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Using Autoethnography in Qualitative Research

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Abstract: This article highlights the importance of using autoethnography in qualitative research. Autoethnography is an approach in qualitative research where the researcher uses personal experiences as data to analyse, describe, understand and interpret events in her/his life to describe sociological understanding of past and present with regards a given context and/or phenomenon. In qualitative research, autoethnography can be used either as one whole data, or as partial data blended with the stories of other people to explore a particular event. The main objective of this article is to describe some scholarly justifications in autoethnography and instigate other researchers in using partially or wholly autoethnography in their research. This article was enlightened after myself have explored partial autoethnography in my PhD exploration.

Keywords: Autoethnography, Qualitative research, Social Sciences

Introduction

This article was enlightened after myself have explored partial autoethnography in my PhD exploration.¹

“Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p.1). From this perspective, I describe how autoethnography can be used as a scaffolding framework in research to investigate a sociological event in social sciences since very often, research in social sciences relates to one’s life story, as reliving the past helps in connecting and giving meaning to the present and the future.

Before exploring autoethnography, I will briefly highlight some scholarly literature on qualitative research.

Qualitative research

Life experiences cannot be quantified since they are subjective with a room of different interpretations. While some scholars are of the opinion that life experiences should not influence an exploration, I concur with others who assert that this is impossible, since most research in social sciences is linked with one’s personal beliefs and perceptions. Qualitative research is an excellent paradigm in offering the participants in a study and the researcher time for reflection on their mutual experiences.

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) offer a generic definition on qualitative research:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including fieldnotes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalist approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 3)

¹ PhD Thesis: Leadership and Women: the *Space* between Us. *Narrating ‘my-self’ and telling the stories of senior female educational leaders in Malta.* (<http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/28440/>)

Many scholars define and describe qualitative research in a similar way. The social world is not an objective entity and qualitative research assumes the multiple realities of “the world” (Merriam, 1988). In qualitative research, including autoethnography, a researcher must keep in mind that everyone is different, with different experiences, contributing “multiple perspectives and interpretations” (Wellington, Bathmaker, Hunt, McCulloch & Sikes, 2005, p. 97), and from this perspective a story can be interpreted differently from different people living the same experiences.

Denzin and Lincoln’s line, “These practices transform the world,” can generate some deep thoughts to a researcher, like for example: Will my research transform *the* world? Will it transform *my* world? What and which is my world? Reflecting upon these issues one can conclude that the transformation of ‘my world’ would make sense through one’s experiences and perceptions.

Autoethnography

As Goodall (2008) claims, writing up one’s story reveals things that were missed or forgotten. “Autoethnographers [...] typically use the construction of personal experience as more than a framing device, as the whole of the story is most often drawn *entirely* from personal experiences.” (p. 33). Writing one’s story not only helps in gaining a “personal narrative epistemic” (p. 15), but it will also serve as a legacy where other readers can relate to that story, a story which echoes with their own and empowers them to come to grips with their own story.

In qualitative research, autoethnography can be used to explore personal experiences in more depth within a framework of culture and social meaning and understanding from the perspective of the context being explored. According to Wall (2008, p. 38), one’s narrative account “offers a way of giving voice to personal experience to advance sociological understanding”. This statement by Wall suggests the importance of including one’s life story in research, since it is a means of sharing knowledge. The selected life events to be shared with the readers are treated as data, a story with a meaning, since life stories are “significant and understandable [...] our experience is a construction that results from the interaction of cognitive organizing processes with cues emanating from our external perceptual senses, internal bodily sensations, and cognitive memories” (Polkinghorne, 1991, p. 135). “Cognitive organizing processes” means telling the story, as well as interpreting and giving meaning to

the experiences around particular events. Life accounts can help the researcher to better relate to the context of the study (Clandinin, 2013), as s/he tries to connect her/his story, with that of the participants in the study. Writing one's life story requires time and plenty of reviewing and reflection. The data not only has to be interpreted but communicated effectively to the readers in order to lead to new knowledge and deeper insights, with a possibility of further investigation.

In autoethnography, the researcher interprets life events which s/he tries to memorise and give meaning to. This means going back through what is written and reflecting on what is going about to be shared. One must take into consideration that stories, are shaped by diverse factors, experiences, culture, historical events, and particularly, relationships. According to Ellis et al. (2011), when writing a story, one has to keep in my mind that the story might be similar to that of others, and so, one uses her/his personal experiences to “illustrate facets of cultural experience, and in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders” (p. 3). This is mainly done by comparing and contrasting the experiences to existent literature.

Autobiography/autoethnography is one's story retold, and so it involves people. Sikes (2010) and Clandinin (2013) advice to researchers using autobiography/autoethnography is to ensure that the mentioned people are respected and by no means demeaned. Sikes (2012, p. 135) claimed that “stories can end up in unexpected places [...] readers can find that they are reading about someone they know, [and] this can happen across continents and years”. So, a researcher using life-stories in research must endorse Sikes's advice regarding the impact of writing her/his life-story and as a researcher one must be ready to show her/his writings “to any one mentioned in the text” (Sikes, 2012, p. 135).

Conclusion

Sharing and revealing personal events is sometimes hurtful and emotional, as one not only reflects on pleasant experiences, but also on distasteful ones. Nonetheless, this epistemological method helps the researcher in exploring and sharing information by incorporating others and thus giving more context and identity to one's life story.

Writing an autoethnography involves writing autobiographic narrative accounts of a person's life experience where other people are involved in this story. So, a researcher must always be alert on the ethical concern as to respect the lives mentioned in the story (Sikes, 2010), and

great caution must be taken throughout the whole research process (Kvale, 1996). Sikes (2015, p. 1) further asserted, that “researching, writing about and re-presenting lives carries a heavy burden regardless of whatever methodology [...] our own stories usually implicates other people as there is very little, if anything, that we do in total isolation”.

Autoethnographic experiences can be considered as data, with the possibility to investigate one’s experiences either as one big story, or blended with that of other people, to generate sociological and cultural knowledge. Roth (2005) declared that autobiography is a justifiable way to arrive at intersubjectivity as it gives the researcher the opportunity to use their life story blended with that of others for the purpose of sharing information. Many times, research within the social sciences relates to the story of the researcher, since reviving the past helps in connecting and giving meaning to the present and the future. In view of these perspectives, researchers should be more forthcoming when it comes to using one’s life story, in part or in full, to enlighten readers with alternative insights.

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