I'm Interested in Autoethnography, but How Do I Do It?

Robin Cooper
Nova Southeastern University, robicoop@nova.edu

Bruce V. Lilyea
Nova Southeastern University, lilyea@nova.edu

I'm Interested in Autoethnography, but How Do I Do It?

Abstract

Autoethnography is one of the qualitative research methodologies that remains somewhat mysterious to many scholars. While the use of autoethnography has expanded across numerous fields, it can be difficult to find much guidance about the procedures involved in conducting an autoethnography. Recognizing both the flexibility and creativity inherent in autoethnography, as well as the need for rigor in achieving meaningful research results, we offer in this article some suggestions and reflections regarding the process of conducting an autoethnography – from developing the research question to reporting the findings. These recommendations draw from both narrative and ethnographic research methodologies, as well as descriptive and arts-based approaches. This discussion may serve as a resource for those interested in teaching and conducting autoethnography.

Keywords

autoethnography, qualitative research, cultural analysis

Creative Commons License

I'm Interested in Autoethnography, but How Do I Do It?

Robin Cooper and Bruce Lilyea
Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, Florida USA

Autoethnography is one of the qualitative research methodologies that remains somewhat mysterious to many scholars. While the use of autoethnography has expanded across numerous fields, it can be difficult to find much guidance about the procedures involved in conducting an autoethnography. Recognizing both the flexibility and creativity inherent in autoethnography, as well as the need for rigor in achieving meaningful research results, we offer in this article some suggestions and reflections regarding the process of conducting an autoethnography – from developing the research question to reporting the findings. These recommendations draw from both narrative and ethnographic research methodologies, as well as descriptive and arts-based approaches. This discussion may serve as a resource for those interested in teaching and conducting autoethnography.

Keywords: autoethnography, qualitative research, cultural analysis

In academic journals and edited volumes of qualitative research, we can read research reports reflecting various approaches to autoethnography and different styles of reporting. Autoethnography is a unique qualitative methodology that draws upon several qualitative traditions, including narrative research, autobiography, ethnography, and arts-based research. Describing autoethnographers as one type of narrative researcher, Butler-Kisber (2010) states, "Individually or collaboratively they use narrative dialogue, self-study/autobiographical and memory work to construct stories of their own experiences" (p. 65). Autoethnographies that draw upon this narrative tradition emphasize story and pivotal experiences in one's life. For example, Carano (2013) tells the story of his emerging cross-cultural awareness as a Peace Corps volunteer. In McLaurin's (2003) account of her evolving attitudes toward homosexuality, she refers explicitly to "a turning point in my life" (p. 483) when she met and befriended a woman who was a lesbian. Likewise, Nethsinghe (2012) includes a section of his autoethnography with the heading, "The Life-Changing Experience" (p. 7).

Whereas some scholars situate autoethnography within the family of narrative methods, others place it within the ethnographic tradition (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Robben & Sluka, 2012). Chang (2008) says of autoethnography, "Stemming from the field of anthropology, autoethnography shares the storytelling feature with other genres of self-narrative but transcends mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation" (p. 43). Likewise, Creswell (2013) highlights the focus on cultural meaning inherent in autoethnographic narratives, noting that they "contain the personal story of the author as well as the larger cultural meaning for the individual's story" (p. 73). Malhotra's (2013) autoethnography reflects this focus. She states, "I utilize autoethnography because I was drawn to view adoption from diverse viewpoints. Furthermore, I had a desire to understand how the Indian culture contributes to adoption regardless of intercountry or domestic placement. Autoethnographers describe and analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience" (p. 3). Ethnographers typically focus not only on context but also on a particular

social issue. This characteristic of ethnography is likewise reflected in autoethnography. Congdon (2014) explains his research objective in terms of a particular societal issue:

> In this study, I explore this issue of recognition and nonrecognition further by providing a personal and autoethnographic account of my experiences living with TS, OCD, and ADHD, and negotiating the communicative practices employed within my public school experience using co-cultural theory (CCT) as the theoretical framework. In doing so, I seek to encourage teachers, social workers, educational psychologists and other professionals who deal with students living with TS to consider how their power and influence may hinder the communicative practices employed and educational and social experiences of these students in their care. (p. 2)

