Navigating the subjective terrain: Overcoming challenges in autoethnography for management research

Navegando no terreno subjetivo: Superando os desafios da autoetnografia para a pesquisa em administração

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Abstract

Purpose: This article aims to incorporate scholarly work on autoethnography into applied social sciences to solidify the knowledge that steers research methodology in the business and management field.

Originality/value: In the sphere of social sciences, researchers are distinguished by their comprehensive practical acumen and adeptness at deciphering complex phenomena, bringing an array of insights to the discipline that enriches surface-level understanding. However, due to the persistent sway of the functionalist paradigm, these insights are often disregarded in favor of traditional methodologies, thereby bypassing opportunities for advancement. The research methodology of autoethnography, characterized by distinctive elements diverging from conventional ethnographic methods, presents a promising avenue to harness these overlooked potentials. Despite its recent emergence in ethnographic discourse, the under-recognition and fragmentation of scholarly work on autoethnography within management research constitute a challenge that warrants attention.

Design/methodology/approach: A systematic literature review was employed, consisting of books, book chapters, and peer-reviewed journal articles, to scrutinize both the theoretical underpinnings and practical applications of autoethnography, particularly within the domain of social sciences.

Findings: This study illuminates the intricacies of employing autoethnography within management research. This article explores the method's relevance, potentialities, and challenges, providing practical solutions to enhance its rigor and appeal. By synthesizing and integrating four main categories of autoethnography, this study contributes to the methodology in management studies. Case examples further enrich this discourse by highlighting the effective use of autoethnography in real-world scenarios. The product is a systematic and practical insight into harnessing the power of autoethnography for profound management research.

Keywords: autoethnography, management research, reflexivity, methodological challenges, autoethnographic writing

Resumo

Objetivo: Este artigo objetiva incorporar o trabalho acadêmico sobre autoetnografia nas ciências sociais aplicadas para consolidar o conhecimento que orienta a metodologia de pesquisa no campo da administração.

Originalidade/valor: Na esfera das ciências sociais, os pesquisadores se distinguem por sua perspicácia prática abrangente e habilidade em decifrar fenômenos complexos, trazendo uma série de percepções para o campo que enriquece a compreensão em nível superficial. No entanto, devido à influência persistente do paradigma funcionalista, esses insights são muitas vezes desconsiderados em favor de metodologias tradicionais, ignorando assim as oportunidades de avanço. A autoetnografia, caracterizada por elementos distintos que divergem dos métodos etnográficos convencionais, apresenta um caminho promissor para aproveitar esses potenciais negligenciados. Apesar de seu recente surgimento no discurso etnográfico, o pouco reconhecimento e a fragmentação do trabalho acadêmico sobre autoetnografia na pesquisa em administração constituem um desafio que merece atenção.

Design/metodologia/abordagem: Realizamos uma revisão sistemática da produção acadêmica, abrangendo livros, capítulos de livros e artigos de periódicos revisados por pares, para examinar tanto os fundamentos teóricos quanto as aplicações práticas da autoetnografia, particularmente no campo das ciências sociais.

Resultados: Este estudo esclarece as complexidades do emprego da autoetnografia na pesquisa em administração. Este artigo explora a relevância, as potencialidades e os desafios do método etnográfico, fornecendo soluções práticas para aumentar seu rigor e apelo. Ao sintetizar e integrar quatro categorias principais de autoetnografia, este artigo contribui para a metodologia em administração. Os exemplos de casos enriquecem ainda mais esse discurso, destacando o uso eficaz da autoetnografia em cenários do mundo prático. O produto é uma visão sistematizada e prática do aproveitamento do poder da autoetnografia para uma pesquisa profunda em administração.

Palavras-chave: autoetnografia, pesquisa em administração, reflexividade, desafios metodológicos, escrita autoetnográfica

INTRODUCTION

Autoethnography, a methodological union of autobiography and ethnography, systematically unpacks personal experiences to shed light on sociocultural phenomena (Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnography has been used since the 1970s. However, it has gained scholarly attention from the early 21st century (Choi, 2016). Unlike traditional ethnography, which positions the researcher as an outsider and distinct from autobiography, which is focused on personal experiences, autoethnography harnesses the researcher's experiences to create specific knowledge (Chang, 2008; Reed-Danahay, 2019). Despite this method's potential for rich empirical insights, conventional research often shies away from exploring their domains' "lived reality" due to concerns over subjectivity and the perceived inability to achieve sufficient theoretical distance (Alvesson, 2003, p. 176).

