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Considering "Objective" Possibilities in Autoethnography: A Critique of Heewon Chang's Autoethnography as Method¹

Abstract

Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology that emphasizes a more personal, almost intimate level of study. It renders the researcher-participant opportunities to explore past and present experiences while gaining self-awareness of his or her interactions and their socio-cultural effects. In the book *Autoethnography as Method* Heewon Chang presents this research methodology in an easy to follow text and illustration, while advocating an objective approach to data collection and analysis. However, Chang's theoretical positions seem to shift back and forth between this objective point-of-view and a subjective perspective throughout the text causing ambiguity and contradiction of ideas and approaches.

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Autoethnography, Autoethnographic Research, Self-reflexivity, Self-observational, Autoethnographic Data

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Considering “Objective” Possibilities in Autoethnography: A Critique of Heewon Chang’s *Autoethnography as Method*¹

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*Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology that emphasizes a more personal, almost intimate level of study. It renders the researcher-participant opportunities to explore past and present experiences while gaining self-awareness of his or her interactions and their socio-cultural effects. In the book *Autoethnography as Method* Heewon Chang presents this research methodology in an easy to follow text and illustration, while advocating an objective approach to data collection and analysis. However, Chang’s theoretical positions seem to shift back and forth between this objective point-of-view and a subjective perspective throughout the text causing ambiguity and contradiction of ideas and approaches. Key Words: Qualitative Research, Autoethnography, Autoethnographic Research, Self-reflexivity, Self-observational, and Autoethnographic Data*

Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology that emphasizes a more personal, almost intimate level of study. It renders the researcher-participant opportunities to explore past and present experiences while gaining self-awareness of his or her interactions and their socio-cultural effects. Nevertheless, this methodology requires planning and implementation with the same rigor required by other types of research inquiry.

In the book *Autoethnography as Method*, Heewon Chang (2008) has attempted to broaden its popularity and use by providing a well-planned scheme of how to do autoethnographic research. The author details the main assumptions of her conceptual framework in the first three chapters by focusing on four points: (a) culture as a group experience where self is always connected with others; (b) self narratives as a way for self and others to be explored and understood; (c) telling one’s story is not enough to gain understanding of self and others; this only results from in-depth cultural analysis and interpretation; and (d) autoethnography is a valuable tool for social scientists and practitioners such as counselors, teachers, medical personnel, and human services workers. Culture and understanding of self and others become recurrent ideas with definitions that shape readers’ understanding. However, the author clarifies that “my intention is not to provide a comprehensive list of definitions, but to focus on the concepts of culture that address people as interactive agents” (p. 15).

The author presents this research subject in an easy-to-read text; she clearly conveys each step necessary to complete an autoethnographic study. What at first might

¹ Please see Sally St. George’s complementary “autoethnographic” review of this same book in Volume 2, Number 50 of *The Weekly Qualitative Report* located at <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/WQR/chang.pdf>.

seem difficult concepts to explain, she presents with citations and examples that support her position. Her vigor and enthusiasm are apparent throughout passages such as:

Although self has been viewed differently in different time periods and cultures, I argue that self is consistently connected to others in the realm of culture. The others refer to other human beings differently regarded by self: some are seen as others of similarity (friends to self), as others as of difference (strangers to self), or as others of opposition (enemies to self). (p. 29)

Chang (2008) leads readers through basic concepts to the more complex sections of the book such as methodology and autoethnographic writing. As she moves from chapter to chapter, the author presents all the individual ideas and ties them together as a whole. To accomplish this, she systematically merges relevant information with newly introduced concepts and techniques, saying for example, "As I discussed in Chapter 1, our lives are pulled into intentional and unintentional interactions with different others.....The 'who' information in the secondary label gives you a database..." (p. 117).

The author presents the theoretical underpinnings of this paradigm within what seems an objective position in social research, saying: "The autoethnography that I promote in this book combines cultural analysis and interpretations with narrative details. It follows the anthropological and social scientific inquiry approach rather than descriptive or performative storytelling" (p. 46). As this comment indicates, Chang's version of autoethnographic research seems to have been highly influenced by Anderson (2006a), who proposes that "analytic autoethnography refers to ethnographic work in which the researcher is (a) a full member in the research group or setting, (b) visible as such a member in the researcher's published texts, and (c) committed to an analytical research agenda focused on improving theoretical understanding of broader social phenomena" (p. 375).

Chang (2008) describes Anderson's (2006a) approach to analytic autoethnography as objective and remarks that Anderson "leans toward the objectivity camp" (p. 45). She also identifies Atkinson (2006) as a researcher who "aligns himself" with Anderson's "objective" orientation to autoethnography (p. 46). Anderson (2006a), however, often describes his epistemological assumption as "realist" (p. 374) and declares, "I am committed to pursuing theoretically informed, inductively grounded realist ethnography" (2006b, 451). This position is substantiated by Charmaz (2006), when she says, "He advocates a form of realist ethnography" (p. 396). Ellis and Bochner (2006) state, "He does want to claim autoethnography for realist ethnographers" (p. 445).

While Chang (2008) does not openly identify her theoretical orientation, she hints at objectivity in saying, "this book will limit its consideration to autoethnographies that handle autobiographical data with ethnographic methodology and intent" (p. 56). It could be assumed that the author positions herself along Anderson's realist and analytical orientation to research since Chang emphasizes "profound cultural analysis and interpretation" (p. 51) and notes that "autoethnography is a rigorous ethnographic, broadly qualitative research method" (p. 57). In what seems an attempt at distancing herself from a subjective perspective, Chang lists Ellis and Bochner (2006) and Denzin (2006) as researchers that "stand on the opposite end" and endorse an "evocative," "more

subjective” approach to autoethnography (p. 46). Nevertheless, any assumption of Chang's epistemological stance is uncertain as the author carefully avoids clarifying it.

