Autoethnography: situating personal sporting narratives in socio-cultural contexts

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Abstract

Purpose
To introduce autoethnography as an innovative research approach within sport and physical culture, and consider its key tenets, strengths and weaknesses. For illustrative purposes, the chapter draws upon two specific autoethnographic research projects on distance running, one collaborative and one solo.

Design/methodology/approach
The design of the two projects is delineated, including methods of data collection and analysis: tape-recorded field and 'head' notes, personal and analytic logs, phenomenological, thematic and narrative data analysis. Issues of representation are addressed and the chapter explores salient, but often-overlooked, ethical considerations in undertaking autoethnographic research.

Findings
Key findings of two research projects are presented, cohering around issues of identity construction and identity work, together with lived body and sensory experiences of distance running.

Research limitations/implications (if applicable)
The limitations of using an autoethnographic approach are discussed, including in relation to fulfilling traditional, positivistic judgment criteria such as validity, reliability and generalizability; more appropriate criteria are discussed, particularly in relation to evocative autoethnographies. Novel forms of the genre: collaborative autoethnography and autophenomenography, are suggested as future directions for autoethnographic research in SPC.

Originality/value
The chapter provides a succinct introduction to the use of autoethnography in sport and physical culture, for those unfamiliar with the genre. The author also suggests an innovative variation - autophenomenography.

Keywords

Autoethnography; collaborative autoethnography; autophenomenography; distance running; embodiment.

Introduction

This chapter considers the use of autoethnography as a relatively novel research methodology within the range of qualitative forms utilised in research on sport and physical culture (SPC); a research approach that is enjoying growing popularity. After introducing autoethnography for those unfamiliar with its tenets and forms, I consider how, as researchers, we might set about designing a SPC project using autoethnography. For illustrative purposes, the chapter portrays two specific research projects, a collaborative autoethnographic study of the injury and rehabilitative process encountered by two distance runners suffering from long-term knee injuries, and an authoethnography of female distance running. Here I shall be focusing upon the research design and execution of the projects, including methods of data collection, analysis and representation, together with some salient ethical considerations. The data and findings are also briefly considered (for fuller details, please see for example, Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2001). In conclusion, I consider some of the strengths and weaknesses of the autoethnographic approach, and suggest some future developments and exciting new applications in SPC research. First then, we consider what autoethnography is and how it has challenged research orthodoxies.

What is autoethnography?

Arising out of the 'crisis of representation' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) within qualitative research more widely, autoethnography has challenged some of the very foundations and key tenets of more 'traditional' forms of research in its requirement for the researcher explicitly to situate and 'write in' her/himself as a key player

within a research account. This stands in stark contrast to more traditional notions of the researcher/author as a distanced, 'neutral', impartial and 'uninvolved' observer and recorder of the ethnographic field. Indeed, it is still considered somewhat of a contentious genre within some quarters of the more traditional social science community, due to its analytic focus upon the 'self' of the researcher rather than primarily on research 'others'. Some critics view it with deep suspicion and a high degree of scepticism, accusing autoethnographers of indulging in 'navel-gazing' and introspection, and of generating something more akin to autobiographical writing than to scholarly, rigorous, 'scientific' research. Despite its detractors, however, autoethnography has generated enthusiastic support from researchers interested in, and committed to discovering new, innovative ways of portraying and evoking the lived experience of engaging in sport and physical culture, particularly corporeally-based experiences. For those with a background in sociological or anthropological ethnographic research in sport, for example, autoethnography represents an exciting, challenging, innovative variation of ethnography. Here ethnographic research methods, analysis and insight are used to portray the researcher's own personal, lived experience of a culture.

In general, then, autoethnography is a research approach which draws upon the researcher's own personal lived experience, specifically in relation to the culture (and subcultures) of which s/he is a member. As Reed-Danahay (1997: 2) neatly encapsulates, autoethnography synthesizes postmodern ethnography (where realist conventions and 'objectivity' are called into question) and postmodern autobiography (in which the idea of the coherent, individual self is similarly called into question); a demanding synthesis. The researcher, in her/his social interaction with others, is the subject of the research, thus blurring putative distinctions between

the personal and the social, and between self and other (Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Reed-Danahay, 1997). Autoethnographers thus engage personally with the dialectics of subjectivity and (sub)culture, with different authors placing different emphases on the three key components of autoethnography: the auto, the self (autos); the ethno, 'race' or nation (ethnós) - nowadays more usually applied to a socio-cultural group; and the graphy, the writing (graphein) or other form of representation.