Autoethnography navigates this impasse by integrating self and culture, dissecting societal ideologies and structures that shape norms and experiences (McDonald & Birrell, 1999; Hoeber & Shaw, 2017). Furthermore, it resonates with Santos' (1996) skepticism regarding the capacity of an external expert to delve into a context lacking immersion.

Despite its evolution as a social sciences methodology, misgivings about autoethnography persist. Criticisms range from claims of excess subjectivity to dismissal as "non-rigorous" storytelling (Delamont, 2007; Ellis, 1999). These concerns underscore the need to elucidate how autoethnography can be effectively harnessed in management, with potential implications for societal awareness and equity.

Autoethnography differs fundamentally from traditional ethnography. Autoethnography focuses on the researcher's experience and interpretation of acts, words, and artifacts from a distanced perspective rather than an outsider's viewpoint (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Fetterman, 2009; Gobo & Molle, 2017). This approach enables the researcher to investigate places and phenomena inaccessible to an external observer (Lawrence, 2014; Chang, 2008; Alvesson, 2003).

Autoethnographic research spans diverse topics within social sciences, including cultural identities, domestic violence, education, management, public policies, and food consumption (Adams, 2012; Johnson & Eaves, 2013; Luckett, 2017; Metta, 2013; Collins, 2017; Brilhante, 2016; Britto, 2016; Abonizio, 2016). This research aims to amalgamate academic production on autoethnography in applied social sciences to collaborate on autoethnographic research in management, offering an integrated understanding of perspec-

tives, challenges, and applications in the management realm. This is expected to contribute to advancing knowledge in research methodology, providing a more structured understanding of autoethnography in management.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this research was grounded in a narrative literature review, drawing on Williams's (2018) comprehensive review framework. This systematic and meticulous approach was chosen to synthesize a diverse range of literature on the developing topic of autoethnography while ensuring clear and valuable insights for researchers interested in this field. Our exploration phase was initially broad, focusing on identifying and assessing a wide spectrum of autoethnography-related academic works, including articles, books, book chapters, theses, and dissertations. While we acknowledged the rich history of autoethnography, rooted in response to the limitations of traditional social science methodologies and the desire for research that is accessible, personal, and empathetic (Ellis, 2004), we did not confine our search to a specific timeline. This approach was due to the recognition of autoethnography's relatively recent emergence and evolution in the early 21st century (Choi, 2016), which continues to the present day. Therefore, our review incorporated the breadth of autoethnographic work, from its foundations to the latest contributions published up to 2023, providing a perspective on this growing field. The search was conducted using established databases such as Google Scholar, Taylor & Francis Online, University of South Australia, University Library, EBSCO, Library of Congress, Routledge, Sage Journals, and SciELO, with the keywords autoethnography and self-ethnography. The search ended in June 2023, capturing both English and Portuguese publications.

During the initial search, a storing and organizing phase was employed to manage the large body of literature. The selection and deselection of information followed a set of criteria, ensuring that only credible sources were used, such as peer-reviewed articles, books, and book chapters from acknowledged publishers and databases. The interpretive phase involved the analysis and synthesis of the accumulated material. The authors constructed thematic categories to understand autoethnography's various perspectives, concepts, relevance, applications, and results. This allowed the authors to generate integrated categories: perspectives, concepts, relevance, challenges, and practices of the autoethnographic method.

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AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC SIGNIFICANCE

Autoethnography is significant for four reasons, emerging from the need for a methodology that integrates the researcher's experiences into knowledge development. Firstly, it facilitates access and immersion into complex cultural phenomena. Autoethnography, typically already part of their study's social world, can leverage personal interests and objectives, resulting in a more fluid, pleasurable, and productive research process (Britto, 2016; Oliveira, 2010; Chang & Boyd, 2011).

Secondly, autoethnography promotes awareness and refined comprehension of the culture under investigation. Exploring personal experiences and perceptions contributes to a better understanding broader social issues and the researcher's self about their context (Anderson, 2006; Chang, 2008). This can accurately represent experiences, intricate processes, practices, and social assumptions underlying the research phenomenon.

