constructions of self, and their interactions with others within socio-historical contexts.

1.4 Autoethnography: Strengths

The advocates of the autoethnographic research writing approach point out the benefits of this method. First, it lets the author to be presented both as an ethnographer and a participant and allows that “writing is a way of framing” (Denzin, 1997, p. 224). Autobiography as a mode of knowing allows a writer voice to emerge with speaking voice (Kamanos-Gamelin, 2001). In addition, autoethnographic writing provides a venue to collapse into one of the often disparate stances of object and subject. The “empirical omniscience” (Denzin, 1997, p. 210) presented in autoethnography offers researchers to present multiple interpretations simultaneously and to process the sometimes conflicting nature of these multiple positions.

The use of personal narratives in autoethnography assists writers to integrate life events into their histories so that the story is experienced as coherent, intelligible and meaningful (Bochner, 1994). Besides, autoethnography allows both readers and writers to experience something new. Simply put, this device opens up space for them to feel, to learn, to discover, and to co-create through writing. In this state, the writing process is like a revealing narrative

from the self of the writer and from a lived experience (Richardson, 2000). It is also an attempt to relive the experience with the reader as each provides his or her own interpretation, understanding, and lens. It makes a substantive contribution, uses self-exposure, and moves the reader to question, to research and to write.

Some writers have used autoethnography to portray their lived experiences typically hidden from view. For example, Ronai (1996) detailed story of being sexually abused by her parents. Ellis and Bochner (1992) presented, in a script format, their emotional decision to have an abortion. As argued by Kiesinger (2002), stories can be employed as the framework of meaning of which we act, think, interpret, and relate. He wrote, “when our stories break down or no longer serve us well, it is imperative that we examine the quality of the stories we are telling and actively reinvent our accounts in ways that permit us live more fulfilling lives.” (p. 107)

In terms of methodological value, the autoethnographic method is recommended to fit in “the spaces between subjectivity and objectivity, passion and intellect, and autobiography and culture” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 761). Therefore, it offers a more holistic, engaging, integrative and authentic picture of human existence. This methodology permits the autoethnographer to enter inside the experience and systematically document the moment to moment concrete details of life and permits the generalization of the learning process and the personal enquiry into the lived experience to a larger group or culture. By this means, it contributes social scientific knowledge of a human phenomenon and makes it both a social science and academic research. This process is called “systematic sociological introspection” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). With a language, not neutral or objective, autoethnography invites writers to think, feel and write about their own lived experience. This is a powerful invitation to communicate and make meaning of lived experience from the writer’s stance.

Essentially, autoethnography is an attempt to disrupt a notion of normalcy in research. Grounded in a poststructural position, it narrates a complex story about the power of “discourse over the human imagination” (Holt, 2003, p. 24). In summary, although autoethnography is at risk of being overly narcissistic, there does seem to be a place for research that links the personal with the

cultural. The approach, to a certain extent, can encourage empathy and connection beyond the self of the author and contribute to sociological understanding (Sparkes, 2002).

1.5 Autoethnography: Limitations

Despite the insight provided within autobiographical studies, autoethnographic research has not yet enjoyed the popularity and respect of its autoethnographic predecessors (Duncan, 2004). The use of self as a sole source of data has been questioned and criticized for lacking validity (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) and for being too self indulgent, introspective and narcissistic (Coffey, 1999). Moreover, researchers still worry about the potential contamination through subjectivity, that it is a blemish upon research that should be minimized (Settelmaier & Taylor, 2002). Many contend that autobiographical research is a form of art based on fictional writing which contributes only to the pleasure of benefit of the researcher.

In addition, autoethnographic writing is criticized as sentimental, unscientific, and the product of the excesses of postmodernism (Duncan, 2004). In terms of an academic aspect, autoethnography is criticized for being over-reliant on the potential of a personal writing style to evoke direct emotional responses in readers but offers no deeper levels of reflection or analysis scholarship, lacks of self-honesty and disclosure about the motivation for doing the research, resulting the misuse of the role of author to justify actions or advocate the interests of a particular group. Although the sharing of a story as a credible research methodology in the scientific community of academia remains somewhat controversial, research characteristics and qualifiers such as objectivity, detachment and the potential to generalize, continue to be held in high regard. Ellis and Bochner (1996) thus argued “instead of masking our presence, leaving it at the margins, we should make ourselves more personally accountable for our perspective” (p. 15). Embracing the subjectivity of the research, they contended that the researcher should be viewed as “an involved, situated, and integral part of the research and writing process” (p. 18).

