

TITLE

Playing with the metaphysical foundations of a self-related ethnographic study (autoethnography)

Abstract

This article emphasises the academic possibilities of autoethnography using a philosophical and theoretical framework to underpin it. The author uses a proposed research project to illustrate how and why autoethnography should be considered an academic methodology appropriate for a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) study. Crotty's (1998) research paradigm model informs the author's theoretical framework with a focus on Social Constructionism and Symbolic Interactionism as its foundations. The intention of the article is to encourage other doctoral candidates to consider the scholarly attributes of autoethnography for their own research endeavours through the utilisation of an interpretivist research paradigm.

As a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) candidate, I currently spend much of my time reading and thinking about methodology and various philosophical underpinnings for academic research. It is one thing, however, to decide on a topic for a thesis, identify any gaps in one's area of interest and find a supervisor willing to take you on.

Though, once one is on the PhD programme itself, it is time to finalise a methodology and not only the theoretical approach, but the metaphysical one. When I originally applied for my PhD, I submitted a positivist quantitative approach to my area of interest, mental health. Why? Because I thought I would sound more

scholarly and would be more likely to be accepted onto the programme. However, I am innately of the qualitative discipline and am more comfortable with interpretive data as opposed to quantifiable statistics when answering academic questions.

While I was studying for my master's degree in Applied Positive Psychology, I was required to apply the positive psychological theories to myself in what I now know was an autoethnographic manner. Whilst reading around interpretive inquiry and phenomenology for the taught modules on my PhD I identified autoethnography as a legitimate methodology. The enthusiasm for my newly found legitimised methodology and the abatement of self-perceived pressure to conform to positivism that I feel is profound.

The structure of PhD programmes differs around the globe in terms of how to apply and how they are executed. I am currently going into my second year of the Mental Health pathway at Lancaster University (in the United Kingdom), where they offer a part-time blended distance learning programme. The first two years are taught modules, honing and developing all the necessary academic research skills needed for an advanced degree. The taught modules allow students to explore methodologies that were perhaps not considered previously, although I have an academic tutor, a thesis supervisor will not be allocated until the end of year two. This means that unlike some PhD programmes, students have the luxury of being able to adjust research proposals to incorporate any new academic research knowledge. My formal research proposal will be somewhat different to that of the one I presented on application to the programme, primarily due to my introduction to autoethnography proper.

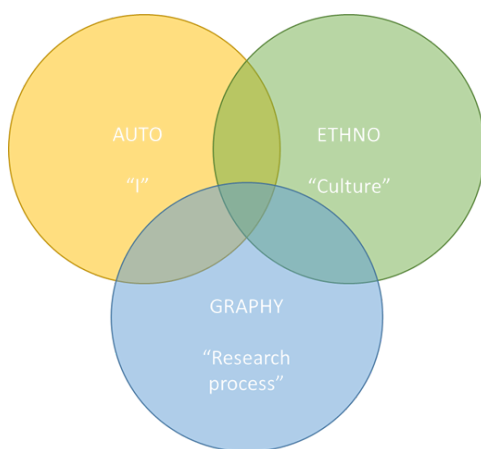
While (virtually) attending the *International Conference of Autoethnography* in July of this year (2021), the difficulty of having an autoethnographic study accepted as a PhD methodology was repeatedly referenced. This included a fantastic presentation by Ann-Mari Lofthus on her paper (2020) about rejection in academia. There are also articles and case studies that have been published on the difficulty of having an autoethnography accepted as 'academic enough' for research (Brown, 2014). This could potentially be due to a lack of understanding of the prospective theoretical foundations of autoethnography and how the impact of first-person account inquiry can still be considered rigorous research. Although autoethnography is becoming more mainstream as evidenced by my recent conference attendance and the inclusion of articles such as the one you are now reading in quality academic journals. There still lacks a plethora of academic 'how-to' on the practice of automethodologies and the metaphysical elements that come with a PhD study utilising them. The purpose of the current article is to show how interpretive philosophical foundations can be used to explicate the social world we exist in and how a PhD thesis can apply these understandings using a self-related ethnographic study. My intention is to highlight the academic and metaphysical implications of utilising autoethnography for a PhD thesis, therefore, the focus will be on the philosophical and theoretical approaches anticipated to be used in a proposed research project. I will begin with a brief background on my proposed research and an introduction to Analytic Autoethnography (Anderson, 2006) for those who are unfamiliar with it, followed by the structure of the research paradigm identified as appropriate and finally an exploration of the elements of said paradigm.