Thirdly, it enhances engagement between the researcher and the reader. Unlike traditional research narratives, autoethnography provides a more intimate writing style, often challenging hegemonic practices and beliefs. Its flexibility in writing conventions allows for a more immersive reader-text interaction, thus promoting self-reflection and empathy among readers (Chang, 2008; Adams et al., 2015).

Last, it enables the generation of rich and engaging empirical material. As an active participant in the research locus, the auto ethnographer has a better chance to capture an expanded reality, uncovering nuanced insights potentially overlooked by traditional ethnographers (Adams et al., 2015). This privileged knowledge, combined with reflexivity, can generate new and transformative propositions.

FOUNDATIONS OF AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Over several decades, autoethnography has developed as a significant method in qualitative research. While initial practitioners often implicitly invoked their experiences, they seldom fully acknowledged the researcher's personhood (Anderson, 2006). This implicitness drew methodological criticism, prompting a paradigm shift in the 1980s toward acknowledging the unique peculiarities of each approach and the necessity for less impersonal narratives (Ellis et al., 2011). According to Anderson (2006), analytic autoethnography utilizes autobiographical narratives, critically reflexive writings,

and narratives based on past experiences to analyze broader social phenomena. This method highlights the role of reflexivity and identity politics in comprehending and representing social issues (Brown, 2018).

Autoethnography is an evolved form of ethnography, shifting the research focus from personal experiences to the broader cultural phenomena that these experiences reflect. This approach brings the researcher into a central, experiential role, leveraging their direct familiarity and active engagement with the subject matter. This participatory element distinguishes autoethnography from traditional ethnography, which typically features a more detached observer-researcher relationship (Chang, 2008). Literature on autoethnography identifies four main foundational elements: the cultural self, the silenced self, the researcher's role in estrangement, and the narrative of the cultural self.

The cultural self

Autoethnography amalgamates autobiographical and ethnographic research, employing personal experiences to examine cultural practices critically (Winkler, 2018). Unlike autobiography—conceived by Bruner (1990) as a retrospective account of personal experiences—autoethnography contextualizes these experiences within a broader cultural canvas. Choi (2016) characterizes autoethnography as a hybrid genre that integrates the literary tradition of autobiography with the scholarly perspective of ethnography. Hence, the objective of autoethnography transcends the mere exploration of individual experiences; it utilizes these to enhance understanding and representation of more expansive cultural phenomena. This highlights that while the researcher's role is pivotal, it serves a larger cultural framework. Using autoethnography and the researcher's personal experiences can render a more genuine understanding of specific cultures or phenomena than less personal methodologies.

The challenge, as Winkler (2018) observes, lies in maintaining an appropriate balance between the "auto" (personal) and the "ethno" (cultural). Overemphasis on the "auto" could lead to accusations of veering into autobiography, while excessive focus on the "ethno" might resemble traditional ethnography. A practical solution to this balance, as proposed by Hayler (2013), is to share autoethnographic stories with other members of the cultural setting, encouraging dialogue beyond the self. This approach thus serves as a productive method, creating a robust link between the personal and the societal.

The silenced self

Autoethnography not only provides researchers with the opportunity to explore phenomena through their own experiences, but it also democratizes the narration of cultural and social phenomena. It grants voices to those whose stories were previously told by others, enabling these individuals or communities to analyze the subjects through their perspectives. For instance, Brown's (2018) computational digital autoethnography employed her social media data, viewed through Black feminist technologies, to uncover themes associated with broader societal issues impacting African American women. In a different cultural setting, Choi (2016) used autoethnography to explore her silence in contexts requiring the use of the Korean language, demonstrating how autoethnography can aid in understanding the complexities of language, identity, and multiculturalism.

Likewise, the intersection of autoethnography and queer theory was investigated by Adams et al. (2015). They used reflexive queer personal texts to delve into the fluidity of subjectivities, multiple forms of knowledge representation, and the transformative power of research.

