

Autoethnographic Methodology and its Applicability to Psychological Research and Practitioners

Abstract

Despite psychology's primary focus – understanding of human behaviour, there is a long tradition that excludes the voices of psychological practitioners from the content they investigate. In fact, publications in psychology that draw on reflexive methodologies are scant and not readily available or sought after. In this paper, I argue that autoethnographic methodology can contribute meaningfully to knowledge production in psychology. It is argued, that by virtue of its paradigmatic and methodological characteristics, autoethnographic research could allow psychological practitioners to reflect and share their lived experiences in the production of knowledge. These personal experiences, are unfortunately, not adequately captured, documented and shared. The transformation of psychological methodology has become a key feature in the decolonial project, that resonates with the current South African trajectory set in motion by students, calling for more contextualised and relevant knowledge systems. In this paper, I present the key features of autoethnographic methodology and argue for its relevance in psychological knowledge production. I also argue that through the implementation of autoethnographic methodology, the psychological practitioner, by virtue of lived experiences, will be able to generate knowledge that can be utilized both in theory development and therapeutic settings.

Introduction

One of the philosophical challenges that psychology has faced has been its endeavour to be considered a science. Because of this, objective research as conducted in the hard sciences was emphasized. This developed,

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despite the strong reliance on self-reflection, paramount to success as a mental health professional. The challenge to this is that in the pursuit of objectivity, practitioners' lived realities are seconded to that of the experiences and realities of others (McIlveen, 2008). Despite every person having a story to tell, we find that we intensify the focus on othering and our own personal events that have resulted in a variety of emotional experiences, triumphs and personal struggles have been overlooked (McIlveen, 2008; Ellis & Adams, 2014). Bakhtin's (1981) work on the dialogical self, encapsulates why this exclusion is worrisome: the act of authoring, he argued, invokes dialogue between the self and others in human inquiry. Maguire (2006: 2) indicates that "the concept of authoring views a self that is answerable not only to the social environment but also a self that is answerable for the authoring of its responses". Bakhtin (1981) argues, that the self as subject enables one to author the discursive existence and this notion, of the dialogical self then, resonating with the epistemological assumptions of a postmodern and interpretive paradigm, positions the researcher to push the boundaries of social scientific research. Bakhtin (1984: 287) states "I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself to another, through another, and with the help of another". The interconnectedness of self and other indicated through Bakhtin's (1981; 1984) work cannot be ignored and resonates with the core struggle that many qualitative researchers are faced with: the representation of "other" voices at the interface of one's own, lived experiences. As much as we attempt to shelter research from the researcher's "subjective bias", we have to consider the richness of understanding and the depth of meaning that we attach to the psychological process, which are lost.

In the study of psychology, I became astutely aware of the need to develop and maintain healthy boundaries between clients, students and research participants. Rightfully so, this comes with merit. Healthy boundaries enable a psychological practitioner to objectively analyse, understand and effectively intervene (Pope & Keith-Spiegel, 2008). After all, that is what psychology is predominantly about. Yet, these boundaries have been challenged and paradigmatically the inclusion of humanistic and existential methodologies, applied in research and therapy, have been made and the discipline has become more inclusive to the lived realities of those we study. However, as psychological practitioners, we each have a unique story to share – a set of events or even a single event that was so powerful, that it has influenced our behaviour in various ways. Yet these stories, these lived realities, these moments of hope, triumph and even failure, are left outside of the boundaries of psychological science. Yes, we are told to reflect and to keep reflexive journals of our research processes, but these do not effectively capture the intricate and detailed knowledge that could emanate through such investigations. Introspection and self-observation have long been viewed critically in psychology in terms of evaluating

