Autoethnographic Methods for Leadership Research

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The first article in ILA’s “Method Moments” series about leadership research explored the issue of rigorous and relevant leadership research, encouraging ILA members to engage in leadership research to advance knowledge about leadership. Rebecca J. Reichard, Scott J. Pine, and David M. Rosch argued “Rigorous and relevant scholarship is important to ultimately have a positive impact on society through narrowing the research-practice gap in the area of leadership and leader development” (2014, p.4). We totally agree, and suggest that autoethnographic methods are appropriate towards accomplishing this goal. Below, we provide a brief outline of autoethnographic methods, summarized from our recent book Collaborative Autoethnography (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013) and other recent publications.

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that utilizes an individual’s own life as the starting point for research. The researcher becomes both the research data source as well as the instrument of research. Chang (2008) defines autoethnography as “a qualitative research method that utilizes ethnographic methods to bring cultural interpretation to the autobiographical data of researchers with the intent of understanding self and its connection to others” (p. 36). Carolyn Ellis, who is the grandmother of autoethnography due to her expansive solo and collaborative work, describes it thus: “It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness…Back and forth autoethnographers gaze: First they look through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretation” (Ellis, 2004 p. 37).

Some autoethnographers, like Ellis, advocate for an evocative approach to autoethnography where story telling is simultaneously the method and the analysis. Though we appreciate evocative autoethnography, the approach to which we are aligned is more analytical (Anderson, 2006; Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010; Chang et al., 2013). Collaborative autoethnography (CAE) takes autoethnography into a communal space of two or more collaborators. Moreover, CAE is more than sharing personal story telling; rather, it also involves critical analyses of those stories in order to provide insight into sociocultural phenomenon such as leadership experience in particular contexts and situations. For example, one of our most recently published articles focuses on telling and analyzing our stories related to being immigrant women of color exercising leadership in predominantly white institutions (Hernandez, Ngunjiri, & Chang, 2014).

In choosing to apply methodological rigor and critical analysis to the study, and to make our stories public, we have chosen to give voice to people like us who lead in marginal spaces, illuminate such experiences, and generate scholarly conversations and research efforts along these lines. Hence, the intent of CAE is not generalizability, but in keeping with the tradition of qualitative inquiry, it is to provide thick and rich descriptions of situated experiences, and in so doing, to advance understanding about the phenomena — in this case, the experiences of women as leaders in higher education. The themes that emerged from our collaborative autoethnographic study contribute towards advancing knowledge, towards building theory. “The central navigational strategy is the unique multifocal lens we posses as outsiders within the U.S. academy. It is the part of our identity that we guard most aggressively. From this critical standpoint, we discern how best to reconfigure out identities and engage in tempered radicalism as acts of resistance against system that seek to marginalize us…” (Hernandez et al., 2014, p. 7).

So how then does one go about doing a CAE study? In Collaborative Autoethnography (Chang et al., 2013), we provide exhaustive steps and processes for undertaking a collective autoethnographic project, where two or more researchers combine their self-data in order to narrate and explore a particular experience, identity, or phenomena. Briefly, the steps can be summarized as choosing a team and a topic, data collection and analysis, and meaning-making and writing.

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Choosing a Team and a Topic: Teams may begin by collectivizing around a common topic, or determining a topic and then inviting team members to join. Our approach, which resulted in the article in the International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, involved coming together as people who shared a set of common identities, and designing the study to explore those identities, as people who, at the time, were working in the same institution. Specifically, we came together when Heewon was facilitating a learning community after the publication of her Autoethnography as Method (2008). Realizing our shared identities as immigrant women who have had to develop a racial identity in the U.S., we decided to use that as the starting point for our collective research. Geist-Martin et al. (2010) is an example of the other approach which begins with proposing a topic and then inviting participants. Patricia Geist-Martin was interested in the topic of mothering and sent out a call for participants to explore the topic together for a conference. After the conference, the co-researchers then published an article exploring their collaborative autoethnography process in a special issue of the Journal of Research Practice, which we co-edited.

Data Collection and Analysis: After forming a team and determining the topic of study, the researchers then need to choose the kinds of data to be collected in order to respond to their central research question. These can include recollecting memory data, collecting photographs and other archival documents, interviewing each other, etc. In Autoethnography as Method (Chang, 2008) and Collaborative Autoethnography (Chang et al., 2013), we provide exhaustive how-to instruction for this step. Additionally, the team needs to determine the data collection approach for the study. Will it be a sequential approach, where researchers post their data in turn, or a concurrent approach, where all researchers submit their self-data into the pool simultaneously?

For example, in our recent article, we started by asking one research question around experiences that illustrated our recognition of our gender identities. We first wrote about it independently, collected the stories and reviewed them, and then met for a focused group discussion to engage in meaning making and determine further questions. We used those subsequent research questions to collect self-data, and then met again for a focused group discussion to make meaning of that data. This iterative process went on until we felt that we had exhausted data collection to explore the overall research question. As we were collecting data, it occurred to us that it would be beneficial to outline these steps for others to follow since we found ourselves building the bridge as we walked on it. That is how the book was born, to enable researchers to take advantage of collaborative autoethnography in their own studies.