In addition to the traditions of narrative research and ethnography, autoethnography often draws upon arts-based research, particularly evocative approaches to ethnography. Barone and Eisner (2012) describe arts-based research as "a process that uses the expressive qualities of form to convey meaning" (p. xii). The focus of arts-based autoethnography aligns with the goals of autoethnography while using interpretive and representational collection and presentation techniques. For example, Averett and Soper (2011) used a shadowbox to symbolize significant fears, Ketelle (2004) used a fictionalized narrative, Lai (2012) used narrative and poetic inquiry, Reilly (2013) framed the autoethnography using a comparative alignment to a fairy tale metaphor, and Ricci (2003) used poetic interpretation.

Readers often find autoethnography compelling and impactful, but we have heard many students and colleagues asking, "Where can I learn how to actually *do* autoethnography?" In this article, we focus on the process of conducting and reporting an autoethnography. Given the various models of autoethnography, our goal is to avoid being too prescriptive or rigid in terms of procedural guidelines. At the same time, we hope you may find it helpful to have some practical tips for conducting your own autoethnographic study, as this methodology is not highly structured and relies upon the researcher to determine specific procedures.

Autoethnography fills a gap in traditional research where the researcher's own voice typically is not overtly included as part of the research. As you develop your autoethnography, it is key to keep in mind that the base unit of analysis is *you*, the author, and the researcher. Although this may seem like a simple idea, many of us have been trained that the researcher is to be somehow opaque, and certainly never the focus, so it can be a challenge to willingly reveal ourselves at the core of the research.

Getting Started: The Research Question

As with any qualitative research project, the first step is to compose your research question, which reflects the focus of your study. It is important that the research question reflects the focus of autoethnography, which is exploring a cultural issue through one's personal story. An autoethnographic study is a form of cultural analysis. As you develop your research question, ask yourself, what is the cultural issue/feature you would like to address, what is it that you want to learn through your study, and what is the aspect of your own lived experience that you are interested in exploring? The answers to these questions can help you in the formulation of your research question. The following are samples of research questions for autoethnographic studies:

- What impact did the 9/11 terrorist attacks have on me, as a survivor, and on my overall sense of self? (McIntyre, 2016)

- What are the intrapersonal conflict experiences that originate from the researcher's complex cultural background of Chabad-Lubavitch? (Silverman, 2017)
- What makes me the teacher I am? What has made me into the teacher I am? (Vasconcelos, 2011)

The research questions above highlight the autobiographical focus of autoethnography – the experience of surviving the attacks of 9/11; the personal experience of one's faith; one's own story of becoming a teacher. At the same time, they indicate the broader social and cultural contexts such as the United States after 9/11 and the unique cultural context of a religious sect that reflects the focus on society as well as self.

While autoethnographic reports may not always explicitly state the research question in the published article, having one articulated can help to guide you through the research process and keep you on track in terms of the focus, which, as Chang (2008) states, "transcends mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation" (p. 43).

Data Collection

One of the key questions that researchers ask when conducting an autoethnography is what constitutes their data. Since your own life is the primary source of information, there are several ways to collect your data.

You may conduct self-observations and take ethnographic field notes and jottings on your own observations. This was a technique utilized by Yehuda Silverman (2017) in his dissertation entitled *Uncertain Peace: An Autoethnographic Analysis of Intrapersonal Conflicts from Chabad-Lubavitch Origins*. Silverman utilized several techniques of data collection, including self-observation, in which he recorded memos of his observations of his internal conflicts throughout the day on a smartphone and then transferred them later to a spreadsheet log of observations.