its scientific rigor, reliability, and measurability which have been well-documented and researched (Ellis, 1991; McIlveen, 2008; Polkinghorne, 2005; Schultz & Shultz, 2012). In fact, we have as practitioners, silenced our own realities and experiences and focused primarily on our clients or participants. I problematise this, given that depth of meaning is lost through this age-old tradition in psychology. One can then ask, what exactly can we learn from our own experiences? More importantly we need to grapple with what the discipline of psychology can gain through the sharing of these lived realities of its practitioners. In fact, I argue that psychology cannot be decolonised unless we begin to include the experiences of its practitioners into the science and knowledge we produce (Wilson et al, 2015). Contextual realities do not only refer to the inclusion of the voices of our participants into research, but also the inclusion of the voices of psychological practitioners who have experiences with race, gender, class, loss, marriage, divorce, therapeutic challenges – the list is endless. I am not in particular referring to the many psychological blogs and reflection websites that have spawned in recent days, but I am more interested in how these experiences can be translated into psychological knowledge.

Some interpretive psychologists – whether they refer to themselves as autoethnographers or not – have embraced autoethnographic practices for some time. Some have composed autoethnographies and others have examined the use of personal narratives in research (Josselson, 1996; Lieblich, 1997). Josselson (1996; 2011) has composed personal stories about herself as a researcher, her feelings about the research process, and the issues that arise in doing research with others.

A powerful South African example is Nelson Mandela, while not autoethnographic per se, his book “A long walk to freedom” lends itself as an example of the power inherent to storytelling. The shared personal accounts of social, cultural and political contexts that defined Mandela’s life and experiences provide the reader with a deeper understanding not only of the writer, but the socio-cultural and political landscape those experiences were embedded within. The power of such narratives is needed in psychological science as we have tended to rely more on the voices of our participants than our own lived, experiences. Thando Mgqolazana (2009) who in writing of his experience as a *Xhosa* boy who went to the mountains to become a man, shares some of the psychological triumphs and challenges he faced when coming back. I acknowledge that Mgqolazana is not a psychologist, but his experience, captured in a book entitled **A man who is not a man**, richly describes the emotional experiences of a failed circumcision ceremony. Even though research on *ulwaluko* has been conducted (Diverti, 2015; Dlamini, 2020; Magodyo, 2013; Siswana, 2015), these are written in the third person and deeper meaning and psychological knowledge is lost.

In this paper, I argue for the applicability and relevance of autoethnographic methodology for psychological studies. In the construction of my argument, I arrange my discussion according to core ideas and themes derived through the reading of literature published on autoethnography. It is somewhat confusing that I acknowledge that autoethnography as a methodology has not been extensively applied in psychology, given that the primary focus of psychology is to analyse human behaviour. I deduce that, in our pursuit of psychological science, we have, along the historical and intellectual development of psychological theory, favoured the objective over and above the subjective voice. Even when we focus on the subjective experience of a phenomenon, we tend to exclude our own lived experiences in these explorations and the conclusions drawn are more often than not, directed at a population under study or our clients. In the section that follows, I draw on some of the key contributions that autoethnographic research has and could have made on psychological theory development and psychological practice. In doing so, the reader will be drawn towards the relevance and application of autoethnography.

Autoethnography: Ideas and core themes

For many qualitative researchers, there is a struggle to find the appropriate research design to research within the field of one's work (Dyson, 2007). Where most research ideas stem from personal experiences or the need to further understand something within the self, this closeness of the researcher to the research has been, for reasons of neutrality and objectivity, problematized. However, autoethnographic methodology is a genre of writing and research that connects the personal to the socio-cultural context that the research is embedded within. In doing so, autoethnographers are recommended to write in the first person and to reflect and include dialogue, emotion, and self-consciousness as relational and institutional stories affected by history, social structure and culture (Bochner, 2012; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnography can be simplistically understood as the interaction between the self (auto), ethnos (culture and social context) and graphy (the research process) (Halt, 2003). Consequently, the researcher will focus on their "experiences in a culture reflexively to look more deeply as self – other interactions" (Halt, 2003: 2). In doing so, autoethnography provides an expression of liberation from the dominant constraints found in various methodologies. Invariably, we must consider, that how researchers are expected to write, will influence what and how they write. However, autoethnography is not without its criticism. The blurring of the boundaries between what is considered fact and what is considered fiction, has been levelled against the methodology as autoethnographers are considered to write both about self and others, which goes against much of the academic research discourse (Foster et al, 2006). However, forms of autoethnographic reflections have found acceptance, through narrative and storytelling (Denshire, 2013), and can be of particular relevance to capturing oral traditions

