

# **AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS A METHOD FOR REFLEXIVE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE IN VOCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY**

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This paper overviews the qualitative research method autoethnography and its relevance to research in vocational psychology and practice in career development. Autoethnography is a reflexive means by which the researcher-practitioner consciously embeds himself or herself amidst theory and practice, and by way of intimate autobiographic account, explicates a phenomenon under investigation or intervention. Autoethnography is presented as a vehicle to operationalise social constructionist research and practice that aims to establish trustworthiness and authenticity. Furthermore, the method is presented as a means to operationalise the notion of critical consciousness within researchers and practitioners. It is concluded that autoethnography should be admitted to the methodological repertoire of methods for vocational psychology research and practice.

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Although qualitative data and methods have regained a legitimised place—albeit as yet limited—in the mainstream of psychology theory, research, and practice (as indicated by special issues in prestigious journals such as *The Counseling Psychologist*, *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, and the *Journal of Career Assessment*), story as data and as method are yet to be comprehensively articulated within the field of vocational psychology and its attendant research programmes and practices. This is problematic because, as with other branches of psychology, the contemporary practices of vocational psychology have ostensibly outpaced theory and research—perhaps because of restrained research traditions. Take narrative career counselling as an example of the differential proliferation of practice over explanatory theory and research. The narrative approach treats the client’s story as being integral to the very process and outcome of assessment and intervention, however explanatory theory and research studies for this approach are, as yet, limited (McIlveen & Patton, 2007b).

The most promising theoretical frameworks within vocational psychology which explicitly include story are the Systems Theory Framework (Patton & McMahon, 2006), the Contextual-Action Theory of Career (Young & Valach, 2004; Young, Valach, & Collin, 2002), the Theory of Career Construction (Savickas, 2005), and emerging theoretical approaches that conceptualise story and storying of career and identity as a dialogical process (Guichard, 2005; McIlveen & Patton, 2007a). All of those theoretical frameworks emphasise story and the process of storying career and, moreover, emphasise storying as a recursive co-constructive process the goes on between client and counsellor.

Although the development of theory and research into career counselling practice with the client’s story as subject of intervention and enquiry is crucial for the field, there are additional foci requiring attention. If the notions of inter-subjectivity and co-construction in career counselling practice and research are to have a methodological place, then the stories of the practitioner and the scientist also must be brought into the frame of critical inspection. It is suggested here, therefore, that enquiry into story as data, and by story as method, would offer another means by which to close the purported gap between practice and research. Thus, within this paper, I posit autoethnography as a qualitative method of reflexive enquiry for narrative research and practice that specifically addresses the stories of the scientist and the practitioner.

## **STORY AS DATA AND METHOD**

The narrative approach in psychology—promulgated by Polkinghorne (1988) and Sarbin (1986)—represents an ontological and epistemological stance generative of theory, research, and practice which comprehends the person as a social construction perpetually formed and reformed in and of socially mediated discourse, talk, text, and image (e.g., Barresi & Juckes, 1997; Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Bruner, 2004; Gergen & Davis, 1985; Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992; McAdams, 1993, 1996; Singer, 2004). For some psychological theorists, narrative may be wholly constitutive of personhood: “In the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives” (Bruner, 2004, p. 694) [original italics] or, as the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote over one century before, “however far man may extend himself with his knowledge, however objective he may appear to himself – ultimately he reaps nothing but his own biography” (Nietzsche, 1994, p. 238). The diversity in the definitions of narrative is acknowledged (Hoshmand, 2005), however, in this paper, and following Polkinghorne (1988), narrative and story are treated as equivalent concepts.

There are variations in narrative approaches to research in psychology (e.g., Hoshmand, 2005; Kirkman, 2002; Murray, 2003; B. Smith & Sparkes, 2006). Hoshmand proposed three types of research reporting that would be consistent with the tenets of narrative inquiry:

- (a) a descriptive report of a privately constructed self-account in its original narrated form;
- (b) a recounting of a dialogically generated narrative or set of narratives in a story form; and
- (c) a storied account of an experience constructed from interviews, written reports, observations, and artifacts. (p. 181)

Smith and Sparkes (2006) usefully outlined the narrative field of inquiry and differentiated analysis of narrative and narrative analysis. In their scheme, analysis of narrative entails inquiry into stories by a story analyst. In this case, the researcher takes story as data and analyses it as such. In conducting an analysis of narrative, the story analyst objectifies the story as any other form of qualitative data. On the other hand, narrative analysis involves a storyteller who inquires with and through the production of story. Thus, in narrative analysis, storying is the method which ultimately aims to produce a story pertaining to the research interest and objective. Using this heuristic, autoethnography as described in this space, is to be conceived of a form of narrative analysis.