You might develop self-reflective data, in which you journal your reflections about your experience and perceptions related to the topic. Lai (2012) asked himself a series of questions related to the death of his grandmother and recorded and transcribed his answers to those questions for later analysis. McIntyre (2016), who conducted an autoethnography about her experience of being in the World Trade Center on 9/11, describes writing in her journal daily, noting thoughts, feelings, memories, questions about her experience with the goal of having an entry every day, no matter how small (though at times she needed to pause to manage and process the emotions that arose from the data collection process). Additionally, there is the consideration of when the reflections are made, if they were made with potential research in mind, and if it is helpful to intentionally address factual, social, and emotional elements, rather than letting these emerge later. One's reflections in the moment are likely to be different than reflections at a later point.

You may have access to external data, such as photographs, letters, diaries, reports, and other documents or artifacts that are pertinent to your study. Moynihan (2018) included documents such as court motions, judicial decisions, letters, and emails pertaining to her topic, which was *Structural Violence in the New Hampshire Family Court System: An Autoethnographic Exploration*. Others have used bills, doctor's appointments, or other similar items such as artifacts to determine timeframes and spark memories.

Another technique for data collection is to chronologically list major events or experiences from your life that pertain to your research topic. Chang (2008) suggests this as a data generation exercise, in which you describe these events and how they contributed to

cultural self-discovery, describe the circumstances of these events, and explain why they are important in your life.

You will likely draw heavily upon personal memory data. There are some challenges associated with using memory as a data source. It can be difficult to know what is "true." Some memories may be vague while others are vivid. It can be beneficial to ask, do we "color" our memories for various reasons? How might your emotions impact your memory and event recollection? If we approach memory not so much as "objective reality" but as an indication of what holds meaning for us about the topic we are exploring, we can draw upon these memories with confidence as indicative of significant aspects of the experience (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). As you explore your memories, look for aspects of memory that reflect cultural values. Additionally, there is a consideration of what to include – some things seem too raw, too personal, too vulnerable, or maybe there is a question about relevancy. A suggested approach is to "over-include" information in the data collection stage of research, which allows you to be more intentional about what to highlight during the analysis and writing of the story/final presentation.

Since you are investigating your topic through the lens of your own life story, consider how family rituals, proverbs (those endlessly repeated family sayings), or other significant inputs during your formative years may have informed your view of the topic. Attitudes and perspectives we hold are often due in part to what you might describe as the "acculturation" process we experience growing up in our extended families. Sayings that are indicative of family attitudes assist in cultural analysis of our own lives.

Finally, you can draw upon ethnographic methods by making use of field notes to capture not only observations, but also asides, commentaries, and in-process memos (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). You can also employ ethnographic writing in the form of rich, thick description to capture experience within context. In keeping with such writing, you can include sensory data to achieve *verisimilitude*, so that the reader can see and feel what it was like to have that experience or be in that setting.

Once you have collected your data – whether in the form of journal entries, historic artifacts, documents, field notes, and/or interviews – you will prepare the data for analysis. This may involve recording and transcribing interviews or recorded reflections. It may involve organizing artifacts and/or documents into categories or chronological order to prepare for further analysis.

Data Analysis

Similar to the challenge identified in data collection section, there is a challenge of "seeing" when analyzing your own data (what you wrote, what you experienced, etc.). This is both a strength and weakness to this model, and the ability to operate both on the "balcony" and on the "dance floor" (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009) is a skill that can be developed to help the autoethnographic researcher navigate this challenge. Additionally, there are many existing qualitative research tools and techniques that can be used to be able to better "see". Specifically, in analyzing your data for your autoethnographic study, you can draw upon several qualitative traditions:

- General, descriptive qualitative research
- Ethnographic research
- Narrative inquiry
- Arts-based qualitative research

In this section, we'll discuss some of the ways in which you can draw upon these traditions in qualitative inquiry for your autoethnographic analysis.

Drawing from Basic Qualitative Data Analysis

What we might consider "basic" qualitative research – qualitative research that is not tied to one of the major traditions such as grounded theory, ethnography, phenomenology, and so forth – has several characteristics which are applicable and beneficial to autoethnographic data analysis, such as a descriptive focus, exploring human experience, and acknowledging subjective meaning-making. These characteristics can be incorporated into your autoethnographic analysis through the use of general, qualitative coding methods such as descriptive coding, in vivo coding, emotion coding, and initial coding (Saldaña, 2016).