– applicable to the South African context. Consider the fact that historical conditions have resulted in many South African communities experiencing challenges of limited resources, access to healthcare and even education (Delobelle, 2013). The ability to then capture these stories and experiences, will allow for the development of depth of meaning that is applicable within a social and cultural context, and will allow for the development of deeper understandings. As a self-narrative then, it allows for a critique of the situatedness of the self with others in social contexts. Ellis and Bochner (1996), and Goodall (1998), all autoethnographers, argue that one’s positionality and the self-reflexive critique assumed through the application of the methodology on personal experiences inspires readers to reflect critically upon their own life experience, their constructions of self, and their interactions with others within sociohistorical contexts. In fact, autoethnographic writing has a particular relevance for psychological research (McIlveen, 2008). Researchers who have themselves undergone such experiences have an opportunity to describe, analyse and report them by using themselves as research subjects. Extreme emotional experiences are infrequent, and most are involuntary (Berntsen, 2009), so data are sparse. In these particular cases, a researcher who is also a practitioner can adopt an experimental approach to autoethnography. That is, they can deliberately repeat an experience which creates powerful emotions (Buckley, 2015), specifically to study those emotions, using three themes that are core to autoethnographic work: 1) privileging of subjectivity, 2) temporality and 3) therapeutic benefits, discussed below.

Theme 1: Privileging of subjectivity

One of the key features of autoethnography, is the fore fronting of subjective experience in research (Van den Broucke, 2019). Custer (2014: 8) indicates that “students are encouraged to study a phenomenon from afar, failing to situate themselves in personal relationship to the study and failing to reveal how the study relates to them personally”. In doing so, science has created a binary between the self and the subject of research which consequently, rejects personal experience as valid (Byczkowska-Owczarek, 2014). The renewed focus on individuality allows for researchers to understand their own intimate relationships in relation to the research process and findings.

Theme 2: Temporality

Autoethnography focuses on the idea of time and space: “Time, as a linear procession of past, present and future increments of experience, undergoes a metamorphosis. It becomes a dance without boundaries” (Jones et al, 2013). Space includes all of the elements that an individual utilizes to construct their identity. “Those elements can be corporeal objects, for example, their body, a house, a loved one, et cetera; or non-corporeal manifestations, for example, beliefs, personality traits, ideas, et cetera.”

(Custer, 2014: 2). Indicative from this, is that the autoethnographic researcher would allow themselves to write not only about the positive psychological and emotional well-being experiences that have defined us; the writer would also be allowed the freedom to enter writing about personal accounts and experiences that were traumatic, debilitating and even, difficult to recall. Such reflexive research, which is usually explored through dialogue with the “other” (the research participant), allows the researcher to more deeply understand and engage with the psychological complexities under investigation (McIlveen, 2008; Tilley-Lubbs, 2016). Although such writing, may open the writer to feelings of vulnerability – this is encouraged in autoethnographic methodology (Tilley-Lubbs, 2016).

Such a positioning entails that researchers have considered their power and privilege as they enter communities and conduct research, and by engaging with local contexts through a relational approach, would empower and foster more socially just and inclusive projects.

Theme 3: Therapeutic benefits

The therapeutic benefits that stem from autoethnographic writing can be understood twofold: firstly, it allows the therapist to assume the role of a researcher of their own lives in the processing of life events and experiences (Custer, 2014; Mendez, 2013). As indicated above, space and time shift and change for the writer. For example, a traumatic car accident that occurred four years ago, would be understood relatively differently from an accident that occurred a few days ago. However, we tend not to critically revisit these experiences and as such, we may not be consciously aware of the psychological, emotional and behavioural dispositions we have come to assume (Griffin & Griffin, 2019). The writing itself, allows the writer to revisit such experience and document it as a narrative, as a story that has unfolded with particular psychological implications. Even though this methodology may not appeal to many psychological practitioners, the ability to critically reflect on personal experience *and* to share such accounts has benefits to understading the self and its constructions. These lived experiences from the perspective of a psychological practitioner presents a unique opportunity to “I-witness” our own reality constructions. Secondly, it provides the ability to share such vulnerabilities through autoethnographic writing, from autoethnographic writers, to provide the space for other psychologists, researchers, or interested individuals to gain insight to a variety of lived experiences that would have been otherwise, lost (Mendez, 2013). By privileging subjectivity – the writer foregrounds personal experience and ways of coping, dealing with and even resolving psychological experiences which could have monumental benefit to theory development, therapeutic practice and training. Essentially, this methodology provides a psychologist like me, the opportunity to reflect on my own lived experiences through theory. In so doing, I would