## **AUTOETHNOGRAPHY**

Autoethnography is used in a variety of disciplines typically including anthropology, sociology, and education (Anderson, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Etherington, 2004; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Roth, 2005). The defining feature of autoethnography is that it entails the scientist or practitioner performing narrative analysis pertaining to himself or herself as intimately related to a particular phenomenon. Autoethnography entails writing about oneself as a researcher-practitioner, but it is not the same as autobiography in the literary sense. It is not simply the telling of a life—not that doing such would be simple. It is a specific form of critical enquiry that is embedded in theory and practice (i.e., practice as a researcher and/or career development practitioner).

### **Philosophical Basis**

With respect to outlining a philosophical grounding of autoethnography within the repertoire of psychology, Ponterotto's (2005) scheme of paradigm, ontology, epistemology, axiology, rhetorical structure, and method, is used here as a conceptual framework. Autoethnography can align with either the constructivism-interpretivism or critical-ideological paradigms. With respect to ontology, the user of autoethnography would assume "personal reality" to be a psychosocial construction, with varying emphasis upon internality, externality, and personal agency, across the constructivism and social constructionism divide (cf. Young & Collin, 2004). The critical-ideological user would likely extend the social constructionist stance to further emphasise the role of discourse and power relations in shaping a personal reality. Thus, the user of autoethnography may write his or her narrative analysis as personal "truth", but within this process and outcome there would be an attendant awareness and expression of the discursive milieu of oppressive or liberating influences. As for its epistemology, autoethnography goes to the notion of "lived experience", subjectivity, and meaning within relative contexts.. Users may or may not take autoethnography as a phenomenology (again reference is made to the distinction between constructivism and social constructionism). As for axiology, autoethnographers are avowedly transparent in the expression of their values and personal concerns, with critical-ideological adherents

acknowledging their ideological stance in writing out their experiences and transformative intentions.

The rhetorical structure of an autoethnographic narrative analysis may vary widely from the formal style of a scientific publication to literary texts, perhaps even poetics. Essentially there are few regulations on how to write out an autoethnographic narrative analysis, as it is the meaning of the story that is important, rather than conventions of scholarly production. Rhetoric and method are inextricably linked in autoethnography, because the method itself ultimately requires rhetorical expression in reporting. An autoethnographer may use a combination of archival data (e.g., memoirs, photographs), concurrent self-observation and recording (e.g., diary, audio-visual), and triangulation through other sources of data (e.g., interviews with individuals who could corroborate data or conclusions). Analysis of data would entail the production of a meaningful account. Rather than a self-absorbed rendering, an autoethnography should produce a narrative that is authentic and thus enable the reader to deeply grasp the experience and interpretation of this one interesting case.

Anderson (2006) differentiated between analytic autoethnography and evocative autoethnography, with the former representing a more traditional scientific approach (advocated by Anderson) and the latter representing the more free-form style (Ellis, 2000; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Anderson's analytic autoethnography would align with the postpositivist and constructivist-interpretivist paradigms in psychology, whereas evocative autoethnography would align with the critical-ideological paradigm. The analytic approach tends toward objective writing and analysis, whereas the evocative tends toward empathy and resonance within the reader. Both are valuable, however the user and reader should be aware of their differences. Doubtless, psychology would be more comfortable with Anderson's analytic autoethnography because of its emphasis upon formalised "scientific" rhetoric and method.

### **Indicators of Quality**

The user of autoethnography necessarily would follow the usual rigors of research in psychology. Morrow's (2005) framework for quality and trustworthiness of qualitative research is readily applicable to autoethnography used within either the constructivism-interpretivism or critical-ideological paradigms. In addition, Morrow's suggested guidelines for the reporting of qualitative research are equally appropriate for autoethnography should the author wish to direct the manuscript at a publication controlled by the formal editorial policies for psychological research—again highlighting the potential for rhetorical flexibility. As an ideal, the story produced by the process of autoethnographic narrative analysis should meld theory and the autobiographical reporting of experiences so as to:

- (a) be a faithful and comprehensive rendition of the author's experience (i.e., fairness, ontological authenticity, and meaningfulness);
- (b) transform the author through self-explication (i.e., educative authenticity and catalytic authenticity); and
- (c) inform the reader of an experience he or she may have never endured or would be unlikely to in the future, or of an experience he or she may have endured in the past or is likely to in the future, but has been unable to share the experience with his or her community of scholars and practitioners.

