

CRITERIA FOR RIGOUR AND TRUSTWORTHINESS IN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

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Abstract

The academic rigour of autoethnographic studies should be established and safeguarded to enhance the credibility and value of this form of research. This paper appraises the views of published autoethnographers on the rigour, validity and scientific accountability of such research. These insights are supplemented by the views of a sample of established autoethnographers determined through a qualitative survey. The criteria used to ensure trustworthiness in autoethnographic research must be judiciously determined and applied. From the research findings, criteria to establish rigour in autoethnographic research are proposed.

Key words: *autoethnographic research, research rigour, trustworthiness criteria, research credibility, research validity*

1. INTRODUCTION

Research rigour is the essence of scientific research (Allende, 2012), since it is on the strength of such rigour that research is accepted in academe, gains recognition and carries conviction and strength. Generally, the process of verifying research rigour involves the application of agreed upon criteria that underpin a multi-dimensional concept of quality in research. The 'dimensions' of what constitutes research include the soundness of the research approach, its conceptual depth, the accuracy of the findings and the integrity of the assumptions made and the conclusions reached. In qualitative research, of which autoethnography is a genre, Guba's (1981) four criteria for research trustworthiness, namely credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, are favoured as a means to evaluate research validity. However, it is argued in this paper that autoethnography has unique characteristics which require specifically identified and selected criteria for the establishment of its authenticity and rigour. This premise is based on the aforementioned fact as well as the fact that the issue of rigour in autoethnographic research is much debated, indicating that consensus regarding evaluation criteria is not a foregone conclusion. On the one hand there are those who are of the opinion that criteria for establishing rigour in autoethnographic research are elusive and perhaps even non-existent (Bochner, 2000; Hope & Waterman, 2003; Rolfe, 2006; Schwandt, 1996), while on the other there are those who propose the application of various specific criteria (Duncan, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Loh, 2013; Manning & Adams, 2015; Medford, 2006; Morrow, 2005; Ragan, 2000; Richardson, 2000; Tracy, 2010) to assess the rigour of the research.

In this paper I first examine the literature on rigour in autoethnographic research to establish current views on the topic. The literature I cite emanates from research undertaken by proficient, esteemed autoethnographers, and I put forward their thoughts on criteria for evaluating rigour in such research. In this section I highlight the underlying issues, controversies and dilemmas in relation to presenting or defending criteria for establishing rigour in autoethnographic research. To further elucidate and add to the current body of knowledge on the topic, I undertook field research with established autoethnographers to determine their views on rigour in autoethnographic research and to find out whether these researchers apply specific criteria to ensure the rigour of their research.

Based on the findings from the literature review and fieldwork, I conclude with my own presentation of a set of criteria which, if applied to the research, I believe will promote research trustworthiness or the integrity of autoethnographic research processes and findings.

2. RESEARCH AND RESEARCH RIGOUR

Research makes a critical contribution to the development of society (Georghiou 2015, p. 4), and consequently research should inform, develop and advance knowledge. Above all, the research should be trustworthy, and for this to be achieved, the processes used to conduct the research and arrive at the research conclusions should be above reproach. In the humanities, research specifically generates knowledge about human behaviour, human experience and human environments, and consequently it is vital for the research to be conducted in an ethical, trustworthy and responsible manner.

Research occurs within a particular paradigm, and consequently the criteria used to measure the rigour or academic worth of the research process and outcomes need to be aligned with the philosophies of the research paradigm and the goals of the particular research endeavour. Tracy (2010, pp. 837–838) argues that the proliferation of concepts for quality in qualitative research illustrates the complexity of the methodological landscape and that the guidelines to assess quality in qualitative research are contextually situated. Consequently, determining the rigour or validity of research is perhaps a more complex issue than might first appear (Bryman, Becker & Sempik, 2007, p. 261). Tracy (2010, p. 849) further cautions that researchers should not ‘grasp too strongly’ at any set list of criteria to assess research trustworthiness. This notion is supported by Ellis (2007), who advises that researchers should approach research with honesty and integrity which encompasses the process of embarking on the research and the ensuing product as evidenced in the research findings and subsequent conclusions and research recommendations.

3. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was selected for this investigation, since its ultimate purpose was to explore the personal experiences of individuals of conducting autoethnographic research, and I wished to immerse myself in the data and reflect on, describe, analyse and creatively synthesis the emerging data (Patton, 2002 pp. 40–41). The perceptions and experiences of the phenomenon under discussion were reported through various means (Cresswell, 2013), such as researcher self-reporting through responding to open-ended survey questionnaires distributed during field research and through reporting the perceptions and experiences of established autoethnographers as evidenced in their published works on the topic. This facet of the research can be described as a review of the extant literature on the topic. Over 50 relevant research articles published in internationally accredited research journals were analysed.

The second dimension of the research involved field research and the administration of a questionnaire to research respondents. A cohort of six established autoethnographers was surveyed. The survey questions were based on my readings of the issues relating to research rigour and authenticity in autoethnographic research as evidenced in the literature. Respondents were specifically asked to elaborate on their views relating to rigour in autoethnography and how they ensured rigour in their autoethnographic research endeavours.

