Linking Qualitative Research with a First Nations Cultural, Sociopolitical Context: Excerpts from My Autoethnograpy

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Abstract

Composing my autoethnography for academic purposes became a vast undertaking. It was an important avenue to take, in order to make known experiences of culture, health and family, situated within lived experiences of a First Nation's community.

Unleashing the personal story within the cultural sociopolitical context, in the prescribed autoethnographical form, was an interesting way to arouse genuine interest in key issues, and as importantly, to disrupt ingrained assumptions regarding First Nations' cultures. In this short article, perspectives garnered through the experiences of crafting an autoethnography as, a doctoral nursing student, and the process of seeking ethical approval are delineated. Furthermore, the intricacies of the autoethnographical story are depicted, in association with, Indigenous storytelling approaches, ontology and relationality, in order to further illuminate the inherent, decolonizing potential and relevance to the development of culturally safe methodologies. Hopefully, this account may contribute to the growing acceptance, understanding and utilization of autoethnography within academia and beyond.

Keywords: autoethnography, culture, Indigenous, story, ethics, health, nursing

Introduction

My personal experience as a kidney organ donor within a First Nation's context developed into an autoethnographical story. It was concurrent with my journey within a doctoral program in Nursing at the University of Victoria. A unique opportunity to tell my story, and a way to share experiences of culture that emerge from living as an active member within an Ojibwe community, presented itself, as a challenging gift, in my doctoral program. My proposed autoethnographic study was successfully reviewed by the university's Ethics Board. The full doctoral study, awaits publishing elsewhere. Here, the account of the intricacies, learnings and challenges associated with autoethnography may offer insight into the method's strong affinity with indigenous storytelling approaches and methodologies. In addition, by illuminating the ethical angles in an explicit manner, it might be useful information for students interested in developing narratives of their own experiences.

For a researcher, unleashing the personal story from a cultural standpoint in the autoethnographical form may be both exhilarating and unsettling. I struggled to learn the autoethnographic methodology. At the same time, I was associated closely with a system that I felt was awakening. It was becoming more far more receptive, towards qualitative research, and accepting of decolonizing research methods as well as, research which practiced cultural safety

and respect of research participants. In this account, the processes and perspectives of creating an autoethnography are delineated as follows: firstly, Storying into Autoethnography, secondly, The Uncovered Autoethnographer, thirdly, Gaining Acceptance, fourthly, Decolonizing through Autoethnography and, finally, Learning through Ethics.[1]

Storying into Autoethnography

Emanating from ancient historical times, stories have endured to explain the mysteries of life as well as the hardships endured. "The story and the story teller both serve to connect the past with the future, one generation with the other, the land with the people and the people with the story" (Smith, 2012, p. 146). To wrestle with our life experiences and to create narratives that surface from our lives may foster meaning and purpose for both the self and the other. Johnston (2010) describes the Ojibwe elders' usage of oral stories as strengthening the youth in facing life challenges.

Storymaking was integral to going beyond the physical in order to instill values of respect, love, compassion, courage, honesty, generosity, and persistence (Johnston, 2010). In sharing life stories, others may recognize and identify with their own experiences where understanding and inner consolation may occur. A meaningful intimate connection between the storyteller and listener of the story is made possible that may nurture and heal.[2]

In autoethnography, the story expands to magnify and encompass the self that is fundamentally enmeshed within an intersecting world. The autoethnographer risks divulging life circumstances inside the contextual cultural, social, political and environmental circumstances. Additionally, autoethnography potentially reveals one's raw experiences through a process that seeks to yield the crux of meaning. This process may entail lengthy and meticulous introspection that may necessitate ethics approval. In this, the life story may inspire awareness, understanding and possibly an awakening to meaningful action. Autoethnography entails a process of self-discovery that may bring oneself forwards towards healing and understanding of past events. In this way, autoethnographical writing is thought to have therapeutic potential (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011).