My proposed study

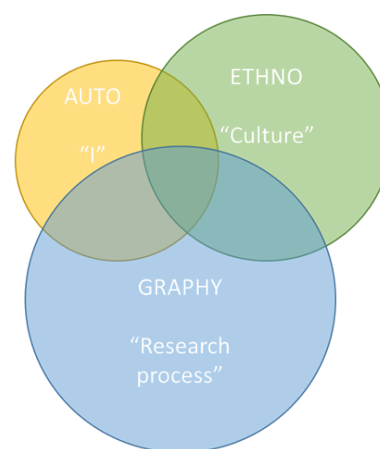
Women are twice as likely to have an anxiety disorder and are at higher risk of being diagnosed with depression in their lifetime than men are, 24% and 13% respectively (NHS Digital, 2014). Reasons cited are usually due to being the main carer of any children, role conflict, gender violence and a higher prospect of poverty (Mental Health Foundation, 2016). Although there is an anecdotal apparentness of a relationship between the female sex hormones and affectivity, this is often not considered when prescribing treatment (Newbigging, 2018), whether that be psychological or pharmacological. The exception to this directive is during the perinatal period, from conception up until the infant is one-year old, when women receive additional and appropriate attention during this transitional time. If primary healthcare services are to improve the mental health support of their female patients outside of the perinatal period, they need to know what it is that their patients need and want from treatment. The intention of the research is to identify and offer female patients with mental health issues, more specifically anxiety and depression, appropriate help in a community setting to prevent referral to secondary services. An analytic autoethnographic (Anderson, 2006) study is proposed to identify the requirements of female patients with anxiety and/or depression in order to create and implement a peer-led psychoeducation programme informed by positive psychology. Data collection methods will include focus groups to explore beyond myself and self observational data captured through an app in addition to reflexive writing, whilst engaging with theory. A discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003) approach will then be applied to identify themes extracted from the collected data.

Analytic Autoethnography as methodology

Autoethnography could be considered a self-narrative methodology, although it is more often identified as a sub-discipline of contemporary ethnography. Ellis and Bochner (2000) propose a triadic model of three components to explicate autoethnography; 'auto', the self; 'ethno', the knowledge of cultures; and 'graphy', the research process (figure 1). Dependent on the emphasis of each of these three elements is what identifies the ethnographic orientation of the researcher. At each end of a basic dichotomy are an evocative orientation (emphasis on the auto) at one end and analytic (emphasis on the graphy) at the other end (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008). An analytic approach to autoethnography will be applied to my study.



Basic triad model of Autoethnography
Ellis & Bochner (2000)



Triad model of Analytic Autoethnography
Informed by Ellis and Bochner (2000)

Figure 1; Triad Model of Autoethnography – Ellis and Bochner (2000)

Analytic Autoethnography (Anderson, 2006) has five core elements; complete member researcher (CMR) status; analytic reflexivity; narrative visibility of the researcher's self; dialogue with information beyond the self; and commitment to an analytic agenda. It is this structure and the requirement for the researcher to actively engage with academic theory that makes analytic autoethnography a candidate for first person narrative that is also scholarly enough for a PhD study.

Research Paradigm

As a PhD student, it is vital that I address the philosophy in the doctorate title by identifying a research paradigm; a value system that influences the researcher. Fundamentally, a philosophical approach is a belief about how data concerning a phenomenon to be studied, should be collected, analysed and used. Guba and Lincoln (1994) propose that there are three primary questions that lead to a set of four basic paradigms; (1) the ontological question, (2) the epistemological question, and (3) the methodological question. These questions lead to the creation of their competing paradigms model (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). In employing these three questions, four major paradigms were revealed; positivism, postpositivism, critical theory and constructivism. Each of these paradigms have their own identifiers and methodologies. The two most frequently used paradigms are positivism (including postpositivism) and interpretivism (constructionism). The former is considered by traditionalists as the most rigorous and scientific form of research and is often used synonymously with quantitative methods (Creswell, 2003). Positivists view reality as objective and quantifiable by operationalising abstract concepts. In contrast,

interpretivism emphasises the experiences of individuals and society and acknowledges a value-laden axiology that is subjective. Autoethnography fits well with interpretivist ideologies as it highlights the subjective experience of the researcher and the community under study.

