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WRITING THE 'SELF': INTRODUCING AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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Ethnography in anthropology has for a very long time been focused on the study of the 'Other'. Field methods and techniques have been developed accordingly. While ethnography is a method of qualitative research that describes human social phenomena based on fieldwork of a community which is not the researcher's own, in autoethnography the researcher studies the 'Self'. The benefits of autoethnography are many - research of such a personal nature might give us insight into problems often overlooked in culture. These could be issues such as the nature of identity, ethnicity, sexuality, political life and undercurrents etc. However, there are many who criticize this form of ethnography as sentimental, unscientific and personal. This could, if done subjectively, lead to rewriting of one's collective memory as well.

This paper discusses autoethnography as a method of enquiry and puts forward a review of some of the prominent anthropological works done in the area. It also discusses the ethics of doing such a narrative yet experimental ethnography in anthropology.

I

> "What is the role of the 'I' in ethnography?" questions Carolyn Ellis (2004: xix), "... is the 'I' only about the eye of the researcher, the researcher standing apart and looking? What about the 'I' of the researcher, the part that not only looks but is looked back at, that not only acts but is acted back upon by those in her focus. Is ethnography only about the other? Isn't ethnography also relational, about the other and the 'I' of the researcher in interaction? Might the researcher also be a subject? Might the 'I' refer to the researcher who looks inward as well as outward? What can be gained from making the 'I' a part, or even a focus of ethnographic research?"

Autoethnography began in the 1980s as a protest to the existing social science methodologies of how the stories of the 'Other' were not accurately represented, how a universal narrative was impossible, how researching the 'Other' led to a juxtaposition of the 'Self', and how stories made meaningful sense of the 'Self' and the 'Other'. The colonialist approach of "authoritatively entering a culture, exploiting cultural members, and then recklessly leaving to write about the culture for monetary and/or professional gain, while disregarding relational ties to cultural members" (Ellis *et al.*, 2011: 274) was challenged. Thus, the beginning of autoethnography was a "turn towards blurred genres of writing, a heightened self-reflexivity in ethnographic research, an increased focus on emotion in the social sciences, and the postmodern scepticism regarding generalization of knowledge claims" (Anderson, 2006:373). New methodologies and forms of writing and research thus emerged, one of which was autoethnography.

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In the 1960s and 1970s many social scientists were experimenting with self observation and analysis, but very few anthropologists ventured into this except an occasional methodological note (in field notes and diaries), or in "confessional tales" (Van Maanen, 1988). One of the earliest anthropological works which followed this tradition was Anthony Wallace's (1965) self-observational study, of the cognitive "mazeway" he constructed and used while driving to work[1]. But Wallace's studies were deeply subjective and lacked broader ethnographic focus. In 1979, David Hayano published an essay on autoethnography that laid out a case for self-observation in ethnographic research. He argued that as anthropologists moved out of the colonial era of ethnography, they would come more and more to study the social worlds and subcultures of which they were a part. In contrast to the detached-outsider characteristic of colonial anthropologists, contemporary anthropologists would frequently be full members of the cultures they studied.

The term "autoethnography" was first coined by Raymond Firth in his seminar on structuralism in 1966 (Hayano, 1979). In his lecture, Firth made a passing reference to Jomo Kenyatta's study (1938) of his native Kikuyu people. He narrated how when Kenyatta first presented his field material in Malinowski's seminar, he touched off a heated shouting match with another Kikuyu speaker a white African, L. S. B. Leakey. Their argument raised the question of judging the validity of anthropological data by assessing the characteristics, interests, and origin of the person who did the fieldwork.

II

The term autoethnography has several meanings, but largely refers to both the method and the product of researching and writing about personal lived experiences and their relationship to culture (Ellis, 2004; Ellis *et al*., 2011). *Auto* involves the "turning of the ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography looking at the larger context wherein self experiences occur" (Denzin, 1997: 227). This is a research to conduct and write ethnographies of their "own people" (Hayano, 1979). Hayano felt it encompasses a wide range of studies, as it includes the works of social scientists who have done intensive participant-observation research in natural field settings.

As a methodology it "acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist" (Ellis *et.al*., 2011: 275). Thus autoethnographers "research themselves in relation to others" (Boylorn and Orbe, 2014:17). It is a "research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political" (Ellis, 2004: xix).

