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Learning Autoethnography: A Review of Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research

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Abstract

Tony E. Adams, Stacy Jones, and Carolyn Ellis' publication of Autoethnography explains the scope and process of conducting autoethnographic research and its uses of self-examination and society. As a recent graduate, the author examined his own experiences in graduate school and the debates over quantitative and qualitative research methodologies as he read the text. The book outlined the purposes, procedures, and methods to determine validity in autoethnographic research by proffering personal examples and narratives to elucidate the research paradigm.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Autoethnographic Philosophy

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Learning Autoethnography: A Review of *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research*

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Tony E. Adams, Stacy Jones, and Carolyn Ellis' publication of Autoethnography explains the scope and process of conducting autoethnographic research and its uses of self-examination and society. As a recent graduate, the author examined his own experiences in graduate school and the debates over quantitative and qualitative research methodologies as he read the text. The book outlined the purposes, procedures, and methods to determine validity in autoethnographic research by proffering personal examples and narratives to elucidate the research paradigm. Keywords: Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Autoethnographic Philosophy.

German theologian Meister Eckhart once wrote “A human being has so many skins inside, covering the depths of the heart. We know so many things, but we don’t know ourselves.” If this statement is to be taken literally, our understanding of ourselves is limited by the fact that we create layers that mask our true natures. As a graduate student, a Statistics professor posted a poster on the wall that read “In God we trust, all others must bring data.” The professor refused to allow any other types of research to be used for seminar projects because of the supposed “lack of credibility and generalizability” among non-sanctioned research paradigms. Similar statements can be found in quantitative and qualitative journals in which they reject the notion that self-reflection can add validity to a study. Accordingly, autobiographical and autoethnographical studies elicit little support in certain academic circles. However, since the 1970s, some researchers have begun to challenge the status quo by utilizing personal narratives as a rich primary source to inform a study (Chang, 2008).

In *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research*, authors Tony E. Adams, Stacy Jones, and Carolyn Ellis explain how autoethnographic research “enable us to live and to live *better*” and argue that “stories allow us to lead more reflective, more meaningful, and more just lives” (p. 1). Adams, Jones, and Ellis contend that through careful self-examination, we are able to understand, empathize, and connect our personal experiences to others. Thus, our lived experiences contribute to the growing social narratives at work in society.

Autoethnography is a relatively new research paradigm that offers reflective narratives to elucidate the researcher’s personal experiences to analyze cultural beliefs, practices, and the social experiences that influence our identities (Wall, 2008). Throughout their study, the authors offer personal stories to illustrate their own understanding of and the importance of autoethnography as a valid and important research tool. Ultimately, they contend that the research method’s goal is to create a symmetry between “intellectual and methodological rigor, emotion, and creativity” as well as seeking “social justice and to make life better” (p. 2).

Choosing a theoretical framework for any study is daunting. Researchers take great care in selecting which approach will best suit their investigations. As such, the authors provide a list of arguments why autoethnography is a valid and useful tool to investigate how “acknowledge how their own identities, lives, beliefs, feelings, and relationships influenced their approach and their reporting” of data. (p. 22). This contextualization provides a

platform for the researcher to relate the subject being studied and their interpretation to the broader discussion. Adams, Jones, and Ellis provide personal examples to illustrate how their own lives have influenced their research. Again, all three authors provide the connection of their own experiences to others'.

Unlike other Social Science disciplines (history, anthropology, etc.) which promotes the detachment of the researcher from the participants or subjects under study, either by time or the notion that personal immersion into the field would violate the integrity of the study, autoethnographers begin by examining one's personal views or beliefs on a particular subject. Adams, an openly gay professor, utilizes his experiences to illustrate the issue of "coming out" to friends and family to examine the experiences of others. Interestingly, Jones and Ellis also provide further parallels between their own self-examinations to clarify that a researcher can use their own lives as a metaphorical sounding board to juxtapose their experiences with others. The authors correctly assert that an autoethnographer must be careful not to become so identified by a particular field of inquiry that they will become "typecast" into an academic genre.

The most important contribution of the book for students of autoethnography or someone simply interested in discovering more about the paradigm is the inclusion of journal articles and a series of published books that utilize autoethnography. Combing through the hundreds of scholarly journals can be overwhelming for any person seeking to better understand a subject. However, the list provided offers a shortcut for researchers and graduate students to seek other autoethnographic texts. Despite the seemingly exhaustive list, there are likely other sources that publish similar styles of work which are not mentioned. Also, the book cogently describes the scope and processes of conducting autoethnographic studies. While the section on defending autoethnography offers a satisfactory argument on the validity of the paradigm, the authors could have addressed the more intricate criticisms against autoethnography. For example, many have attacked the issue of validity in using personal narratives as primary source material (Wall, 2008). Yet, the authors offer minimal attention to these criticisms.

There are only minor criticisms this reviewer catalogued when reading this book. Despite the open dialogue the authors have with the reader, such as Adams' analysis of his own "coming out" stories, it would be useful to share some critiques of their work beyond their own experiences (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Another concern that emerged from this book was the lack of breadth in which disciplines utilize autoethnography in conducting research. Other disciplines, such as history or anthropology, utilize autoethnographic texts as primary sources to inform their own respective studies. Lastly, this reviewer would have liked to see a greater symmetry between the authors' experiences of writing autoethnography. Jones and Ellis' commentary on their own published and unpublished works was not as in-depth as Adams' reflections. As such, there is less continuity among the authors' backgrounds as Adams'. However, these issues in no way detract from the overall value this book adds to the growing literature on autoethnography.

Autoethnography could replace several course texts in autoethnographic research courses. Adams, Jones, and Ellis' contribution to the limited understanding of this research paradigm is noteworthy because it provides an introduction to a discipline that is hotly debated among scholars. Those quantitative and qualitative "purists" will likely have much to say about the use of personal narratives as a valid tool to conduct research. Understandingly, the authors devote significant attention to answering autoethnography's critics while building a sound case for its validity. *Autoethnography* fills an important space in the field of qualitative research. While some may dismiss autoethnography as an invalid theoretical framework, the authors have established its ability to relate one's personal experiences to the broader social experiences of others.

If Eckhart's quote is to be taken literally, then it is very likely that autoethnography can contribute to academia. However, as Adams et al. (2011) have demonstrated, it is possible to know ourselves through the critical lens of autoethnography. Thus, as researchers critically reflect on their own experiences, a broader narrative emerges which can be linked to larger social phenomena. More importantly, understanding ourselves in relation to the larger communities in which we interact is only possible through careful self-examination. Thus, Eckhart's comments could be rewritten as "A human being has so many skins inside, covering the depths of the heart. We know many things, and through careful self-examination, we are able to know ourselves."

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