In autoethnography, the roles of researcher and participant coalesce so that the researcher's own experiences qua member of a social group and within social contexts are subject to analysis, in order to produce richly textured, often powerfully evocative research accounts or even performances (see for example, Spry, 20010) of lived experience. Autoethnographers thus occupy a dual, and often highly demanding, role as both member of the social world under study and researcher of that same world (Anderson, 2006). This demands of the autoethnographic researcher high levels of critical awareness and reflexivity, and, many of us would add, self-discipline. Of particular interest to autoethnographers in sport and physical culture has been a focus on embodiment and lived sporting experience, together with the emotional dimension of engagement in physical cultures. Autoethnographers seek systematically, rigorously and analytically to portray their own consciousness and emotions, to 'open up the realm of the interior and the personal' (Fiske, 1990: 90). This aim can, perhaps unsurprisingly, open up the autoethnographer to charges of narcissistic self-indulgence from those working from a more traditional research perspective. It can also initiate a challenging, intellectually demanding and emotionally painful voyage of self-investigation... it is not for the faint-hearted.

A key feature of autoethnography is that the researcher's own personal experiential narrative is 'written in' (Tedlock, 1991), explicitly, in rigorous and

analytic fashion as a central, fundamental and integral part of the research process, rather than as a subsidiary, confessional 'aside', which was often the case with many 'classic' ethnographies. Some autoethnographers have also engaged with novel (at least within the social sciences) representational forms, such as poetry, ethnodrama, fiction and performance (Spry, 2001). For, as Richardson (1994: 516) highlights: 'Writing is also a way of "knowing" - a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic'. Autoethnographic narratives thus often contrast starkly with more traditional forms of social-scientific writing, on a whole series of dimensions (see Ellis & Bochner, 2000: 744), including the blurring of the researcher/researched distinction, and attempts to write evocatively, to engage the reader emotionally and empathetically, and to resonate with the reader's own experiences.

The focus upon self and the degree of departure from more established realist/neo-realist ethnographic conventions of writing and representation toward more innovative forms, has generated much debate. Anderson (2006), for example has suggested that autoethnography be categorised into either 'analytic' or 'evocative' forms. Other more 'evocatively orientated' autoethnographers (for example, Ellis & Bochner, 2006) view with suspicion attempts to shift autoethnography away from its more innovative, personally-engaged and emotional forms and back towards what they perceive as more traditional, (neo)realist, ethnographic content and style. As Atkinson (2006: 402) reminds us, however: '...all ethnographic work implies a degree of personal engagement with the field and with the data... Autoethnography is, it would appear, grounded in an explicit recognition of those biographical and personal foundations'. As Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) succinctly note, autoethnographers use personal experience to illustrate cultural experience and thus make

characteristics of a culture familiar for both insiders and outsiders. Of interest to us as autoethnographers then is the notion of the ethnós (Greek for 'race' or 'nation', but nowadays generally extended to include a cultural, subcultural or social group of some kind), which, as Denzin (1983: 133-4) notes, holds its own sets of meanings, structures and normative order. Exactly who constitutes the particular ethnós of course is open to debate: who should be included and who excluded? Ty and Verduyn (2008: 4) caution against essentialist notions of the social group, and in terms of 'insider' status, interactionists would remind us that membership of any social group or category - our group 'insiderness' - is ever shifting, fluid, mutable and context-dependent. With regard to my own sporting subcultural group membership, for example, I am a non-élite but serious, female distance runner. But, further, I am a cross-country specialist rather than a road or track runner. I am a white female in a middle-class professional occupational group. My current distance is nowadays between 5 and 10 miles, which would not constitute 'distance' for many runners. Thus, my group membership is complex, shifting and context-dependent.

In a similar vein and from an anthropological perspective, Strathern (1987), has problematized the 'insider' status of professional anthropologists who portray themselves as members of the culture they study, but who, Strathern notes, do not necessarily hold the same views as do the 'natives'. But, again who are the 'authentic' natives or the 'insiders' to a given culture? It is debatable whether anyone can ever be deemed a 'complete member' of any culture, subculture or social group, for what criteria would have to be fulfilled in order to ascertain complete membership, and for how long does one have to be a member? Who should decide and agree upon such criteria? Perhaps then, it is more accurate to think in terms of a continuum, of degrees of 'insiderness', which change over time, place and social context and bring into

interactional play different 'selves' in different contexts, as symbolic interactionists would contend. As an academic sociologist, a 'veteran', cross-country, female distance runner (amongst many other things), I hold membership of various social groups, but at any one point, my 'felt membership' may relate to any one or combination of these groups, or indeed to none of the above.