Given that the fieldwork aspect of the research involved individual contact with researchers during which their personal opinions and experiences would be probed, ethics clearance for the project was sought from the institution where the research took place. The researcher was consequently mindful of ensuring that informed consent to participate in the research and collect data was provided by respondents and that they were aware that they could withdraw from the research at any time without reprisal. The researcher furthermore vouched that confidentiality and anonymity would be upheld. No risk to research participants was anticipated.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The literature on autoethnographic research attests to the fact that various authors view this particular form of research differently. Adams (2005) and Wood (2009) view autoethnography as research which opens up a wider perspective of reality and which defies rigid definitions of what constitutes

meaningful research. It is viewed as being a unique approach to research, of which the primary quest is self-understanding (Anderson, 2006) through self-exploration and introspection (Starr, 2010), and as research which invites a personal dimension in which the researcher actively contributes to the production of knowledge through responding to, critiquing and interpreting data (Butler, 2009). Given the involvement of the reader in bringing meaning to the research, autoethnographic research is also acclaimed for its therapeutic value for both the researcher and the reader of the research (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2010). Autoethnography thus acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality and researcher influence. The concepts of personal experience and culture are central to explanations of what autoethnographic research constitutes, with Spry (2001, p. 710) describing autoethnography as a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social, political, economic and cultural contexts.

It is suggested that autoethnographic studies give researchers a unique way to gain and share knowledge. It is evident from the literature that various autoethnographers approach their research from different orientations: some emphasise the evocative nature of their research (cf Ellis, 2000; Bartleet, 2009; Bochner, 2000; Denzin, 2006), while others adopt a more analytical approach to their work (cf Anderson, 2006; Atkinson, 2006; Butler, 2009; Delamont, 2007). Manning and Adams (2015, p. 191) contend that there are variations in autoethnographic practice, all of which emphasize different aspects of the social research–life continuum. This implies that along the continuum between evocative and analytic autoethnography there are other ways of approaching and practising this research method. These researchers identify four orientations towards autoethnography, namely: social-scientific autoethnography (likened to analytic autoethnography); interpretive humanistic; critical and creative-artistic – the latter two being akin to evocative autoethnography. The rationale and outcome of the research consequently differ depending on the stance taken towards the study. The objectives of the research thus determine which of the approaches to autoethnographic research will be followed. This leads to the deduction that the criteria for determining research trustworthiness would need to be aligned with the particular approach decided on, which further suggests that there could be different assessment criteria for different autoethnographic approaches. Perhaps, though, it is possible to propose general criteria for research rigour in autoethnographic studies, since autoethnographies do have certain elements in common: the narration and reflection of a personal experience of an aspect of culture, as suggested previously.

With regard to criteria which rigorous autoethnographic research should meet, Chang (2008) is of the opinion that meaningful cultural analysis and interpretation is imperative. He is of the opinion that research which does not evidence a profound level of analysis is nothing more than descriptive autobiography or memoir, and consequently has little value as research. Ellis and Bochner (2000) emphasise that rigour in autoethnographic research requires verisimilitude. Readers should have the impression that the experience described is authentic and convincing, and they should be able to relate to it. Ellis (2000) posits that autoethnographic research should engage readers' emotions and thinking capacities. Readers should be able to position themselves in relation to the event and attempt to anticipate how the researcher experienced the event described, and be able to place themselves in the researcher's shoes. It is important for the reader to benefit in some way from reading the narrative – remembering that autoethnographic research is acclaimed for its potential therapeutic value.

Medford (2006) suggests that the criteria for evaluating trustworthiness in autoethnographic research are accountability, credibility and dependability, while Richardson (2000) suggests that autoethnography should be appraised against five criteria – substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity (defined as self-awareness and agency within that self-awareness), the impact the narrative has on the reader and its credibility. Loh (2013) reiterates the issue of plausibility and utility value or contribution. Autoethnographic narratives must be credible, and must also produce knowledge that contributes to other people's capacities to solve problems.

Criteria proposed by Ragan (2000) include the requirement that the narrative should be interesting and accurately written; the fundamental issue addressed must be important; readers should learn something from the narrative, and the research should have the potential to make a contribution to the academic discipline as well as to scholarly enquiry in general. Morrow (2005) lists criteria such as social

viability, subjectivity, reflexivity, adequacy of data and adequacy of interpretation. Duncan (2004) suggests that rigorous autoethnography will evidence a clear delimitation of the study, will have instrumental value and exhibit construct validity, external validity, reliability and scholarship. In summary, these researchers cite criteria such as resonance, narrative truth, reflexivity, aesthetic merit, substantive contribution and utility, scholarship and plausibility as being fundamental to ensuring research rigour (Ellis, 2000; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Duncan, 2004; Loh, 2013; Manning & Adams, 2015; Medford, 2006; Morrow, 2005; Ragan, 2000; Richardson, 2000.)