On the autoethnographic continuum proposed by Sambrook et al. (2014), one end is characterized by the "researcher and researched" relationship. Here, the autoethnographer does not participate in the study as a subject but serves as a complete member researcher, using their voice to represent the cultural group. This spectrum of the researcher's role within autoethnography further underlines the flexibility and personal agency that this method allows, which could lead to more nuanced, multi-faceted, and authentic narratives.

The researcher's role in estrangement

In autoethnography, the concept of estrangement, typically associated with traditional ethnography and an ethnographer's unfamiliarity with the studied culture, is reconceptualized. Given the researcher's pre-existing familiarity with the cultural milieu under investigation, estrangement takes the form of a reflexive analysis of the self, the environment, and their interrelationships. This analysis not only engages with the researcher's feelings, emotions, and state of being concerning their experience but also triangulates this understanding with insights gained from interviews with others who have similar experiences or interact with the environment differently (Araújo et al., 2020).

Narrative of the cultural self

The analytic process in autoethnography moves beyond mere reflection on personal experiences. It provided a rich experiential narrative. It involves applying relevant theories and epistemologies within broader cultural, political, and social contexts to facilitate a deep understanding of the researcher's experiences (Hoeber & Shaw, 2017). This process allows the researcher to fully immerse in the events and emotions associated with their cultural experiences, creating a recursive meaning-making process. As such, the autoethnographer re-experiences their culture and constructs an understanding through detailed examination and interpretation (Ellis et al., 2011).

The presentation of these experiences incorporates a blend of honest descriptions, impressionistic images, analytical perspectives, and confessional narratives (Chang, 2008). Layered accounts of the author's experiences, data analysis, and relevant literature are woven together, creating a rich, nuanced narrative. This is achieved through a reciprocal process in which existing concepts and theories are analytical tools to make sense of one's experiences and observations (Hoeber & Shaw, 2017).

Therefore, this reinterpretation of estrangement as narratives enhances the understanding of the cultural self within the autoethnographic method, shedding light on elements that the researcher's perceptions might otherwise overlook (Chang, 2008). By incorporating multiple voices, including theoretical insights, subjective experiences, and imagined scenarios, autoethnography enriches the research narrative's evocativeness, aesthetic, and authenticity (Rambo, 2005).

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY IN DIFFERENT USES AND APPROACHES

This section elucidates the varied modes of application and use of autoethnography, thereby revealing the breadth of its potential as a research methodology. Autoethnography acts as a nexus between personal experience and societal fabric, enabling researchers to navigate and dissect their subjective experiences in the backdrop of broader sociocultural landscapes. This potent research mechanism can be employed via several distinct approaches. Each avenue possesses unique attributes, presents exclusive possibilities for amalgamating self and environment, and caters to diverse objectives. Table 1 illustrates the four forms in which autoethnography is manifested according to the literature analyzed for this study.

Table 1

Different approaches to autoethnography

Category	Main characteristic	Level of relationship with the self and the environment	Main purpose
Evocative autoethnography	Emotional resonance and personal connection	High connection with the self, variable connection with the environment	To stir feelings within the reader, elicit a sense of shared experience
Analytical autoethnography	Theoretical analysis and reflexivity	High connection with both the self and the environment	To understand personal experiences within a broader theoretical framework
Cultural autoethnography	Contextual immersion and analysis	High connection with the environment, variable connection with the self	To understand the researcher's familiar context through their personal experiences
Interpretive and critical autoethnography	Life story as an element of transformation	High connection with both the self and the environment	To enable critical reflection and transformation, addressing social justice, reparation, and inequality

As demonstrated in Table 1, this study discerns four main categories that define different manifestations of autoethnography. The "category" column denotes each specific approach. "Main characteristics" delineate the unique attributes of each category, whereas "level of relationship with the self and the environment" describes how deeply each approach engages with the interplay between personal experience and cultural context. Finally, "main purpose" illustrates the primary objectives pursued in each category in the broad spectrum of autoethnographic research. Each category is now described.