Within research on sport and physical culture, autoethnographic researchers have addressed a wide spectrum of different sports and physical cultures, using different representational forms, ranging from highly evocative poetic or prose representations (e.g. Stone, 2009 on excessive exercising and anorexia; Denison, 2006 on running), to more 'analytic' representations where sections of autoethnographic narrative are subject to theoretical analysis in a more (neo)realist style (e.g. Allen-Collinson, 2003 on distance running and temporality; McMahon & Dinan Thompson, 2011, on elite swimming and regulation of the body). To date, SPC autoethnographic researchers have in general tended to employ more analytic forms, but the analytic-evocative spectrum (see Anderson, 2006, and Ellis, 1997 for contrasting perspectives) means that the autoethnographic genre is open to a vast range of different styles and usages. As Sparkes (1998: 380) notes in relation to more innovative forms of qualitative research in general: 'there can be no canonical approach to this form of inquiry, no recipes or rigid formulas …'. This openness to different forms, and refusal to be pigeonholed, is perhaps one of the great strengths of autoethnographic research. To give just a flavour of this burgeoning field within SPC, some of the sporting and physical cultural contexts and experiences studied to date include triathlon (Drummond, 2010; McCarville, 2007), running (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2001; Denison, 2006; Stone, 2009), rugby (Mellick & Fleming, 2010),

competitive rowing (Purdy, Potrac & Jones, 2008; Tsang, 2000), windsurfing (Humberstone, 2011), sports coaching (Jones, 2006, 2009), and performance psychology and dance (Lussier-Ley, 2010), to name just a few domains, which have sparked the interest of SPC researchers. These studies involve a range of different ways of utilising autoethnography and in the next section I consider some of the 'hows' of undertaking a research project using this approach.

Doing autoethnography: research design and praxis

In this section, to illustrate some of the key methodological elements, I focus upon two particular research studies where an autoethnographic research approach was adopted. The first was a collaborative autoethnography that I undertook some years ago in conjunction with my co-runner and co-researcher, Dr John Hockey, when we were both suffering from long-term knee injuries, and decided to research our experiences. The second was an autoethnographic study of female distance running in public space. I also address below some of the salient ethical issues involved in undertaking these and analogous autoethnographic research projects.

<u>The collaborative autoethnographic project</u>

First, and commensurate with an automethodology, to help contextualise the research discussed here, I provide some background biographical information to the collaborative autoethnographic study[1], much of which is also relevant to the second, solo autoethnographic research project. At the time of the collaborative study, both I and my co-researcher were (and still are) two non-élite, but 'serious' middle/long-

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[1] My co-researcher has kindly given his consent for a little of his biographical information to be included for the purposes of this chapter.

distance runners with athletic biographies of distance running and racing, requiring a commitment to training 6 or 7 days a week, sometimes twice daily, for 26 years (author) and 44 years (training partner) respectively. For 17 years we trained together on a regular and frequent basis when living in the same cities. As veteran runners, our degree of involvement in running mirrors Stebbins' (1992: 6 et seq.) concept of 'serious leisure', involving the following elements: perseverance, progressive improvement (generally!), significant personal effort based on specially-acquired knowledge and training, durable benefits (such as health and fitness), a unique ethos or idioculture, and a tendency to identify strongly with the chosen pursuit. All six of these dimensions figured prominently in our running biographies. By strange coincidence, on different days during a particular windswept November week of training in the UK, we both suffered knee injuries, occasioned primarily by having to train in the winter dark on a local park strewn with branches and other assorted débris following several days of storms and high winds. Early in the training week, I stumbled into a branch, twisting my right knee sharply and had to half-ran, half-limp through the remaining mileage that evening. Later that same week, my training partner slipped on muddy terrain, wrenching his left knee. It quite quickly became apparent to both of us that the knee injuries were more serious than the usual bodily 'niggles' that frequently plague habitual runners. As a consequence we arrived at a decision systematically to document our experiences, one of our key motives being to extract something positive out of a very negative athletic context. We therefore together designed a collaborative research study of the injury and subsequent rehabilitative process; a process that eventually turned out to span a period of around two years. We decided that a collaborative autoethnographic approach - sometimes termed 'duoethnography' (Ngunjiri, Hernandez & Chang,

2010) combining our own personal experiences as distance runners, would provide the best research strategy for investigating our individual and joint lived experiences of the injury process, and providing researcher 'triangulation' (metaphorically if not literally). Collaborative autoethnography is a wide-ranging form of autoethnography, spanning the involvement of two co-researchers/co-authors to construct the narrative, as in this particular case, to the involvement of many others to produce more of a 'community autoethnography' (e.g. Toyosaki, Pensoneau-Conway, Wendt & Leathers, 2009) format, with multiple authorial voices.