Hayano (1979:99) offers three reasons for the development of autoethnography in anthropological studies:

> First, it is obvious that fieldwork can no longer be conducted under the wing of friendly colonial authorities. The disappearance or incorporation of former tribal peoples into peasant and urban social systems has made it almost impossible to study small, isolated tribal groups as if they existed apart from other peoples or from world economic and political forces.
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> Second, minority and foreign anthropologists are being trained in greater numbers than ever before, and many of them have clear priorities for doing ethnography in their home territories. Within anthropology and sociology there has long been a propensity for minority scholars to study their own group, either by choice or social restriction (Bracey *et.al*., 1973). The recent upsurge in popularity of Third World courses and Ethnic Studies departments has also generated the need for minority social scientists to examine first their own peoples and communities.
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> Third, specializations such as urban anthropology, applied or action anthropology, and various other interdisciplinary studies have led many graduate students to do at least some predoctoral fieldwork in their own backyards, particularly since shrinking research funds and increased competition have reduced much of the support for anthropological fieldwork abroad.

The publication of two volumes in 1992 captured this trend and influenced its subsequent development. Okely and Callaway's collection *Anthropology and Autobiography* (1992) and Bourdieu's *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (1992). The first book aimed to convey personal narratives about experiences in the field, and open discussion on the role of the anthropologist as a person in the construction of knowledge in the field. Okely and Callaway's approach to reflexivity is somewhat different from that of Bourdieu who delineated an intellectual stance that he called ''anti-autobiography'' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:213). Bourdieu used the notion of ''reflexivity'' to refer to an approach of social science research that does not privilege the individualism of the author (which he felt was the misguided standard approach of autobiography), but, rather, required an awareness of the researcher's positioning in various social fields and social spaces, as well as a broader critique of the ways in which social science constructs its objects. According to Bourdieu, reflexivity is a methodological approach in which one critically examines one's own position within the field of academic production—not in order to be more objective and less subjective, but rather to understand the false distinction between these two categories.

In recent years much of autoethnography is spearheaded by Ellis and Bochner (Ellis, 1991, 1995, 1999, 2004, 2007; Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Ellis *et al*., 2011) who have experimented with variations of autoethnography. Also, Richardson (1994) and Denzin (1997, 2003) have served a critical role in defining autoethnography. Some recent works in anthropology include Behar (1996), Rapport and Overing (2000), Reed-Danahay (1997, 2001, 2002, 2009), Davies (2002) among others.

III

While autoethnography has traditionally been tied into autobiography or ethnography (Reed-Danahay, 1997; Ellis, 2004), Chang (2008) argues that

autoethnography "should be ethnographic in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation, and autobiographical in its content orientation" (p.48). She further explains how autoethnography is distinct from ethnography as a method, while acknowledging that autoethnography is ethnographic in nature.

> First, like ethnographers, autoethnographers follow similar ethnographic research process by systematically collecting data ... analysing and interpreting them, and producing scholarly reports, also called autoethnography. In this sense, the term "autoethnography" refers to the process and the product, just as "ethnography" does. Second, like ethnographers, autoethnographers attempt to achieve cultural understanding through analysis and interpretation. In other words, autoethnographers attempt to achieve cultural understanding through analysis and interpretation. In other words, autoethnography is not about focusing on self alone, but about searching for understanding of others (culture/society) through self... The last aspect of autoethnography sets it apart from other ethnographic enquiries. Autoethnographers use their personal experiences as primary data.
>
> (Chang, 2008: 48-49)

The different methods of writing in this "methodological innovation" (Anderson 2006: 374) has been discussed by authors extensively. Reed-Danahay (1997:2) explained autoethnography as an intersection of three writing genres: (a) "native anthropology", in which people who were formerly the subjects of ethnography become the authors of studies of their own group; (b) "ethnic autobiography", personal narratives written by members of ethnic minority groups; and (c) "autobiographical ethnography", in which anthropologists interject personal experiences into ethnographic writing.

Ellis (2004:46), on the other hand, discusses genres of writing similar to autoethnography. "Indigenous or native ethnography" are written by researchers who share a history of colonialism or economic subordination, including subjucation by ethnographers who have made them subjects of their work; "bicultural insider/ outsider" in which the researcher constructs their own cultural story to depict a way of life; and "reflexive or narrative ethnography", which are written by authors focusing on a culture or subculture who use their life story in that culture to look more deeply at self-other interactions. This approach offers insight into how the researcher changed as a result of observing others.

