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An autoethnographic miniature on the tensions and boundaries of researcher experiences

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Across disciplinary and methodological boundaries, conventional wisdom holds that the best research often originates from an intimate interest of the researcher. Yet, the standard approaches of method and genre of the research literature rarely convey the intimate nature of the work and experience of research. There is a contradiction here, a missing link of a sort, which positions and characterizes the researcher as little more than part of a finely tuned research machinery. One problem of characterizing a researcher as a kind of machine is that doing so fails to identify as strengths or sources of insight the flaws (or even breakdowns) that are intrinsic to the imperfect mechanics of research done not only on human “subjects” but also, *by* human “subjects.”

Autoethnography permits in ways that other methods do not, a revisiting of the questions and answers of what it means to conduct research, for the researcher and the researched, both. As with any other research method, there are reaches and limitations to autoethnography; however, it can provide perspective not only on what matters and/or happens in the conduct and in name of research, but also, it contributes to a discourse that extends what is possible in the presentation, analysis, interpretation and understanding of scholarly research.

The autoethnographic method, as a variation on ethnography whereby the researcher is also the researched (the researcher studies him- or herself) is a method that permits a distinct perspective by virtue of its very limitations as method: it is highly self-conscious and self-reflective and recognizes that the act of observing a phenomenon inevitably alters that phenomenon in some way(s). By acknowledging the subjectivity of perspective and the inability of the researcher to separate him- or herself from the researched (which, of course, to the chagrin of some and the delight of others, has been said of all research methods), the autoethnographic method is able to provide a uniquely intimate report of the experience of researcher and/as researched. The autoethnographic method lends a quiet, yet not insignificant authority to my voice as researcher: it is the authority of claiming that this is my perspective of and on my experience as researcher and researched.

Autoethnography was introduced to me in the first semester of my PhD program and truth be told, I struggled with a resistance to the ideas presented by autoethnography.¹ There have been varying approaches to autoethnography: as an approach to pedagogy (Banks and Banks); as a personal ethnographic genre (Crawford); as interpretive or performance ethnography (Denzin); as a critical self-inquiry (Pelias); and as a “field of play” for both inquiry and the textual genres of communicating research (Richardson). My initial resistance to autoethnography led me, however, to take a more structured approach to the method than what I encountered in the literature.

I designed a preliminary autoethnographic framework and protocol by integrating standards from both ethnography and case study methods (Bassey; Graham; Hamel; Merriam; and Yin) and from this literature I took particular note of the distinction made between *what* to observe and *how* to observe (see slide presentation document in the table of contents). In my preliminary response to the protocol, my observations became notably multi-dimensional (the question of who I am and what was

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happening, for example, became complex in a way that it might not have if I had been observing a research subject other than myself). Similarly, the questions of *how* I observed became notably nuanced (for example, the boundary between how I observed through my sensory faculties versus my intuition became blurred, as did the boundary between my tacit and explicit knowledge).

In order to examine these complexities and nuances, I revised the protocol by integrating the “*what* and *how* to observe” questions with the following dimensions as variables: the intellectual, physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual (again, see slide presentation document in the table of contents).ⁱⁱ Adding these variables drew on the strengths of autoethnography as method to allow me (as researcher) to ask myself (as researched) questions that attempted to explicitly invite both the limitations and reaches of my “humanity” into the research experience by asking questions not only about the intellectual experience of research, but also the physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual. The revised protocol allowed me to ask such questions as: (1) “How would I describe my setting in intellectual, physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual terms?” or (2) “How would I describe the intellectual, physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual activities of this research?” The juxtaposition of the standard ethnographic protocol questions and of the dimensions added to the protocol gave attention to the nuances of experiences accessible through the autoethnographic method.

Approaching Analysis, Revisiting Theory

The credibility, reliability and validity of autoethnographic findings are debated. The most common criticism is that autoethnography’s conflation of researcher and research affects credibility, making reliability and validity impossible. Those defending autoethnography, however, hold that researcher and research are never separated (regardless of method), and as such, claims to credibility, reliability and validity are always questionable. Autoethnography is a method that:

...teaches us about ourselves...it affirms our subjectivity, challenges our assumptions of normalcy...and it forces us to be more self-reflexive...[it] introduces a new form of scholarly writing...[addressing] our need to inculcate and model a critical attitude and self-disclosiveness in our teaching and learning, not just with our students and colleagues, but also with our institutional administrators. (Banks & Banks, 235-236).

Revision of the autoethnographic protocol (the adding of dimensions) was something I chose to do because I had experienced precisely what Banks and Banks describe: as a doctoral student, I found the academy to be a place where assumptions about what it meant to be a scholar and/or researcher (and to do scholarly research) seemed often left *unchallenged* (and how ironic, if not hypocritical this was, given what research and scholarship claim to be). Similarly, I also found unchallenged assumptions (that fell under the title of “standards of the tradition,” but these were assumptions nonetheless) about form and style in scholarly writing (my difficulty with this was derived from what I had learned from a community of literary publishers, where challenging standards of form and style kept literature relevant and representative of the time and place in which it was written).

When I revisit the protocol, which I do from time to time, to question myself and to examine my approach to the work I am doing (and the life I am living), the resistance I had to autoethnography returns to me—but it is changed, something is uncovered. My resistance to the autoethnographic protocol is no longer a resistance that comes with thinking that it has nothing worthwhile to contribute. My resistance to the protocol is a resistance to what is in the data. It is not always what I expect or want to see: in myself or in my experience of the academy. The reason why I put this to paper is because I think it is worthwhile to revisit (and in different ways) the questions and answers of what it means to conduct research, to conduct myself (oneself?) as a researcher and a scholar. Autoethnography not only

revisits those questions and answers, but calls on the researcher to pose the question: If I were to ask myself these things, what would I answer? My answers are perhaps insignificant to anyone other than myself. Of significance, I would argue, are the questions of the protocol and the kinds of tensions of researcher experiences that autoethnography confronts, both as a method of inquiry and as a genre through which to convey what are often the unsaid and unseen nuances and complexities of what it means to conduct research, of what it means to be in the academy, or even, to be human.

This “autoethnographic miniature” is intended as an invitation to others to consider how their own autoethnographic practice could serve as a looking glass, if not a method and genre, in their research, in life and work in the academy. The snapshot presented here is also intended as an attempt to contribute to the discourse of those who diversify the questions that research asks, the ways of asking questions, and the answers given; and further, it attempts to join those who look more closely at the academy and the people who inhabit it, myself (ourselves?) among them.

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ⁱ When introduced to the idea of autoethnography as method, my knee-jerk response was to cry out, “No thanks! I have been living with myself my whole life and the last thing I am interested in is studying myself. Besides, who cares? I don’t even care about myself as a research subject, so how could this possibly be useful to anyone?” As I began to work through the literature in the field of autoethnography, however, this resistance was soon replaced with curiosity.

ⁱⁱ Adding these dimensions was inspired by Heesoon Bai, my PhD supervisor, who on the very first day of my first doctoral seminar, called on more than the intellect to enter the room, and she named specifically these dimensions—the physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual—as important and legitimate dimensions of personhood and inquiry, to enter into our seminar discussions on philosophical and theoretical frameworks and questions in the field(s) of education.