In community presentations of my story, I integrated cultural stories and traditions including the story of the moccasin slipper and the significance of the bear. These stories, I found were like extensions of bringing the viscerally felt, earthbound unconditional union to realization and evoked a togetherness that people could identify with and understand. Central to this relational connection to the land and everything of it, is the language that expresses this full cultural meaning. Johnston (2010) explains the Ojibwe or Anishinaubaemowin people spoke of the teachings and directions of the earth or the "aki-inoomaugaewin" (p. 11). In this regard, the autoethnographical text necessitated striving to bring the people's Ojibwe language into the English text so that deep cultural meanings would be conveyed. Coming to the central core of an experience demanded a discovery beyond superficial layers, a toilsome contemplation of the self in relation to the broader community.

The Uncovered Autoethnographer

The autoethnographer emerges, the "I", the writing in the first person seeking proximity with the reader. As a researcher and autoethnographer, I have come to understand that my assumptions and ways of being are intricately linked with the sociocultural context. Particularly my involvement as an organ donor has propelled me to seek ways to share the insights garnered from this experience that intersect deeply with culture and the health care system. It may seem strange to write about the experience of organ donation. On the contrary, this donation of one of my organs awakened me to see so much more of life, its beauty and deep meaning. Additionally, within the context of a First Nation community, the experience brought forth issues of inequality in health care services, inaccessibility, misperceptions and stereotypes that have collectively mushroomed into devastating consequences for the health and well-being of First Nations communities. It was not enough to go through actual organ donation, I felt compelled and heart driven to do something.

In my autoethnographical story I have thought of myself as an insider, connected to a culture as a member of a First Nation community. I am also familiar with the workings of the health care and educational systems through my roles in nursing and as a member of a faculty. In this respect, I have a vested interest and feel obligated to learn more about health and to engage in ways to further understand and share how cultural context plays into the experiences of health care. Autoethnography I feel offers the deep and rich cultural expression of my life story. As an insider within a cultural context and as a health care provider, I hold the assumptions that through the genuine understanding of cultural ways of being, people may be furthered to act towards compassion and humanity.

Thomas King (2003) describes, "those racial shadow zones that have been created for us and that we create for ourselves" (p. 92). In autoethnography, the self as the autoethnographer may be challenged to consider these zones or categories and one's positioning as either an insider or outsider. Indeed, in Hayano's (1979) discussion of autoethnography, the insider and outsider status debate emerges in deliberating if the researcher as an outsider has the objective advantage within the research. It may even be argued that the insider and outsider designation is not always fixed and may change and transition depending on whom or what group a person decides to identify with at any given time (Kusow, 2003). "The insider/outsider distinction lacks acknowledgment that insiders and outsiders, like all social roles and statuses, are frequently situational, depending on the prevailing social, political, and cultural values of a given social context" (Kusow, 2003, p. 592). In this sense, the autoethnographer is challenged to tackle the insider / outsider categories. The autoethnographer may disclose the personal experience within the intimate contextual that reveals the insider perspective. Moreover, the autoethnographer seeks to bring forth the authentic self and unique perspective. I am who I am in this story the autoethnographer, the vulnerable self.

As a PhD nursing student living within the First Nation family context, the autoethnographical method offered an interesting opportunity to express my lived experience. Through this explication of a significant life event, I hoped to increase awareness of a serious health problem and to possibly incite further action from my unique standpoint within an Indigenous community. In autoethnography, the researcher's voice speaks to their place or position within an entangled cultural, social and political context. The autoethnographer does not hide behind a

veil of objectivity and distance to the participant but seeks a heartfelt connection. Locating oneself within the context is inherent to Indigenous research, "…self-locating is a powerful tool for increasing awareness of power differentials in society and for taking action to further social justice" (Kovach, 2012, p. 110). The personal story may be brought out within the public to reveal forth disproportions within society in the hopes that awareness will motion action or change. This is often expressed in a language that is emotional to the core, bare or poetic and strives to bring the reader to feel rather than to just intellectualize the experience. The intention may be to shock the reader; to cause the reader's jaw to drop so they image the pain and darkness that comes from a life immersed in judgment, poverty and oppression.