Today there is much literature on self-narration with a bent towards emotion. This has been termed as "self-indulgent" (Sparkes, 2002), "heartful" (Ellis, 1999), and "evocative or emotional" (Ellis, 2004) autoethnography. These include the use of systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall; the inclusion of the researcher's vulnerable selves, emotions, body, and spirit; the production of evocative stories that create the effect of reality; the celebration of concrete experience and intimate detail; the examination of how human experience is endowed with meaning; a concern with moral, ethical, and political consequences; an encouragement of compassion and empathy; a focus on helping us know how

to live and cope; the featuring of multiple voices and the repositioning of readers and "subjects" as co-participants in dialogue; the seeking of a fusion (Sparkes, 2002).

In opposition to Ellis' "evocative or emotional autoethnography", Anderson (2006) uses the term "analytic autoethnography". This refers to ethnographic work in which the researcher is a full member in the research group or setting, visible as such in the researcher's published texts, and committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena.

"Critical autoethnography" shares similarity with Madison's (2012:5) conception of critical ethnography, which "begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain". Critical autoethnographers are invested in the "politics of positionality" (Madison, 2012) that require researchers to acknowledge the inevitable priviledges one experiences alongside marginalization and to take responsibility for one's subjective lenses through reflexivity. In such a genre of writing, one "write(s) as an Other, and for an Other" (Boylorn and Orbe, 2014: 15).

IV

Despite criticisms, there are many who support the methodology of personalized self narrative as an important and necessary variant of ethnography. Nevertheless, autoethnography has limitations like any other field of science.

Hayano (1979) says that the most important field method for an autoethnographer is "intensive participant observation", to the neglect of other research tools. Again in undertaking fieldwork, the choice of a field location is often determined by the researcher's identity and group membership. Some anthropologists of foreign or ethnic origin state that, in their experiences in American universities, they are expected to study their own peoples rather than do fieldwork elsewhere. While mentioning the problems faced by Jones (1970) and Chilungu (1976), he further states the obvious practical advantages of doing fieldwork – prior knowledge of the native language, a major obstacle for other ethnographers who are not a part of the ethnic group; and feelings of empathy and emotions which insiders share from knowing their subjects on a deep, subtle level.

However, contrarily, the most fundamental dilemma raised by most autoethnographers concerns research bias and the objective-subjective polarity in collecting, interpreting, and reporting information. Opinion diverges as to how much the insider's viewpoint should be presented and how accurate it actually is. Chilungu (1976) resents the accusation that insiders are automatically biased in their interpretation of data in comparison to outside ethnographers. Jones (1970) is a stronger advocate of subjectivity and involvement, and takes the position that the ethnographer should present data on behalf of and beneficial to his own

membership group. In either case, the lack and distinctiveness of the insider's perspective in anthropology is noticeable (*c.f.* Hayano 1979: 102).

In questioning how "native" a native anthropologist is, Narayan (1993) states that every researcher has "multiplex identity". Therefore, she says, "it is more profitable to focus on shifting identities in relationship with the people and issues an anthropologist seeks to represent. Even if one can blend into a particular social group without the quest of fieldwork, the very nature of researching what to others is taken-for-granted reality creates an uneasy distance. However, even if one starts out as a stranger, sympathies and ties developed through engaged coexistence may subsume difference within relationships of reciprocity. 'Objectivity' must be replaced by an involvement that is unabashedly subjective as it interacts with and invites other subjectivities to take a place in anthropological productions. Knowledge, in this scheme, is not transcendental, but situated, negotiated, and part of an ongoing process. This process spans personal, professional, and cultural domains" (p. 682).

While writing a personalized narrative in anthropology, other issues of ethics come into the picture. Ellis (2004) in the introduction to the book *The Ethnographic I* says, "The self questioning autoethnography demands is extremely difficult. Often you confront things about yourself that are less than flattering. Believe me, honest autoethnographic exploration generates a lot of fears and self-doubts – and emotional pain. Just when you think you can't stand the pain anymore – that's when the real work begins. Then there's the vulnerability of revealing yourself, not being able to take back what you've written or having any control over how readers interpret your story. Its hard not to feel that critics are judging your life as well as your work. The critique can be humiliating. And the ethical issues... just wait until you're writing about family members and loved ones who are part of your story..." (p. xviii).

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) delineate two major dimensions of ethics. The first is procedural ethics, which usually involves seeking approval from a relevant ethics committee to undertake research involving humans; and "ethics in practice" or the everyday ethical issues that arise in the doing of research. It is the latter which finds no space in procedural ethics but which is the most commonly faced dilemma of an ethnographic researcher. While discussing a situation where in an informant reveals a personal and wounding situation, they question how should the researcher respond? "Does the researcher let the disclosure pass or take it up in some way? And in what way—what words to say, what tone of voice to use? Turn off the tape recorder or keep it running? Abandon the interview plan or try to return to it? Offer to discuss the situation or offer to help in some way?" (p. 264).