Data collection & analysis

The data collection process upon which we decided involved the construction of detailed, individual and collective research logs throughout the 2-year, often painful and distressing, injury and rehabilitative period. This systematic documentation was a habit already familiar to us, not only via our academic research work but also as a habitual practice amongst serious runners, who record their daily performance in training logs. We were thus used to keeping training logs to record details of timings, distances, terrain type, weather conditions, health and so on. For the research project, we replaced these with 'injury-rehabilitation logs', to record individual and collective engagement with the injured state, and our attempts to regain sufficient fitness to run again at the level we had enjoyed previous to incurring the injuries. This data collection was undertaken via field note books and micro tape recorders, the latter accompanying us on training sessions, to some physiotherapy sessions, and also throughout the day for 'head notes' or 'notes to self' when thoughts occurred to us, for example when travelling to work in the car. We did briefly consider video recording parts of our training and rehabilitative sessions but quickly abandoned this idea,

deciding it would be too cumbersome to be practicable, and would interfere too much with the actual training. Audio tapes were transcribed as soon as possible after recording, usually at weekends. In addition to our individual research logs, we created a joint 'analytic log' in which our discussions and salient themes, theoretical ideas and concepts were recorded. So, for example, if we found that one of us had documented a particular narrative theme, we would discuss this, posing questions, challenging each other's assumptions, trying to pinpoint the precise composition of that theme, its boundaries and its connections to other themes already generated either singly or jointly.

As two qualitative sociologists with strong running identities, we shared many similarities, but inevitably also diverged - sometimes radically - in relation to our lived experiences and also our ideas. As part of the data analysis process, within our joint log, thematic or conceptual differences between our individual accounts were identified and if possible 'reconciled'. But where no analytical reconciliation proved achievable or indeed desirable, we were content to accept and record the differences. We also discussed the reasons for such divergence and the impact, if any, upon the process of handling our injuries. This added a further analytic dimension to the data collection and analysis process (c.f. Ngunjiri et al., 2010). We thus acted as the 'primary recipient' (Ochs & Capps, 1996) of each other's data, discussing events, experiences and interpretations, supplying regular feedback and critique. Subsequently, we analysed and re-analysed our journal entries, primarily via thematic analysis, employing processes of 're-memory' (Sanders-Bustle & Oliver, 2001) to send ourselves back in what we termed our 'time tunnel' to try to recapture as vividly as possible the sometimes wildly oscillating emotions of the injury and rehabilitative journey (Allen-Collinson, 2005).

In this particular form of 'concurrent autoethnography' (Ngunjiri et al., 2010), we moved between individual, divergent activities (e.g. self-reflection, recording our individual logs) and collaborative, convergent activities (e.g. discussions and recording of the joint log) at various points in the research process. Undertaking the collaborative autoethnography fulfilled a range of purposes, including at times the cathartic and therapeutic, and, as we had originally hoped, it did generate something positive out of what was a very difficult, painful (psychologically and physically) experience. Indeed, the long-term injury/rehabilitative process, and also the autoethnographic research process itself, proved to be learning and life-changing experiences. They demonstrated both the importance of shared human lived experiences, but also the limits of intersubjectivity - the times of existential loneliness and despair, which even the most experienced, supportive and caring of running life-world inhabitants could not share.

The autophenomenographic project

The second autoethnographic and autophenomenographic (see also Conclusion section below) research project was a study of female distance running. In order to document my lived experience of training for middle/long-distance running, I again maintained a research log, in this instance for a period of just over 3 years, incorporating detailed subjective and corporeal experiences of daily training sessions. The research approach adhered quite closely to Giorgi's (1997) guidelines for undertaking empirical-phenomenological research, and included the following stages: i) the collection of concrete descriptions of phenomena from an insider perspective (i.e. as a female distance runner); ii) initial impressionistic readings of the log entries to gain a feel for the whole; iii) in-depth, close re-reading of these descriptions as part

of a process of thorough data-immersion, to identify themes and sub-themes; iv) free imaginative variation, where I searched for the most fundamental meanings of a phenomenon, its 'essential' or core characteristics. This stage of the method involved imaginatively varying elements of any given phenomenon to ascertain whether it remained identifiable after various imagined changes. This assisted in the identification and analysis of 'essences': those elements which were, for me, necessary for the phenomenon to be experienced as that particular phenomenon; and then finally, v) the production of the general account of experience. There were specific challenges in undertaking the solo study, and below I outline one of the classic problems familiar to 'insider' researchers: that of seeking to make the familiar strange and thus bringing the mundane everyday world to heightened analytic attention via a process of 'bracketing'.

