My Story: An Authoethnographical Account of Being a PhD Candidate

Rod Pitcher
Australian National University, Rod.Pitcher@anu.edu.au

Recommended APA Citation

Pitcher, R. (2014). My Story: An Authoethnographical Account of Being a PhD Candidate. *The Qualitative Report*, *19*(35), 1-13. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2014.1019

My Story: An Authoethnographical Account of Being a PhD Candidate

Abstract

This paper is an autoethnographical account of my PhD candidature. It shows how the work affected my development as a researcher and also as a person. As I near the end I realise that the process of doing a PhD has changed me beyond recognition. I am no longer the naive undergraduate student of the recent past. I have developed beyond that. I discuss some of the important influences on me during my candidature and how they changed me and my way of thinking about myself and my work.

My Story: An Authoethnographical Account of Being a PhD Candidate

Rod Pitcher
Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

This paper is an autoethnographical account of my PhD candidature. It shows how the work affected my development as a researcher and also as a person. As I near the end I realise that the process of doing a PhD has changed me beyond recognition. I am no longer the naive undergraduate student of the recent past. I have developed beyond that. I discuss some of the important influences on me during my candidature and how they changed me and my way of thinking about myself and my work. Key Words: PhD Candidature, PhD Students, PhD Student Development, Autoethnography, Metaphors

This is the story of my journey throughout the time of my PhD candidature. It gives a chronological account of important events and decision which affected my progress towards the completion of my candidature and the writing of my thesis.

I give this account in the form of a story or narrative as it seems to me the best way of showing how I developed as a researcher during my candidature and how my thinking changed as I progressed through my analysis and writing. It is intended not only to show where I started from and where I ended up, but also how I got there.

To begin at the beginning, then…

Thoughts on my Autoethnographical Approach

I chose to write the Introduction to my thesis as an autoethnography because I believe it will help the reader understand the process of doing PhD research as a social phenomenon better. It is an account of one person's experience as it is experienced by the person doing it.

I do not claim that my way is the only one. Rather it is presented in this form as a highly personalised account. As Sparkes (2000) says, "Autoethnographies are highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding" (pg. 21). Wall (2008) says that "it is the intersection of the personal and the societal that offers a new vantage point from which to make a unique contribution to social science" (pg. 39). It is my intention to help the reader develop some way towards that understanding from my account of my own experience as a PhD candidate. Studies of the method "reveal that autoethnography has been used as a way of telling a story that invites personal connection rather than analysis" (Wall, 2008, pg. 39). I concur with Dyson (2007): "As my understanding of the narrative approach [of autoethnography] developed I began to recognise that it was an appropriate means of telling my story."

This account is very personal. As autoethnography it could not be anything else. It is an expression of the way I did my PhD. Others may have experienced their PhDs differently, and many probably did. Each of us has our own way of working through the problems, the worries and the work, and thus we would each produce a different autoethnography. That does not mean that any, or all, of them are invalid. Rather each is a peephole into the world of the PhD candidate. Each provides a unique view. From the total, a more comprehensive understanding of the PhD journey as a sociological phenomenon can arise. Each of us provides a single piece of understanding of that phenomenon. So the whole becomes much greater than the sum of each of the individual parts when taken alone. As Ellis, Adams and

Bochner point out (2011), autoethnologies "propose to understand a self or some aspect of life as it intersects with a cultural context" (p. 5). It is within this context that I propose to present my experience as a PhD candidate (but see Afterword, below, for more discussion of Ellis et al., (2011) and how it influenced my approach to my autoethnographical account).

However, for some readers, there is a need to justify the approach more fully. Dyson (2007) argues that autoethnography is a "recognised post positive approach" (p. 37) and that the subjective approach of autoethnography is appropriate providing the text is of a sufficient quality and meaning. Since the subjective responses of a person can never be completely ignored nor can anything be completely impersonal, then the more personal approach of autoethnography is quite legitimate (Dyson, 2007). Since the personal cannot be completely ignored, why not use it as data? If nothing else it provides a different, alternative view to an approach that tries to be completely objective, an approach which, it is now commonly accepted, can never be completely achieved. Starr (2010) demonstrates convincingly that autoethnography falls well within the rigour expected of all scholarly work.

