Chapter 7
Autoethnography in Information Science Research:
A Transformative Generation and Sharing of Knowledge or a Fallacy?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the concept of autoethnography as a qualitative research method. It aims to investigate the critical question of the importance of autoethnography as a transformative scientific research method for the purpose of generating and sharing knowledge to advance research in information science. The chapter is an exploratory study investigating the current context of autoethnography in information science, its applicability to the field for transformative learning and knowledge sharing, and possible challenges to be experienced. Findings indicate the potential of the autoethnographic method to provide the opportunity for information professionals to study experiences of information use in diverse contexts of information science. Recommendations highlight the viability of the application of Sense Making theory and the Information Search Process (ISP) model to research practices in autoethnography by information scientists.

INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research methods lie within the interpretive paradigm that focuses on complex social constructs that seek to understand human actions from the perspective of the social actors themselves. The key assumption in qualitative research is that events that occur can only be understood through the eyes of the actual participant in context (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Berg, 2012; Gorman & Clayton, 2005). As an approach, the qualitative research method is able to provide a descriptive analysis of the social context it examines; in this way, it affords the researcher the facts and figures that allow for the interpretation of findings in the context of the community or situation being investigated. Similarly, the fact that qualitative data are collected over a sustained period of time makes them useful for studying social processes within any given context (Bryman, 1988; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

In practice, qualitative research methods lack the precision and definition of quantitative methods, and its processes are inductive; that is, theory formulation is grounded in the findings of the research that can be used to support, refine, compare, or formulate new theories (Sarantakos, 1993). The methods and approaches used in qualitative research therefore relate to the processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency, but rather emphasize the socially constructed nature of reality and the situational constraints that shape the inquiry. However, qualitative research does allow for a more nuanced approach to the development of theories (Creswell, 1994, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The following approaches have been identified as being distinctly aligned to qualitative research methods, among which include case study, ethnography, phenomenology, autoethnography, grounded theory, and narrative inquiry (Leedy & Ormond, 2005).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Autoethnography is a relatively new research approach within qualitative research methods; it is a method that seeks to describe and systematically analyze the personal experience of a researcher in order to understand a particular context, cultural belief, or practice (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). It entails the researcher writing about themselves as a form of critical self-inquiry in which he/she is at the center of investigation as the "subject" as well as the "object" or participant being investigated (Denshire, 2013; McIlveen, 2008; Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010). However, this particular feature of the research method has been a subject of much scrutiny, as it involves highly personalized accounts where the opinion of the researcher is written in the first person, which opposes the widely accepted view that maintains that any rigorous and valuable research should be undertaken from a neutral, impersonal, and objective stance (Holt, 2003; Méndez, 2013; Ngunjiri et al., 2010). Similarly, even though autoethnography as a qualitative research method utilizes data about self and context in order to gain an understanding of the connectivity with other social phenomena, issues of ethics, the absence of a strong analytical approach, and the inability to generalize research outcomes have constituted some of its major limitations as a research method (Anderson, 2006; Ellis, 2007; Méndez, 2013). Despite these challenges, the applicability of autoethnography to various disciplines, professional practice, and organizations is growing, thereby providing an opportunity to further interrogate the assumptions and processes that define this research method (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2012; McIlveen, 2008; Parry & Boyle, 2009).

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