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An Autoethnography of Becoming a Qualitative Researcher: A Book Review

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Abstract

Autoethnography has been steadily taking its well-deserved place in the field of the qualitative research in the recent years. As more and more doctoral students consider autoethnography as their research method, the approach is still somewhat mysterious. *An Autoethnography of Becoming a Qualitative Researcher* offers a rare opportunity to look into one novice researcher's exploration of becoming a Qualitative Researcher. This review provides an overview of the book, which was published in 2022, as well as an evaluation of its strengths and shortcomings and suggestions for potential audience.

Keywords

autoethnography, qualitative researcher, narrative inquiry

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An Autoethnography of Becoming a Qualitative Researcher: A Book Review

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Autoethnography has been steadily taking its well-deserved place in the field of qualitative research in recent years. As more and more doctoral students consider autoethnography as their research method, the approach is still somewhat mysterious. *An Autoethnography of Becoming a Qualitative Researcher* offers a rare opportunity to look into one novice researcher's exploration of becoming a Qualitative Researcher. This review provides an overview of the book, which was published in 2022, as well as an evaluation of its strengths and shortcomings and suggestions for potential audience.

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Small, but Mighty

An Autoethnography of Becoming a Qualitative Researcher is a compact (one hundred twenty-six pages plus references, to be precise), yet powerful read on the topic of narrative inquiry. It is co-written by Trude Klevan, currently an Associate Professor of Mental Health at the University of South-Eastern Norway, and Alec Grant, an independent scholar in the field of qualitative inquiry and a 2020 recipient of the ICAE (the International Conference of Autoethnography) Lifetime Contribution Award. While the book itself was first published by Routledge in 2022, some parts of it have seen the world in different forms. For example, according to the authors, Chapter 1 was previously published in *The Qualitative Report* and Chapter 7 in *Critical Education*. The book describes Trude Klevan's intellectual journey of "becoming" a qualitative researcher through the route of completing her PhD and writing her dissertation thesis which, naturally, was written in the form of autoethnography.

The book consists of eight concise yet intense chapters that take the reader on a thought-provoking dive into philosophical matters of the narrative inquiry and specifically an autoethnography. Chapter 1 provides a preview summary of the chapters ahead. While a summary may sound like a light read, it is, by any means, not the case for this book. Without delay, the authors introduce some deep topics, such as the meaning of research and the researcher, the meaning of "I" in qualitative research writing, and the meaning of truth and knowledge in the interpretive approach. The chapter then outlines Trude's trials with different approaches, called "acts" – the hermeneutic phenomenological, the narrative, and the discursive – in a spiral manner: from her inspiration by each to doubt. Chapter 2, which recapitulates Trude's PhD project, can be of a special value to novice researchers entering the academia. The idea of non-existence of the ideal PhD route and "messy rather than linear" PhD thesis journeys helps relate to Trude and her searching and helped her to become inspired by the uniqueness of individuals' PhD endeavors. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 delve deeper into each of the acts mentioned in Chapter 1. The authors' narrated reflections promote deep readers' reflections on the topics of understanding onto-epistemological assumptions of hermeneutic phenomenology, importance of context in narrative inquiry, and issues in the discursive approach, such as political motivations in discourse. While the aforementioned three chapters

may be of a particular interest to students in the field of qualitative research, the following Chapters 6 and 7 – *Diffraction, Entanglement, and Difference* and *Friendship, and Trouble and Nurturing, and Performing Wild Time* – could be well-appreciated by mentors of doctoral students. The ideas of prevalent dogmatism and “the importance of troubling” and “nurturing relationship” in researchers’ training may be of consideration to the ‘great men of academia.’ Similarly, PhD students could be empowered by realizing that “...what we see as morally desirable in social research is not God-given, and if it is allowed to exist unquestioned, it can cause great harm.” The chapters are not a “skim-read;” they require deep reading and reflection. Chapter 8 is a powerful closure for the book. It focuses on the tug war of problems and a necessity to “preserve integrity” in qualitative inquiry, as well as offering some solutions.

While *An Autoethnography of Becoming a Qualitative Researcher* offers fascinating content, it is the form of the narration that keeps the reader captivated. The majority of the book is written as an exchange of emails between the authors, Trude and Alex, where they discuss the philosophical underpinnings of the qualitative research. It feels as if the reader were a participant of the conversation, who is trying to offer their thoughts in response to the ideas expressed in the emails. Trude’s childhood stories sprinkled throughout the book create a warm, fuzzy feeling of belonging to the authors’ conversation. It makes the narrative of the book very engaging. The terminology of the qualitative research, which may look dry and intimidating in regular coursebooks, becomes almost like a live creature in this autoethnography. Just as drawings on paper turn into magical Disney cartoon characters on the screen. In other words, even though the book may not be an easy read, it definitely fits the category of an intellectual pleasure reading.

The only caveat that should be mentioned is that the book may not be the best choice for students who are completely new to the qualitative research and narrative inquiry fields. Some preliminary readings that include introductory terminology would be advisable before this reading. One suggestion is Chapter 6 from Jeong-Hee Kim’s *Understanding Narrative Inquiry* (2016), which focuses on narrative data analysis and interpretation.

All in all, *An Autoethnography of Becoming a Qualitative Researcher* would be a desirable addition to anyone who is interested in narrative inquiry.

References

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Author Note

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