Delamont (2007) claims that autoethnography is "essentially lazy, literally lazy and also intellectually lazy" (p. 1) and then she goes on to add that "autoethnography is almost impossible to write and publish *ethically*" (p. 1) because it may refer to other people without their permission (Delamont, 2007). It is necessary to answer these objections lest they be raised by the reader. I shall do so from my own experience in writing autoethnography.

Taking the last point first, I can understand Delamont's point. However, I would argue that, in my case, the ethical conundrum does not apply since I am only describing matters to do with myself. No-one else is named nor described in a way that might lead to their identification. Thus I do not have any ethical problems with my account.

As to autoethnography being lazy. I would dispute Delamont's points. Good autoethnography is not easier to write than other analyses. Indeed it can be very hard work making the meaning of one's thoughts and emotions clearly apparent to the potential reader. It takes as much intellectual effort to compose and write good autoethnography as it does any other analysis, if it is too be successful. Writing good prose always requires a large amount of effort. From some of the papers I've read I would argue that autoethnography requires some talent for writing literature to make it successful. This sort of talent is often missing from papers written in a less personal fashion. To sum up, I would argue, against Delamont, that autoethnography may take more effort than less graphic prose, require a talent for writing narrative and require more intellectual effort.

In telling my story as a journey, using the autoethnographical approach, I am able to relate my experience as a PhD candidate in a way that says something interesting about the experience. In this way I have been able to re-think my experience and write an account that has meaning for me and, hopefully, for the reader. In doing so I have been able to draw out some of the important changes that occurred in me, and probably in others, during the process of doing research and producing a PhD thesis. I must also say that using autoethnography has been, for me, a more joyful part of writing my thesis. It has allowed me to express some of my own conceptions of the importance of the work I have done.

What follows, then is *my* story of *my* candidature, as I experienced it while doing my research and writing up my thesis. For me, the fact that it helped me to develop my understanding of my own motives and aims is sufficient reason to include it here. I hope that the reader will accept it in a similar vein and will read it with an open mind ready to accept something somewhat different from the usual account of a PhD candidacy.

In the Beginning

The story of my PhD candidature begins with my interest in metaphors. When I decided that I would like to do a PhD I started by thinking about the ways in which I could do some more useful work on metaphors and satisfy my interest in them. I was looking for a way that I could follow up my interest in metaphors by exploring how they are used by some group of people. I would study their ideas and conceptions by considering the metaphors they used when talking about their ideas and see what I could discover.

During my initial time at The Centre for Educational Development and Academic Methods (CEDAM) at The Australian National University, I discovered metaphor analysis as a method. I read the little that I could find on the topic and decided that that would be how I would do my research. The idea of being able to look at the metaphors people use and from them understand the person's thinking seemed to me to be something worth looking into in more detail. Thus, at this point I had found my method but still needed the material upon which I could put it into practice. It was obvious that I would have to use written material for ease of working. How and from where I would gather that material was still to be decided. Also, I still had to find the subjects of my research.

At this stage I still didn't have any firm idea who I was going to investigate. That was the first question I had to answer. The main problem that surfaced was finding a source of material from which I could extract the metaphors for my analysis. I discarded a number of possibilities for one reason or another. I finally decided to study doctoral students and find a way of gathering my data from them. I would look at their conceptions of research as illustrated by the metaphors they use in talking about it. I found that there was a small amount of literature on the subject of conceptions of research and read what I could find. Of course, I am also doing a PhD and conceiving of it, so those metaphors are used by me in my own PhD, which is why my story is a key part of my research work. On the basis of the proposal written soon after, relating my intention to use metaphor analysis to study doctoral students' conceptions of research, I was accepted into the PhD programme at CEDAM.

To gather the raw data that I would need I decided that I would use an on-line survey of all the PhD students in the university. Since I didn't have access to the students' emailing list I would send an email to the Graduate Convenors in each area. I would ask them to pass the information about the survey onto the students in their area with a request that they undertake the on-line survey. The email would have a link to the survey so that the students would only need to click on it to take part. It was hoped that making the process as simple as possible for the students would encourage more of them to take part.

There were two main reasons for deciding to use an on-line survey. The first was that, given the large amount of social anxiety from which I suffer it makes it difficult for me to talk to strangers, I didn't feel comfortable with the idea of interviewing people face-to-face. The second reason was that in the survey the same questions would be put in the same manner to all the participants. There would be no possibility of my asking leading questions during face-to-face interviews. Any influence arising from the nature of the questions or the method of asking them would be constant across all the participants. I decided that the use of an on-line survey would satisfy both reasons.

