Autoethnography, An Unusual Research Method, With the Researcher as a Participant. By Dr. Rick Sheridan, Assistant Professor, Wilberforce University

Autoethnography is a relatively new research method that includes the researcher’s personal experience and his or her observations about the group or individuals who are being researched. These observations and insights are not always possible with the more conventional empirical research methods. Autoethnographers write narratives about what they experience, and are themselves a primary participant and/or subject of the research. Autoethnographers generally reject the idea of research as an objective and neutral process which requires a detachment of the researcher from the subject. Autoethnography is a form of self-reflection that explores the researcher’s perspective on the dynamics of the research scenario, often from a diary or journal that they keep. Towards the end of this article is an example of autoethnography from this author’s doctoral dissertation.

Carolyn Ellis (2004) defines autoethnography as “research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political.” Maréchal (2010) defines it as “a form or method of research that involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic field work and writing.” Ellingson and Ellis (2008) point out, “the meanings and applications of autoethnography have evolved in a manner that makes precise definition difficult.”

According to Bochner and Ellis (2006), an autoethnographic researcher is first and foremost a communicator and a storyteller. The researcher shows people in the process of personal discovery, making choices, interacting with other humans, etc. It provides insight into the meaning of their struggles. Autoethnography allows the researcher to move beyond traditional methods of writing, by using narrative, poetry, stream-of-consciousness, displays of artifacts, photographs, drawings, and live performances (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2008). This approach is much different than the theory-driven, hypothesis-testing research methods that are based on the positivist epistemology, or the reductionism approach of allopathic medicine.

Recording thought processes are paramount

By including personal thoughts, feelings, and observations as a way to help understand what they are researching, autoethnographers are providing the reader with an insight into their thought process along with variables that are typically not measured with conventional research methods.

Autoethnography is controversial since it relies on a more subjective approach to the research variables. Despite the controversy, it is now being used in a variety of academic disciplines such as performance studies, anthropology, sociology, and communication. This author believes that autoethnography can be effectively combined with the more objective empirical research methods and can add a more well-rounded perspective to all of the variables. Even if the autoethnographical section is relegated to the appendix, it provides the reader with information that could help them understand the total context.

Autoethnography can also be used in teaching. Below is an example of where this author used autoethnography in a first-person account of his experiences teaching a group of 30 elderly individuals how to use computers (this was part of his doctoral dissertation). Teachers at any grade level could use some of the prompts in this article to raise their own awareness of many of the dynamics that affect their own teaching performance along with the things that may be increasing or decreasing motivation in their students.

A sample report

“I was continually filled with emotional conflict during the two years that I taught a ‘Computers Made Easy for Seniors’ class through a small college in California. During the classroom sessions, I had to continually remind myself that this elderly group (seniors) were important members of society and worthy of respect. The reason for this feeling was that most of them had a slow reaction time due to cognitive decline, illness, or other factor, and were not able to learn new material very easily. I had to continually avoid the temptation to shout at them to pay more attention. In fact, several of the other teachers of this same course had begun to treat their class members as small children who needed constant supervision and discipline. I did ask the seniors to take notes and pay close attention to certain learning suggestions, but I tried to motivate them with positive statements such as, “you will love what you can do with this new skill.”

What seemed to help the seniors to learn was a combination of techniques. For example, the use of metaphors for learning computers. Almost all of them had used an electric typewriter earlier in their life. The metaphorical link between the typewriter and computer was obvious. As the teacher, I was able to compare the two and point out the similarities and differences.

The motivation for them to learn was due to several goals that many of these individuals seemed to have. The primary motivation, as far as I could see, was a desire to communicate with friends and family by e-mail, along with a curiosity about all of the interesting websites which they had heard friends talking about. There also seemed to be a negative motivator. This was the embarrassment of not being able to keep up with the rest of the class and appearing foolish to their peers. I tried very hard not to encourage this negative motivator, but it seemed to be there, regardless.”

Sample autoethnography prompts:

Below are some ideas to get the autoethnography research process started:

• What were some of the key activities, conversations, or internal thoughts that I experienced today?

• What are my feelings toward the group, and what are the possible reasons for my reactions?

• What exactly happened today? (This is a description of events, experiences, or a process you have been through).
• What did I find inspiring about this project, and what was good about this experience?

• What was frustrating or boring about this to me?

• What key events did I pay the most attention to?

• What would I do differently next time if I researched the same group or event?

• What in my past can I connect to this incident that possibly impacts my feelings now?

• Are there any assumptions or prejudices that I brought into this research? If so, are they interfering with an objective evaluation?

• How do I feel about what happened?

• What are some of the key details that the typical quantitative or qualitative research might leave out (this might include the facial expressions of the participants, the level of frustration (or joy) expressed by the participants, etc.

• What did I learn from this experience? What did the other participants learn?

• What would I like to change and why?

• How can I describe this situation so that others would fully understand what happened?

• What action could I have realistically taken to change the situation?

• Are there any key principles that others might find useful about this group or event?

• What type of duties or responsibilities did I have?

• Why did I think the process was successful or unsuccessful?

• Are there unexplainable holes in my general understanding of the people or event?

• Will this research help others cope with or better understand their situations?

• How can I apply this research to my teaching?

Dr. Sheridan is available as a speaker, consultant or seminar leader in helping individuals and organizations understand the field of autoethnography. He is an assistant professor of communications at Wilberforce University, and has also lectured at Stanford and California State Universities. Please go to http://Autoethnography.info or http://RickSheridan.com for more information.

References:


