Transpersonal Approaches to Autoethnographic Research and Writing

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Abstract

My life as nonfiction writer has led to my interest in doing an autoethnographical study and this paper will discuss how autoethnography can be performed using transpersonal psychology as a model. Autoethnography is a personal narrative akin to biography and memoir, and has become a more prevalent research method because of its accessibility an d the ease with which the reader can connect with the researcher ' s and participant's lived experiences and/or epiphanies. The best narratives consist of embodied, vulnerable, and evocative writing, which help to explore, transform, and heal through various life journeys. This self - awareness and self - discovery are some of the main goals of transpersonal psychology. This paper will address the link between performing an autoethnographical study and the transpersonal psychology model.

Keywords

Autoe thnography, T ranspersonal P sychology, M emoir, E thnography

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My life as nonfiction writer has lead to my interest in doing an autoethnographical study and this paper will discuss how autoethnography can be performed using transpersonal psychology as a model. Autoethnography is a personal narrative akin to biography and memoir, and has become a more prevalent research method because of its accessibility and the ease with which the reader can connect with the researcher's and participant's lived experiences and/or epiphanies. The best narratives consist of embodied, vulnerable, and evocative writing, which help to explore, transform, and heal through various life journeys. This self-awareness and self-discovery are some of the main goals of transpersonal psychology. This paper will address the link between performing an autoethnographical study and the transpersonal psychology model. Keywords: Autoethnography, Transpersonal Psychology, Memoir, Ethnography

During my life as a professional writer, I have always been intrigued by the power of the personal story as a way of healing and transformation. As an avid reader and writer of biographies and memoir, it seems appropriate for me to pursue my doctorate through a qualitative study using the autoethnographical research method, because this research method utilizes autobiographical writing in that it examines the personal experience of the researcher and participants. My impetus for writing this paper is to provide an overview of how to do an autoethnographical study, with the hope that my literature review will help facilitate a successful research journey.

Thus, this paper consists of an examination and review of the recent literature regarding the general aspects and mechanics of doing an autoethnographic study. The paper examines the various components of this type of study, including the characteristics of an autoethnographical researcher, identifying an autoethnographical study, approaches to research and writing, transpersonal relevance, and a brief discussion of the pitfalls and ethical issues associated with this method of study. This paper also highlights the transpersonal relevance of doing an autoethnographical study.

The argument presented in this paper builds on Ellis' (2004) suggestion that autoethnographical research is expanding outside the realm of anthropology, and merging into other disciplines, such as psychology and sociology. Further, the paper examines the need for more accessible qualitative research studies, such as autoethnography, as ways for the researcher and reader to connect regarding a particular lived experience. Examples are provided of how this method of research may offer a better understanding of the self in the lived experience, while weaving the stories of other participants into that of the researcher's lived experience.

Finally, the paper is used to demonstrate that like other methods of research, the autoethnographical research method has pitfalls and issues, of which the researcher should be mindful in order to maximize its acceptance within the research community. Additionally, this paper offers examples of ethnographic studies which might be relevant to the transpersonal psychologist.

Transpersonal Psychology and Autoethnography

The focus of my doctorate program is in transpersonal psychology. *Transpersonal* refers to going beyond the personal in order to encompass a wider sense of consciousness. Some transpersonal qualities might include compassion, wisdom, intuition, mindfulness, creativity, self-awareness, and empathy. Transpersonal psychology is the newest or fifth branch of psychology, which emerged in the 1960s as an offshoot of humanistic psychology, spear-headed by Abraham Maslow. Transpersonal psychology has been considered a positive psychology that encompasses all the branches of psychology, with its main concern being the achievement of optimal health, well-being, and a higher state of consciousness. In contrast to traditional psychoanalysis, less emphasis is placed on past experiences, and more emphasis placed on the present and future possibilities. Thus, transpersonal psychology encompasses the positive effects of transpersonal experiences or the self, moving beyond the individual to encompass various aspects of humankind, life, psyche and cosmos. These transpersonal experiences, which usually occur during an altered state of consciousness, lead to increased awareness, self-discovery, and ultimately transformation. Some examples of transpersonal experiences that could lead to transcendence include, but are not limited to, peak experiences, dream experiences, intuitive experiences, clairvoyance, revelations, life review, direct knowing, creative inspiration, drug-induced, out-of-body-experiences, and/or near-death experiences (Grof, 1996, 2000; Walsh & Vaughan, 1996).

Autoethnography is defined as a form of autobiographical writing and an approach to research that describes and analyzes personal experience as a way to understand cultural experiences. In so doing, it demonstrates the numerous layers of consciousness as a way to connect the personal to the cultural. An autoethnographical text merges the genres of autobiography and ethnography, where the narrator's lived experience is at the core of the story. The presentation of an autoethnologocial study may be done in the form of memoir, personal essays, short stories, journals, scripts or poetry. Typically, autoethnographical writing highlights action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and a sense of self-consciousness. The writing of an autoethnography is not only the crafting of a confessional story of self-renewal, but it is also a compelling weaving of both story and theory (Ellis, 2004; Spry 2001).

Ethnographers study the meaning of behavior, language, and the interaction amongst members of a group or culture. Some autoethnographical researchers see this type of study as a cathartic measure to understand the issues or lived experiences in the researcher's life. Sometimes, ethnography serves as a way the researcher comes to terms with certain questions about themselves and the culture or group they choose to study. While examining an experience up close and personal, the researcher is able to better understand and analyze the essence of the experience. In other words, placing a magnifying glass on a lived experience could offer invaluable insights for the researcher, participants, and readers (Creswell, 2007; Ellis, 1995; Goodall, 2000). The range of lived experiences to examine in this form of study exist on a wide spectrum, from emotional, health-related, or professional experiences to anything which falls in between.

The link between transpersonal psychology and autoethnography seems organic. The transpersonal paradigm entails highlighting the experiential facets of experiences, which can be easily documented in autoethnographical format through personal narrative, memoir, narrative poetry or fiction. This form of communication can be therapeutic and healing in that the information presented by the autoethnographer involves self-discovery, self-awareness, and a sense of empowerment. The shared stories put both the writer and the reader in conversation with themselves, thus leading to a sense of personal achievement.