Some Doubts Begin

It was at this stage that I started to wonder about metaphor analysis as a method. Perhaps the problem was my application of it. Since I had little literature on the topic I had to proceed largely by intuition. I was also having trouble documenting my work as I was not totally clear in my own mind what I was doing. As well, my Supervisory Panel members

began asking me questions about my analysis that I couldn't answer. Doubts were starting to creep in from all sides.

Due to the problems with my work at this time I became much more aware of the requirements for rigour. I learnt of the need for my work to be validated and reproducible by others. As it stood at this time my work didn't come near to satisfying those requirements. Thus another problem was added to my worries about my work.

At this stage, it appeared that my research would flounder for a verifiable and reproducible method. I felt that my work would not be accepted due to a lack of rigour. I came to accept that my research had come to a standstill and virtually gave up any hope of gaining my PhD. I sank into depression and did not do any useful work for some time.

Then I happened on a paper describing a method for finding the metaphors in text. It appeared to have the potential to solve all my problems. The authors claimed to describe a procedure that could be followed almost mechanically. It would isolate the metaphors from a sample of text in a valid and reproducible manner. Thus I learnt of the *Metaphor Identification Procedure* or MIP. It was to be a major breakthrough that would revolutionise and revitalise my research.

A New Breakthrough

MIP requires that every word in the text be considered in relation to its contextual and literal meanings. The contextual meaning comes from the way the word is used in the text and the literal meaning is taken from a dictionary. On the basis of the relationship a decision can be made as to whether or not the word is used metaphorically. A discussion of MIP and its significance to my work is given in Chapter 8 - MIP: *Metaphor Identification Procedure*.

As a trial for MIP I re-analysed a sample of my survey responses. The results, compared to my previous ones, can only be described as spectacular. Metaphors were revealed that I would never have thought of or even considered as metaphors. My research again became interesting and worthwhile. Using MIP is a slow process when done properly. However it does produce an excellent result which can be verified and reproduced by other people. Thus the rigour of the analysis is guaranteed. A journal paper discussing my application of MIP is currently being considered for publication.

Was finding MIP serendipity in action or was it simply a product of my reading of the wider literature? Either way it was to be a great asset in my work. With MIP I had a practical and well-surfaced road ahead of me. My path could only get better.

Using MIP has produced a great array of relationships from the data. My analysis has shown that there were conceptions other than the conception of research to be derived from the responses. Such conceptions include the conception of the self in research, the conception of the outcomes of research and the conception of the PhD itself among others. Just how the various conceptions will fit together is at this time uncertain but they are sure to produce some interesting conclusions. Due to the finding of these other conceptions the scope of my research and its possible results has broadened.

A Pause to Reconsider

The journey in pursuit of my PhD to this stage had had its ups and downs but overall it was interesting and informative. I had learnt a great deal about PhD students, research, writing, presenting my work and many other things. There had been trials and tribulations but, so far, they had been overcome and some good progress made.

There are some interesting things coming out of my examination of my survey responses using MIP. It appears that MIP has some apparent shortcomings that raise interesting questions about some other linguistic features of the responses.

I'm getting very interested in the other words that are coming out, such as the *metaphor-like* words, which are the words that look and sound like metaphors because they are pictorial – such as "fruitful" – but whose contextual meaning turns out to be the same as the dictionary's basic meaning. Also of interest are the 'metaphors-by-contagion' which appear to gain metaphorical attributes due to their position in the text, but are not metaphors, strictly speaking, and *linguistic ciphers* the words that cannot be taken literally because they are exaggerations for effect, and so on

At this stage I am also thinking about MIP itself and the fact that it doesn't help in identifying the interesting features mentioned above. What I am discovering does, however, indicate that discussion of MIP's findings does cause me to think about the linguistic features in the context that provide the MIP-identified metaphors with their contextual meanings.

All the above is useful and interesting. These words may have some deeper significance than their simple literal meanings, even though they are not, strictly speaking the metaphors about which I began my investigation. However, the fact that they seem to indicate some problems with the strictly literal application of MIP makes them an important part of my investigation. It will be necessary to explain the above anomalies as part of my justification for using MIP. As well, they are interesting for their own sakes and I would like some answers to satisfy my curiosity even if there were no other reason.

My supervisor and I spent a lot of time discussing the above ideas. We had many sessions where we explored the significance of them. As well, we explored some of the implications of the words for my use of MIP in analysing the survey responses and for my development as a researcher using metaphor analysis.

At this stage we also considered at some depth the dictionary definition that should be used to provide the basic meaning of the words. After much discussion we decided that all the dictionary definitions should be considered when seeking the basic meaning this decision was to have serious consequences for my analysis since it meant that many of the words previously accepted as metaphors could no longer be so accepted.

Following the above decision about the dictionary definitions I found it necessary to go back through the responses and re-consider all the metaphors. Many of the metaphors were rejected which resulted in a higher proportion of the responses having no metaphors.

The work on MIP has changed many of my ideas about using metaphor analysis as a method. If MIP is used in its simplest form it appears to lack rigour and repeatability. If it is used in its most comprehensive form it produces a loss of data. This conundrum is difficult to work with. Most of what is lost with the most comprehensive form of MIP is the colour and personality in the responses. When most of the metaphors disappear they take with them much of the colour and picturesque data which throws light on what the person is thinking about the topic. These problems are discussed in greater depth in the chapters near the end of the thesis, where I examine some of the implications in detail at various places. Elsewhere I make the important link between *colour* and implicit meaning, and between *loss of colour* and increase in literal meaning.

The Goods from MIP

This discussion of the problems with MIP is part of my contribution to knowledge. My discussion of the use of MIP and some ideas how the use of it might be improved is another part. I feel that these two topics add considerably to the quality of the results obtained from

using MIP to find the metaphors and how the data so found may be usefully employed in interpreting the respondents' conceptions.

Perhaps I might summarise my findings by saying that MIP should be used in its most comprehensive sense, using multiple dictionaries and the multiple definitions found in them, but that the words not found to be metaphors should not be completely thrown away but should be considered for what they add in the way of colour to the responses. This I consider is a worthwhile result from my work. This strict application of MIP can also be seen as an enabling process in that it enables the researcher to see clearly the literal meaning of the text.

The experience of using MIP to research the metaphors in the responses and discovering some of its advantages and disadvantages turned out to be a profound one for me. I found that it had considerable effect on me personally and the way I think about the connection between metaphors and meaning. In particular the relationship between the metaphors found in the final application of MIP and the original intuitive examination are playing on my mind. Becoming a proficient user of MIP has had a considerable effect on me intellectually and emotionally. It has even been a sensual experience in that the way I feel about my work has changed. I have the need to discuss some of those effects and to show how they changed me and my way of thinking about metaphors, literal meanings and the conjunction and use of the two. If I have difficulty explaining myself it is because of the profoundness of the experience and the difficulty of putting such an experience into words.

More Thoughts about MIP

I have to wonder whether, by using MIP in its most comprehensive mode, we are short-changing the writers of the survey responses. How can we be sure whether they meant some of the words to be metaphors, or not? The literature reveals that metaphors are often used unconsciously. So how can we know whether the participant is deliberately using metaphors that MIP rejects as being literal? Just because they are no longer metaphorical – as indicated by MIP – does not mean that the participant is not using them as metaphors. The only way we might answer those questions is to ask the participants. However, as I have pointed out, they might be unconscious metaphors, so even the user might not know. All this suggests that the participant's comments might be more metaphorical and colourful than MIP suggests – maybe more than the participant intends or means. Further, asking the participants about their metaphor usage might influence them to use, or not use, metaphors thus partly defeating the purpose of the survey. Because MIP has caused me an apparent loss of metaphors it has caused me to notice them more and be more aware of the possibilities in the responses.

From the reader's point of view, the rejection of some words that ought, maybe, to be classified as metaphors, takes away a lot of the colour and variety of the responses. Words like *field* and *area* conjure up pictures by stimulating the imagination, even if MIP says that they are not metaphors. This conjuring up of visions and stimulation of the imagination gives them some of the nature of metaphors, even if MIP says that they are not. This property of the words gives additional meaning to the responses. It brings the reader into closer communication with the writer in the sharing of ideas and feelings. Without them the responses lose a lot of their colourful and picturesque information. I feel that lose acutely. I have the nagging feeling that something has been stolen away from me. When I used my intuition to find the metaphors all this colour and emotion remained in the responses. Using MIP in its strictest, most clinical, mode has deprived me of something that I feel has value. In return it has given me rigour, repeatability and validity. I'm not sure that the trade-off is worthwhile. I think that there are grounds, at some times, for sidestepping the rigour and repeatability of MIP in favour of the colour and emotion of the intuitive method. I feel that

the latter gives us a much better picture of the writer and his or her thoughts, emotions and personality. Surely there is some place, even in rigorous research, for those factors to be included and discussed.