With the preceding in mind, research survey questions were designed for administration to respondents. The questionnaire comprised two sections, the first establishing the researchers' opinion on the nature and scope of autoethnographic research and the second, respondents' experiences and perceptions of ensuring research trustworthiness when conducting autoethnographic studies. The research survey ultimately highlighted respondents' perceptions of the criteria they apply in ensuring that the research they conduct is valid and rigorous. Respondents were unanimous that autoethnographic studies should be appraised for their rigour, as this would enhance the impact and relevance of such research. Two respondents indicated that in their opinion research rigour primarily required evidence of reliability and validity resonating with the criteria generally accepted to establish rigour in quantitative studies. The other respondents indicated that a broader set of criteria should be applied to ensure research trustworthiness given the nature and scope of autoethnographic research. Respondents were in agreement that the purpose of autoethnography was to reach greater self-understanding and insight into the social world. Autoethnographic research provided the opportunity for research that allowed for creativity, emotive expression and high levels of self-reflexivity. It was imperative for autoethnographic research to have utility value and to make a contribution to the research community. Autoethnography was also perceived as 'narrative art', which implies that to be relevant and rigorous, autoethnographers should be able to apply well-honed literary skills.

It was emphasised by all respondents that the centrality of the researcher to the research process implies the necessity of researcher sincerity, integrity and authenticity. These researcher attributes were central and could not be contested. Given the therapeutic value of autoethnographies, the ability of the narrative to enable readers to reach greater self-understanding and achieve resonance with the research process and outcome was fundamental.

Concerns about research integrity in general and also those specific to autoethnographic research were raised, especially given the pervasive 'publish or perish' trend which characterises academe at present. Autoethnographic research has been dismissed as being 'experiential and lacking in analytical outcomes' and an 'easy way of doing research because you just write about your experiences of something and palm that off as research'. In keeping with this criticism it was pointed out that certain critics of autoethnography have gone as far as to describe autoethnographic research as a 'navel-gazing exercise'. Some respondents raised the point that peers and readers of research – the ultimate evaluators of the quality of research – have become less critical of what constitutes good research in the current milieu, given the acknowledged pressure to publish their work in order to sustain or further careers. The sudden proliferation of solicitation for articles for publication in 'peer-reviewed' 'online' periodicals which academics receive daily was cited as but one example of how researchers could be enticed to publish what may constitute mediocre work, since the journals were not necessarily reputed or established and the peer review process was possibly toned down. The respondents were unanimous in saying that research integrity was of the utmost importance, especially in the present climate. Researcher integrity is clearly linked to research ethics, as well as the credibility, reliability and trustworthiness of the individual researcher. This sentiment is aligned with what Ellis (2000) and others cited previously have to say about researchers needing to be especially vigilant about being honest, truthful and scrupulous in the research they undertake. Ultimately, the researcher must be willing to be held accountable for research rigour.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Research comprises more than the presentation of research findings: it encompasses determining the objective of the research; decision-making regarding research processes, including research design, data collection and analysis; and the presentation of the findings from which convincing conclusions and constructive recommendations can be made. Rigour should be exercised with regard to each of these dimensions of a study.

Given that it is accepted that autoethnographers approach their research from different orientations, it could be unviable to suggest that all autoethnography should meet the same criteria to determine the rigour of the research. The purpose and nature of the study must be taken into account, and the criteria should be aligned with the underlying rationale for the research. However, the suggestion of certain criteria that apply to autoethnographic studies in general – since there are certain elements that all autoethnographic studies have in common – could be useful. I base my proposition of criteria that could be applied to autoethnographic studies on the fact that there appears to be consensus amongst autoethnographers about certain markers for excellence in this field of work. The criteria I propose are as follows:

- There should be evidence of *subjectivity*. The researcher should re-enact and re-construct a noteworthy personal or institutional experience in search of self-understanding, and construct a reliable and credible narrative that constitutes the research.
- The researcher should achieve *resonance* with the audience through which they are able to enter into and engage with the writer's story on an intellectual and emotional level.
- The research should be *plausible* and evidence authenticity, while the research process and reporting should be permeated by honesty.
- The research should extend knowledge, empower, inform, inspire, generate ongoing research, improve practice or make a *contribution* to social change.

Inherent in these criteria is the expectation that the research is ethical and honest. The research – the circumstances, emotions and events – should be trustworthy and honestly portrayed, an observation supported by Méndez (2013), who argues that above all, research should be true and undisputable.

However, checklists cannot substitute for informed judgment. Any appraisal of autoethnographies should be subject to individual judgment based on insight and experience. Competent researchers and appraisers of research must acquire not only the ability to use and understand the application of various research skills, but also the acumen to judge when some kinds of research are likely to prove more productive and germane than others. Recognizing the need to appraise research against evaluative guidelines wins respect and gains acceptability for the research process and product and should consequently be pursued as measures to ensure research rigour.

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