To these Ellis (2007) added a third dimension, relational ethics, which is heightened for ethnographers. For instance, she says, "...if an autoethnographer writes a story about a particular neighbor's racist acts, the neighbor is implicated

by the words even though the autoethnographer may never mention the name of the neighbour" (Ellis, 2007:29). Slattery and Rapp (2003:55) describe relational ethics as doing what is necessary to be "true to one's character and responsible for one's actions and their consequences on others". Relational ethics recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they live and work. Central to relational ethics is the question "What should I do now?" rather than the statement "This is what you should do now".

Finally, when writing about the 'Self', whose story are we narrating? Is it our own story? Clandinin and Connelly (2000) challenge all self-narrative writers with a poignant question: Do they own a story because they tell it? A Story is never made in a vacuum and others are always visible or invisible participants in our story (Chang, 2008). Tolich (2004) says the relational risk is not that the researcher will expose confidences to outsiders, but that confidences will be exposed to other participants or members of their family, friendship or acquaintanceship networks.

V

Over 40 years ago, Walter Goldschmidt (1977) had proposed that "in a sense, all ethnography is self-ethnography" (p. 294), prompting Reed-Danahay (2009:29) to question, "Does this mean that all ethnography is autoethnography?"

Anthropologists have been writing reflexively and using autobiography in their work for a long time, but that trend has intensified since the 1990s. A large number of published material exists today that merges autobiography into ethnography — which many people take to be synonymous with the term ''autoethnography.'' There are memoirs of fieldwork, memoirs of academic careers, and edited collections on topics ranging from taking children to the field, sexuality in the field, long-term fieldwork, and fieldwork in different regions of the world (Reed-Danahay, 2009). There is also an increasing interest in autoethnography in the field of education - in self-narrative as a teaching tool and as a way to improve teaching (Burdell and Swadener, 1999). Many writings that combine ethnographic and autobiographical perspectives, even if they do not adopt the label autoethnography, could be associated with it. Reflection on our own practices as anthropologists (at an individual and institutional level) is currently very much a part of sociocultural anthropology too (Reed-Danahay, 2009).

It does not use the conventions of what Marcus and Cushman (1982) have identified as the "realist" approach to writing, in which an omniscient narrator would detail and analyze a group's behaviour and believes with an aim of objective description. Rather, it tries to convey to the reader the human qualities of both the ethnographer and the studied people and thus to "humanize the ethnographic encounter" (Reed-Danahay, 2002: 421). Thus, in the field of anthropology, this is an "experimental" genre.

The concept of autoethnography captures tension between "postmodern ethnography, in which the realist conventions and objective observer position of standard ethnography have been called into question, and a postmodern autobiography, in which the notion of the coherent, individual self has been similarly called into question'' (Reed-Danahay, 1997: 2). It is a useful concept for thinking about representation and ethnography, but it has multiple histories and uses. It can refer both to the autobiographical or self-reflexive voice of the ethnographer who inserts him or herself into the text, and to ethnography produced by an "insider'' or "native'' observer of his or her own cultural milieu. The idea is to transcend and move forward from the dichotomies of objective vs. subjective and self vs. society.

In understanding particular accuracies of any work, the value of interrogating the subjectivity of the author is invaluable. While there are many critiques of autoethnography, "one of its many values is that it allows us to access the experience of discrimination and understand it from the perspective of the person it is happening to. While someone can take care in understanding and experiencing the process another person is going through, nothing can take the place of someone speaking from their own position" (Yomtoob, 2014:145).

Notes

1. In an interview Wallace later said, "I first began to wonder about the old mills that I saw every day while driving to work. What were they? How old were they? What was it like to have lived and worked in this tiny industrial community? Looking into county histories and other secondary sources, I discovered that they went back quite a way, in fact to the 1870s in some cases. They had originally been cotton mills, built at a time when cotton manufacturing was a prominent industry in the Northeast… I pursued the subject and came to realize that just as Handsome Lake and Seneca was a type case for revitalization movements, so Rockdale could be treated as a kind of exemplar of the social processes that went on in individual communities during the industrial revolution. As an anthropologist, I found it particularly appropriate to survey something as vast as the industrial revolution in America through an intensive study of a very small community like Rockdale" (Grumet and Wallace, 1998: 117).

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