Characteristics of an Autoethnographical Researcher

The researcher who chooses ethnographic is unique in that he or she has a preference for writing about epiphanies or remembered moments which might have greatly impacted his or her life (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). The researcher strives to examine these experiences in relation to others who have encountered similiar experiences as a way to detect a pattern, theory, or thread inherent to the culture or group.

According to Zaner (2004), the researcher's events or ephiphanies might have occured at moments of existential crisis that might have forced a person to attend to, and analyze a lived experience. It might have been a time when the individual simply did not feel the same afterwards. Ellis (2004), a sociologist who wrote numerous articles and books on autoethnographical research, suggested that with the embodied or transcendendent experience, the researcher becomes their story. The best time for this to happen is when the researcher has established some distance from the lived experience, in order to have a more clear perspective of the event. As Ellis and Bocher (2000) suggested, if the story is recalled and written about too close to the lived experience, there is a temptation to get too caught up in living the experience to be able to write about it. Establishing this distance not only provides clarity, but also might provide a more helpful and healthy perspective for the reader to learn from. This is one of the reasons memoirs about childhood are most often written in middle or old age. Frank (1995) supported this belief by saying, "Lived chaos makes reflection, and consequently story-telling, impossible" (p. 98).

Once enough distance from the lived experience has been established, the researcher becomes empowered by sharing his or her story. At the same time, sharing inspires and encourages a reader to examine and expose his or her own lived experience. By comparison, during conversation if a person reveals intimate information about him or herself, it is more likely that the other person will also follow suit, rendering an open forum for self-reflection and discussion.

The rewards to the researcher doing this type of study are numerous. For example, Ellis (2004) deftly claimed, "People respond to it [autoethnographical study]. I can count on one hand how many people ever wrote to me about my more orthodox social science work, but I have gotten hundreds of responses to my autoethnographic stories" (p. 35). In view of the recent surge in memoirs in the trade book market, it is apparent that the general public enjoys reading about the personal lives of others. Getting up close and personal to a lived experience has a tendency to move the reader emotionally, while helping the researcher to embody the experience.

The autoethnographic study paints a vivid picture of the researcher (self) and those he or she is studying (the participants). The researcher presents him or herself to the reader through vivid and carefully crafted character descriptions. The researcher's voice on the page may also help the reader depict character and sensibilities. Goodall (2000) argued that "the personality of this character acquires shape, force, and meaning through representations of questions and concerns, actions and passions, personal and professional life" (p. 69). The reader connects with the narrator and identifies with what he or she encounters, in the same way that the reader makes a connection with a memoirist when the story resonates with his or her own life experience. When a story resonates with a reader, it means the researcher has been successful in documenting the study.

Ellis of Ellis and Bochner (2000) reported that she turned to autoethnography because she wanted to veer away from orthodox research methods. This mode of inquiry persuaded Ellis that social science texts needed to demonstrate the relationship between researchers and subjects and between authors and readers. Ellis wanted to examine on a deeper level the emotional truth of a story. She wanted to "show" rather than "tell." Ellis furthered her stance

by saying, "I wanted a more personal, collaborative, and interactive relationship, one that centered on the questions of how human experience is endowed with meaning…I also wanted to understand the conventions that constrain which stories we can tell and how we can tell them" (p. 744).

In her extensive work with autoethnographic studies, Ellis (2004) shared the background of one of her students, and what led the student to choose an autoethnographical study. The student was introspective and revealed her personality type by saying that ever since she was a little girl, she spent an inordinate amount of time trying to figure things out, such as her parents' relationship, her own relationships, and the dramas encountered in her everyday life. She indicated that she was a very observant person who carefully watched and listened to people and situations, often wondering what people were thinking, and what their motives were. Since an early age, she had been fascinated by people's inconsistencies, and yearned to figure out people and situations. She frequently posed the question, "what's going on here?" which seems to be an important inquiry for an autoethnographical researcher.

This example also has particular significance to this writer, in that the platform for her own life as a writer was set very early during childhood. When silenced by her significant adults, she was told, "Children should be seen, but not heard." Thus, she became an introvert and a devout observer. She was told to document her feelings and observations in a journal. As a result, her journal became her confidant and best friend. Her passion for journaling taught her to be both observant and self-reflexive, two characteristics necessary to undertake an autoethnographical study. Furthermore, during every winter of her adolescence, this writer spent one month visiting Paris with her grandfather who taught her the fine art of people-watching in Parisean cafes. This sparked her interest in observing people in their environments and their cultures—the core of the autoethnographical study. Ellis (2004) believes that the goal of the ideal researcher is to create "artful, poetic, and empathetic social science in which readers can keep in their minds and feel in their bodies the complexitites of concrete moments of lived experience" (p. 30).

Identifying an Autoethnographical Study

Chang (2008) suggested that the stories gathered by the researcher may be powerful tools, not only for researcher, but also for the practitioner who is confronted by various human conditions and relationships in multiculturual environments. For example, therapists, clergy, educators, social workers, and medical professionals may benefit from the narrative offered in describing the lived experience.

Any aspect of the researcher's life, either broad or narrow, may become a research focus. Many autoethnographical studies are similar to memoirs in that the researcher might gravitate to a past negative or challenging experience. In general, people tend to be compelled to write about melodramatic or traumatic events, in lieu of joyous ones. This is illustrated in the daily news coverage where these types of events are forefront. Ellis (2004) suggested

> Because social science from the beginning has been grounded in understanding deviance, evil, dysfunction, mental illness, abuse, and abnormal behavior…happiness and the mundane don't always make a good plot, which works better with a buildup of tension, and usually some resolution. (p. 43)

The importance of plot and tension, to be discussed later, is critical in the development of an autoethnographical study.

Even when the more melancholic story lines are selected, the autoethnological researcher, by sharing his or her story, may shed some light, and ultimately offer hope to

those who encounter a similar lived experience. For example, Tilmann-Healy (1996) did an autoethnographical study addressing her battle with bulimia and summarizes: "I take the emotional/professional risk of sharing the darkest, most painful secret of my life in order to expose some of the lived, felt consequences of these stories and to open dialogues aimed at writing new and better ones" (p. 81).