Am I, in fact, losing much from the responses by using MIP? It appears to me that I am. I'm losing a lot of the colour and picturesqueness. These very qualities bring out much of the 'humanness' of the participants. By the strictly proper application of MIP I am dehumanising the participants by discarding many of their emotional and personal contributions to the responses. I doubt that this is a good thing. I would like my participants to be as human as possible. I want to know how they, as humans, react to my questions about important aspects of their lives. I want the person to remain in my research as a person not as a non-imaginative, non-sensual, non-reactive subject. I want the participants to use colourful, picturesque words to explain themselves and their experiences as living, breathing, imaginative, colourful people. I want imagery and imagination to be important in my research and findings. Unfortunately, using MIP in its rigid sense doesn't seem to allow that. This, I believe, is a shortcoming of MIP, that it doesn't make allowances for the writer, nor the reader, being human.

All this is not bad, because the change induced in me has caused me to find more pleasure in the personal, human side of the participants in the survey. Now, when I read a response, I find myself looking for words that I intuitively feel are metaphors, but MIP rejects. Thus I notice more of the colour and personality in the responses. This must surely influence my analysis of the responses and bring out more of the respondents as people. Even if I can't use the words that MIP rejects as metaphors in my analysis, at least I can enjoy them as part of the imaginative, sensual, personal part of my participants. Thus, the use of MIP has one very positive outcome. It has made me more aware of my respondents as people -- colourful, sensual, imaginative, creative, and much more. I count it as one of the great gains of doing my PhD.

The strict, clinical application of MIP tends to negate the experience of the imaginative reader, that is, the reader with aural, visual, tactile proclivities and the acute memory of having been previously imaginatively stimulated by his or her previous reading experiences on various occasions. Thus a word might have such an impact on the reader's imagination that she or he thinks of it being a metaphor, regardless of what MIP might say. That is, the word might work as a metaphor to the imaginative reader, even though the strict use of MIP might say that it isn't. Also we must take into account that the writer might intend as a metaphor a word that MIP says isn't. This paradoxical situation means that using MIP to find the metaphors may contradict the actual usage and meaning of the words as they are intended by the writer or understood by the reader. Something is lost by the too strict application of MIP, which would justify a broader view that takes it into account. Thus, while the clinical use of MIP tends to take some of the fun and colour out of the text, that does not prohibit the reader from putting it back in to satisfy his or her imagination and search for the person in the text. There is still joy to be found in the texts by allowing the mind to see some value in what MIP tends to reject.

The strict use of MIP concentrates the reader's attention on the literal meaning of the text. However, this need not be seen as a loss of data. Rather it can be seen as providing a greater contrast and context for the metaphors and hence thrusting their colourful and picturesque qualities into the foreground of the analysis.

The above gives me a reason for looking closely at the words that MIP rejects as metaphors but which I feel intuitively are metaphors. If I can keep the colourful language in mind during the analysis maybe it will add more depth to the results than is available using the strict application of MIP. It may be that by allowing my intuition to put in a word I am getting closer to what the writer intended. If that is the case, then I could justifiably argue that

I am getting a better view of the writer as a person. It might be a case for being a little less rigorous by being a bit more human. As well, this approach will put back much of the pleasure in reading the texts that MIP seems to have taken away. That in itself is a very useful and worthwhile result.

My research into doctoral students' conceptions and the application of MIP to my work has raised more questions than answers! All along the way I faced interesting distractions that wanted to draw me away from my major focus. However, it hasn't all been bad – the questions have been interesting and the detours have kept me busy and provided enjoyment and interesting results as well as providing opportunities for more research. At times I've felt like I was caught in an avalanche, where all I could do was to try to maintain my footing until some solid ground appeared. Thus is the way of the PhD, or so I'm told.

How it Changed Me

There have been some great and important changes to me over the time of my candidature. I have learnt a great deal about the meaning of research, both as an activity within itself and in its effect on the person doing it. I now believe that it is not possible to do research without being changed by it. That does not only mean that the knowledge gained by doing the research will change the person acquiring it but also that the person will be changed in their outlook by being involved in doing the research. Thus research is a process that changes the individual doing it because it changes the researcher's conceptions of themselves and their world.