In my case, whilst a relatively long 'career' (in the symbolic interactionist sense, rather than as a professional athlete) provided reassurance regarding the fulfilment of Garfinkel's (2002) 'unique adequacy requirement' for the researcher to have great familiarity with the phenomenon, it also presented somewhat of a problem. The need for familiarity rendered problematic a central element in the phenomenological method, epochē or 'bracketing' - the attempted suspension (as far as possible) of the researcher's pre-suppositions and assumptions about a phenomenon - thus requiring heightened reflexivity of me as an autophenomenographic researcher. I should stress that here it is a question of attempting to suspend what Gearing (2004: 1443) terms 'internal (researcher) suppositions': my own personal, insider subcultural knowledge of distance running, together with my academic knowledge - theoretical and conceptual for example, and my own personal history and lived experience of being a female distance runner. In

order to bracket (in a sociological-phenomenological sense, rather than a more philosophical one) my own preconceptions and taken-for-granted assumptions about female running in public space, in the project I engaged in two bracketing practices aimed at making the familiar strange: 1) discussions with both insiders and non-insiders to the distance-running subculture; and 2) in-depth reading of detailed ethnographic accounts of other sporting activities. This latter was undertaken in order to compare and contrast other sports with my own lived experience of running, including the gendered dimension where this was explicitly analysed, for example in accounts of women's triathlon (Granskog, 2003; Cronan and Scott, 2008) and mountain climbing (Chisholm, 2008). As a female runner who undertakes the vast majority of training in 'public' space, I am well aware that such space is also gendered, as feminist analysts have long identified. My running in public space is thus lived and felt at the individual, subjective level, but is also profoundly structurally-shaped by my own socio-cultural (and subcultural) and historical location.

Ethical dimensions of autoethnography

At this point, it is worth discussing generally some of the oft-overlooked ethical dimensions of undertaking autoethnographic research, whether individual or collaborative. Although writing about our own sporting and/or physical cultural experiences may initially appear to be relatively devoid of ethical concerns, when compared with other forms of research with human participants, ethical issues and dilemmas certainly arise for autoethnographers. Whilst we are often accustomed to considering carefully the protection of our research participants, autoethnographers do not always consider carefully how to protect themselves in the research process, should this prove necessary. Indeed, actually engaging in the autoethnographic

process itself can constitute an emotionally painful and potentially self-injurious act. Chatham-Carpenter (2010), for example, describes vividly how, during the writing of her autoethnography of anorexia, she experienced the compulsion to publish her work become intertwined with the compulsion of her anorexia. Furthermore, there arises the question of how far along the self-disclosure/exposure and vulnerability route the autoethnographer wishes to locate her/himself, and how honest s/he chooses to be in creating and representing the self. For autoethnography can confront us with acute dilemmas regarding our 'presentation of self' (Goffman, 1974), and just how much sensitive biographical information to reveal. As Ellis (1999) notes, the autoethnographer makes her/himself vulnerable in revealing sensitive, intimate information, and subsequently being unable to retract this, having no control over how readers might interpret sensitive biographical information. Writing in a personalised and often emotional, open and vulnerable style, challenges the widely held orthodoxy of researcher as neutral, 'objective', coolly rational, and textually absent. This can leave the autoethnographic researcher highly vulnerable to charges of being 'irrational, particularistic, private, and subjective, rather than reasonable, universal, public, and objective' (Greenhalgh, 2001: 55). Behar (1997: 13-14) reminds us of the dangers of over-exposure of the vulnerable self and the need for self-discipline: 'Vulnerability doesn't mean that anything personal goes'; the exposure of the self 'has to be essential to the argument, not a decorative flourish, not exposure for its own sake'.

A further ethical issue with which autoethnographers contend is that however 'personal' the autoethnography may be, it is likely to feature other social actors with whom the researcher has some degree of relationship or at least of social interaction. As Erben (1993) notes, in his case in relation to autobiography, it is a very rare

account that does not contain many - whether shorter or longer - biographies of other people who figure in the writer's life, and thus contribute to the life story being portrayed. In this vein, Wall (2008) highlights some of the dilemmas and difficult judgements arising from recounting her own story of parenting an adopted child. These dilemmas are neatly encapsulated in a footnote where she (2008: 51) acknowledges that whilst she speaks of the autoethnography as 'my' story, her husband and children are also in various ways authors of the story. Autoethnographers have thus to consider carefully how (and indeed if) certain others are included and represented within the write-up of the research. Even when others are anonymised within the account, at least in terms of remaining formally unnamed, they may nevertheless be identifiable via distinctive social or physical characteristics. Within the field of SPC, Mellick and Fleming (2010) address the ethics of disclosure in relation to a personal narrative that included the portrayal of a particular rugby player with an identifiable biography, which made him a 'unique case study', despite all efforts at anonymization. The specific ethical dilemma confronting the authors was that the biographical information and international reputation of the player were essential to the theoretical framing of the narrative. Removing this information would have greatly weakned the analysis, and rendered it 'impotent', in their terms.