Suggested Paradigm

Crotty (1998) uses the term “scaffolding” (p. 9) as opposed to paradigm; however, it appears to essentially be the same thing. He suggests that the following four elements are required for any investigator’s research proposal as is required for submittal when applying for a PhD; (1) *methods* – the methods and processes used to collect data; (2) *methodology* – the strategy and rationale for the methods used; (3) *theoretical perspective* – the philosophical approach informing the methodology; (4) *epistemology* – the philosophy of knowledge grounded in the theoretical perspective.

It should be noted that unlike other potential suggested research paradigms (such as Guba and Lincoln, 1994), ontology is not present in Crotty’s (1998) model. He states that it is not possible to separate ontology from epistemology and therefore it should be assumed that the ontology has informed the epistemology. Ontology conveys our beliefs about whether there is one valid reality or whether multiple socially constructed realities exist, by utilising a constructionist approach, I am already assuming plurality.

Using Crotty’s (1998) table of “representative sampling of each category” (p. 13) I

have categorised my research paradigm as illustrated below in figure 2. I have identified my epistemology as Social Constructionism and my theoretical perspective as Symbolic Interactionism.



Figure 2: Illustration of the four elements that make up my research paradigm informed by Crotty's (1998) model.

Before I go on to explore constructionism and symbolic interactionism it should be stated that there is substantial cross-over between the two. There will therefore be elements discussed that will apply to both constructionism and symbolic interactionism.

Ambiguity of terminology

Terminology is not consistent across research philosophy literature; some authors refer to 'constructionism' as epistemology (Crotty, 1998; Moon and Blackman, 2014) whilst others refer to it as a paradigm (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Furthermore, Moon and Black (2014) use both the terms *constructionism* and *constructivism* within the same model, the latter defined as a theoretical perspective. Much of the literature

use the terms synonymously and it is a subject that has been notoriously discussed as a confusion for researchers, notably novice ones. Schwandt (1994) proposes that the term 'constructivism' should be used when referring to individualistic understanding of reality whilst social 'constructionism' should be used when referring to a collective social reality. Therefore, the term constructionism will be used for the purposes of this article and my thesis as I seek to identify the collective social mechanisms of the explored phenomena from the inside.

Constructionism as epistemology

Constructionism is a theory of knowledge and social reality. As the name would suggest, constructionism submits that reality is socially constructed through interaction with others. Burr (2016) submits that our perception of social reality is historically and culturally relative, "Our ways of understanding do not come from objective reality but from other people, both past and present" (p. 7). Our view of the world is therefore bound by the culture and time period that we are born into. We are not born as fully functioning members of society; we are presented with our cultural norms and ideologies throughout our lives through interaction with others in our sociocultural sphere. Berger and Luckmann (1967) suggest that there is a two-step induction into society; primary socialisation and secondary socialisation. Primary Socialisation takes place in childhood, when an individual learns the attitudes, norms and behaviour deemed suitable for participants of a specific culture. Secondary socialisation is the development of internalising the acceptable behaviour as a smaller group as part of larger society, this usually takes place during adolescence.

It is through socialisation that our perceptions of culturally appropriate discourse around mental health and gender is instilled. Language and discourse play a huge part in the socialisation process and is a keystone of both social constructionism and symbolic interactionism. For this reason, language will have its own dedicated section.