Gaining Acceptance

When I began writing my personal story of organ donation, I stumbled upon a reading of autoethnography that was like an epiphany. I felt that I had discovered the research method that I had been doing all along but was unaware of the name for it. Inside my nursing research educational background, the overwhelming focus of study was in the quantitative realm. Peterson (2014) explains autoethnography as a method that is infrequently utilized and lacking study. In contrast to the preferential objective position within most health related sciences and research, the outright subjective nature of autoethnography challenges predominating attitudes. In autoethnography, the auto is the researcher and the objective distance between the researcher who analyzes and studies the participant is dissolved. The researcher essentially takes the participant's place where the researcher's perspective of the experience becomes central. Additionally, autoethnography departs in its conformity to the prevailing objective methodologies and becomes radical in asserting the subjectivity of the researcher (Peterson, 2014). "Within this approach, self-reflection moves beyond field notes to having a more integral positioning within the research process and the construction of knowledge itself" (Kovach, 2012, p. 33). In this regard, autoethnography departs from conventional research where the autoethnographer's interpretation of their personal account becomes the focus of the research (Wall, 2008). The researcher's interpretation of the participant's experience that typically dominants becomes the researcher's acknowledged interpretation of his or hers experience within the context.

Beyond the subjective and objective divisions and in the postmodern perspective, truth is considered a social construction. In postmodern thinking, autoethnography emerges as a research method that fundamentally challenges concepts of truth. The degree to which the academic setting is postmodern may impact on the acceptability and recognition of autoethnography. From its earliest inceptions the autoethnographical method has been immersed within the politics of academia and acceptability of this method, may play into the fundamental prevailing qualitative and quantitative debates (Dumitrica, 2010; Hayano, 1979). Frequently, autoethnography has struggled to achieve recognition as a legitimated form of research (Dumitrica, 2010; Denzin, 2014). For instance, during the process of my autoethnographical work, a well-intentioned member of faculty questioned if the autoethnographical account would be seen as lacking rigor. It struck how the pervasive quantitative criterion comes to evaluate all forms of research. For me this was a challenge and opened my eyes to see the backbone of the autoethnographical inquiry as a process that may challenge conformity and to reveal the pervasive effects of colonialism. In this trajectory, the autoethnographic voice may *rigorously* disrupt taken for granted assumptions.

Despite the tussles to emerge as a recognized form of qualitative research, autoethnography may be gaining recognition, particularly in light of the growing body of autoethnographical research being published (Badenhorst, McLeod & Joy, 2012; Denshire, 2014). Many autoethnographies advocating for socially marginalized groups including diversities of gender, mental health, chronic illnesses and disabilities have been published (Merryfeather, 2014; Richards, 2008; Schneider, 2005). Beyond a history of denunciation, autoethnographies may be recognized to offer critical learning for health care.

Decolonizing through Autoethnography

Merging within Indigenous perspectives, autoethnography may be recognized for its ability to bring forwards the cultural life story where colonial conventions are challenged (McIvor, 2010; Whitinui, 2013). Decolonizing research involves the critical dissection of assumptions that may belong to Western epistemologies (McCleland, 2011). Smith (2012) explains the term 'savage' where "…Indigenous peoples are deeply cynical about the capacity, motives or methodologies of Western research to deliver any benefits to Indigenous peoples whom science has long regarded, indeed has classified, as being 'non-human'" (p. 122). In this regard, the autoethnographer within the Indigenous context uses the self to decolonize research through explication and synthesis of their Indigenous values and ways of being that are inherent to the diverse cultural context in which they live. The autoethnographer interprets the experience in relation to cultural values and epistemologies. In the Ojibwe language, human teachings are known as "kiki-inoomaugaewin" (Johnston, 2010, p. 11). From a cultural safety standpoint, where cultural safety addresses the implicit power structures within relationships, the autoethnographer has the freedom to express his or hers own views based on relational responsibilities with community. Additionally, culturally safe research "…gives people control over their ways of knowing and being and the development of indigenous knowledge" (McCleland, 2011, p. 364). The colonializing power structures that have typically relegated and oppressed Indigenous persons may be expounded in autoethnography through the description of the experience through the autoethnographer's eyes. This may occur through the personal account of how life has been adversely affected in relation to families and the people within communities (Kovach, 2012). In this way the autoethnographer builds trust through full explication of their position and situatedness within the context of the research.