Table 1
Definitions of Coding Methods (source: Saldaña, 2016)

Coding Method	Definition
Emotion Coding	Emotion codes label the emotions recalled and/or experienced by the participant, or inferred by the researcher about the participant.
Descriptive Coding	Descriptive coding summarizes in a word or short phrase – most often a noun – the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data.
In Vivo Coding	In vivo codes are codes consisting of a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record.
Initial Coding (also called Open Coding)	Initial coding is an open-ended approach to coding data that breaks down qualitative data into discrete parts, comparing them for similarities and differences.

Emotion coding labels feelings participants may have experienced related to the research topic. Descriptive coding applies broadly to capture the experience of participants related to the topic, while in vivo coding is a coding method which uses the participant's own words as the code; the use of quote marks indicates these codes are verbatim excerpts from the transcript. These coding methods will support you in being descriptive of your own experience, capturing your meaning-making through your own words and emotions, and being open to all aspects of your experience relevant to your study.

Drawing from Ethnographic Data Analysis

Fetterman (2020) observes that "analysis in ethnography is as much a test of the ethnographer as it is a test of the data" (p. 100) – this idea is even more true in autoethnography since there is an even tighter connection between the researcher and the data. Clearly, as a form of ethnographic research, autoethnography can benefit from data analysis methods rooted in ethnography. Autoethnography shares with ethnography:

- Focus on culture
- Focus on context

- Focus on both individual and societal issues/events
- Emphasis on holistic analysis

As you analyze your autoethnographic data, the following ethnographic analytical approaches will be useful and may be implemented in autoethnographic research: triangulation, pattern recognition, key events, content analysis, crystallization, and various types of visual representations (Fetterman, 2020). In autoethnography, the process of triangulating internal thoughts and external behaviors, current memories with past notes or artifacts, descriptive facts with visceral emotions, and so forth is key to creating the ability to observe oneself and thereby, allowing for beneficial contrasts and comparisons. As the iterative research process of ethnography unfolds (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011), crystallization allows the researcher to take personal snapshots over time as memories, perceptions, and known facts may morph and change. With these techniques and more, the blending of multiple analytical approaches can generate more validity, depth, and richness in the research findings and outcomes.

Drawing from Narrative Analysis

In addition to the techniques noted above, it makes sense to employ analysis techniques associated with narrative inquiry, since autoethnography is also a form of narrative research. This may be reflected in your analysis by maintaining a focus on your own storytelling, paying attention to both the "told" and the "telling" (content and structure) of your stories. In your analysis, honor your own voice and what you are seeking to convey. Recognize that stories play a crucial role in meaning-making and will help you interpret your experiences.

When analyzing your stories, you might develop a chronology, marking significant life events and turning points that you note in your stories of your own life. Consider what type of stories you are telling about yourself – for example, are they coming of age, redemption, contamination, or success stories? How does this tie in with your cultural analysis, in terms of the role of such stories in your culture?

It is also beneficial to consider story development techniques such as considering the "other", the hero, a turning point(s), and points of convergence or divergence. Additionally, it is okay if there is no solution. So often we feel the need to (or are pushed toward) developing a solid conclusion to our analysis and putting a "bow" on our stories, but it is okay if there is no clear resolution to our journey. Actively work to "make sense," but avoid the temptation to force it. Sometimes it is in that tension where the most important meanings can be found. Finally, you can draw from narrative thematic analysis; there are many models to choose from, several of which are outlined below.

