Autoethnography in Advanced Research

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Autoethnography in Advanced Research

- Today's lecture will provide an overview of auto-ethnographic research methods

- Review several autoethnographic scholarly texts

- Explain both the benefits and potential risks of this methodology

What is Autoethnography?

- What do we mean when we say "autoethnography?"

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- Autoethnography is a form of qualitative research

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- An author's first-person narration is the dominant lens through which research is conducted

- Self-reflection is used alongside data/evidence to explore a hypothesis or research question

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- Carolyn Ellis: prominent Communications scholar

- Ellis's work in the 2000's provides a streamlined definition of this methodology

What is Autoethnography?

Autoethnography is "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (p. 273)

-Ellis, Carolyn, et al. "Autoethnography: An Overview." *Historical Social Research*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2011.

What is Autoethnography?

- Autoethnography has a few underlying goals

What is Autoethnography?

- First: examine how <u>cultural circumstances</u> fundamentally impact the formulation and application of abstract ideas in real-world situations

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- Second: acknowledge the <u>influence of the author</u> when conducting advanced research

What is Autoethnography?

- These goals push back against some assumptions regarding research

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- These goals push back against some assumptions regarding research

- We often strive for objectivity in our research

- We want our research to be transferable, so we try to limit the impact of external variables and our own influence as an author

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What is Autoethnography?

- **Autoethnography does not disregard objectivity**

What is Autoethnography?

- Autoethnography does not disregard objectivity

- Autoethnography demonstrates how objective principles are shaped by subjective, culturally-informed circumstances

- Help us anticipate how to adapt theoretical frameworks to real-world scenarios

What is Autoethnography?

- **Let's look at a keystone autoethnographic text to further unpack the subjective/objective relationship**

What is Autoethnography?

- *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence* by Keith Gilyard (1991)

- Gilyard narrates personal experiences of being an African-American, first-generation college student

- Analyzes the tension and fissures between his home life and academic life

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- Gilyard uses personal experiences to explore the concept of "bidialectalism" (code-switching between different dialects depending on the situation)

- Instead of studying this phenomenon from afar, Gilyard explains how this concept impacted his daily life and education

What is Autoethnography?

- Previous research focused on first-gen and marginal/minority students within educational spaces

- Gilyard's research highlights the personal experiences that first-gen and marginal/minority students bring with them into the classroom

What is Autoethnography?

- **Gilyard demonstrates how theoretical frameworks adapt (or even fail to adapt) to real-world situations**

What is Autoethnography?

- Gilyard demonstrates how theoretical frameworks adapt (or even fail to adapt) to real-world situations

- Also demonstrates how cultural circumstances can provide valuable insight into key ideas (cultural circumstances are not just obstacles to overcome)

Using Autoethnography in Your Work

- How can we use autoethnography?

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- Many of use won't produce full-length autoethnographic research

- However, research that does not label itself as autoethnography still includes some autoethnographic moments

Using Autoethnography in Your Work

- Some instances of using autoethnography might include…

Using Autoethnography in Your Work

- Acknowledging material limitations or institutional restrictions

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- Clarifying how personal experiences shaped the rationale used when designing an experiment or testing a hypothesis

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- Clarifying how personal experiences shaped the rationale used when designing an experiment or testing a hypothesis

- Explaining your own role in gathering data (discussing how you trained interviewers or interacted with interviewees)

Using Autoethnography in Your Work

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- Methods section discussed why I was interested in using Minecraft as a teaching tool

- Played the game to keep in touch with friends in grad school. Also noticed growing Minecraft YouTube community

Using Autoethnography in Your Work

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- Moments of autoethnography allowed me to explain the cultural value and pedagogical value of Minecraft

- Personal experiences were the initial point-of-access into larger conversations surrounding Minecraft's pedagogical merit

Benefits and Drawbacks

- As with any methodology, autoethnography has both benefits and potential drawbacks

- Quickly discuss the advantages and disadvantages of this method

Benefits and Drawbacks

- Autoethnography excels at analyzing the influence of institutional structures and/or cultural circumstances

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- Help us see how external variables can create a gap between theory and practice

- The hope is that we can modify procedures and practices to sync up with actual experiences

Benefits and Drawbacks

- The main strength of auto-ethnography is also its main weakness

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- Autoethnography is most often used in single case studies

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- Case studies are good for "stress testing" theoretical frameworks

- Case studies are not good for extracting long-form patterns across large-scale datasets

Benefits and Drawbacks

- The highly-individualized, self-reflective nature of autoethnography can make it difficult to transfer key lessons to new contexts

Benefits and Drawbacks

- There is also the potential bias of reviewers

- Some might criticize autoethnography as being critically unsubstantial compared to other methodologies

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- Some might criticize autoethnography as being critically unsubstantial compared to other methodologies

- Common critique: how do we peer-review another human's personal experiences?

Benefits and Drawbacks

- I have been a reviewer for manuscripts that include autoethnographic elements

- My approach is to ask the following question:

- Does the inclusion of first-person, personal experiences <u>add new ideas</u> to on-going scholarly conversations?

Conclusion

- Autoethnography is a tool just like any other method or theoretical framework

- We should evaluate its merit based on its ability to identify new outlets for further research

- Also evaluate its ability to help us examine potential gaps in previous research

Conclusion

- Please consult the ORS Lab website for pre-recorded webinars and worksheets that discuss different writing strategies

- Resources and webinars dedicated to different research methods (qualitative, quantitative, and AI-assisted)

- Consultants available to discuss best practices for different research methodologies