

Autoethnography as the Engagement of Self/Other, Self/Culture, Self/Politics, and Selves/Futures

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Citation:

Allen-Collinson, J (2013) Autoethnography as the engagement of self/other, self/culture, self/politics, selves/futures, in S Holman Jones, T E Adams & C Ellis (eds), *Handbook of Autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 281-299.

Exhaustion clouds my body-mind, cotton woolliness of brain. World dimly perceived through a veil of fatigue. Nearly three weeks solid of marking. Legs and arms heavy from it, neck and shoulders rigid, strained, taut to breaking. Eyes red and gritty. It's going to be a hard run tonight, I guess. But just a few minutes into my stride the navy-dusk wind is cutting away the work smog, sloughing off the grey skin of the working day. I am cleansed. I am back. I am back in-body after yet another day of attempted body denial and enforced focus on the headwork. Quads surge forward, muscles strong and bulking, pushing against tracksters, abs tighten and flatten against the chill wind as I begin to up the pace... Power surges through me, I feel butch, lean, mean and honed, and very much woman. [Extract from field notes]

Introduction

In many ways, autoethnography represents a challenge to some of the very foundations and key tenets of much social science research in its exhortation explicitly to situate and “write in” the researcher as a key player—often *the* key player—within a research project or account, as illustrated by the opening excerpt from my autoethnographic account of being a female distance runner. Despite its burgeoning popularity, increasing sophistication and sustained challenge to more orthodox forms of qualitative research, there are those who view autoethnography's focus on “self” with deep suspicion and scepticism, accusing the genre of flirting with indulgent, “navel-gazing” forms of autobiography. For many of us, however, it

represents a fresh and innovative variation of ethnography—and more!—where an ethnographic perspective and analysis are brought to bear on our personal, lived experience, directly linking the micro level with the macro cultural and structural levels in exciting ways. For us, too, autoethnography provides rare discursive space for voices too often muted or forcibly silenced within more traditional forms of research, opening up and democratizing the research space to those seeking to contest hegemonic discourses of whatever flavor.

Within autoethnography, the selves of researcher and participant coalesce and our own experiences *qua* member of a social group are subject to analysis, often generating richly textured, powerfully evocative accounts

ⁱ of human lived experience. As autoethnographers, we thus occupy a dual, and challenging, role as both member of the social world under study and researcher of that same world (Anderson, 2006), requiring acute and sustained reflexivity. Of particular interest to many of us has been a focus on embodiment, our subjective experience of existing as a corporeal being in the physical world. For as Denzin (2012) notes (in relation to sports studies, but certainly applicable more widely): “An embodied (sports studies) project that matters must locate the body within a radically contextual politics. It must focus on the active, agentic flesh-and-blood human body” (p. 298). Thus, as a feminist autoethnographer, one of my concerns has been to explore some of my lived-body experiences as a gendered being, including as a female distance runner (Allen-Collinson, 2011a) often subject to sexist verbal and occasionally physical harassment. There is also in autoethnography a concern to portray self-consciousness, to “open up the realm of the interior and the personal” (Fiske, 1990, p. 90), as well as setting us on a challenging, potentially emotionally painful, voyage of self-investigation.

This chapter considers autoethnography as a relational research approach that offers a variety of modes of engaging with self, or perhaps more accurately with selves, in relation to others, to culture, to politics, and the engagement of selves in relation to future possibilities for research. These domains are also inter-related; engagement with culture often entails engagement with self, others, and politics (see the discussion of Antoniu’s [2004] work later, with regard to intersectionalities of gender, sexuality, nationality, politics, and culture). In relation to future directions of autoethnography, I portray two particular variants—collaborative autoethnography and also autophenomenography (Allen-Collinson, 2011b), which I have selected as two contrasting forms that take forward the autoethnographic enterprise in distinctive ways. But first, our attention turns to autoethnography as the engagement of self and/with others.

Autoethnography as the Engagement of Self/Other

In general, autoethnography is a research approach in which we as an author draw upon our own lived experiences, specifically in relation to the culture (and subcultures) of which we are a member. As Reed-Danahay (1997) neatly encapsulates, autoethnography synthesizes postmodern ethnography (where realist conventions and “objectivity” are strongly called into question) and postmodern autobiography (in which the idea of the coherent, individual self is similarly called into question). Autoethnography seeks to connect the personal to the cultural and to locate both “self”—however shifting and fragmentary—and others within a social context. The researcher, in social interaction with others, is thus the subject of the research, traversing and blurring distinctions of the personal and the social, and of self and other (Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Reed-Danahay, 1997) and also of “native” and “non-native” (Motzafi-Haller, 1997) in some writings. Autoethnography thus engages with the dialectics of subjectivity and culture, albeit with different emphases by different authors on the elements of, respectively: the self (*autos*), the “race” or nation—extended to include a cultural, subcultural or social group of some kind (*ethnós*), and the research process and its representation (*graphein*). In addressing autoethnography as the engagement of self and others, we also encounter some thorny ethical issues surrounding the engagement and representation of self in relation to others, and a body of work addressing autoethnographic ethics has recently begun to emerge (see Ellis, 2007; Chatham-Carpenter, 2010; Roth, 2009; Tullis, this collection). Here I focus upon some key ethical issues surrounding representing the “self,” representing others, and also the need to acknowledge the dialogical nature of autoethnography.

While writing about our own lives and experiences may at first, superficial glance seem relatively devoid of ethical concerns, compared with other forms of research, some delicate ethical issues and thorny dilemmas can indeed arise, including in relation to the representation

of self in autoethnographic accounts. For some writers and researchers, engaging in the autoethnographic process can of itself be a very painful and even potentially self-injurious act. Chatham-Carpenter (2010) reminds us that while we may be accustomed to considering the protection of others from harm within our research, more rarely do autoethnographers consider how to protect ourselves in the autoethnographic process, should this prove necessary. She describes vividly how, during the writing of her autoethnography on anorexia, she felt the compulsion to publish her work become intertwined with the compulsion of her anorexia. Engaging in the analytic self-reflection at the heart of autoethnography made her vulnerable once again to engaging in anorexic thought processes and behavior, which she had determinedly sought to leave behind.

For many autoethnographers, there is the question of how far along the self-disclosure/exposure and vulnerability route we wish or feel compelled to situate ourselves, and how “honest” we decide to be in creating and representing the “auto/biographical I” (Stanley, 1995), or perhaps more accurately, the “autobiographical *we*” given the multiple authorial selves we hold across different contexts. Autoethnography may well confront us with dilemmas regarding self-presentation, and just how much “real” “true” biographical

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