Autoethnography in Advanced Research

- Today’s lecture will provide an overview of autoethnographic research methods
- Review several autoethnographic scholarly texts
- Explain both the benefits and potential risks of this methodology
What is Autoethnography?

- What do we mean when we say “autoethnography?”
What is Autoethnography?

- Autoethnography is a form of qualitative research.
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- Autoethnography is a form of qualitative research
- An author’s first-person narration is the dominant lens through which research is conducted
- Self-reflection is used alongside data/evidence to explore a hypothesis or research question
What is Autoethnography?

- Autoethnography had been used in different research fields from the 1970s onward
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- Carolyn Ellis: prominent Communications scholar
- Ellis’s work in the 2000’s provides a streamlined definition of this methodology
What is Autoethnography?

Autoethnography is “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (p. 273)

What is Autoethnography?

- Autoethnography has a few underlying goals
What is Autoethnography?

- First: examine how cultural circumstances fundamentally impact the formulation and application of abstract ideas in real-world situations
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- Second: acknowledge the influence of the author when conducting advanced research
What is Autoethnography?

- These goals push back against some assumptions regarding research
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- We often strive for objectivity in our research

- We want our research to be transferable, so we try to limit the impact of external variables and our own influence as an author
What is Autoethnography?

- Autoethnography does not disregard objectivity
What is Autoethnography?

- Autoethnography does not disregard objectivity.
- Autoethnography demonstrates how objective principles are shaped by subjective, culturally-informed circumstances.
- Help us anticipate how to adapt theoretical frameworks to real-world scenarios.
What is Autoethnography?

- Let’s look at a keystone autoethnographic text to further unpack the subjective/objective relationship.
What is Autoethnography?

  
- Gilyard narrates personal experiences of being an African-American, first-generation college student
  
- Analyzes the tension and fissures between his home life and academic life
What is Autoethnography?

- Gilyard uses personal experiences to explore the concept of “bidialectalism” (code-switching between different dialects depending on the situation)
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- Gilyard uses personal experiences to explore the concept of “bidialectalism” (code-switching between different dialects depending on the situation)

- Instead of studying this phenomenon from afar, Gilyard explains how this concept impacted his daily life and education
What is Autoethnography?

- Previous research focused on first-gen and marginal/minority students within educational spaces
- Gilyard’s research highlights the personal experiences that first-gen and marginal/minority students bring with them into the classroom
What is Autoethnography?

- Gilyard demonstrates how theoretical frameworks adapt (or even fail to adapt) to real-world situations
What is Autoethnography?

- Gilyard demonstrates how theoretical frameworks adapt (or even fail to adapt) to real-world situations.
- Also demonstrates how cultural circumstances can provide valuable insight into key ideas (cultural circumstances are not just obstacles to overcome).
Using Autoethnography in Your Work

- How can we use autoethnography?
How can we use autoethnography?

Many of us won’t produce full-length autoethnographic research.

However, research that does not label itself as autoethnography still includes some autoethnographic moments.
Some instances of using autoethnography might include...
Using Autoethnography in Your Work

- Acknowledging material limitations or institutional restrictions
Using Autoethnography in Your Work

- Acknowledging material limitations or institutional restrictions
- Clarifying how personal experiences shaped the rationale used when designing an experiment or testing a hypothesis
Using Autoethnography in Your Work

- Acknowledging material limitations or institutional restrictions
- Clarifying how personal experiences shaped the rationale used when designing an experiment or testing a hypothesis
- Explaining your own role in gathering data (discussing how you trained interviewers or interacted with interviewees)
Using Autoethnography in Your Work

- Example: my recent article discussed using “Minecraft” in professional and technical writing classes
Using Autoethnography in Your Work

- Example: my recent article discussed using “Minecraft” in professional and technical writing classes
- Methods section discussed why I was interested in using Minecraft as a teaching tool
- Played the game to keep in touch with friends in grad school. Also noticed growing Minecraft YouTube community
Most of the article was written as a traditional academic publication.

Moments of autoethnography allowed me to explain the cultural value and pedagogical value of Minecraft.
Using Autoethnography in Your Work

- Most of the article was written as a traditional academic publication
- Moments of autoethnography allowed me to explain the cultural value and pedagogical value of Minecraft
- Personal experiences were the initial point-of-access into larger conversations surrounding Minecraft’s pedagogical merit
Benefits and Drawbacks

- As with any methodology, autoethnography has both benefits and potential drawbacks
- Quickly discuss the advantages and disadvantages of this method
Benefits and Drawbacks

- Autoethnography excels at analyzing the influence of institutional structures and/or cultural circumstances
Benefits and Drawbacks

- Autoethnography excels at analyzing the influence of institutional structures and/or cultural circumstances.
- Help us see how external variables can create a gap between theory and practice.
- The hope is that we can modify procedures and practices to sync up with actual experiences.
Benefits and Drawbacks

- The main strength of auto-ethnography is also its main weakness
Benefits and Drawbacks

- Autoethnography is most often used in single case studies
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- Case studies are good for “stress testing” theoretical frameworks

- Case studies are not good for extracting long-form patterns across large-scale datasets
Benefits and Drawbacks

- The highly-individualized, self-reflective nature of autoethnography can make it difficult to transfer key lessons to new contexts
Benefits and Drawbacks

- There is also the potential bias of reviewers
- Some might criticize autoethnography as being critically unsubstantial compared to other methodologies
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- Some might criticize autoethnography as being critically unsubstantial compared to other methodologies
- Common critique: how do we peer-review another human’s personal experiences?
Benefits and Drawbacks

- I have been a reviewer for manuscripts that include autoethnographic elements

- My approach is to ask the following question:

- Does the inclusion of first-person, personal experiences add new ideas to on-going scholarly conversations?
Conclusion

- Autoethnography is a tool just like any other method or theoretical framework
- We should evaluate its merit based on its ability to identify new outlets for further research
- Also evaluate its ability to help us examine potential gaps in previous research
Conclusion

- Please consult the ORS Lab website for pre-recorded webinars and worksheets that discuss different writing strategies.
- Resources and webinars dedicated to different research methods (qualitative, quantitative, and AI-assisted).
- Consultants available to discuss best practices for different research methodologies.