Gibbs (2008) provides the following framework for thematic analysis:

- Look for: events (what happened); experiences (images, feelings, reactions, meanings); accounts (explanations, excuses)
- Prepare a short summary to identify the beginning, middle, and end of the story
- Mark mini-stories or sub-plots
- Look for thematic ideas
- Highlight emotive language, imagery, and feelings
- Take notes or memos about your ideas
- Code thematic ideas; develop coding frame
- Develop broader thematic structure (which may be theoretical)

Janesick (2010) suggests:

- Look for major themes, key words, and indices of behavior and belief
- Make an initial list of major and minor categories
- Look for critical incidents, points of tension and conflict
- Look for what doesn't fit and contradictions and try to explain these
- Develop a metaphor to capture your feelings

Riessman (2008) describes several approaches to narrative thematic analysis, which vary in emphasis in terms of focus on historical context, use of social theory, and use of coding. Ultimately, you as the researcher will determine which approach to analysis best fits your research objectives, as well as your preferences as an author and researcher.

Drawing from Arts-Based Data Analysis

The creative writing element of autoethnography is shared with the creativity embedded in arts-based research. Additionally, the tools and techniques of arts-based research such as collage, poetry, or dramatic reading may help the researcher in their analysis by avoiding limitations, seeing more during the analysis, and creating the space for greater depth. Realizing that one of the challenges for the autobiographical researcher is being so close to the data, an arts medium such as dance or photography may allow the researcher to reexamine their culture and the world around them. Reframing the data using an artistic expression during the analysis phase can allow the researcher to see the data in a new or different way and create the space for additional themes to emerge (McNiff, 1998). Arts-based research can also prompt recall and help refine meaning (Rolling, 2013), thereby improving the usefulness of including this approach (McNiff, 1998). Furthermore, arts-based methods allow for non-textual techniques to make meaning and analyze data that may not be readily available to the researcher by using other text-based methods.

Synthesizing Results of Data Analysis

Given that you may have multiple forms of data and may have utilized several different approaches to data analysis – coding, chronological analysis, thematic analysis, etc. – it will be important to synthesize the results of your analysis. There is no single right way to do this, but one approach would be to layer the themes arising out of your thematic analysis over the autobiographical timeline, which may provide deeper insights into how your personal story aligns with the broader cultural context. It can also deepen analysis to then utilize an arts-based technique as a form of summarizing your results; for example, writing a poem that brings together the key themes you identified, or drawing an image that reflects the overall journey you are recounting. The possibilities are unlimited, but the idea is to bring your analysis together into a coherent set of findings.

Quality Control in Autoethnographic Research

As noted above, it is common to use several forms of data in an autoethnographic study. While this may lead to some complexity in terms of data collection and data analysis, it also has its benefits. In addition to enriching your eventual research findings, these multiple sources of data also provide a mechanism of quality control in your research design; namely, triangulation. For example, aligning a journal entry in which you reflect on an experience with a photograph dated during that time period depicting the experience provides confirmation outside of your own memory. Interviewing a family member about an experience may provide support for your own recollections. Newspaper or other documents can offer objective

information to give credibility to the details of your account. These are ways in which the quality of your findings is enhanced and rendered more trustworthy through the use of another source.

Ethics of Conducting Autoethnographic Research

At first glance, it may appear that autoethnography would be "easy" in terms of ethics since you are focused on your own life. By definition, the autoethnography is autobiographical. Yet none of us lives in isolation; our lives include others. Whereas in most research reports, you protect the privacy of participants by keeping their identities confidential, in an autoethnography, everyone knows the story is about the life of the author/researcher. Thus, there are unique ethical issues that must be taken into consideration. How will publishing this autoethnography reflect upon your family members, co-workers, or friends that may be referenced in your story? Do you have a responsibility as the researcher to obtain their consent to be identified in your story? It remains our responsibility as researchers to minimize the risk to others by protecting them from harm. How will you manage protecting the privacy and confidentiality of those in your story? Malhotra (2013) discusses how she navigated these issues in her autoethnography of intercountry adoption through a combination of pseudonyms where possible, obtaining permission from individuals identified, and receiving confirmation from individuals of the accuracy of written stories sent to them for their review.