At this stage, near the end of my candidature, I conceive research as being a process of growth, not only in the knowledge produced but also in the researcher. I believe that no-one can pursue research for any length of time without growing and developing as a person. That, I would like to think, is one of the most important features of research, that it effects the observer as well as the observed. I believe that my research has caused me to develop as a person.

I have learnt that research is a painstaking process. It must be pursued diligently and with care, as well as honestly and with an open mind. That is the only way to achieve the required level of objectivity and validity. The researcher must always have those factors in mind lest s/he succumb to the temptation to *massage* the data to give the required answers. There can be no justification for falsity. Only complete honesty is good enough.

I conceive of research as a process of building knowledge. Most researchers simply add a tiny bit to the overall edifice, but some, the geniuses, will add larger pieces to the building or even help to redesign it. Each piece of data gradually helps the whole edifice develop. One small bit might seem unimportant at the time of discovery, but might become vitally important at some later date when others have either added to it or built up the structure around it.

Knowledge develops like a building. First the ground floors must be built and reinforced to support the load of the upper storeys as they are added. Then the upper storeys (and stories) can be added. The result will be like a building with different rooms and storeys devoted to different ends and subjects of research. Each room and story will have its own story of how it was started, developed and grew to be accepted as part of the network of knowledge. Sometimes part of the structure will collapse because the foundations are weak or haven't been built properly. Maybe part of the structure will have to be rebuilt due to faulty or inadequate workmanship, but the growth is ever upward. Weeding out the weak parts is also good research as it strengthens the whole structure. In my work I have taken the initial form of MIP and developed it further than the originators did. In that way I have, at least partially, replaced the original MIP with a more sophisticated version. That is part of my

contribution to the building that is knowledge that I have replaced a useful tool with something better. My contribution is not a new storey nor even a new room, it is more like a cupboard in the room about metaphor analysis that someone in the future might open in search of new ideas. Perhaps then my story might stimulate them to produce a further development.

Research is also the construction of a story, and a never ending one at that. Each researcher adds or revises chapters and develops the story further. Some will completely rewrite the book on a particular subject or throw away the old book and start a new book by means of a revolution as described by Kuhn (1996). Even when a new book is started some of the old knowledge will remain as a core on which the new knowledge can form. The chapters will be the separate research projects, the characters are the researchers and the participants in their research. It must be remembered that the people who provide the data in the form of survey or interview transcripts are as important as the researcher. They are like the lesser characters in a story who are important for the development of the plot. Without the relatively minor players there would be no story: Without the people being interviewed or surveyed to provide it there would be no data for the research. Therefore the interviewees are also an important part of the research story and must be treated with respect and courtesy, both in the gathering and the use of the data they provide.

When I started my candidature I had a very simplistic view of research from my reading as an undergraduate. Due to my background in anthropology I thought that it was only necessary to observe a group of people for a short time to be able to understand their actions and motives. I imagined that most of the data would be gathered by simply sitting talking to the people and forming ideas about what motivated them. This understanding was then used as the data for giving an account of the people involved. It came to me as something of a surprise when I had to arrange gathering my own data by planning the nature and delivery of my survey. It became plain that the planning part of data gathering is much more involved than simply asking a few people a few questions.

Before I could complete the planning of my survey I had to run pilot studies. They brought home to me the necessity for the care involved in compiling the survey questions such that the desired data was produced without adversely affecting the respondents either by the difficulty of the questions or due to any influences that might affect their answers.

As part of the planning for my survey I had to obtain ethical clearance for my research. Answering the questions about who I would survey, what information I would elicit, and what I would do with the data after brought home to me the ethics involved in research. I realised then that research was more than just fronting up to the participants and asking questions.

Studying the responses to my survey, reading and re-reading the responses over and over again, sorting out the important parts and figuring out what they mean, brought home to me some of the tediousness of research. The result of that tediousness was a temptation to rush or otherwise compromise the work that had to be resisted.

Research requires care and attention. Sometimes that care and attention must be taken to extremes which are almost unbearable in their tediousness. However, only by persisting can a satisfactory result be obtained. The cost of research is the sometimes hard and tedious work that must take place; the benefits which result from the work are research in which pride can be taken and which will be of value to the researcher and others.

