Leaning Into Autoethnography: A Review of Heewon Chang's Autoethnography As Method

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Abstract

To lean in means to press forward or to move toward something. Leaning in is a deliberate way to approach something whether it is a strong wind or a new skill. Leaning in describes my stance toward autoethnography. I am making a step forward to understand what autoethnography is and how I might be able to use it in my personal research agenda. In reviewing the various approaches to autoethnography, I have found that Autoethnography as Method by Heewon Chang offers a comfortable entry point. Her methodical approach and practical guidelines for doing autoethnography are appealing and useful in creating a balance of reflection, analysis, and interpretation.

Keywords

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Leaning Into Autoethnography:
A Review of Heewon Chang's *Autoethnography As Method*

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To lean in means to press forward or to move toward something. Leaning in is a deliberate way to approach something whether it is a strong wind or a new skill. Leaning in describes my stance toward autoethnography. I am making a step forward to understand what autoethnography is and how I might be able to use it in my personal research agenda. In reviewing the various approaches to autoethnography, I have found that Autoethnography as Method by Heewon Chang offers a comfortable entry point. Her methodical approach and practical guidelines for doing autoethnography are appealing and useful in creating a balance of reflection, analysis, and interpretation. Keywords: Autoethnography, Qualitative Methods, Ethnography, Triad

To *lean in* means to *press forward* or to *move toward* something. Leaning in is a deliberate way to approach something whether it is a strong wind or a new skill. This idiom was used recently in Facebook COO, Sheryl Sandburg's new book, *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*. As a novice qualitative researcher who is more comfortable with a scientific writing style, I use *lean in* to describe my stance toward autoethnography. Chang's (2008) book enabled me to *lean into* or *move toward* an understanding of how I might use this method in my own research. My doctoral education courses included statistics and quantitative research methods. It was not until post-doc that I took any formal courses in qualitative research. Given the various approaches to autoethnography, Chang offers a comfortable entry point because of its objective stance.

Chang (2008) distinguishes autoethnography from other self-narratives such as autobiographies, memoirs, and personal essays. While these forms of self-narratives and autoethnography share the common characteristic of the personal story, autoethnography is distinct in that it moves beyond the personal story into an analysis and interpretation of a culture. It is a way to analyze and interpret a culture using one's personal story. It is a method that "combines cultural analysis and interpretation with narrative details. It follows the anthropological and social scientific inquiry approach rather than descriptive or performative storytelling" (p. 46).

The Two Camps and the Triad

Chang (2008) describes two polarizing camps of autoethnographers stating the "war between objectivity and subjectivity is likely to continue, shaping the discourse of autoethnography" (p. 46). She categorizes researchers including Ellis, Bochner and Denzin on the subjective side with their more evocative and "emotionally engaging" approaches and Anderson and Atkison on the objective side taking more of an "analytical, theoretical, and objective approach" (p. 46). While Chang depicts the approaches to autoethnography as "opposing" and some "straddle both positions," I prefer the way Ellis and Bochner (as cited in Chang) describes the approaches to autoethnography as a triad with varying emphasis on auto (self), ethno (culture) and graphy (process). The visual of a traid triggers a mental image of a discussion rather than a debate about the ways people approach autoethnography. Chang acknowledges Ellis and Bochner's explanation and refers to a "triadic balance" when she

describes autoethnography as being "ethnographic in its methodological orientation, cultural in it interpretive orientation, and autobiographical in its content orientation" (p. 48). Figure 1 is a reproduction of a doodle I made in the sidebar of Chang's book as I processed this representation. It is this triadic balance of reflection, analysis, and interpretation that I find appealing and useful.
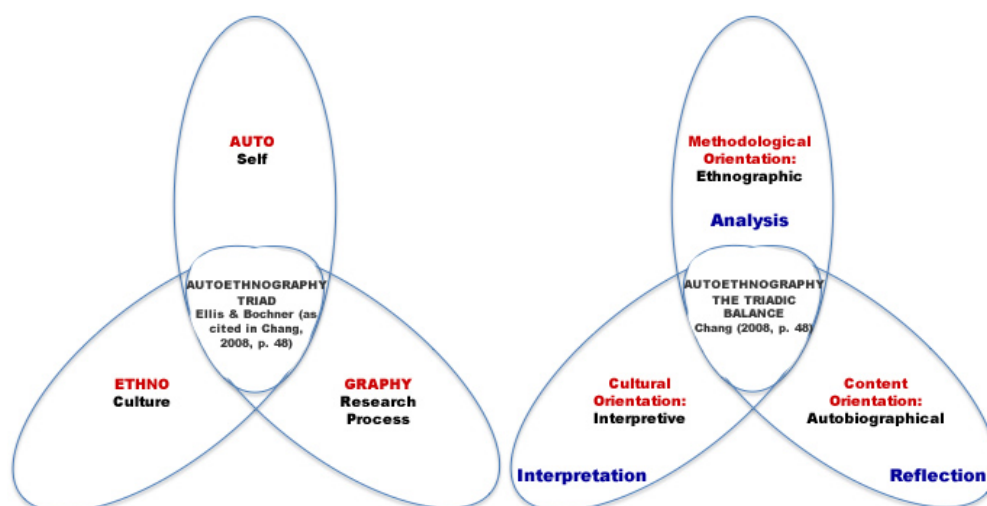

Figure 1. My sidebar doodle of Chang's representation of autoethnography (right) using Ellis and Bochner's triad (left) (as cited in Chang, 2009).