In some cases, a pseudonym, composite figure, or obscured identity may effectively protect the identity of people in your life. You may want to obtain informed consent and interview others as part of your data collection. Alternatively, you might rely on public data so that you are sharing information which is already in the public sphere. It can be a challenge when you carry strong emotions about your experience to maintain this ethical stance. Moynihan (2018) wrote about her experience in a family court system centered around a painful legal battle with her ex-husband. To ensure she was describing him in a manner that was ethical, she focused on her own feelings and experiences, avoided personal characterizations of him, and relied on court filings and other public documents regarding his words and actions.

In addition to caring for others that are connected to the research, as an autoethnographer, it is also important to practice self-care. The autoethnographic process is an exciting journey of exploration and disclosure and it can also lead into highly emotional, vulnerable, and even unresolved parts of ourselves. It is important to be aware of this possibility, and we recommend that the researcher have a pre-established support system for themselves. Both a relational ethic and an ethic of personal care are important throughout the autoethnographic process including the design, development, and sharing of the research.

Writing the Autoethnographic Report

An autoethnography has several unique aspects as a research methodology, and this is reflected in the unique forms it takes as a research report as well. There is a practical element in qualitative research where "sense-making" leads to "sense-sharing" and "meaning-making" leads to "meaning-sharing". When the personal perspective of autoethnography is combined with the pragmatic concepts of sense-sharing and meaning-sharing, that autoethnography becomes especially powerful. There are different styles of autoethnography, and certainly there is not just one right way to write the autoethnographic report. Chang (2008) refers to different orientations and outlines four different writing styles pertinent to autoethnography: descriptive-realistic, confessional-emotive, analytical-interpretive, and imaginative-creative.

Descriptive-realistic writing seeks to depict an "accurate" story through extensive details that create a picture for the reader (e.g., Skinner, 2003). In the confessional-emotive style, the autoethnographer provides self-disclosure of the messy, emotional aspects of their experience (e.g., McLaurin, 2003). This vulnerability invites the reader to make emotional connections to the story. Ellis refers to this as the "evocative" style. Analytical-interpretive writing includes some explanation during the story – telling of how the story pertains to the broader context. In this sense, the "discussion" is woven into the report itself (e.g., Reilly, 2013). Creative possibilities abound in imaginative-creative autoethnographic writing. Examples of this include using poetry, fiction, drama, and other arts-based approaches to convey autobiographical data and how it reflects cultural context (e.g., Ricci, 2003). Spry (2011) referred to this as "performative autoethnography."

As this brief overview indicates, there is no one "right" way to write autoethnography. In keeping with the motto of *The Qualitative Report* that it is "where the world comes to learn qualitative research," we will describe here a style of autoethnographic writing that supports the reader in learning more about how to conduct autoethnography as they simultaneously read and enjoy the autoethnographic report. Thus, while the report may not follow precisely the traditional format of a qualitative research report, we do suggest incorporating those elements in some form. These elements would include: an introduction to the context and purpose of the study, a review of literature that frames the key concepts of cultural analysis explored in the study and highlights prior research in this area, a description of the procedures followed to collect and analyze the autoethnographic data, a presentation of results (the story), and a discussion of those findings and how they contribute new understanding.

Many autoethnographic reports consist primarily of the reconstructed story, which we would characterize as the results. While this style of reporting can be moving, compelling, and lead to important insights for the reader, it does not provide readers with two outcomes we feel are important: an understanding of the research process, and a means to assess the trustworthiness of the findings. Sharing the research method overtly allows for added rigor and duplicability which also has the potential to lead to meta-studies of autoethnographies, thereby generating greater generalizability. Including the supporting literature allows the discussion section to tie the story back to the literature review, which provides the author a chance to compare, contrast, and situate their story within the literature (or identify how it fills the gap). While appreciating and supporting creativity that reflects the less prescriptive tradition of autoethnography, we also advocate for inclusion of those procedural details that help the reader see how you arrived at this story, and explicit cultural analysis that honors the ethnographic components of this methodology.