Furthermore, within autoethnography, the story includes not only the self but also others and may likely detail the other's personal details. "As autoethnographers, we must recognize that we are not removed or separate from the other human beings who populate our tales" (Holman Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013; p. 675). The disclosure of self may also extend to the others included within the contextual description. This may be likened to undressing not only oneself but also others in public (McIvor, 2010). In this respect, the autoethnographer must enlist and weigh heavily the trust between themselves and those who are spoken of. Moreover, under the shadow of colonization research methodologies are often mistrusted within Indigenous communities. Trust is difficult to achieve in relation to a colonial history that pervades societal structures of the present. When trust is broken, the research has the potential to cause harm to both the self and the other(s) or even the community described (Tullis, 2013). Within the realm of trusting and communal bonds, autoethnography demands the researcher to disclose fully who she or he is in relation to the people, the history and the land (Whitinui, 2013).

Learning through Ethics

In an ontology where there is oneness with the land and interconnectedness amongst all living and non-living things, the Indigenous autoethnography facilitates the expression of this way of being that is unlike other research methodologies (McIvor, 2010; Whitinui, 2013). Relationality and the connectedness with everyone within the community motions the axiology for a respectful relationship between the researcher and with all who may be involved (Smithers Graeme, 2013; Wilson, 2008). Ellis (2007) also connects relational ethics with autoethnography where the dignity and respect is the priority where the autoethnographer takes seriously how their stories depict others, necessitating the requirement for consent. Protecting those who would otherwise not wish to divulge their personal details become central to the relational aspects of her or his research and protection for privacy (Ellis et al., 2011). It can be appreciated when the other's story in relation to the self is integral to the meaning of the autoethnographer's writing and the necessity for the writer to make weighty decisions on how the story should be written when consent is not possible. The challenge becomes to abandon the story or to leave particular details out. Pseudonyms may offer an alternative to capture as close as possible the gist and substance of the experience while maintaining confidentiality and privacy.

Ethical research boards may be required to provide ethical approval for an autoethnography where university ethics boards may differ in their approach. For the Indigenous researcher, the decision making ethics review board without Indigenous members or who lack knowledge of Indigenous culture may seem like another level of colonialism where the power is in the hands of the non-Indigenous to determine the appropriateness of the Indigenous research (McCleland, 2011). In addition, ethics applications can involve a lengthy, onerous process that is largely concerned with prospective research with human participants or experimental research where the questions regarding the time periods for data collection may not be applicable for a retrospective autoethnographical account. The distinction may have been made between a retrospective autoethnography and an autoethnography with a prospective component where ethical review may not even be considered necessary when the account is entirely retrospective. On the other hand, it may be the discretion of the ethics board to require all autoethnographies to have ethical approval. Furthermore, the retrospective account may draw on memory that may be difficult to explain on the ethics applications developed for objective data collections methodologies. As well the application may infer the necessity of obtaining consent before the research and data collection begins.