Constructionism is a micro-sociological theory with associations to symbolic interactionism that is often used in Social Psychology (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). As a micro-level approach, it is an inductive reasoning or 'bottom-up' process. This means that it is used to identify themes and build theories as opposed to verifying a hypothesis, befitting the inductive process of discourse analysis that will be used for my project. Constructionism is both idiographic and emic, this means that it is focused on the individual and their constructs or behaviours that are unique to the sociocultural context (Ponterotto, 2005). This is an appropriate view for my study of understanding the perception of gender and mental health treatment through autoethnographic self-reflection and the observation of others. Activated by a bilateral researcher-participant interchange of discourse, suitable for unstructured, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Constructionism rejects reductionist ideas and challenges psychology's determinism by taking an anti-essentialist approach (Schwandt, 1994); discarding the notion that an individual comprises of a stable group of features. We are changed by our experiences over our life span and therefore our understanding of the world changes too. My introspective journey through reflexive journaling will reflect my personal transformation, whilst focus groups will explore the personal journeys of women experiencing anxiety and

depression.

Language as representation

Language is a structural system of communication used by individuals encompassing speech, gestures and writing. It is fundamental as a structure of socially collective symbolic meanings applied within a linguistic community; a homogenous group bound by common language such as a group of women discussing their subjective experience of mental health concerns. Traditional psychologists reduce language to the mere expression of entities and/or inner events. Social constructionists, however, state that language is not explicit, and we should therefore not reduce it to a mere medium for the communication of our inner world (Burr, 2016).

The individual as a being with a personality, motives and desires should not be viewed as an essentialist product that would exist without language. A person comes into being through language as a way of constructing our experience. Through numerous linguistic representations we are constructed as male or female, old or mentally ill (Burr, 2016). It is language that constructs reality rather than reality that determines how we describe it. An element of my study will be to investigate how women communicate and discuss mental health issues. Through focus groups and regular contact with participants other than myself, it may be possible to identify language differences. This could potentially highlight individuals' construction of their understanding of their own mental health status in relation to being a woman.

Qualitative methods are perfect for collecting textual and linguistic data and are considered unlikely to de-contextualise the experience of the participants we are trying to understand. Focus groups and conversations are constructed by both participants and researcher, therefore it is vital that I explicitly examine the participants' role in the construction of the discourse that I will be analysing. This is where reflexivity comes into practice. Social constructionists advocate democratisation of the research relationship (Burr, 2016), this is the view that the participant's account of reality is as equally valid as the researcher's account. As I will be both participant and researcher this may seem irrelevant, however, I will also be executing focus groups with other women with experience of anxiety and/or depression. Reflexivity is a common term in social constructionist writing, often referring to the introspective account of the relationship between the investigator and either the participant or object of study. Barrett et al. (2020) suggest that reflexivity comprises of reflection which is goal-orientated and recursivity, a reflection of the process. My field journal will include not only a record of actions but will also reflect on the procedure of the methodology and data collection processes. I will also engage with introspection on my choice of philosophical and theoretical underpinnings in relation to my position of insider researcher (Barrett et al., 2020).

Pragmatics (Levinson, 1983) is a subfield of linguistics (the scientific study of language) that focuses on the meaning implied by the language used as opposed to the structure of language. This is particularly useful in interpretivist research such as interviews and autoethnography. Frequently, the concepts of semantics and pragmatics are confused, however, the differences are straightforward. Semantics

analyses the meaning of words within sentences while pragmatics examines the same words and meanings but with a focus on the context (Stojanovic, 2008).

Pragmatics will therefore be used during the discourse analysis process of my research as it is the context of the utterances that will be most demonstrable.

Limitations of Constructionism

Reliability and validity are a general requirement for positivist research, it is a requisite of traditional psychology that research findings are repeatable, and that the investigators' explication of the world matches the objective world. This is, however, not appropriate for constructionist research as reality is not separable from our discourse of it (Burr, 2016). Constructionists have, therefore, struggled to justify their studies and are yet to develop a universal criterion to legitimate their research in a still largely positivist environment.

Marks (1993) suggests that regardless of the objective of reflexivity, the investigator's own interpretation is the one that often carries weight. Although my study is an autoethnographic one, it is also an analytic one and will not be reduced to my own views on the subject alone. Bracketing (suspension of my own values and beliefs; Waterhouse, 1977) is not appropriate or possible in autoethnography as I am also a participant, I will however record and transcribe focus groups verbatim as an attempt to elicit a balanced account of the phenomenon I am investigating.