It came as something of a shock to me to see how often different researchers disagreed with each other. I wondered how I could ever make sense of the arguments and counter-arguments. That I eventually did so I put down to persistence and the pressure from my supervisors. It was a salutary lesson that I won't forget quickly.

However, I now realise that it is through disagreements over results and procedures that knowledge is built and tested for validity. If all researchers agreed on what is correct there would be no way of tearing out the errors in knowledge and replacing them with better versions of the truth. The new versions of the truth may eventually also prove to be wrong and have to be replaced, but each version of the truth will, hopefully, be better and more correct than its predecessors. It is through the discussion of differences in methods and results that progress is made.

Even when I settled on a method of analysis I wasn't finished. I found that the literature on my chosen method left much to be desired. I had to work out for myself what to do. I eventually ended up critiquing the method because that was the only way to make any satisfactory progress. In critiquing the method I learnt how to consider, add to and argue against the work of other researchers. Hopefully, in my critique of the method I have produced something worthwhile that will be my contribution to the edifice of knowledge and a better way of analysis. If other people can use my modified method usefully then I shall be well satisfied.

Over the time of my candidature, as can be seen from the above, I have changed my conception of research and the work involved in it. Gone is the simplistic view I started with, to be replaced by a more sophisticated understanding of what research means and what it is meant to achieve. That understanding has changed me as a person, as well in that I have developed a deeper understanding of the methods of research and what it means to be a researcher. Perhaps most importantly, I have learnt that research is hard work when done properly and well. It involves much work in gathering data, analysing it and writing up the results.

More About the Metaphors

Searching for metaphors in my survey responses has heightened my sensitivity to them. I am now more aware of them in my own speech and writing and those of other people. This has changed my own ways of talking and writing because I feel the need to control my own use of metaphors.

When talking to other people or reading their work I take more notice of the metaphors they use. I will often think ahead in the sentence to see what metaphors are likely to appear. This can sometimes interfere with my understanding as I am concentrating on the metaphors more than the sense of the sentence. I find this particularly galling when reading fiction when I find myself critiquing the author's use of metaphors and suggesting, in my mind, alternatives that could have been used and which might have given a more picturesque or colourful view and helped the understanding of the topic better. I am certainly more sensitive to the colour added to the sentence by the metaphors, but I am also, with part of my mind, analysing the person's use of metaphors and trying to attribute meaning to it.

When I am writing or speaking I tend to look ahead and notice if any metaphors are on the horizon. I then often make an effort to avoid using them for fear that I am revealing something about myself that I don't want to give away. I find that this happens both in my academic and non-academic writings and discussions. I think that this has come about because I know that the metaphors reveal the user's inner thoughts and emotions, as they have done for me in relation to the survey respondents. It is not so much that I want to hide my inner thoughts as a desire not to let out too much of myself for public view, since I am very much an introvert and private person. It sometimes makes my writing or speaking a little stilted as I try to quickly rephrase the sentence to avoid the metaphor. Sometimes I have to allow myself to consciously insert a metaphor so that the sentence makes sense or so that

meaning and colour is added to it. I sometimes use metaphors because I feel the need to aid my audience's understanding of what I'm trying to say.

I suppose that that might be seen as a loss I have incurred by doing my research. It is certainly a change in me caused by my experience as a researcher of metaphors. Having said that I, like everyone else, find it impossible to avoid using any metaphors. It just makes me more careful with the ones I do use. In doing so I am trying to avoid most of the unconscious content of the metaphors that I do use. They are now most often added consciously for their flavour and their other qualities.

An Ending. Or a New Beginning?

It can be seen from the above that my research has changed me and my outlook. It has given me much to think about, and in so doing has changed my thinking about the processes and the results of research, both my own and other people's. It has also helped me understand better what actually goes on in research and how doing research affects the person doing it.

As well as a better understanding of myself as a researcher I now have a better understanding of my colleagues as researchers. I have some understanding of what motivates them and drives them to be academic researchers. In that way, as well as many others, my research has broadened my mind and my life. Never again will I be the same person as I was when I started my candidature as a research student. That person now appears to me to have been very naïve about research and the nature of knowledge. He had little understanding of the academic world, the world of research and the world of the researcher. He has grown into a person who now has some understanding and wants more.

Undertaking the PhD has changed me. I have more confidence in myself. I have proven myself – at least to my own satisfaction – as a researcher. I've enjoyed the process – most of the time. True, there have been low spots, but they are all part of the process of growing up as a researcher. I learnt as much from the low spots as I did from the good times. There is now no way that I could go back to being the person who started a PhD all those years ago. I'm changed too much. It was all worthwhile. I'm glad that I did it and I would do it all again.