It may be that the report will include the traditional elements in the standard sequence, or they may be presented in an unconventional format. Perhaps the story comes first, followed by the explanation of the context, procedures, and discussion of the related literature. Perhaps elements of the story are woven throughout review of the literature and discussion of the results; there are many possibilities. In the name of promoting the quality of the report, we simply suggest including the components of high-quality research reporting. This sets autoethnography apart from autobiography.

Review of a Sample Autoethnography

Before we close, we thought it might be helpful to take a sample autoethnographic research report and walk through it together to illustrate the various points we discuss above. For this illustration, we have selected the following article: *Recovery from Relinquishment: Forgiving my Birth Mother. My Journey from 1954 to Today*, by Christian L. Anderson, published in 2020 in *The Qualitative Report* (https://doi.org/10..46743/2160-3715/2020.4723).

This powerfully evocative article is an exploration of a mature woman's search for her birth story, her mother, and an exploration into the cultural system that promoted the separation and many other separations like hers. Throughout the article, ethical issues relating to the relational ethic and ethic of care are addressed as the author demonstrates an awareness of the role of the other(s) in the story and discusses personal vulnerability. Although the author took the liberty to not overtly share the questions until later in the paper, the research questions are clearly stated for the reader. Anderson's personal story explores the cultural issues of adoption and relinquishment through the following research questions:

1) Did my birth mother voluntarily "give me up" because she didn't want me?
2) Who was she, and are we alike?
3) Is it possible to stop being angry?

The author used a wide range of data collection sources including old diaries, shared verbal conversations, pictures, personal reminiscences from a walk in a cemetery, an email, reflections from a data collection exercise, and contextualization of their story emerging throughout the literature review process. The analysis of the data followed the ten strategies offered by Chang (2008) and revealed three recurring themes.

The article follows the standard qualitative research structure of sections that include an introduction, literature review, methods, results, and discussion. The introduction and literature review combine both personal and cultural background information that establishes a solid orientation for the author's personal story describing her quest. The methods section of the paper begins with an introduction and explanation of autoethnography and then the author walks the reader through the data collection and data analysis process. Additionally, research quality, rigor, and trustworthiness are addressed.

The autoethnographic story is presented in the results section and is expressed in a powerful narrative that weaves various elements of the sixty-five-year journey of discovery with the overarching scrutiny of the related cultural issues. The story is then tied back to the literature review in the discussion section as it is viewed through the lens of the research questions. Additionally, the limitations, implications, and next steps are addressed.

Conclusion

While we have focused in this article on the "nuts and bolts" of conducting autoethnography, we want to close by reflecting on the fact that autoethnography is not something we "do" that is separate from who we are, how we engage with the world, and the ways we reflect upon our lives. As Carolyn Ellis (2013) eloquently stated in her Preface to the *Handbook of Autoethnography*,

> For most of us, autoethnography is not simply a way of knowing about the world; it has become a way of being in the world, one that requires living consciously, emotionally, and reflexively. It asks that we not only examine our lives but also consider how and why we think, act, and feel as we do. Autoethnography requires that we observe ourselves observing, that we interrogate what we think and believe, and that we challenge our own assumptions, asking over and over if we have penetrated as many layers of our own defenses, fears, and insecurities as our project requires. It asks that we rethink and revise our lives, making conscious decisions about who and what we want to be. And in the process, it seeks a story that is hopeful, where authors ultimately write themselves as survivors of the story they are living. (p. 10)

We invite you to explore this journey of self-and-cultural exploration and discovery.

References

Anderson, C. L. (2020). Recovery from relinquishment: Forgiving my birth mother. My journey from 1954 to today. *The Qualitative Report*, *25*(11), 3794-3809. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2020.4723

Averett, P., & Soper, D. (2011). Sometimes I am afraid: An autoethnography of resistance and compliance. *The Qualitative Report*, *16*(2), 358-376. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2011.1060

Barone, T. & Eisner, E. W. (2012). *Arts based research*. SAGE.

Bochner, A. P., & Ellis, C. (2016). *Evocative autoethnography: Writing lives and telling stories*. Routledge.

Butler-Kisber, L. (2010). *Qualitative inquiry: Thematic, narrative and arts-informed perspectives*. SAGE.