Symbolic Interactionism as theoretical perspective

Symbolic interactionists view society as made up of symbols that individuals use to provide meaning and to communicate with others. Carter and Alvarado (2015) describe symbolic interactionism as a systemic structure for understanding the association between individuals and society. Symbolic interactionism was developed by Blumer (1962), based on the works of Mead (1934), as an alternative to positivist sociological and psychological theories to understand the social realm. Blumer's research shifted emphasis away from macro-level (focus on the collective) to micro level (the individual) investigation, offering symbolic interactionism a theoretical framework. Symbolic interactionism is equally a theory and a method and is valuable for ascertaining how people construct social reality by building collective meanings of events. Geertz (1973) suggests that symbolic interactionism requires the investigator to actively enter the world of individuals being studied as is the case with autoethnographic studies.

Our understanding of the world is homogeneous and intangible without a framework to give it meaning. There are three primary assumptions that frame symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1962), see the following. (1) Individuals construct meaning through the communication process; language formulates a symbolic system of communication that become constructs of meaning through speech, gestures and textual representations. (2) Self-concept is a motivation for behaviour; the self occurs as an intangible vision of our perceived representation of ourselves. The importance is focused on the reflected judgements of others and the self is created in relation to others through interaction (Cooley, 1902). (3) A unique relationship exists between

the individual and society; symbolic interactionism started with the proposition that the individual and society are symbiotic, both are created via collective meanings.

The main methods employed by symbolic interactionists are interviews, ethnographies and content analysis (Carter and Fuller, 2015), thus such methods are appropriate for an autoethnographic study. Meltzer (1972) applies introspection and participant observation to methods typically used by symbolic interactionists befitting reflexive studies and autoethnography. Focus groups permit rich data gathering and are valuable in identifying the distinctions of individual interpretation and life story, therefore they are suitable for research that utilises a symbolic interactionist framework.

Limitations of Symbolic Interactionism

Criticisms of symbolic interactionism largely focus on the methodology supposedly being “unscientific, apolitical, and too micro” (Carter and Fuller, 2015, p. 5). This is unsurprising as an interactionist approach that does not fit into the scientific method advocated by researchers married to a positivist and empirical stance. This view, however, can be applied to any number of interpretivist approaches, including social constructionism and autoethnography.

Goffman (1974) suggests that symbolic interactionism overemphasises the ability of individuals to construct their own realities and does not acknowledge the fact that individuals occupy a world that already exists. Whilst I understand the importance of not ignoring the environment of where the interaction is taking place, my focus is on

the world that the women have created for themselves in view of their personal experience of mental health. I will, therefore, strive to acknowledge and consider the larger society at play in my reflexivity.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to discuss the philosophical paradigm chosen to underpin my PhD thesis and how it fits into the academic agenda for research. What has been the utmost highlighted, is the importance of language for the construction of our subjective and social reality. The language used within the community of women with mental health conditions is what constructs the collective understanding of that particular social realm. Using autoethnographic methods of focus groups and observation I will collect data on common language used before applying a discourse analysis of the data. As the study will be autoethnographic, there will be a large element of reflexivity and interpretivism. This will allow me to discuss relevant theory in relation to the themes identified as well as my observations and introspection executed utilising an analytic autoethnography approach (Anderson, 2006).

It is my expectation that this article has provided an opening for other doctoral candidates to make a case for the use of autoethnography for their academic pursuits. I have detailed what in my view is a fitting philosophical paradigm for the foundations of a subjective and interpretivist study into the experience of anxiety and/or depression in women when presenting at primary health care services. Positivist research does not have the capacity to propagate experience of a

phenomena, however, it may be used for research further down the line once constructionism has proposed a potential theory or in this case a prospective intervention. My hope is that autoethnography will not continue to be dismissed as not being 'academic enough' when it is evidently possible to provide a philosophical and theoretical framework to support the scholarly spirit of the methodology.

Word count – 3804 including the abstract but excluding references

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