Thus the reader of autoethnography plays a crucial part in establishing its value as research. In reading an autobiographical account enriched with theory, the reader should likely construct lessons for his or her own sphere of practice (i.e., consequential validity and transgressive validity within the critical-ideological paradigm). Ellis and Bochner (Ellis,

2000; Ellis & Bochner, 2000) emphasised empathic resonance within the reader as an indicator of validity.

### **Limitations**

Having purported autoethnography's potential for rigor as a qualitative research method, its concomitant limitations should also be acknowledged. Naturally enough, autoethnographic reporting of common-place experiences would not necessarily capture the interest of the prospective readership of scientists and practitioners. However, an alternative experience of a common-place experience may actually have some potential value. The most significant limitation pertains to its epistemological status (again referring to Ponterotto (2005)), with respect to the relationship between the "the knower" (i.e., the participant) and the "would-be knower" (i.e., the researcher). Narrative knowing (Bruner, 1986) is in itself not an issue (cf. Bochner, 2001), however there are limits to self-knowledge (Wilson & Dunn, 2004) and self-report narratives (Polkinghorne, 2005). Nevertheless, the solution to the problem rests within the assumptions of the particular paradigm and adherence to the standards for quality set out by Morrow (2005). Indeed, the user and reader of autoethnography should at the outset accept the limitation that a single autoethnographic narrative analysis has no rightful purchase on generalisability; but it has the potential to act as a stimulus for profound understanding of a single case and, moreover, act as a stimulus to open new intellectual vistas for the reader through a uniquely personal meaning and empathy.

### **Research Applications**

A relatively common use for autoethnography is analysing a researcher's experience of participating in research. With respect to the method itself, studies have included the process of learning about autoethnographic research (Wall, 2006), analysing data written about oneself (Tenni, Smyth, & Boucher, 2003), performing autoethnography (Spry, 2001; Vickers, 2002), and supervising postgraduate students using the method (Ellis, 1999). Although psychology has a long tradition of self-observation, self-analysis, and introspection (Polkinghorne, 2005), autoethnography has not been established or legitimised within psychology as a research method. Nevertheless, there are some useful studies using autoethnography that have been published within the psychology literature. Within the health psychology field, for example, Smith (2004) used autoethnography to investigate the phenomena of eating behaviour and eating disorders. Within community psychology, Langhout (2006) used autoethnography to reflexively review her research and consider issues of race, class, and gender.

Within vocational psychology, McIlveen (2007) used autoethnography to explore his selection of theories for research and the development of a career counselling procedure. Over a six-month period of critical reflecting and writing, this author drew upon professional and personal experiences (extending back to adolescence), English literature, scientific literature, and music, all toward the end of generating a reflexive narrative that explicated a psychological case study of his research process and outcome. The results of this autoethnographic study suggested a nexus of theory-research-practice-person, each influential of the other, and argued that the discipline's knowledge base would be improved through application of the method for documenting innovation in theory, research, and practice.

### **POTENTIAL APPLICATION IN VOCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY**

Where are the scientist and practitioner in vocational psychology to be located—subjectively or objectively? On a broad level, Blustein and his colleagues (Blustein, 2006; Blustein, McWhirter, & Perry, 2005) called for vocational psychology to take on a moral and

ethical stance in research and practice, and touted emancipatory communitarianism (Prilleltensky, 1997) as a suitable approach. Blustein has also emphasised the notion of *critical consciousness* (cf. Freire, 1972)—that process of raising awareness of oppression so that the oppressed may name their experience and oppressors, and then concomitantly move against it. Essentially, Blustein is asking vocational psychology to address its attention at the disadvantaged and dispossessed of societies. This is a laudable aim, however, much work is needed to explicate how the development critical consciousness can or should be done for researchers and practitioners, and not just clients.

The training and supervision of researchers and practitioners naturally comes into play when considering the development of critical consciousness. Reflexivity is potentiated when situated within a theoretical framework that guides reflection and praxis and autoethnography formalises a reflexive attitude and processing into a research method. Reflexivity in research and practice offers more than a checking process; it is a process which in itself proffers new understandings and actions—transformation. Therefore, as a vehicle for reflexivity, autoethnography is one way to improve the rigor of the process of generating critical consciousness within researchers and practitioners.