Carano, K. (2013). An autoethnography: Constructing (& interpreting) cross - cultural awareness through the mind of a peace corps volunteer. *The Qualitative Report*, *18*(18), 1-15. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2013.1524

Chang, H. (2008). *Autoethnography as method*. Left Coast Press.

Congdon, M. (2014). What's wrong with me?: An autoethnographic investigation of the co-cultural communicative practices of living with tourette syndrome during adolescence. *The Qualitative Report*, *19*(50), 1-25. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2014.1411

Creswell, J. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). SAGE.

Ellis, C. (2013). Carrying the torch for autoethnography. In S. H. Jones, T. E. Adams., and C. Ellis (eds.) *Handbook of Autoethnography* (pp. 9-12). Left Coast Press.

Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (2011). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press.

Fetterman, D. M. (2020). *Ethnography: Step-by-step* (4th ed.). SAGE.

Gibbs, G. (2008). *Analyzing qualitative data*. SAGE.

Heifetz, R. A., Grashow, A., & Linsky, M. (2009). *The practice of adaptive leadership: Tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world*. Harvard Business Press.

Janesick, V. J. (2010). *Oral history for the qualitative researcher: Choreographing the story*. The Guilford Press.

Ketelle, D. (2004). Writing Truth as Fiction: Administrators Think about Their Work through a Different Lens. *The Qualitative Report, 9*(3), 449-462. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2004.1918

Lai, W. (2012). Grandparental death: Through the lens of an Asian child. *The Qualitative Report*, *17*(1), 175-190. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2012.1813

Malhotra, P. (2013). An autoethnographic journey of intercountry adoption. *The Qualitative Report, 18*(32), 1-13. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2013.1480

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2011). *Designing qualitative research* (5th ed.). SAGE.

McIntyre, S. (2016). *Plummeting into chaos: Rising from the ashes of 9/11*. [Doctoral dissertation, Nova Southeastern University].

McLaurin, S. (2003). Homophobia: An autoethnographic story. *The Qualitative Report, 8*(3), 481-486. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2003.1882

McNiff, S. (1998). *Art-based research*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Moynihan, A. M. (2018). *Structural violence in the New Hampshire family court system: An*

    autoethnographic exploration. [Doctoral dissertation, Nova Southeastern University].

Nethsinghe, R. (2012). The influence of informal music education in teacher formation: An autobiography. *The Qualitative Report, 17*(49), 1-16. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2012.1701

Reilly, R. C. (2013). Me and Goldilocks...searching for what is "just right" in trauma research: An autoethnography. *The Qualitative Report, 18*(47), 1-11. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2013.1437

Ricci, R. J. (2003). Autoethnographic verse: Nickys boy: A life in two worlds. *The Qualitative Report, 8*(4), 591-596. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2003.1869.

Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. SAGE.

Robben, A. C. G. M., & Sluka, J. A. (2012). Ethnographic fieldwork: An anthropological reader (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.

Rolling, J. H. (2013). *Arts-based research*. Peter Lang.

Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). SAGE.

Silverman, Y. (2017). *Uncertain peace: An autoethnographic analysis of intrapersonal conflicts from Chabad-Lubavitch origins*. [Doctoral dissertation, Nova Southeastern University].

Skinner, J. (2003). Montserrat place and Monsrat neaga: An example of impressionistic autoethnography. *The Qualitative Report*, *8*(3), 513-529. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2003.1884

Spry, T. (2011). Performative autoethnography. In N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (eds.) *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed.), pp. 497-511. SAGE.

Vasconcelos, E. F. (2011). "I can see you": An autoethnography of my teacher-student self. *The Qualitative Report, 16*(2), 415-440. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2011.1063

Author Note

Robin Cooper, PhD, and Bruce Lilyea, PhD, are both members of the editorial board for *The Qualitative Report*, as well as instructors in the Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate Program at Nova Southeastern University. Please direct correspondence to robicoop@nova.edu - lilyea@nova.edu

Article Citation