be able to produce insights to phenomenon that is unique, given my psychological training and theoretical knowledge – that for the most part, is applied only in pursuit of understanding our clients.

Autoethnography: A transformative methodology for psychology?

In the sections above, I highlighted some of the core themes and ideas that characterize autoethnographic research. In light of its epistemological focus, I am left to wonder about its potential applicability and benefit to psychology. In particular, I am grappling with the notion of autoethnography as a transformative methodology for psychology. As an approach, which vests emphasis on the subjective reality of the researcher, it provides us with a methodological approach that allows one to contextualise the production of knowledge (Kracen & Baird, 2017). Although the literature on autoethnography refers to ‘transformative’ as occurring for “the individual who is courageous enough to reveal him or herself to the world and readily embarks on a fantastic journey”; it also “occurs for those that participate in the process of introspection, reflexivity, and contemplation with the autoethnographer, for example, the readership, audience or other researchers” (Custer, 2014: 11). By virtue of its focus, the methodology would allow for the generation of psychological knowledge that speaks to lived psychological and emotional moments of psychologists whose voices have for the most part of the history of psychological science, been excluded in the development of theory. In doing so, the researcher (or psychologist) presents the opportunity to produce knowledge – not based only on scientific principles linked to the analysis of research participants, but rather an integration of self and science – located within a particular social, cultural and political context. Sell-Smith and Lax (2013: 2) indicate that “the combination of quantitative, constructivist and autoethnographic perspectives could potentially add a new layer of depth and richness to data that originally seemed flat and sparse after statistical analysis alone”. With such an embodied methodological praxis being positioned by autoethnography, for its personal, professional or even political emancipatory potential, such an approach to knowledge production may create the condition for mental health advocacy from within the discipline, from psychological practitioners who have lived and rich experiences to share. These experiences coupled with the psychological practitioners’ understanding of human behaviour could potentially produce more depth to the theory and practice of psychology.

The study of and examination of one’s self, for many researchers and psychologists (Kracen & Baird, 2017), is a foreign notion, making way for the investigation of phenomenon, through case studies, sampling and even theoretical hunches. Ellis and Bochner (2000: 734) state that “by not insisting on some sort of personal accountability, our academic publications reinforce third-person, passive voice as the standard, which

gives more weight to abstract and categorical knowledge than to direct testimony of personal narrative and the first person voice”.

The use of the first person voice, does present an element of risk as it exposes feelings, beliefs and attitudes (Dyson, 2007; Gullian, 2016). However, as indicated by Denshire (2013: 5), “there are so many accounts of life that have been enabled by autoethnography” that “without these intimate and detailed evocations of life and professional practice, our knowledge of those worlds would be severely damaged”. The location of writing within both a social and cultural context is an expectation of autoethnographic methodology, as it limits the bias inherent to writing about oneself (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Conclusion

In this paper, I explored autoethnography as a methodology that could have application and relevance to psychological theory development and psychological practice. The paper positions and argues for self-reflexive accounts to be foregrounded in research studies in psychology. These reflexive accounts are invaluable to the contribution of a deeper understanding of the concept of the self and its relation to the client, who, currently is centralised in psychological theory and analysis. Autoethnographic methodology is argued as having the potential to be a transformative methodology to psychology, in that it may provide psychologists with a methodological framework to objectively reflect on, analyse and understand subjective experiences.

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