Ellis (2004) discussed how her autoethnographical novel, *Final Negotiations,* had two overarching stories, one referring to the mundane aspects of falling in love, and the other pertaining to jealousy and a tragic illness. While writing, Ellis leaned towards focusing on the latter subject as the main story line because it offered more of an opportunity for plot development, and the creation of a story arc. Ultimately, admitted Ellis, "I also hope we can figure out how to write evocatively about happiness and joy" (p. 44). This is an ongoing issue in the realm of personal writing. When teaching memoir classes, this writer is often overwhelmed by how many sad stories are available and waiting to be written. This writer's sense of delight is palpated when a student raises his or her hand and, declares, "I had a very funny life, and want to write about it." The idea of writing a humorous personal story resonates in a world where we tend to get bogged down by negative forces. Joyous and humorous dialgoues would be a refreshing relief for both the writer and reader.

Discovering a story or gap in the literature remains a challenge for the autoethnographical researcher searching for an original angle. Goodall (2000) suggested that the researcher ask many questions as a way to find the storyline. The gap in literature may be identified via discussion with others, and undergoing a comprehensive literature review.

Goodall (2000) offered a number of tips to help decide what could possibly be used as an autoethnographical storyline. Goodall (2000) suggested that during the literature review the following be done:

- Make a chart of names, institutions, and their arguments;
- Pay attention to the beginnings and endings of scholarly articles;
- While reading, be mindful of the storylines;
- Notice any emerging patterns and themes in the stories. (p. 53)

Why Autoethnographical Research?

Numerous reasons have been identified why researchers choose the autoethnographical method. For the most part, writing self-narratives and documenting the narratives of others facilitates a deeper knowing and understanding of those in a given culture or group. Chase (2011) suggested that personal experiences reflect who we are and what we think. Narrative is one way these experiences may be shaped and formed. Many researchers believe that providing the details of a lived experience helps readers more easily relate to the study. The narrative results in self-reflection on the part of the researcher, participant, and reader. Ultimately, this results in self-analysis and transformation. (Chang, 2008; Chase, 2011).

Goodall (2000) offered the reason why ethnographical studies are chosen by suggesting the task of the researcher is to "find out *why* by figuring out how" (p. 128). In order to accomplish this, the researcher must have numerous interactive encounters with each participant. The researcher must also be mindful of the participant's sensibilities, beliefs, likes, dislikes, and voice. Ellis (2004) claimed that the purpose of ethnographical research is to achieve an understanding of what people think, how they feel, and what they do. Van Maanen (2011) furthered the discussion by saying that the point of "the ethnography—from beginning to end—is to take on certain evils in the world, show what they have done (and are

doing), and tell us what might be done about them…the prose is both moral and normative" (p. 171).

The autoethnographic study is useful for the participant, researcher, and reader. Haynes (2011) suggested that autoethnographical narratives and stories may "be used as a means of exploring the epistemology of the self within broader social and cultural narratives" (p.146). More specifically, Spry (2001) stated that autoethnographic texts show all the sutures, fractures, and seams of the interaction the researcher has with others who have had similar lived experiences. From a transpersonal perspective, in order to render the process a cathartic one, it is important for the participant to tranform and consequently heal through sharing his or her story. Spry (2001) claimed that her own healing from sexual assualt began during the writing process where she noticed she became less of a victim. The transformation which occurs during the writing process is what makes this type of study particularily relevant in the transpersonal realm. Further, writing and reading poignant narratives from others may help to inform the reader's life and assist in coping with similar issues. Frank (1995) argued this in *The Wounded Storyteller:*

> people tell stories not just to work out their own changing identities, but also to guide others who will follow them…they seek not to provide a map that can guide others—each must create his own—but rather to witness the experiene of reconstructing one's own map. (p. 17)

Chang (2008) argued that the goal of an ethnographical study is to elicit self-discovery which happens as a result of self-reflection and self-analysis. When reading the narratives of others, the reader is able to compare and contrast his or her life for validation or discovery.

An accurate representation of a culture is important to the autoethnographical study. For a field worker to accurately portray a culture, it requires that he or she observe, listen and write about the lived experience. Sometimes culture is not completely visible at a glance, but only becomes visible during accurate representation (Van Maanen, 2011). The researcher must be familiar with the workings of the culture, by being present with the culture's members and through the lived experience. Sometimes before beginning the study, the researcher is already part of the group, such as in the case of Behar's (1993), *Translated Woman,* where Behar, a Cuban-American woman, studied the culture and women from her country of origin. In this instance, the self is studying another. The beauty of an autoethnographic study, acknowledged Tedlock (2000), is that the self and the participants "appear together within a single narrative that carries a multiplicity of dialoguing voices" (p. 471).

The truth is that the best way to examine and describe a culture is to be a part of it. The best way to do this is to arrange firsthand interaction and experience with the culture to understand the underpinnings, motives, beliefs and behaviors of everyday life. Within it, being a part of the culture gives the researcher a chance to accumulate and record dialogue and stories of each member of the culture. (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Tedlock, 2000).

Approaches to Autoethnography

Deciding upon the appropriate form for an autoethnographical study may be a challenging task for the researcher. Since the researcher is considered a participant in this type of study, the chosen approach should resonate with his or her sensibilities. Hertz (1997) noted in *Reflexivity & Voice* that reflexivity is an important aspect or approach to an autoethnographic study. Being reflexive means to live the moment and continually foster an ongoing conversation with the self about the lived experience. In doing so, the researcher

brings the reader face to face with a culture by having the subject and object virtually in the same sentence. "Reflexivity, then is ubiquitous" (Hertz, 1997, p. viii) because it infiltrates all aspects of the autoethnographic study. During this form of study and writing process, there seems to be no clear demarcation between the researcher and his or her participant. In fact, some may argue that the researcher is one of the participants in his or her own study. Using reflexivity encompasses the entire person—spirit, body, and mind, to provide better access to the intuitive phenomenon. Sometimes the body simply takes over, as the researcher becomes more closely involved in the experience which may be transformed into embodied writing, a transpersonal technique. How to incorporate embodied writing involves maintaining comprehensive fieldnotes that include motives and feelings of all participants, and when examining the self, to use the same lens the world would use to examine and interpret us (Ellis, 2004; Goodall, 2000; Haynes, 2011).