Within the field of career counselling, consider the practical exercises developed by Watson (2006) and McMahan and Patton (2006) for engendering reflexivity in constructivist training and practice. For example, under the primary question, Watson’s exercise asks “What is Your Career Counselling Worldview?” and then lower-level questions ensue. Answering such questions may be useful at one level, but may attain a richer and more complex outcome if taken further into the grip of an autoethnographic narrative analysis of a scientist-practitioner in context of a specific setting and personal experience.

The potential of critical consciousness for vocational psychology could be improved if put to work through autoethnography in research and practice. What if Watson’s question became: Given my upper middle-class upbringing, under the love and care of married parents who invested in my education, security, and social position, and my current tenured position as a research academic in an established university, and my powerful and exclusive social networks, how could I genuinely come to understand the life of street urchins, and position my intention of making their lot in life better through critical consciousness and capacity development? A fictitious case may elucidate the question: I would dearly like to read an autoethnography on this matter to discover how well-to-do, well-intentioned Henry Higgins transcended himself to genuinely meet urchin flower-girl Eliza Doolittle (Shaw, 2003), to consider how I would deal with such a complex ethical and personal problem in the name of science and doing good. Of course, the researcher-practitioner in question could fall to traditional research methods and objectify “the other” with the usual colonial attitude inadvertently inherent to positivism. On the other hand, the researcher may seek to understand the complexities of the disparate yet legitimate worldviews that will inevitably come into confluence. So, through autoethnography, Blustein’s ideal psychology and Watson’s reflective questions would likely engender new vistas should they be delivered on the platform of a specific methodological framework that comprehensively demands reflexivity within researchers and practitioners—autoethnography is apropos.

## CONCLUSION

Within this paper I have provided an introduction to autoethnography or perhaps more specifically described as autoethnographic narrative analysis, to indicate autoethnography being subsumed under a broader methodological scheme of qualitative research. Space limitations necessarily prohibit the presentation of an autoethnographic narrative analysis, however there are emergent examples within the psychology literature (McIlveen, 2007; J. L.

Smith, 2004). I have done no more than suggest that autoethnography has potential for application as a methodological vehicle for reflexivity in research and practice in vocational psychology, and have focused critical consciousness as a site within which to consider its potential.

The method also offers a means to revisit the notion of empathy and revise methods of psychological science to be genuinely inclusive of the narrative which constitutes “personal reality”. To contemplate this assertion, consider the analogue form of English literature. English literature shines a beacon for introspection transcendent of the individual, revealing the author—the creator, and the reader—the re-creator, time and time again. Indeed, there are classics which express not only the author in his or her epoch, but tantalizingly open the reader to his or her own being in the world, and timelessly capture all the ethical frailties of being an ordinary human: lusty self-deception and greed, in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; hiding from oneself, in Graham Greene’s *A Burnt-out Case*; personal redemption, in George Eliot’s *Silas Marner*, and the terrifying and grotesque within all, in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Storying serves the author: it expresses a being in the world by extending his or her ideas into a discursive space in which they may or may not be received as intended, repeated, forgotten, or simply never heard, and thus darkened under historical oblivion, or perhaps re-read into the text of the future to be. Storying serves the reader: I read you, I hear you, I speak you, and thus I am here too. Perhaps story is the soul of *empathy*—genuine understanding, a shared humanity that reaches across, touches; and in feeling with the other, we become our own self—the human intertextuality of existence.

Of course none of the aforementioned literary examples is a surprising to practitioners of psychologies that are honest and genuine to their ontological and epistemological foundations and likewise critically introspective as to their compliance. Autoethnography is a methodological vehicle for a scientist and scientist-practitioner to bring himself or herself into critical view and to reveal a phenomenon with the intellectual objective of a shared disciplinary understanding and empathy. As a process of scientific reflexivity, autoethnography should be granted tentative credence and a probationary place within the methodological repertoire of a critically introspective science of vocational psychology—as being just another method amongst many.

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## **THEORY & PRACTICE**

*Question:* What are some of the key features of autoethnography?

*Answer:* Autoethnography entails some form of autobiographical storying; it serves to explicate a specific dimension of personal experience, in relation to the author’s membership of a specific group (e.g., demographic, cultural, professional), state-of-being (e.g., feeling ill or ecstatic), or event (e.g., career transition); and it is usually constructed in context of theory and practices, so as to formally contribute to a body of disciplinary knowledge.

*Question:* What is one potential training benefit of autoethnography?

*Answer:* Autoethnography enables the researcher and/or practitioner to construct an intimate and theoretically-grounded, critical understanding of the self or identity in relation to research and professional activities, and thus improves awareness of the researcher’s or practitioner’s influences and roles in their work with research participants or clients.

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