Evocative autoethnography

Representing a distinct sub-genre within the larger discipline of autoethnography, the approach used in this study profoundly engages with the well-springs of emotional resonance and personal connection. Its principal objective is to evoke a potent sense of shared experience, elicit an effective response in the reader, and facilitate an immersive understanding of another's way of life (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). By favoring emotional self-reflexivity as a primary data source (Chang et al., 2012), evocative autoethnography posi-

tions itself as an alternative to the realist conventions of ethnographic research, thus aligning more closely with interpretivism and postmodern/poststructuralist paradigms (Reed-Danahay, 1997; Van Maanen, 2011). This mode of autoethnography transcends mere abstraction to prioritize narratives aimed at eliciting emotional evocation (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013). This powerful approach is deftly demonstrated in narratives exploring profound personal transitions, such as the one in Emerald and Carpenter's (2014) study of Carpenter's transition from active academia to retirement. Such narratives illuminate the richness and depth of human experiences and cultivate empathy and emotional resonance among readers, resonating effectively and aesthetically (Gannon, 2013).

Analytical autoethnography

The approach of analytical autoethnography is centered around theoretical analysis, emphasizing the need for reflexivity and active visibility of the researcher in the narrative. Anderson (2006) identified five main characteristics that enable the researcher to maintain analytical detachment while being immersed in the subject matter: 1. complete member researcher status, 2. analytic reflexivity, 3. narrative visibility of the researcher's self, 4. dialogue with informants beyond the self, and 5. a commitment to theoretical analysis. Anderson (2006) argues that autoethnographic inquiry, a nontraditional form of research, is compatible with traditional interactionist ethnography. The analytical form of autoethnography combines the personal richness of subjective experience with the rigor of conventional ethnographic methods.

Cultural autoethnography

This perspective encourages researchers to draw insights from intimately familiar contexts, using their lived experiences as a primary data source. As per Alvesson (2003), the researcher's personal experiences serve as a lens through which to interpret the cultural context, making this approach more external than introspective. Cultural autoethnography is less concerned with aesthetic rigor and more with maintaining fidelity to the cultural context.

Interpretive and critical autoethnography

This approach empowers marginalized voices, emphasizing social justice, reparation, and inequality. The narrative stimulates critical reflection

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and effect transformation, often by exploring epiphanies or significant life events (Denzin, 2014). This form of autoethnography is more than a personal narrative; it is a call to action for addressing social issues and advocating for change.
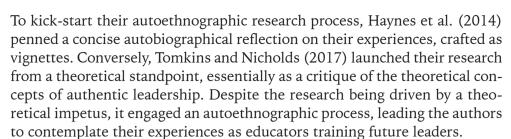
AUTOETHNOGRAPHY APPLIED IN RESEARCH PRACTICE

Since there is no consensus on autoethnographic practices, there is no prescribed formula for their application. If, on the one hand, autoethnographic researchers disagree about the evocative (Ellis & Bochner, 2006) and analytical (Anderson, 2006) nature of the method, on the other hand, they recognize that it is possible to have a variation in the positioning of the "self" when applying autoethnography. In general, it is acceptable for autoethnography to either (a) place experiences as central and others as secondary or (b) include other experiences similar to the researcher's own in the study in the same proportion. An aspect that Ellis and Bochner (2000) may not have acknowledged in their definition of autoethnography is causing some unease among proponents of evocative autoethnography. In this perspective, while researchers draw upon their own experiences to inform their choice of topics, the primary focus remains on the experiences of others. This approach positions the researchers' experiences as a lens through which the phenomena are examined rather than making the researchers themselves the central subject of study.

Composing lived experiences: Initial narratives

Autoethnographic research can commence from two distinct vantage points: 1. progressing from a specific theme to a broader topic or 2. navigating from a general theme to a specific subject (Chang, 2008). In the first approach, the research might begin with a detailed exploration of the researcher's experiences, aiming to understand these experiences in a comprehensive, meaningful, and in-depth manner (Adams et al., 2015). Examining these distinct experiences, the researcher progresses toward a broader understanding, pinpointing universal problems and concerns, enduring beliefs, and other situations that invite reconsideration, interrogation, transformation, or even broader validation.

The second approach for commencing autoethnographic research, transitioning from a broad concern to a specific topic, operates in reverse: a general theme is employed as a catalyst to probe into personal experiences connected to it. General themes can be prompted by literature reviews, discussions with fellow researchers, or context perception (Chang, 2008).