Van Maanen (2011) identified three types of autoethnographic studies—realist, impressionist, and confessional. Ellis (2004) argued that confessional stories may also be called, *ethnographical memoirs.* A *realist* story*,* according to Ellis (2004), is presented via grounded theory and analytic essays. In this type of study, the method is more theoretical, and deals primarily with conceptual ideas. In its presentation, only one voice exists. From a reader's standpoint, the questions addressed include how do we know? how do we explain reality, and what does it all mean? Richardson (2000) further broke down the realist story into more categories—*traditional ethnographies,* where the author exists only in the preface of the work; *documentary,* which provides details of a member's culture; *culture member's point of view,* which includes quotations, explanations and syntax; and *interpretative omnipotence of the ethonographer.* Richardson (2000) indicated that most of the classic ethnographic studies in the social sciences may be classified as realist stories. For some, these categories clarify the different types of realist studies, but for this writer, the descriptions and categorizations overlap and in the long run, could result in confusion.

An *impressionist* ethnographical study, according to Ellis (2004) is expressed through autoethnography, poetry, fiction, photographs, art, performance and dance. Ellis says an impressionist story contains dialogue, is co-constructed, is lifelike, concerned with meaning, and learning about something in particular. It also highlights expressive communication, is multivoiced, emphasizes creative interpretation (thus, writing is important), emphasizes the relationship between the author, text and reader, and contains stories that are plausible, ring true, and are transformational. Additionally, from a transpersonal perspective, the impressionist story incorporates embodied writing. Ellis (2004) claimed that from the reader's standpoint an impressionist story answers life questions, such as: how we cope, how we live life, and why we talk or act in a certain way. Van Maanen (2011) argued that impressionist stories are analagous to impressionist paintings, in that the painter's intent captures a moment in a scene.

Those who choose the impressionist approach to autoethnography, typically write in the first person, and aspire to surprise the reader by using metaphors, imagery and compelling phrases. The story is presented without reflections, in the same way that a painter presents a painting and leaves the interpretation and analysis to the viewer. Those who lean towards impressionist research would probably favor this more literary study, rather than the scientific one. Therefore, the actual writing process might lend itself to more creative devices than the other types of autoethnographical research.

Confessional stories or ethnographical memoirs, according to Goodall (2000), are "first-person narratives that establish intimacy with the reader" (p. 72), and persuade the reader about human qualities. The researcher, while part of the study, learns from the study, and expresses empathy towards it, rather than trying to interpret the findings gathered from the fieldwork data. The primary goal of confessional writing is primarily to convince the

reader of the researcher's human qualities. Thus, the text might include the researcher's character, personal biases or habits particular to the study. In this type of study, the character or narrator is active, present, and illuminated in the writing. According to Van Maanen (2011), "The details that matter in confessional tales are those that constitute the field experience of the author" (p. 76).

Another approach to sharing an autoethnographic study is through *performative autoethnography*. Within this mode of presentation, sometimes the messages and issues are hidden, and therefore it may invoke deep conflicts, situations, change, and thus transformation during an embodied lived experience. In so doing, the actors elicit a response from the audience which leads both the audience and the performers to self-reflect. Also, the audience transmits the mood of the performance back to the performers who then receive immediate feedback, and may immediately ascertain what is compelling, what is funny, what might be boring, clear or cohesive. The audience also experiences a sense of reflexivity as they attach to the segments of the presentation which might resonate with his or her own individual lived experience (Ellis, 2004; Haynes, 2011; Viramontes, 2008).

In her performative autoethnography, Viramontes (2008) shared her story about her life and relationship with her grandmother, and how her grandmother taught her how to be a survivor. The story has a thread of self-discovery and transformation with the acknowledgement of how her grandmother's life story resonates with her own and how she learned from her. This performative autoethnography resonates with this writer because she also learned from her maternal grandmother how to be a survivor through hardship, emotional turmoil, and disease.

In *The Authentic Dissertation*, Jacobs (2008) discussed alternative and creative ideas for dissertations. He used the study about a woman who uses performative autoethnography to document and study incest. He alluded to the importance of filling the gap between knowledge and acknowledgement. While doing the research on incest, the narrator acknowledged that her story was not unique, and this inspired her to study further. In digging deeper into her own issues she realized that doing the dissertation was a cathartic measure, in that she finally had to transcend her own boundaries, and start talking about her traumatic experiences. In doing so, meaning was brought to her lived experience. As Jacobs (2008) said, "We tell stories for the sake of other listeners, for the purpose of sharing knowledge" (p. 165). In the process, she realized how through autoethnography, a person may reclaim not only who they are, but also their voices through the arts or creative expression. Thus, performative autoethnography may be thought of as a way to merge academia with real life events, in an embodied and accessible way which may help others.

While interviewing one of her participants about performance autoethnography, Ellis (2004) suggested this about what happens during performative autoethnography: "My voice cracks. A wave of emotion courses through my body. I stumble in my speech…although the audiences's response is warm and generous… I feel pummelled. My body, eyes, head, and heart, all ache" (p. 143).

Spry (2001) is another researcher who uses performative autoethnography to tell her story which focuses on her experience with anorexia:

> In calling to myself through the performance of her autoethnography, someone, someone from inside my body, finally, gingerly, began to call back. Embodying theory about anorexia nervosa through performance allows me to enter the uninhabitable corporeal terrain of my 16-year-old body, and to problematize the context in which the anorexia thrived. (p. 715)

It is through this performance that the experience becomes embodied and if done in a compelling manner, the audience may feel this sense of embodiment and empowerment. To be effective, the researcher is required to write a script adaptable for the stage, and then needs to cast appropriate actors suitable for each character. What is different about writing the performance ethnography, according to McCall (2000) is that it is unimportant to overstate information, analysis, or commentary, which is a vital element to a compelling written autoethnography. In the case of performative autoethnography, much of the interpretation is left up to the audience.