Additionally, in relation to the representation of others, there are questions of how exactly to 'use' another person's life to tell our own stories, as Wall (2008: 49) discusses. In the case of the kind of collaborative autoethnographic research project described above, it is standard practice to check and agree with one's co-researcher/author what should be included in (and excluded from) the research write-up; a decision that may require careful negotiation. Fortunately, my co-researcher and I found we shared similar perspectives on the inclusion of more

private and sensitive autoethnographic data. Securing this form of consent from other 'participants' in an autoethnographic project, however incidental to the account, may not prove quite so straightforward or indeed even possible. In our collaborative autoethnography, photographs of others were included in published articles based on the study. Although it would have been difficult to ascertain the identity of any individual, given that the photographs were taken at some distance, identification may just have been possible for someone familiar with the individuals portrayed. Similarly, in the accounts generated from the autoethnographic data, family members, friends and others could - with some detective work - have been identifiable.

A final ethics-related point I highlight here concerns the wish not to 'finalize' the stories of other co-authors and co-participants in one's autoethnographic narrative, but to engage in dialogical rather than monological research (see Smith, Allen-Collinson, Phoenix, Brown & Sparkes, 2009). This means having a willingness to 'converse' with others and indeed with the autoethnographic process itself (c.f. Wall, 2008: 40), rather than seeking to give 'the final word' on events. To this end, autoethnographers often deliberately employ relational language to create and promote reader-author dialogue, rather than making monologic pronouncements. To explain briefly, for Bakhtin (1984) and Frank (2004), monologue is a form of self-narrative that purports to be self-sufficient, telling what the author or speaker knows and to what the listener must attend and learn from. Bakhtin's (1984) conceptualisaton of monologue portrays a self-narrative seeking, explicitly or implicitly, to <u>merge</u> with the other, to assimilate others into the narrator's self, via the abridging of difference and distance. According to Bakhtin (1984), dialogical writing involves abandoning the illusion that we can, even with the best of intentions, merge with another person. To act ethically, we should never presume to know exactly how

another person feels, and speak <u>for</u> them. Instead, we should acknowledge and respect alterity and seek to preserve some intersubjective distance. Critical reflexivity is crucial for the autoethnographer, as indeed for qualitative researchers in general, who must guard against <u>merging</u> with other participants, however much of the ethnographic field we feel we hold in common. An important consequence for this form of research is that no individual autoethnographer's story is completely and entirely her/his own; the voices and selves of others intertwine with ourselves and our stories, as Wall (2008) perceptively highlights in her autoethnographic study of adoptive parenting.

Key findings of the studies

The purpose of the collaborative autoethnographic study was to analyse the impact of relatively severe and chronic injuries on our identities as two amateur, non-élite, but <u>serious</u> and long-term middle/long-distance runners, and to explore the rehabilitative journey back to (what we hoped would be) full running fitness.   In analysing the considerable amount of data generated by the methods portrayed above, we found several key themes emerged, several of which I portray here. We had both agreed when undertaking the research, that whilst we would certainly publish jointly off the data, each of us would also be free to undertake his and her own separate analysis and write-up, and to publish individually from the project. One of the key themes, which we identified jointly, cohered strongly with the symbolic interactionist concept of 'identity work'. Such identity work, it emerged, played a major role in providing continuity of identity during the liminality of long-term injury and rehabilitation, and the 'injury time' that posed a fundamental challenge to our athletic identities. In our subsequent analyses and reports of the study, we employed

Snow & Anderson's (1995) and also Perinbanayagam's (2000) interactionist theoretical conceptualisations in order to examine the various forms of identity work in which we engaged (for more details, see Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2007). Identity work has been defined as:

> ...the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept. So defined, identity work may involve a number of complementary activities: a) arrangement of physical settings or props; b) cosmetic face-work or the arrangement of personal appearance; c) selective association with other individuals and groups; d) verbal constructions and assertion of personal identities. (Snow & Anderson, 1995: 241)

In Perinbanayagam's (2000) categorisation, these activities are reformulated as materialistic, associative and vocabularic identifications respectively, and these and Snow & Anderson's categories were found to be highly applicable to the identity work we undertook as (temporarily) non-running runners. Such 'work' was found to be central, and indeed crucial, in sustaining credible athletic identities in the face of intense disruption to the running self, and also in generating momentum towards the goal of restitution to full running fitness; a goal eventually achieved after a two-year journey.