To kick-start their autoethnographic research process, Haynes et al. (2014) penned a concise autobiographical reflection on their experiences, crafted as vignettes. Conversely, Tomkins and Nicholds (2017) launched their research from a theoretical standpoint, essentially as a critique of the theoretical concepts of authentic leadership. Despite the research being driven by a theoretical impetus, it engaged an autoethnographic process, leading the authors to contemplate their experiences as educators training future leaders.

Both autoethnography and ethnography rely heavily on memories as primary data sources. Ethnography, on the one hand, seeks the recollections of others as informative sources, whereas autoethnography employs the researchers' memories. However, on the other hand, human memory does not operate linearly or systematically, meaning initial data acquisition can be scattered and disorganized. As such, researchers are advised to create an inventory of their experiences, establishing a list of thematic categories pertinent to the study (Chang, 2008).

This thematic list guides the researcher in further data collection, supplemented by other documents that help revive past experiences. Items such as personal writings, books, reports, press clippings, blogs, photographs, videos, and other documentation can be harnessed as secondary data sources and aids to stimulate the researcher's memory (Adams et al., 2015; Ellis et al., 2011).

In the initial phase, another valuable strategy may involve chronologically organizing the data (Chang, 2008). This method refers to sequential events on a timeline, positioning the lived experiences and perceptions accordingly. This structured approach can enhance clarity and coherence in the research process, correcting what some argue to be memory faults or basics (Chang, 2008). As part of the qualitative research process, as information collection progresses, the research focus may change. The analysis of information from autoethnographic research already begins in the information collection phase, which, in turn, can rectify or ratify the direction of the study. This means that the design of autoethnographic research challenges a rigid and linear model of research (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 1991, 1999; Ellis et al., 2011). It is a dynamic approach that can improve the research focus at each stage of collection and interpretation.

Interacting with other experiences: Autoethnographic interview

Memory, while instrumental, can be a capricious ally in autoethnography (Chang, 2008). It may present distorted or biased truths that warp the

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factual narrative. Additionally, memory can evoke biases, casting certain experiences in a glorified or disdainful light, thus jeopardizing data analysis. It is thus crucial for autoethnographers to consider perspectives beyond their own memories and documents, particularly those of individuals who have had similar experiences (Adams et al., 2015). Engaging in dialogues with individuals who have undergone comparable experiences can offer valuable insights into the phenomenon under investigation. For instance, a hospital manager researching practices within their field could gain diverse perspectives by conversing with other managers. Such interactions can verify, refute, or enrich the introspectively gathered data while stimulating memory, filling informational gaps, and providing alternative viewpoints (Chang, 2008).

Autoethnographic interviews possess a dual nature. While offering a sense of intimacy akin to an autobiography, they also carry an element of estrangement inherent to ethnography. The researcher's experiences are not the focal point but serve as lenses through which the phenomenon is examined. The unique aspect of autoethnography lies in the distancing that arises when the researcher's experiences are juxtaposed with those of other individuals garnered through interviews. Such interviews provide a sense of detachment, allowing the researcher's experiences to be contrasted with others. For instance, Araújo et al. (2020) generated narratives from their experiences managing arts organizations and contrasted them with those obtained from interviews with other managers. There are no stringent protocols for conducting autoethnographic interviews. They can take various forms—oral histories, personal narratives, topical interviews, or shared experiences (Adams et al., 2015)—and can even occur through informal interactions, symbols, images, videos, and other aesthetic elements (Ellis, 1999).

As Winkler (2018) underlined, there has been a recent shift towards more collaborative autoethnography. This approach, through its inherent polyphony, minimizes the risk of privileging one perspective over another (Chang, 2013) and enhances the robustness of the research (Lietz et al., 2006). It echoes Hayler's (2013) advocacy for shared stories, which enrich dialogue and link the personal with the social (Winkler, 2018).

Conducting autoethnographic interviews is dynamic and iterative. It challenges the conventional linear progression of research, and as the interviews unfold, the data becomes more refined, the research focuses more sharply, and the need for additional information becomes apparent. Thus, it is not uncommon for the autoethnography to revisit past experiences for review or additional insights during this process.