Research Methods

The researcher's personal story is critical to the autoethnographical study. When choosing the participants for the study it is important that the stories resonate with the researcher so that he or she can respond and analyze the data during the writing process. Creswell (2007) suggested that in the selection of the participants, the ethnographer should rely on his or her judgment and intuition.

The data collection for an ethnographical study is similar to other qualitative methodologies. Creswell identifies the types of data, observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials. Observations include fieldnotes gathered as a participant and observer.

Fieldnotes include all aspects of the research and may be in the form of a personal journal or professional notes. A personal journal, according to Goodall (2000), includes information about what happens in everyday life. The contents tend to be intimate and include descriptions of positive and troubling emotions. On the other hand, a professional notebook includes "a record of what you observe, hear, overhear, think about, wonder about, and worry about that connects your personal life to your professional one" (p. 88). In this type of notebook, recordings are made of what is heard or read in regard to the subject of the study.

Since beginning her doctorate work, this writer has kept both a personal and professional journal. Personal journaling is a morning ritual, and taps into her deep emotional truth about the connection of her research to her past and present life. In addition, her professional journal includes jottings for dissertation ideas and subsubjects. It also includes dialogue from conversations with professors regarding the research direction and brainstorming sessions. Sometimes an overlapping of the two journals exists, but in both cases, they provide invaluable information.

The fieldnotes may include thoughts, ideas, intuitions, hunches, dreams, and interactions. The researcher writes about what resonates in the field work, what is convincing and meaningful about the experience. This is a good opportunity to identify patterns from the field. In order to attain the most poignant fieldnotes, the researcher should be with the participant in his or her environment, learn from the participant's everyday practice, and jot down notes. When returning back to home or office, the researcher should reflect on his or her own similar memories, analyze, and edit the notes into a compelling narrative. To maximize memory recall, this is best done as close to the meeting or interview as possible. (Goodall, 2000).

Interviews may be structured or unstructured, but the most successful ones are those offering open-ended questions. Interactive interviews are conducted much like a conversation with a friend or colleague, in that conversation flow occurs more naturally than in the classical question and answer type of interview. The information procured in this type of interview is valuable for learning about another person; the story becomes interactive and collaborative (Ellis, 2004; Hertz, 1997). Having numerous voices discussing similar subjects, also provides a varied perspective.

Some researchers, like Ellis (2004) believed that the interactive interview may be akin to psychoanalysis, in that it probes and offers feedback. Other researchers have also suggested this as well (Hertz, 1997). The main difference is that the primary goals of the researcher are not to help, support, change or get in touch with the participant's unconscious, but rather to remain at a conscious level and describe the lived experience of the participant.

Another common type of interview used in the autoethnographical study is the reflexive, dyadic interview where the focus is primarily on the interviewee and his or her story. The researcher might share the inspiration and impetus for doing the study, and how the participant's story may help the researcher understand his or her own. This might be a highly effective method to get a quiet participant to gain trust, and reveal personal details and descriptions to the reseacher (Ellis, 2004).

Regardless of the type of method, the interview is a vital component of the study. The transcription of the interview is important along side the observations of the participant, the researcher's journal entries written during the study, personal correspondence with the participants, photographs, and any materials shared by the participant. For example, if the researcher is studying writers, he or she might gather published works from the writers to include in the study. Audiovisual materials may include any of the participant's possessions, photographs, or artifacts.

After the researcher listens to the taped interviews and the interaction is transcribed, poignant passages should be underlined and coding the data should be done according to main themes. Once the main themes are identified, the subthemes are determined. At this point, the researcher should return to the transcript to ensure the chosen themes reflect the essence of the study. When all this information is finalized, then validation is done via member-checking, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Creswell, 2007; Ellis, 2004).

Once the interviews and fieldnotes are examined, the researcher determines what connects the self (researcher) with the others (participants). To make this determination, the researcher should tap into his or her intuition, as it is this aspect of the research that sets autoethnographic studies apart from other methodologies. (Chang, 2008). Further, following one's intuition is a powerful force in qualitative research, and of particular interest to the transpersonal psychologist.

Ellis and Bochner (2000) suggest a number of methods to organize the research. One way is for the researcher to open the dissertation by sharing his or her own personal story. The researcher may also integrate parts of his or her story into the various chapters of the participants' lives. And yet another method would be for the researcher to identify one participant and compare their lived experience to that of the researcher. Regardless of which method is chosen, the researcher should document, observe and compare the various lived experiences and how the stories have affected the researcher's outlook.

Research methodology typically includes data analysis and in ethnographical study, the grounded theory could be incorporated to do this, whereby the various chapters are divided into concepts or categories. In this method, coding is critical to the process (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

For data analysis in an autoethnographical study, it is important that instead of the researcher merely describing what happened in his or her life, she should describe how memories may be strung together to illustrate cultural traits and relationships with others in society. In other words, the autoethnographic researcher should be conscious of the participant's history because it helps to understand how past events may affect present behaviors and thought patterns.

Chang (2008) stated that data collection and analysis are at the heart of autoethnography. He furthered his discussion and claimed, "What you search for in the mass of data is indicators that may explain how your life experiences are culturally, not just

personally, meaningful and how your experiences can be compared with others' in society" (Chang, 2008, p. 137). It is the comparing and contrasting of these experiences which serve as the center of what the autoethnographer writes and examines in his or her study. It provides a chance to shed light on a culture or event which might resonate with the reader, and provide a new theory or insight into the lived experience being discussed.

In all the stages of research, including collecting, analyzing, and interpretation of the data, the researcher must be mindful that what makes autoethnography ethnographic is its powerful understanding of cultural differences, both verbal and nonverbal. This implies that the researcher's fieldnotes and journal entries are comprehensive and all inclusive. The fieldnotes serve as the kernels of the story, and it is the researcher's task to find the common thread linking all the notes—the thread which links the story together so that the writing may begin (Chang, 2009; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).