Autoethnographic Research: Practice

2.1 Reflections on Autoethnographic Writing Experiences

In the past thirty years, ethnographers have come to understand that who they are will affect what they observe, that what they observe will affect what they write, and that what they write will affect how others react to what was said (Bochner & Ellis, 2002). While autoethnographers write about themselves, they are touching “a world beyond the self of the writer” (p. 24). In short, autoethnographers enact the basic assumption of interpretive, qualitative social science that one cannot separate the knower from the known (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In using oneself as an ethnographic exemplar, the researcher is free from the traditional conventions of writing and makes the reader gains a sense of the writer as a full human being (Bochner & Ellis, 2002).

For example, Ronai’s (1996) story shortens the distance between writers and readers. Her first person expression of private matters brought readers into a space of intimacy. As clearly stated at the outset, the hierarchy implicit in traditional writing is removed from her implicit message, “these are my experiences,” and “I chose to share them with you.” Fox (1996) is another example which demonstrates an engaging autoethnographic account. The use of first person narratives derived from interviews with a convicted child sexual abuser (Ben) and his victimized stepdaughter (Sherry) and the form of writing she used also allowed her to include her personal voice within the account. Besides, Richardson (1997 as cited in Brochner & Ellis, 2002) reflected her daily life during the time she wrote the book. As an ethnographer, she captured her reality, thoughts, and feelings of another person through her writing.

Jones (2002) wrote stories which inscribed her own melancholy, mourning, and release. Her stories evoked the same emotions in readers. Jones’ story demonstrates the notion that, “autoethnographies move from the inside of the author to outward expression while working to take readers inside themselves and ultimately out again” (Denzin, 1997, p. 208). From this work, readers were invited to share in the emotional experience of an author. The performances came down to whether they evoked in readers a “feeling that the experience described is authentic, that it is believable and possible” (Ellis, 1999, p. 318). Ellis (2004) interviewed writers who contributed in this book. One participant asked about the responsibilities of doing autoethnographic research said, “When

I do autoethnography with students, I get intimately involved in their lives. The mentor-student relationship becomes an autoethnography in itself.” (p. 290). From the same interview, another informant reflected about the use of autoethnographic writing:

In my dissertation, autoethnography provided a way of telling my story and freed me to think that I had a story worth telling. I came to see my story as one that could stand alone yet, like a ribbon or thread, also weave through and connect with other women’s stories. Autoethnography helped me to gain better understanding and appreciation of who I was” (Ellis, 2004, p. 295-6)

She emphasized that this writing genre helps us gain insight into who we are and find a way to be in the world that works for us. In short, from these examples, autoethnography, to put it simply, had worked.

Conclusion

On the road of doing research, researchers are at a paradigm shift in ethnographic methodology and there seems to be several roads ahead that they can choose. As an autoethnographer, Reed-Danahay (2002) argued that we should have a choice in narrative strategy and that we should remember that choices are always there. However, there is a shifting terrain, in which forms of writing and representation move from margin to center and back again.

Some says real life is messy and even those who write about the self’s experience change over time. Like life, writing sometimes is chaotic and never for itself; it is always both about and for somebody, something, somewhere, sometime and it is never natural, unbiased, or disinterested. In other words, it is never simply writing down (Segall, 2001). Some says it takes courage to reflect upon lived experience since one can never be certain as to the underlying themes and issues that will be made visible. It takes even greater courage to share their stories, and to make public, the insights gained from personal experience. There are many stories to be shared. There is much knowing to be explored and discovered when we find the courage to share

our story with others. There are many chapters yet to be written. There are so many lived experiences to record. The real work of autoethnography begins anytime; we do not have to wait until “you think you can’t stand the pain anymore” (Bochner & Ellis, 2002). The renowned anthropologist, Clifford (1988), called culture “a serious fiction” but one that he could not “do without”.

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