An example of a subjective approach is Denzin's (2014) interpretive autoethnography. Denzin defines interpretative autoethnography as "the life experiences as performances of a person" (p. 1). Using the term, *pentimiento*, "something painted out of a picture which later becomes visible again," (p. 1) to describe stories, Denzin emphasizes the performative nature of autoethnography and the idea that a life is like a painting with layers of meaning. An example of an objective approach is Anderson's (2006) "analytic ethnographic paradigm" and presents five features that differentiate this style of autoethnography from the evocative style. These features are that "the researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in the researcher's published texts, and (3) committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena" (p. 375). Although Chang (2008) does not define her approach as analytic, I would place her in the objective camp.

Organization of Chapters

The book is organized into three parts including 10 chapters. In Part I, Conceptual Framework, Chang (2008) provides an overview of culture, self-narratives, and autoethnography. These three chapters prime the reader for Part II, Collecting Data and Part III, Turning Data into Autoethnography. The appendices include resources for the autoethnographer including a biography of self-narratives, autoethnographies, memoirs, and autobiographies; several writing exercises and concludes with an autoethnography example by Jaime J. Romo that serves as an autoethnography exemplar. It is understood by this exemplar that using this method can still tell and story and evoke emotion as I was moved by Romo's account of his experiences as a young Chicano and his identity development. He is vivid in the description of his experiences such as this description of his desire to attend a private high school:

> School was my oasis and sometimes my mirage. When I was in the eighth grade,
> I still wet the bed and was still terrorized by the violence in my home. When I
> heard about a private high school that had boarders, I knew that I had to get a
> scholarship to attend and get away from my house and the insanity I lived in.
> (Romo, 2004, as cited in Chang, 2008 p. 187)

Autoethnography as Method

I found Chang's (2008) book helpful in understanding how to do autoethnography, which may lead to my understanding how to write it. Chang writes in a straightforward and systematic way resembling a scientific writing style. She explains various components of autoethnography as method and offers exercises for readers to practice. It is one thing to read about autoethnography but another thing to do it. In her review of Ellis's book, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*, Moro (2006) states, "One wonders if it is easier for an accomplished writer to learn to do qualitative research than it is the other way around" (p. 267). Autoethnographies require a unique writing style and for researchers with technical or scientific backgrounds, Chang's systematic and structured style is familiar. She refers to her book as a "research guidebook (p. 15)" and uses action verbs such as *list*, *describe*, and *select* to structure and prescribe various writing exercises. Her word choices sometimes feel heartless and sterile or perhaps they are merely reflective of her background in anthropology. For example, "autoethnographers must be willing to dig deeper into their memories, excavate rich details, bring them onto the examination tables to sort, label, interconnect, and contextualize them in the sociocultural environment" (p. 51). I find it awkward to think about placing my emotions on an examination table; nevertheless, I understand her point. Although some might liken Chang's lists and exercises to a cookbook, she warns readers "Quick tricks showing how to string bits of data together in a certain style and a certain structure may appear useful, especially to novice autoethnographers. However, such tricks are inadequate in producing a well-developed cultural self-analysis or a confident autoethnographer" (pp. 139-140).

On Ethics

Chang (2009) takes a proactive approach toward ethical issues stating, "you may feel that ethical issue involving human subjects do not apply to your research design. This assumption is incorrect" (p. 68). She advises the autoethnographer to check with their institution's IRB to find out their guidelines pertaining to this type of research. Specifically, Chang states that IRB approval should be sought if the study involves interviews or observations with others. If IRB is deemed unnecessary, Chang suggests that the researcher use the code of confidentiality throughout the research process. Use of pseudonyms for others connected to the researcher is a good practice and it might also be advisable to use a *nom de plume* to protect the identities of others in the story. Tolich (2012), who is also interested in the ethics of autoethnography, stated that he is "curious about how the rights of the 'other' in autoethnography are weighted against the interests of the self when the starting point of the research is one's own sociological imagination and is likely to involve others" (p. 1659). He referenced Chang (2009) often in his article about ethics including in his ten foundational guidelines for autoethnographers to address ethics in practice. Chang (2009) ends her discussion about ethics with this suggestion, "As you play a multi-faceted role as researcher, informant, and author, you should be reminded that your story is never made in a vacuum and others are always visible or invisible participants in your story" (p. 69). This is sound advice.

Leaning In

In Ellis, Adams, and Bochner's (2011) description of the history of autoethnography, they explain how scholars wanted social science research to become "meaningful, accessible, and evocative…grounded in personal experience" (para. 3). Chang's (2009) work has enabled me to see how I might be able to write an autoethnography. Chang speaks to me and my way of understanding and organizing data and producing research. For autoethnography to be wide reaching, it needs different types of entry points and approaches. Chang's approach has enabled me to find my entry point and lean in.

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