Analyzing narratives: Interpretative dynamics

Autoethnography uses information generated introspectively and confronted with other information generated through interviews as a lens through which cultural phenomena are studied. This means that the analysis is at the service of a cultural and not a personal understanding and that the information obtained must be analyzed in its cultural context. Boje and Tyler (2009) analyzed narratives of compulsion to work (workaholism) in their careers and analyzed films from American popular culture that referred to the American dream. The authors made a juxtaposition between their memories and the narratives constructed by the culture of the American dream.

The analysis of autoethnographic information happens dynamically and from the moment of collection. The analysis is the part that determines the pace and path of autoethnographic research: from the analysis, information is reviewed, reordered, and results are confronted and reanalyzed. Linearity is not expected so that one activity leads to the next until reaching the final destination (Chang, 2008), but analysis stages overlap and return many times to previous stages. For this reason, the design of autoethnographic research is rarely sequential, approaching a spiral format of comings and goings with different perspectives on the same point.

EXAMPLES OF THE PRACTICE OF AUTOETHNOGRAPHY IN MANAGEMENT

The production of research based on autoethnography is still limited in applied social sciences, as in the case of management. Most studies in the social sciences are about education, research, teaching, and sociology. Even so, we found six examples of autoethnography practices in management, illustrated in Table 2 and detailed below.

Table 2

Examples of autoethnography practices in management

Theme	Focus	Reference
Art organizations management	The primary author's experience (20 years as a manager of artistic organizations) was used as a lens for identifying and understanding how aesthetic consumption impacts the management processes of artistic organizations.	Araújo et al. (2020)

(continues)

Table 2 (conclusion)

Examples of autoethnography practices in management

Theme	Focus	Reference
Human resources	The field of human resource development uses autoethnography to identify and reflect on organizational and work phenomena.	Grenier (2015)
Human resources	Development of an autoethnographic approach to intertwine the personal experiences of the researcher and employees with the purpose of better understanding organizational engagement.	Sambrook et al. (2014)
Workplace	Academics who lived in the same workspace carried out an autoethnographic research to redefine their understanding of the work environment and deepen the challenges of the field.	Haynes et al. (2014)
Emotion at workplace	The author relies on a tragic experience at the institution where she taught and reflected on emotions in the work environment. From her reflections and interactions with other community members affected by the tragedy, she analyzed how emotion can affect work environments.	Miller (2002)
Leadership	As a manager, the author experiences a dilemma in his leadership role. His report explores the dilemma faced by a manager and reflects on how it can be understood and related to other factors and contexts.	Kempster and Gregory (2017)

Themes related to individuals and their relationships in the work environment have resorted to autoethnography for a finer and deeper understanding of the phenomenon. To deepen the understanding of emotions in the workplace, Miller (2002) analyzed a tragedy at the university where she taught, taking advantage of her impressions, emotions, and reactions to examine the event. The researcher also used reports from other teachers and students who were contrasted (strangeness) with her impressions.

Grenier (2015) and Sambrook et al. (2014) advocated a more appropriate methodology for understanding an organization's individuals and human resources. Grenier (2015) used autoethnography to rethink the understanding of human resources, while Sambrook et al. (2014) intertwined their experiences with experiences lived by other employees to broaden their understanding of engagement in the work environment. Still, on the individual level, Kempster and Gregory (2017) took advantage of the managerial experience of one of the authors to analyze leadership and its weaknesses and challenges.

Araújo et al. (2020) proposed an autoethnographic study to analyze the impacts of aesthetic consumption on the management of artistic organizations. The phenomenon was analyzed through the lens of the first author, who had two decades of experience managing arts organizations, was fluent in the field, and was knowledgeable in subtleties that would go unnoticed by lay researchers. In addition to her impressions, interviews with managers of other artistic organizations were conducted, as well as observation and document analysis, to obtain estrangement and contrast for the research.

PITFALLS OF THE AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC METHOD

Indeed, the world of autoethnography, inherently subjective and crafted through the researcher's lens, is not devoid of challenges and pitfalls. This section aims to explore these critical challenges that may confront autoethnographic researchers concisely. It underscores four main pitfalls, each with distinct characteristics, and offers pragmatic solutions grounded in the relevant literature. These elements are synthesized into Table 3 for easy reference and enhanced comprehension, aiding researchers in successfully navigating the intricate terrains of autoethnographic research.