Writing an Autoethnographical Study

Many factors come into play when writing an autoethnographical study. The best autoethnographic writing is truthful, vulnerable, evocative, and therapeutic, suggested Ellis (2004). Being truthful entails getting down to both the participant's and researcher's emotional truth, and this involves a fair amount of introspection, in the fieldnotes, journal entries, and ultimately in the writing up of the study. Ellis (2009) discussed the importance of truthful and introspective writing as a way to convey the emotion of an experience; otherwise, the writer talks in an unspirited way or as "empty husks of people who have programmed, patterned emotions, whose feelings resemble the decision-making models of rational choice theorists" (Ellis, 2009, p. 104). In her autoethnographical study, *Final Negotiations*, Ellis (1995) worked and wrote from her own truths. She claimed that the first draft simply "poured out" of her in an uncensored way. She honored this, and with her subsequent revisions she dramatized the story because she believed it was less important to convey the facts than it was to convey the meaning of her experience, gleaned from the interviews and fieldnotes.

When Behar (1996) discussed the idea of vulnerability in writing, she indicated that it does not mean that any or all information may and should be shared with the reader. To write in a vulnerable manner means exposing parts of the deeper self. Behar (1996) believes that "to write vulnerably is to open a Pandora's box" (p. 19). When an author exposes his or her deeper self, the reader is inspired to do the same, so transformation and growth may ensue. When the autoethnographer becomes vulnerable and reveals his or her deepest thoughts, both writer and reader transcend to a place where self-discovery occurs, and the writer has essentially accomplished what many writers hope for. Thus, the researcher feels the positive effects of the study. Ellis (2009) supported this claim by saying, "When people react to this story out of their own grief or empathy for mine, I feel part of a community…that belonging gives me comfort and makes me want to comfort others, to feel we are not alone in our despair" (p. 153).

When writing evocatively and in a compelling manner, it is important to incorporate the transpersonal skill of embodied writing. Spry (2001) suggested that autoethnographical writing is a "felt-text" (p. 714), in that the story reflects the researcher's collaboration with people, culture, and time. The story is also crafted in the space between experience and language, the known and the unknown.

An interesting phenomenon experienced by the author of this paper is that when she encounters a flow of words on the page, embodied writing takes over, and she inevitably transcends to a place where automatic writing occurs. Sometimes, the passage of time cannot be remembered, and the writing feels as if it is trance-induced. According to Spry (2001), "Enacting the embodied method of autoethnography, I have learned, is to believe in myself

when a story moves into my body and grows stronger with the critical self-reflection" (p. 727).

Embodied writing may lead to both self-discovery and transformation for the researcher and reader. Ellis (2004) acknowledged this about writing her own autoethnographical study: "when I am writing autoethnography, I conjure up emotional, visual, and other sensory images about my experiences of real people engaged in actual events" (p. 333). The transpersonal practice of visualization may be useful for the researcher in that during the writing process, he or she may be transported back into the moment of the lived experience or interview. This method renders the most captivating and compelling writing which brings the reader not only face to face with the lived experience, but it also helps them to embody the experience. Identifying the most compelling way to share the story becomes an ongoing challenge for the researcher, and Ellis claims that she searched for the best words to describe her innermost feelings. Sometimes the right words meant using her imagination in the same way as novelists.

Parallels and differences exist between autoethnographical writing and novel writing. The techniques used in both genres are similar, such as plot development and character development, the use of scene, setting and dialogue. Using these techniques ensures that the writer *shows* rather than *tells*, a major characteristic of compelling prose.

In her book, *Writing Fiction*, Burroway (2000) viewed that setting the scene is a key element in crafting compelling fiction. In this writer's experience, setting the scene is also imperative in the genres of nonfiction and poetry because doing so enables the reader to get a visual of where the characters are, and also helps to embody the experience or event in discussion. The best autoethnographical studies include well-rounded and interesting characters, accompanied by compelling and accurate dialogue placed in appropriate scenes and setting. Sometimes interviews may be inserted into the story in the form of plot or scene. Plot helps organize the story's structure (Laterza, 2007).

Dialogue, whether in fiction or nonfiction, is also an important aspect of prose because dialogue provides insight into character. Ellis (2004) argued that what people say helps the reader understand who they are, what they think, and what they feel. Dialogue also helps the reader become embodied in the lived experience. The dialogue offered in the autoethnographical study may be transcribed from the researcher's interviews.

Voice, sometimes called point of view, is another important aspect of writing compelling narrative. Some authors might write like they speak, while others have verbal and written voices which greatly differ. Most often, autoethnographical text is written in first person because the author is the primary narrator. Goodall (2000) recognized that "voice sums up the way in which prose communicates a writer's vocal range and tone, her or his sensitivities to the nuancs and passions of spoken language, and the essential *phenomenological essence* of what is being said" (p. 140).

Reflexivity encompasses voice and plays an important role in the written autoethnographical study. In relationship to the autoethnographic study, according to Goodall (2000), reflexivity refers to the researcher asking him or herself the same questions that are asked of the participant. The answers to these questions are what guides the researcher's analysis and interpretation. It is the voice of the narrator which represents the study.

When the autoethnographer writes about his or her own story, the "person" or voice comes across on the page. The challenge arises when the researcher writes about the participant, and a merging occurs between both of the stories. It is the researcher who decides what to include, so in some ways this is a subjective process, which some authorities might not find scientifically-based. On the other hand, if the autoethnographer has also had the same lived experience as the participant, then writing will be easier because he or she has already embodied the discussed lived experience. Sometimes when rereading a participant's story

which is similar to the autoethnographer's, the autoethnographer might more easily recall his or her lived experience (Hertz, 1997).

Finding the format for presenting the study may prove to be challenging for the autoethnographer. Behar (1996) shares the story of writing her own autoethnography, and how when she started she had no concept of the direction of her writing. She began with the thought to embed the diary of her life inside the life accounts of the participants. During the writing process, she realized there was a merging between her story and that of the participants. The idea is that one way to write an autoethnography is for the researcher to intertwine his or her story with that of the participants. One of Ellis' (2004) autoethnography students said this about the merging of the researcher's and participant's stories,

> When I tell their stories, I also tell my story, and a part of my wounded self feels heard and nourished. I have a more complex story of my illness now than I did before, when I was a victim and the medical staff were the victimizers. (p. 154)

For some writers, structure is intuitive, while some, such as Ellis (2004) suggested the use of an outline to help the plot unfold. "If you are trying to mirror what actually happened, you can be forgiven if the plot is less than dramatic...life is often mundane, and in traditional ethnography, representation wins out over dramatization" (Ellis, 2004, p. 337). In her particular study, Ellis chose to assign each chapter a thematic title as a way to organize the plot and to ensure all her material was included in the text. From an organizational standpoint, this helps the researcher cover all the basics.

