

# Autoethnography: Storying Life and Lives

Based on:

Grant, A., Short, N. P., & Turner, L. 2013. Introduction: Storying life and lives. In *Contemporary British Autoethnography*. Boston, MA: Sense.

# What is autoethnography?

**auto**ethnography =  
ethnography + **autobiography**

# What is autoethnography?

“ ... research, writing, and method that connect the **autobiographical** and **personal** to the **cultural** and **social**. The form usually features concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection ... (and) claims the conventions of literary writing. ”

Ellis, C. 2004. *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about teaching and doing autoethnography.*

# What is autoethnography?

- a qualitative **methodology**
- the researcher and the researched is **the same person**
- demands rigorous, multi-layered levels of researcher **reflexivity**
- produces **first-person accounts** of the relationship between personal **biography and culture**
- embraces the researcher's **subjectivity**

# Autoethnographic narrative is...

- creatively written
- local and evocative
- reflexive
- nonlinear

# Historical roots of autoethnography

- “triple crisis” of representation, legitimation and authority:

skepticism toward “grand narratives” of objectivity, authority and research neutrality in the study of culture and social life

- “narrative turn”

→ the notion of the “distant spectator” is rejected “in favour of the embodied, culturally engaged, <...> vulnerable observer”



# The personal as political

- Autoethnography promotes inquiry into "experiences of people who feel they have been **culturally excluded** and **marginalised**," thus challenging "dominant cultural meanings"
- Focus on the personal necessitates **uncomfortable reflexive practices**
- Autoethnographers often engage in **social activism** in a pursuit "to positively impact on and change the world"

# The politics of subjectivism

- **Subjectivism** is embraced because “culture flows through self and vice versa” and “people are inscribed within dialogic, socially shared, linguistic and representational practices”
- “Identity and experience simultaneously produce each other” and are thus inseparable
- Subjectivism should not be confused with **solipsism** or **self-indulgence**



# Functions of autoethnography

- **social and cultural critique**: “expose 'the elephants in the room' of cultural context”
- **problematize** the deceptive idea of culture as homogeneous, “**challeng[e] cultural hegemony**”
- **deconstruct binaries** such as self/other, inner/outer, individual/society, ...

To achieve that, autoethnography may employ such unconventional (in academia) techniques as **satire, mimicry** and **fiction**.

# Voice

- Implicit assumption in conventional social science approaches: “voices of participants and researchers <...> directly correspond to their narrative identities”; an informant is a “self-knowing subject <...> who can speak for her/himself and others”
- And yet
  - voice is **not** a clear window into one's inner life
  - self and voice are **not** identical
  - voice is inherently **dialogic**

# Voice

The way we speak about our present situation is influenced by

- "power, subjectivity and desire"
- "the dark glass of language <...> and the process of signification"

Writing autoethnography is thus "the performance of provisional 'truths'" which embraces ambiguity, complexity and plurality, and is aware of power, history and specificity

# Voice

- In the academia, the standard practice is to use the **normative voice**: phrasal and syntactic clichés; pre-determined, linear narrative structures etc.
- But doing so risks to obscure the researcher's own voice and the complexities of their narrative
- Autoethnography favors **distinct voices** armed with humor, mimicry, mockery, secrecy, masks, etc.

# Institutional resistance

- Autoethnography is **not universally accepted** in the academia
- It is often criticized by proponents of **positivism** and **rationalism**
- Standards of “good qualitative research” are themselves **political**
- Many assumptions about qualitative research need to be **deconstructed**: e.g. “research <...> is conducted *elsewhere* and to *others*”

# Risks and pitfalls

- Can be **uncomfortable** and **disturbing** for the autoethnographer
  - **Personal disclosure** and reader reception
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- Narrative can “overtake” ethnography
  - **Nonlinear structure** can lead to confusion for both the author and their readers
  - **Insufficient reflection** can lead to shallow or faulty accounts
  - Failure to differentiate between experiences and retrospective reflections of them

# Examples of autoethnography

Ronai, C.R. 1997. *On Loving and Hating My Mentally Retarded Mother.*

- a first-hand account of a child's experiences of living with a cognitively challenged mother and a sexually abusive father
- raises socially important questions through gripping, if disturbing narrative
- the data would be unobtainable using regular ethnography due to the sensitive nature of the issue and the lack of an organized community

# Examples of autoethnography

Forber-Pratt, A.J. 2015. *"You're Going to Do What?" Challenges of Autoethnography in the Academy.*

- a meta-autoethnography describing the challenges the author faced while creating an autoethnography as a dissertation at a prestigious university
- reflexive discussion of finding one's voice and negotiating university bureaucracy
- unconventional narrative techniques