Chang (2008) seems to shift from Anderson's (2006a) objectivism and “realist ethnography” by aligning herself with a more subjective theoretical position with her strong focus and emphasis on the concept of self (p. 392). Anderson (2006a) puts the idea of the “complete member researcher” at the center of an autoethnography study (p. 378). He proposes that “the first and most obvious feature of autoethnography is that the researcher is a complete member in the social world under study” (p. 379). Chang locates self as the main element that intertwines with the concept of culture and others: “Autoethnography benefits greatly from the thought that self is an extension of community rather than that it is an independent, self-sufficient being” (p. 26).

More consistent with a constructionist epistemology, Chang (2008) brings forth the “concept of self as a relational being” and cites Gergen's (1991) to underline her position: “One's sense of individual autonomy gives way to a reality of immersed interdependence, in which it is relationship that constructs the self” (p. 24). Creswell (1998) states that “ideological perspectives often guide qualitative studies, drawn broadly from postmodern concerns” (p. 88). Clearly, constructionism and its implications inform Chang's autoethnographic research approach.

Furthermore, Chang (2008) outlines a section of history of the concept of self to solidify its prominence within her research approach and to explain her processes for negotiating the constructs she deems valuable. She notes: “Rather, the positionality of self to others is socially constructed and transformable as the self develops its relationship to others” (p. 29).

To support her central assumption of self, the author draws on the principles of social constructionism proposed by Ken Gergen (1999/2000):

What we take to be knowledge of world grows from relationship, and is embedded not within individual minds but within interpretive or communal traditions. In effect, there is a way in which constructionalist dialogues celebrate relationship as opposed to the individual, connection over isolation, and communion over antagonism. (p. 122)

Chang (2008) merges the well-structured methodological process she proposes with her focus on self and its relationship to culture and others throughout the data collection chapters. Her theoretical assumption is embedded in each technique, as when she states, “Through writing exercises of chronicling, inventorying, and visualizing self, you are encouraged to unravel your memory, write down fragments of your past, and build the database for your cultural analysis and interpretation” (p. 72). The data analysis section is consistent with this, as well: “Since self is considered a carrier of culture, intimately connected to others in society, the self's behaviors--verbal and nonverbal--should be interpreted in their cultural context” (p. 125).

Does this mean that Chang's paradigm could fit in the center of the subjective and objective positions in autoethnographic research? Is it possible to follow rigorous methodological procedures of data collection and interpretation while embracing opposing philosophical, theoretical and epistemological stances? These questions are important for a number of reasons. First, Chang's approach to autoethnography could

bring clarity to the debate in autoethnographic research about subjectivity versus objectivity. Second, other researchers who find value in what seems to be an and/or approach could implement her particular take on autoethnography. Finally, by explicitly addressing this question the author could greatly strengthen the value of an already easy-to-read guidebook to autoethnographic research. These proposals inevitably depend on larger, more complex social constructs that researchers from both sides would find of value

Chang (2008) manages not to place herself on either side of the objectivity or subjectivity debate by not claiming either position. However, the author's inclusion of writing exercises, samples, and Venn diagrams in the technical phases of the book, and the appendices with learning tools, exemplifies her back and forth shift from a realist, objective to a constructionist, subjective orientation. In spite of this shift, Chang advocates a more objective, more tangible, approach to autoethnographic research. The detailed step-by-step guide to every phase of this qualitative inquiry gives beginners and advanced researchers a clear idea how to proceed from beginning to end, as opposed to more subjective approaches, which do not offer the guidance Chang makes available in this book. Moreover, others will a much less objective approach to research leave readers in obscure places wondering what type of methodology, if any, was applied.

The question that will concern the research field will not be whether the author subscribes to an objective or subjective approach to social science research, but why she does not take a clear and substantial position. This creates a discrepancy that greatly minimizes the value of the text as a tool in the qualitative research field. For example, the author advocates for a less "personal nature of inquiry" and criticizes Bochner and Ellis (2002) for "promoting one" (p. 51). Chang (2008) takes a strong stand in saying "I argue that the mere self-exposure without profound cultural analysis and interpretation leaves this writing at the level of descriptive autobiography or memoir" (p. 51)

Paradoxically, Chang (2008) includes Jaime Romo's moving, touching, and courageous account of his days as a young "Chicano" growing up in northeast Los Angeles as a sample. His autoethnographic study has long passages of what Chang does not agree should be part of autoethnographic research: "Article length autoethnographic studies frequently cover emotive topics, sometimes including those conventionally kept private, such as a complex mother and daughter relationship (Ellis, 1996), a father's death, (Wyatt, 2005)...child abuse (Fox, 1996)" (p. 50). Furthermore, it contains passages that are very personal and intimate. Romo wrote: "Sister called me to the board to spell the next word, but I also had to go to the bathroom. The contest won out and I marched to the board to spell orange: O-R-N-G-E, as I quietly peed on myself, leaving a small puddle for the next student to discover...' Perhaps Romo's autoethnography represents a study completed under an and/or position and is a study that contains evocative elements while following a well-structured methodological process.

Although there are discrepancies and ambiguous theoretical positions throughout the book, the author has created a text that will spark the interest of readers to further develop qualitative research skills, in particular autoethnography studies. Chang (2008) took a step to distance herself from unproductive debates by focusing mainly on sharing her expertise with others.

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Author Note

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