Integrating the data into the text presents numerous organizational strategies. Richardson (2000) suggestsed that a creative way to incorporate interviews into the text is using the poetic form. According to Richardson, "Writing up interviews as poems, honoring the speaker's pauses, repititions, alliterations, narrative strategies, rhythms, and so on, may actually better represent the speaker than the practice of quoting in prose snippets" (p. 933). Because poetry is a form of writing that embodies the reader, it could be a poignant way to share the story and interview.

In his autobiography, *Table Talk*, Mykhalovskiy (1997) suggested that in writing what he hoped to accomplish "was to show that to write individual experience is, at the same time, to write social experience. While I am the central character of the story, the article tells, I do not stand alone" (p. 239).

Another essential component of autoethnographic writing is that the researcher accurately depicts the culture or group. One way to create this is to move back and forth from the specifics mentioned in the field notes (which include vivid descriptions, action and voice) to general theoretical concepts relevant to the subject of the study. This may be done by establishing a narrative by stating a general *topic* or *question.* The idea is to identify a concern or phenonmenon, without posing a specific thesis. The topic is identified through the thematic codings ascertained during data analysis. During this phase of the study, pertinent excerpts are highlighted. When the writing begins, all text should move the story forward and not be extraneous, however, this should be done by using multiple voices and perspectives (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).

Ellis and Bochner (2000) have suggested organizational strategies to their doctorate students. One option is for the dissertation to begin with a chapter on the researcher's personal story, and what lead him or her to the study. A second option is for the researcher to weave his or her story into the participant's story, thus giving each his or her own chapter. A third option is to choose one participant who has a story similar to the researcher's and write a compare and contrast narrative. During the interview, the researcher may jot down thoughts,

which may become part of the written report. If the option was to do an interactive interview, then this could be embedded in the written report. In this case, the plot of the study would be the researcher's journey. A fourth option, particularly useful if coding is done during the analysis, is to divide chapters into concepts which have emerged, and then incorporate a grounded theory analysis into the written report.

As shown, many different styles, forms, and layouts of writing are possible in the autoethnographical study. Creswell (2007) argued that the way we write is a reflection of our gender, social class, cultural group, and our interpretation of the data. Here are some of the questions Creswell offers the researcher to ponder during the writing process: Should the researcher write just about what the participant said or should the lapse in memory be acknowledged? Does the writing connect the stories? What is the role of theorizing what the participant say? Is the passive voice used in the writing? And to what extent has the writing (and analysis) provided an alternative to the normal discourse?

Transpersonal Relevance

For the most part, the *transpersonal relevance* of an autoethonographical study encompasses the idea of fostering self-awareness and self-discovery, which may lead to transformation. The autoethnographical researcher must be comfortable exposing his or her deepest emotions. In other words, he or she needs to be at ease talking deeply about oneselfand be empathetic when listening to the stories of others. For most transpersonal psychologists, this should come easily.

Because many autoethnographical studies relate to painful experiences, the researcher may encounter difficult moments during the course of the research and writing. Ellis (2009) further expressed candidly her thoughts while writing *Final Negotiations,* by saying that the process was both painful and therapeutic. The idea of writing until it becomes too painful is not a new one, but Ellis handled this by saying, "If the emotionality became too intense, I could stop and return to current time, a safety valve I did not have while engulfed by the actual experiences" (p. 108). Ellis confessed that knowing that she could stop gave her the confidence to explore all the lived experiences, while paying attention to the most difficult emotions, those needing resolve, and potentially resulting in transformation (Ellis, 2004, 2009).

Ellis and Bochner (2000) furthered the discussion and said, "Just when you think you can't stand the pain anymore…that's when the real work has begun…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 it" (p. 738).

In addition to the process of empowering the researcher, like memoir writing, autoethnography has the ability to transcend a person's account by linking the story to broader social implications and contexts. The autoethnographical study is an embodied experience in that by the nature of the study, it shares the personal information of "who we are, what we have been, and what we may become" (Haynes, 2011, p. 144). This process of understanding who we are leads to the path of self-reflection, self-discovery, and transformation for the researcher, participant, and reader. This might occur at a subconcious level. When stories about painful feelings and experiences are shared with the reader, then the writer becomes liberated of bearing the burden of the wound, and this may be a powerful component of emotional healing. During the writing process, the researcher might experience an increased sense of self-awareness, which may assist a cross-section of cultural groups feel a sense of connectedness. When there is a sensed feeling of connectedness, then cultural misunderstandings may be minimized, while at the same time there might be an increased awareness of cultural sensitivity. (Chang, 2008).

The goal of the autoethnographer is to encourage the reader to be sensitive, have compassion for cultural differences, and to ultimately open up the dialogue between different groups and/or cultures. This results in a win-win situation for both sides. Thus, it is important for the researcher to understand that studying people and writing about them is a learning process. From a transpersonal perspective, the writing process is a way of knowing, and also a method of discovery and analysis. Through writing, we learn different aspects of self, situations, and culture. Further, many memoirists and autoethnographers will claim that they write to find out what they do not know or want to learn something about what they already know (Richardson, 2000).

Pitfalls and Issues

Much of the controversy surrounding autoethnographical research stems from the issues of validity, and the use of fiction techniques. Unlike fiction, autoethnography leaves little room for fabricated characters or plot. This is a research study and must provide accurate details and data which has been validated, otherwise it loses its credability among other researchers and academics. This infers that the researcher should have chosen participants who will do the study justice, and who are interesting and multi-dimensional, so the temptation to invent is minimalized.

Using fiction technique to craft a compelling autoethnographical study is an idea borrowed from novelists. Researchers like Ellis (2004) confessed that she had to allow the characters in her book to "act the way they wished," rather than how they actually acted. "I had to negotiate their roles, think back and forth—not about what this person had said or done, as much as what the character would have or could have said or done in the situation" (p. 340). Making these types of decisions may present a challenge and tension for the researcher who feels committed to honesty.