Table 3

Main pitfalls associated with autoethnography

Main pitfall	Characteristic	Recommended avoidance strategy
Narcissistic narratives	Excessive focus on personal experiences without relevant contextual analysis can result in an autobiography instead of an autoethnography.	Combine personal experiences with an intense process of reflexivity and broader context analysis. Avoid creating a flattering narrative about oneself (Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Alvesson, 2003).
Unethical involvement	Confidentiality can be overlooked in self-narrative studies.	Follow ethical standards in narrating personal stories that may be linked to others (Ellis et al., 2011).
Mislabeling	Inappropriate application of the label "autoethnography" due to varying interpretations.	Substantiate and align the methodological approach with supporting theories to legitimize the research.
Constrained perspective	Using a single, subjective source (the researcher) can be challenged for validity.	Utilize multiple sources of information for a more rounded perspective and triangulation purposes. Develop practices to create distance from personal biases (Alvesson, 2003).

Narcissistic narratives

Narcissistic narratives arise when researchers overly focus on their personal experiences without connecting these experiences to a broader context. Ellis et al. (2011) stated that autoethnography is often criticized for not achieving the same goals as traditional ethnography or performance arts. A solution lies in combining personal experiences with intense reflexivity and broad context analysis, helping to advance knowledge.

Unethical involvement

Autoethnography can blur the lines of ethical standards, particularly regarding confidentiality. Ellis et al. (2011) emphasize that autoethnography should be careful when narrating personal stories involving others. Ethical standards should be upheld, even in self-narrative studies.

Mislabeling

Autoethnography can be mislabeled due to different interpretations among researchers. Therefore, researchers must substantiate their methodological approach and support it with relevant theories to maintain the credibility of their research.

Constrained perspective

Relying solely on the researcher's subjective viewpoint can challenge the validity of an autoethnographic study. Alvesson (2003) suggests that autoethnographers should use multiple sources of information for a more rounded perspective and employ reflexivity to create distance from personal biases. Moreover, Ellis et al. (2011) caution against the risk of narrowing perception too much, advocating for diversification of information sources and a balance between approximation and distancing movements.

In addition to the strategies suggested above, Winkler (2018) discusses the critiques faced by autoethnography, such as being perceived as self-indulgent or narcissistic. He argues this stems from a traditional understanding of the researcher's role as outside, objective, and neutral. He supports the idea that autoethnography is not about self-gratification but about understanding the influence of the researcher's subjectivity within the research context. In essence, the conventional understanding of research needs to evolve to accommodate the unique nature of autoethnography.

By adhering to these strategies, researchers can avoid common pitfalls and ensure that their autoethnographic research is credible, valid, and contributes effectively to social sciences.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Young and disturbing, autoethnography arrives as a research methodology that validates the researcher's experiences and uses them, without shame, to advance knowledge, especially in difficult access situations. It is a research methodology that comes from the family of ethnographies and, therefore, intends to study the cultural context in an exploratory and sensitive way. It differs from classic ethnographies in that the researcher is not a stranger in the context but an intimate and fluent participant. If classic ethnographies promote a distanced and analytical look at some phenomena, auto-ethnographies allow a more in-depth and complex approach to situations that only a few researchers have mastered. To prevent these experiences from becoming toxic to the research, we conducted semi-structured interviews with other individuals in a situation of parity with the researcher, which are triggered as engines of estrangement.

Some situations demand an ethnographic approach, but there are others that only environmental experts can access through autoethnography. These recognition, self-criticism, and self-reflection processes are the key to a leap in knowledge about the phenomenon, others, and oneself. The researcher provides precious information about the context, those who are part of it, and himself as a participating member of that environment.

Pitfalls are present at each stage of the autoethnographic process. Full attention must be paid to the focus of the research, which should be about something other than the researcher, given that we are not here based on the autobiographical method. The researcher's experiences are inputs used to generate knowledge about the environment that will always be the object of autoethnographic research. The different approaches to the methodology can also confuse the researcher. As we see in this work, some theorists rely on a more evocative and subjective understanding, while others defend a more analytical and theoretical approach. We build our arguments from the knowledge of this second theoretical line, and we believe that, although it is a humanized, innovative, and personal method, it must meet the methodological rigors that validate its commitment to the construction of relevant knowledge for scientific research.

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