In my experience of organ donation, I kept medical records and a journal without realizing that I would one day consider writing an autoethnography. This data would eventually become invaluable in the recollection of events. Moreover, this experience occurred before my doctoral journey began and my knowledge of autoethnographical methods at that time was next to none. So the decision to write an autoethnography came a few years after the actual experience. This became an awkward twist to the process where I obtained consent from the transplant recipient to write the autoethnography several years after the transplant procedure. Furthermore, in my experience no personal names or names of community places were mentioned however informed and process consent was still required should the unnamed persons be recognized due to his or hers relational connections to the author. This puzzled me as well for my experience of organ donation was already well known within my family and community and I had spoken of my experience at a health presentation for the community and at a conference well before I began

writing the autoethnography. Another challenge involved in the consent process occurred when describing those who were deceased where their descriptions were felt to be essential to enabling the full meaning of the toll of kidney disease. Obtaining consent from deceased family members is challenging and the delicate process of asking consent from other family member for those who are deceased may be very difficult if there are fears of resurfacing grief or trauma. Tolich (2010) advises avoiding publishing if the researcher has not shared what has been revealed first in text with those included in the autoethnographical account, and providing confidentiality or protection amongst family members concerning information they may not have known about each other that is described within the text. In my research, the consent process was critical because it was the personal details that to me made the story evocative, penetrating and more likely to draw attention to the disparities in health care I had witnessed.

In addition, in Canada, the Tri-Council Policy Statement for research involving First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples necessitates consultation with the communities involved. As Murray, Pushor and Reihan (2012) depict in their discussion of the TCPS there is need to consider if the benefits outweigh the risk. Exploitation is the concern but at the same time vulnerable groups should not be denied the benefits of research. Exposing the raw situation may unveil the larger disparities affecting a group and without such exposure through research, underlying causes of inequities may not be adequately addressed. I wanted strongly to share my organ donation that challenged the assumption where organ donation may not be consistent with Indigenous cultures. In light of the disproportionate number of transplants in Indigenous populations around the globe, there was the strong feeling in my heart to share the story that supports organ donation. The autoethnography allowed me to describe from the actual lived experience the financial, logistical and geographical disparities that may adversely impact on the rate of transplants. The benefits for the community and family far outweighed the risks. When I received ethical approval I felt excitedly energized with the prospect that I could contribute to positive, meaningful and healthful change.

Conclusion

From its very beginnings, autoethnography as a method has struggled to find acceptance within the Social Sciences and related disciplines. Within certain sectors of the research communities, is has gained popularity and today, occupies a somewhat, larger space within the qualitative research arena. Without a doubt, this method presents some onerous ethical obstacles. For example, gaining retrospective consent from those who emerge in the researcher's memory, including those who are deceased, represents unique challenges which are not encountered in other types of qualitative research. This method is also challenged to establish genuine trust through transparency of the self as relational to others. Autoethnographers may need to think through carefully their positioning in terms of insider or outsider status. Consideration for the risk versus the benefits of personal and public disclosure is essential.

Auto-ethnography offers a captivating and powerful way for research that has the potential to pierce through societal injustices and to foster emancipatory action. In light of, the historical and contemporary, colonizing sufferings that Indigenous peoples around the world have endured and survived, autoethnography is a method that builds on the power of the story to foster healing and revelation.

Hopefully, health care providers recognize the contributions, the potential learnings and understandings which autoethnography offers, to the people for whom we care. Sharing the learnings and perspectives of autoethnography, may further enable others in the field and beyond, to consider seriously, creating their own stories. The potential impacts which storymaking and telling may have in improving our lives is immeasurable.

Finally, the autoethnographical story may offer a culturally safe form of research. One in which the person's story and experiences, provide invaluable information. Hopefully, such information will inform and improve, any future, public health practice and care.

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[1] This work is related to the author's dissertation in the PhD Nursing Program at the University of Victoria currently in progress regarding kidney disease and organ donation pertaining to First Nation communities.

[2] See Smith, M. (2015). (in press). Nagweyaab geebawug: A retrospective autoethnography of the lived experience of kidney donation. *Canadian Association of Nephrology Nurses and Technologists Journal.*

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