Ellis (2000), when writing *Final Negotiations,* claims that she she did not take copious notes during her late husband's illness, so she was unable to recall exact dialogues. "I had notes for much of what I described, but I still had to construct scenes and dialogue from the partial descriptions in my notes" (p. 751). A more orthodox researcher might argue that there is no way to validate a constructed scene or made-up dialogue, but Ellis might respond by saying "it depends on your definition of validity…to me validity means that our work seeks verisimiltitude; it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience is lifelike, beliveable, and possible" (p. 751). Ellis supported this by stating that a text is valid if it improves or broadens the life of the participant and reader. One way to validate fabricated text, claimed Ellis, is to engage in member-checking or to show the text to the participant and to give them an opportunity to comment. Ellis also recommended writing a scene as close as possible to the time it occurred. If this is not possible, she suggested something called using, "emotional recall" where the researcher imagines being back in the scene both physically and emotionally. This may be thought of as the transpersonal technique of creative visualization. During creative visualization, it is also important to be vulnerable. As Behar (1996) wrote in the *Vulnerable Observer*, if social science "doesn't break your heart just isn't worth doing" (p. 177).

Ellis (2004) justified using her creative fiction license by claiming that instead of becoming the omniscient narrator, she might fictionalize. She wrote only about what was possible for her to know in the role she played as a researcher. In other words, she did not fabricate what she thought the participant said or thought. During those times when she was missing information in the story, she would ask an outside person who might have been present, what he or she might have been feeling during the lived experience.

The issues inherent to memoir writing are also correlated with autoethnographical writing, in particular, the inaccuracy of memory. Memory is often inaccurate or unreliable, especially when writing about a lived experience which occurred years earlier. Ellis and Bochner (2000) claimed that "narrative truth seeks to keep the past alive in the present. Stories show us that the meanings and significance of the past are incomplete, tentative, and revisable…" (p. 745). This researcher's experience as a memoir instructor has found that because of distorted memory banks, many stories written about childhood have a high probability of distortion, especially if written later in life.

One risk of an autoethnographical study is for the researcher to become wrapped up in his or her own story. One way to avoid this is to offer different perspectives, for instance interviews of family members. Ellis (2004) claimed

> If you write only your story, you'll have to do it as fully as possible. I'm talking about interviewing your siblings, possibly the doctors and nurses [her student writing about a dying parent] who attend to your father, and doing a participant observation in the nursing home…part of doing an autoethnography is to include as much of the experience as possible. (p. 128)

On the other hand, one might argue than an important advantage of this type of qualitative study is that it could potentially reach a wider audience of readers than a classical study which will most likely remain on an academic bookshelf. Richardson (2000) argued by saying that traditional research methods could be deemed narcisstic, as a great deal of work is put into them, they are documented, and then placed on shelves to accumulate dust. As Richardson stated, "It seems foolish at best, and narcisstic and wholly self-absorbed…to spend months or years doing research that ends up not being read and not making a differernce to anything but the author's career" (p. 925). In addition, when personal information or stories are incorporated into the text of a research study, then it becomes easier and more interesting to read. As a former journalist, this researcher understands the need for reading human interest stories, and how readers like understanding how writers cope with various events in their lives.

To the casual observer, it might appear that an autoethnographical study is not a "real study." According to Van Maanen (2011), "From the outside [the ethnographical study] looks to the uninitiated as a semi-respectable form of hanging out, requiring only a little time and the effort to sally forth with notebook and pen (or tape recorder) in hand" (p. 165). The researcher could be viewed as someone who visits the cultural field, documents, and reports, with little theoretical analysis. However, this is not necessarily the case, as Van Maanen (2011) stated

> such invisible work and the skills honed through its labor take years to develop...ethnography relies heavily on others, but in the end, it is the ethnographer, and not the member or native who develops and takes responsibility for whatever cultural concepts, accounts and representations mark a study. (p. 165)

Ethical Considerations

When ethical issues arise, it is best for the researcher to think systematically. Each situation needs to be addressed on an individual basis, without being too general. The goal is to avoid harm to the researcher and participants. This is particularly relevant when writing about loved ones or family members. The researcher is often torn, wanting to make the story

compelling and interesting for the reader, but without detrimentally affecting his or her personal relationships. This applies whether the participants are family or not because those being written about are real, and not simply numbers in a quantitative research study. (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Again, the ethical issues inherent to the autoethnographical study are similar to those presented during the writing of a memoir. When controversial subjects and situations are addressed in the study and the researcher senses a discomfort in the sharing, Ellis (2009) suggested one or any of the following: use pseudonyms, delay publication until after the death of a person, fictionize the story, seek approval after the fact, omit or alter facts, and obtain proper consent. Each situation is different and needs to be evaluated separately. Ellis (2009) claimed that even after all her years working on this type of study, situations still arise that cause her to question her decisions. "Just when I think I have a handle on a guiding principle about research with intimate others, a student presents a new project and my understanding unfurls into the intricacies…" (p. 209). Ellis (2000) furthered this by saying that the balance is difficult while trying to give "readers the information they expect without betraying the trust of participants" (Ellis, 2000, p. 758). This is the challenge and the joy of the craft of being involved in an autoethnographical study.

Conclusion

The benefits of an autoethnographical study far outweigh the issues and pitfalls. In view of the market flood of memoirs and biographies during recent years, there is increasing evidence that character-driven narratives are becoming more and more popular. The landscape of academic research is changing, in that studies are becoming more applicable and usable to the world-at-large, rather than being documents which fill library shelves and archives never to be read after the dissertation defense.

Furthermore, it is demonstrated in this paper, that there is a natural blend between the autoethnographical method and the work of the transpersonal psychologist. The core of transpersonal psychology is the concept of self-discovery and transformation, two benefits derived from sharing stories through narrative. Validation for autoethnographical studies may be a bit more challenging, but it is not impossible, and this paper shares some suggestions on how the researcher may seek to validate his or her study.

Finally, it is evident as a result of the information gathered in this paper, that more research needs to be done in regard to the specifics of conducting autoethnographical research in the field of psychology. It is hoped that many opportunities for this will arise in the near future.

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