


Chapter 2

Critical Autoethnography for Social Justice Research in Doctoral Education

Robin Throne

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3015-9587>
University of the Cumberlands, USA

ABSTRACT

As autoethnography and other methods for self-as-subject research continue to increase in use across doctoral education, this guide proposes to inform the methods in this area specific to critical autoethnography for doctoral scholars desiring to conduct the many forms of social justice research. This includes indigenous research, contemporary feminist research, and arts-based research, which have also seen rise across dissertation research among many disciplines. While many works exist to describe critical autoethnography within specific contexts, few research guides examine critical autoethnography specific for use by the doctoral scholar and specific examples across research focused on societal change and/or disruption of existing power dynamics, lack of parity, or historical trauma from acculturation and/or dispossession. Thus, this chapter offers a concise research methods resource for doctoral scholars and their research supervisors to facilitate use of critical autoethnography across disciplines and among diverse research problems of inquiry.

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INTRODUCTION

In past works, the author with others have reported on the many challenges faced by doctoral scholars who choose autoethnography or other self-as-subject research designs for dissertation research (Lewis & Throne, 2021). Yet, numerous doctoral scholars have reported the means to overcome these impediments to complete rigorous and valuable critical autoethnography of a multitude of phenomena of inquiry for social justice aims. Specifically, for critical autoethnography, Adams (2017, 2020) noted how and why critical autoethnographies can be used as bridges between the individual experience and the larger sociocultural, sociohistorical, sociopolitical, and/or socioeconomic experience. Even more so, critical autoethnography can be used as a mechanism to propose and discover remedy to unequal power dynamics, inequities, injustices, and other personal, cultural, and social destructive dynamics (Adams, 2017).

While challenges may exist within doctoral programs as to the use of critical autoethnographic dissertation research design, transformative research methods have historically gained interest and increased use due to popularities or trends within doctoral research. As Candy (2011) reported, doctoral research has served to formalize research methodologies especially due to their use within dissertation research. Critical autoethnography, specifically, involves blurred research genres and disciplines while addressing institutionalized power and privilege whether emotional, evocative, performative, or arts-based (Marx et al., 2019; Tilley-Lubbs, 2016). Yet, this blurring has also raised concern by some doctoral research supervisors as a research design too nebulous for doctoral research where systematic methods are expected within conventional dissertation research (Forber-Pratt, 2015) or rejected for educational research (Bhattacharya, 2020). Yet, these views diminish the capacity of autoethnography to examine the experiences of marginalized or oppressed voices who may bring forward alternate views to multiplicity of identities necessary to best understand power dynamics and oppression while simultaneously highlighting the interconnectedness of a global human experience (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016). Unlike objectivists or positivist views, this form of research does not separate lived experience from research (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016).

Critical inquiry was generally defined previously by the author within “qualitative research as research undertaken beyond the theoretical to intentionally engage the political discourse to advance the public good, social justice, power structures, or critical consciousness within a socially-just democratic society” (Throne, 2020, p. 173) and this definition is continued here. Thus, doctoral scholars who aspire to explore a phenomenon of inquiry that involves social justice, or pursuit of a dissertation study with a social change aspect, the conventions of critical inquiry may be used or even organic to the research focus. Further, doctoral scholars who desire to explore the

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