The reflections which occurred and are presented in writing this paper have helped that process of growing up as a researcher and have helped me to resolve and come to terms with some of the problems, worries and stresses that I encountered during my candidature.

Thus writing this paper has been of advantage both to me and, hopefully, to other PhD candidates who read it. If it can help them to deal with the problems of being a PhD candidate then it will have achieved one of my ambitions. As a second ambition it may provoke other PhD students to write of their experience, to add to the literature on the candidature and to spread the benefits wider. Thirdly, it may also help supervisors to be better at their job in dealing with PhD candidates and to reflect on the process and problems of PhD candidature, thus leading to it being a better experience and enabling the candidates to enjoy it more, and, most importantly, to complete their candidature.

There is still much to be said about PhD candidature. I hope that other PhD candidates will accept the challenge and take up the pen (or keyboard) and produce papers describing their experience. Such writing will be of advantage to future candidates, supervisors, universities and whoever else has a part to play in the candidate achieving her or his goal of getting a PhD.

Afterword

Of the material I read for this account of my work I found the paper by Ellis et al., (2011) the most influential on my thinking about autoethnography.

As the post-modernists have long insisted, any research or account of research is influenced by the feelings, beliefs and personal values of the practitioner. For these reasons it is impossible for any account of such work to be completely value-free: The researcher is always present in the research. Thus, as Ellis et al., (2011) point out, there has been some movement towards making and seeing the reports of the social sciences as literature rather than scientific accounts, and specifically including the personal presence of the researcher. In other words, rather than making the impossible-to-achieve attempt to keep the researcher out of the report, the researcher as a person should be included. In particular there should be space in the account for "ways of producing meaningful accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience" (p. 2) because "conventional ways of doing and thinking about research were narrow, limiting, and parochial" (Ellis et al. 2011, p. 2).

Although I am not a post-modernist, as such, I like the idea of broadening my approach and including myself in the account of my work. That is what I have done in this paper.

Ethnography, auto- or otherwise, usually involves other people. Other people and their culture is usually the centre and topic of ethnography. Ellis et al. (2011) point out some of the ethical problems which such ethnographies might entail. Some of these issues might also impinge on autoethnograpies since they often detail the writer's interactions with other people. Where these interactions with others are an important and influential part of the account the ethical situation must be considered. Since my account only describes my own actions and does not impinge on the privacy of others, I see no ethical problem with my account.

The paper by Ellis et al. (2011) is a complex one so I only here deal with what is appropriate to my own thoughts on autoethnography. I refer the reader to that freely-available paper for more discussion, ideas and justification for the art and practice of autoethnography and for references to other works that cover similar or related ground.

References

Delamont, S. (2007). Arguments against auto-ethnography. Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, University of London, 5-8 September 2007.

Dyson, M. (2007). My story in a profession of stories: Autoethnography – an empowering methodology for educators. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education 32*(1), 36-48.

Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research 12*(1), 1-13.

Kuhn, T. S. (1996). *The structure of scientific revolutions* (3rd ed.). London, UK: Chicago University Press.

Sparkes, A. C. (2000). Autoethnography and narratives of self: Reflections on criteria in action. *Sociology of Sport Journal 17,* 21-43.

Starr, L. J. (2010). The use of autoethnography in educational research. *Canadian Journal for New Science in Education 3*(1), 1-9.

Wall, S. (2008). Easier said than done: Writing an autoethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods 7*(1), 38-53.

Author Note

I am a Higher Degree by Research Student at the Australian National University, Canberra, Australia. My research work involves the use of the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) devised by The Pragglejaz Group to find the metaphors in the texts people

write and how those metaphors tell us about the writers' conceptions and also add colour and personality to the text.

Correspondence can be made to Rod Pitcher at the following: The Centre for Higher Education, Learning, and Teaching (CHELT), Chancelry 10T1, Ellery Crescent, The Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 0200, Australia; Phone: +61 2 61250838; Fax: +61 2 61254023; E-mail: Rod.Pitcher@anu.edu.au

Article Citation

Pitcher, R. (2014). My story: An autoethnographical account of being a PhD candidate. *The Qualitative Report, 19*(70), 1-13. Retrieved from http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR19/pitcher70.pdf