A second key finding for me was the temporal dimension of the injury and rehabilitation process; a theme which at the time of writing was found to be under-explored within SPC studies. Despite a growing corpus of research on the sociology of time, and with some notable exceptions (e.g. Eichberg, 1982) relatively little sports

literature had taken time as its analytic focus. This seemed to me a curious lacuna,

particularly given the centrality of time within most sports, and certainly within

running, where race times, personal bests, and so on are salient features of the

sporting context. As Adam (2000) notes, there is still a propensity for social time to be

taken-for-granted, left unproblematised and treated by many social science

researchers as a neutral medium within which events simply take place. From the

autoethnographic data, four categories of time emerged strongly: linear, cyclical,

inner and biographical time (see Allen-Collinson, 2003). One of the main findings was

the need for sports coaches, physiotherapists and other health-care practitioners

involved with injured sportspeople, to take into account the subjective, 'inner-time'

(durée), dimension of injury and rehabilitative processes, in order better to tailor

effective individual treatment plans.

Conclusion

In sum, autoethnographers seek to connect the personal to the (sub)cultural, often

writing in highly evocative and personal ways, and thus, for those working from a

more traditional perspective, transgressing orthodox requirements for social science

research. The autoethnographic genre often boldly traverses and blurs distinctions of

the personal and the social, and of self and other. For many of us who have tried

working with this relatively novel research approach, autoethnography has certain

strengths. These include its openness to new directions and multiple forms, its wide-

ranging, protean nature, and its refusal to be tied down and tightly constrained by

adherence to traditional notions of 'validity' and other inappropriate positivistic

judgment criteria. The evocative and more literary writing styles often offer striking

and thought-provoking ways of addressing mundane experience and subjecting it to

rigorous analysis. The insider perspective gives autoethnographers the advantage of access to in-depth and often highly nuanced meanings, knowledge about, and lived experience of the field of study. This brings into play a wide range of resources, which would not normally be available to 'outsider' researchers. In inviting the reader to share the feelings and the sensations, and to connect with the author's experience, autoethnographers often write highly readable, insightful and thought-provoking work, vividly bringing alive sub/cultural experiences for those unfamiliar with the social terrain under study. Further, the requirement for the researcher explicitly to situate and analyse her/himself in the dual role of researcher and participant means that the reader is enabled to make some kind of judgment about the author's 'legitimacy' with regard to portraying and interpreting the specific social context studied.

In terms of weaknesses, autoethnography in general has been accused of a lack of academic rigour, of self-indulgence and navel-gazing, and employing a diarist style, particularly when more evocative forms are, erroneously, believed to be representative of what is a highly diverse and multi-stranded field. For those seeking to adhere to the traditional triad of evaluation criteria appropriate to the 'scientific method' - validity, reliability and generalizability - autoethnographic research would not provide a suitable methodology, and indeed has no concern with fulfilling these criteria. The kinds of assessment criteria posited for autoethnographic - and also much ethnographic - work, are wide-ranging, and generally acknowledge the relativism of 'truth' and knowledge claims as being dependent upon historical and socio-cultural context. Alternative criteria suggested for assessing auto/ethnographic research include concepts such as credibility and verisimilitude. Richardson (2000: 254), for example, argues in relation to ethnography that it should express a 'reality'

that 'seems true', furnishing us with a 'credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the "real"'; a sentiment that also holds in relation to good autoethnography, many of us would argue. A further judgment criterion highlighted as important is the notion of <u>resonance</u>, where the research findings and write-up should reverberate with the experience of the reader so that s/he can identify at some level with what is being communicated, and also feel empathy for the author/researcher, thus achieving what Dadds (2008) terms 'empathetic validity'.

It should be remembered, however, that whilst autoethnographic research certainly does incorporate very personal, evocative and poetic accounts, seeking to promote empathetic understanding, it also includes highly analytic and theoretical work under its wide-ranging <u>aegis</u>. It makes little sense to evaluate both forms, located at different ends of the analytic-evocative spectrum, via the same criteria. Furthermore, as Sparkes & Smith (2009) argue in relation to judging qualitative research in general, evaluation criteria should never be viewed as fixed and universal, but rather as open to reinterpretation as times, conditions and research purposes change. Thus, in order to be fair and ethical, they argue, we need to adopt a mode of connoisseurship in order to make judgments vis-à-vis different kinds of research. One set of evaluation criteria most certainly does not fit all.

With regard to future directions, one of the strengths of autoethnography is its openness to new uses and formats, and I think that a new form of the genre, 'autophenomenography' (Gruppetta, 2004; Allen-Collinson, 2011a, 2011b) holds rich possibilities for SPC researchers. In this form of research, as described above in relation to the autophenomenographic study of female distance running, the primary focus is upon the researcher's lived experience of a phenomenon or phenomena rather than upon her or his cultural or subcultural location. This latter is more

usually the locus of scholarly attention in autoethnography, although clearly cultural location and lived experience are closely inter-twined, certainly in the application of phenomenology by SPC researchers in the social sciences, rather than in its 'purer' philosophical form. In autophenomenography, the self is engaged in a specific way: in relation to phenomena, or things as they appear to the conscious mind. This is a research approach that I found interesting but also very challenging in relation to my own lived body experiences of distance running. I should explain that I choose to use the term 'autophenomenography' rather than 'autophenomenology' here for two reasons. First, as with autoethnography, 'graphy' is taken as applicable to the research process in general as well as to the written, or representational product of that process. Second, autophenomenology has specific and highly contested meanings within phenomenology (see for example, Drummond 2007) and here is not really the forum to engage in such debates.

Although Gruppetta (2004) is the first person (to my knowledge) to make reference to 'autophenomenography', she does not go into any detail regarding how actually to utilize this approach, and it would seem to offer exciting possibilities to add to the developing corpus of autoethnographic work. I have suggested above using a form of Giorgi's empirical phenomenology to undertake autophenomenography, but others may have different ideas as to how profitably to engage in this form of research; the way is open! Analogous to its autoethnographic sibling, autophenomenography is capable of producing the rich, finely textured, 'thick descriptions' of first-person experience, and bringing to life the felt, lived, corporeal experience, so central to much of our participation in sport and physical cultures. Within the autophenomenographic genre too there is scope for a wide spectrum of representational styles, including evocative forms such as poetic representations and

performative, audience-interactive presentations, already familiar to those of us working with autoethnography. Along with the use of collaborative and community autoethnographies, I envisage autophenomenography to be one of the key new directions for those employing 'automethodology' (Pensoneau-Conway & Toyosaki, 2011) within SPC.

This chapter has considered autoethnography as a relatively novel research approach within SPC, one which offers a variety of modes of engaging with self, or perhaps more accurately, selves - to reflect the context-dependency of our felt identities. Whilst autoethnography undoubtedly has proved a vibrant and innovative research approach for those working in SPC (and beyond), there are both strengths and weaknesses as delineated above. The key task, as with any form of research, is to decide what methodological approach will best suit the ontological and epistemological bases, and the aims and objectives of the particular research study. Autoethnographic research offers, I would argue, a means of gaining rich and nuanced insights into personal lived experience and situating these within a wider socio-cultural context; insights which are unlikely to be accessible via more 'orthodox' research approaches. It thus adds a potent additional element to the methodological pantheon available to us as researchers in SPC.

Key Readings

Allen-Collinson, J. & Hockey, J. (2005). Autoethnography: self-indulgence or rigorous methodology? In M. J. McNamee (ed), <u>Philosophy and the Sciences of Exercise, Health and Sport: Critical Perspectives on Research Methods</u>. London: Routledge, pp. 187-202.

This chapter sets out the ways in which autoethnography has been and can be utilised within research in sport, exercise and health sciences, also addressing head-on criticisms of the approach as 'self-indulgent' and narcissistic.

Anderson, L. (2006). Analytic autoethnography. Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 35 (4): 373-395.

This article argues (not uncontentiously) for a distinction between 'analytic' and more 'evocative' forms of autoethnography, and posits that the former refers to research in which the researcher is: a full member in the research group or setting, visible as such in published texts, and committed to developing theoretical understandings.

Ellis, C. & Bochner, A.P. (2000). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds), Handbook of Qualitative Research. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

This chapter considers, amongst other things, issues of representation and autoethnographic writing as a method of inquiry that requires great reflexivity, and takes the author on a journey through various stages of self-reflection.

Jones, R. (2006). Dilemmas, maintaining 'face' and paranoia: an average coaching life. Qualitative Inquiry, 12 (5): 1012-1021.

This is an interesting and highly readable example of an article that combines evocative and analytic autoethnography by presenting the evocative narrative of the author himself (as a coach of a semi-professional soccer team) as the core of the article, with the theoretical and analytic section provided in the form of end notes.

Reed-Danahay, D. (Ed.) (1997). Auto/Ethnography. Rewriting the self and the social. Oxford: Berg.

A 'classic', original introduction to autoethnography.

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