Meaning-Making and Writing: In qualitative research, data collection and analysis go hand in hand, iteratively. However, the meaning making that takes place along with data collection is merely preliminary. Further, more focused meaning making should take place after the data collection iterations are completed. In this phase, researchers can make meaning of the data individually then bring their codes and themes together for communal negotiation — that is, individual and collective meaning making — in order to exploit the power of doing research collectively. Meaning making is further enhanced by having a team of researchers who bring different strengths and different disciplinary and theoretical backgrounds to the study — providing theoretical triangulation that increases the rigor of the study. The team can agree on whether they should all be co-authors of the final product (see for example, Lapadat et al., 2010), or whether only a sub-section of the team will co-author the final, publishable product (see for example, Chang, Longman, & Franco, 2014).

Rigor and Relevance

As collaborative autoethnographic methods continue to explode in relevance and usage by scholars from various disciplines, it is imperative that researchers utilize tried and tested approaches to assure rigor. In our own work, we stress process, the salience of scholarly significance of CAE projects, transparency, as well as three forms of triangulation — data triangulation, theoretical triangulation and analyst triangulation — which all help to enhance rigor by providing multiple perspectives (Chang et al., 2014; Chang et al., 2013). Further, we stress the need for ethics and protecting not only ourselves, but also those implicated in our self-stories (Hernandez & Ngunjiri, 2013), and we seek to align our work with the standards of our respective fields.

The more people involved in the data collection and analysis, the more likely a variety of perspectives are brought to the study through which researchers can examine their intersubjectivity and enhance rigor. For example, Chang et al. (2014) involved data from 14 participants. These participants shared their varied perspectives at the

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data collection stage and probed each other with challenging questions during data analysis and interpretation, which often shattered presumptions of fellow teammates. In addition, CAE studies encourage researchers to collect a variety of data, instead of relying only on one type of data, typically memory data. More “subjective” data such as memory and reflective data can be triangulated with more “objective” or physical data such as official documents or published materials to check accuracy, credibility, and transferability of data analysis.

Reichard et al. (2014) further argued that rigor and relevance must go hand in hand: “Rigorous scholarship is needed, but without relevance, our research misses the target” (p. 5). CAE methods provide leadership research with contextual relevance. Drawing from the ethnographic tradition of research, CAE places players within their socio-cultural contexts. For organizational leaders, this means a leadership and organizational context within which researchers interrogate, analyze, and understand their leadership experiences. Considering the inevitable interactivity between leaders’ experiences and their environments, CAE offers richer explanations about leaders’ experiences than other research methods that often isolate their experiences from their contexts, thus ensuring that CAE research is always contextually relevant.

Applications of Autoethnographic Approaches

Autoethnographic methods, whether solo or in collaboration, offer leadership scholars critical, transformative, and contextually relevant methods for studying leadership (Chang, 2013). In a solo format, the researcher centers his/her investigation on his/her unique leadership-related topics and experiences. A collaborative format provides a group of researchers with rich data sources from their multiple stories and lived experiences from which to construct their shared meaning and thus contribute to leadership knowledge and understanding. In our book Collaborative Autoethnography, you will find descriptions of various applications of CAE practice for use in the classroom, building community, professional development, and as a tool for activism.

In the classroom, for example, CAE can be utilized for teaching students how to do qualitative research by using their own leadership experiences as sources of data and going through the entire process of building teams; determining topics; collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data; and writing it up as a final project or even for presentation in conferences. Heewon has done that with Organizational Leadership PhD students at Eastern University, who often subsequently present their research at ILA conferences. Further, some of those projects from Heewon’s qualitative research classes grow into dissertation topics for some of the students; in which case, the class CAE project serves as a pilot study for later dissertation work.

CAE can be utilized in building communities of solidarity through self-exploration and collective discovery, a topic well illustrated in the work of Lapadat and her students (Lapadat et al., 2010) as well as Toyosaki et al. (2009). This process of building communities of solidarity is particularly applicable to using research as activism, where co-researchers engage in collective action and agency over a particular social or institutional issue. The book also explores using CAE as a tool for critical work, as it empowers researcher-participants to find and articulate their individual and collective voice. This is particularly useful in giving voice to marginalized populations, enabling participants to articulate their leadership agency and capacity for action. Finally, we argue that CAE can be utilized in professional development practice, such as faculty development programs (that is how our own began), or leadership development in organizations.

Conclusions and Further Reading

Space does not allow us to go into a lot of details about each of these applications of CAE approaches, so allow us to commend our book to you for further exploration. In addition, we commend the works of autoethnography gurus Arthur Bochner and Carolyn Ellis to you — they offer a vast array of autoethnographic texts, both methodological ones and autoethnographies of their own lives. Tessa Muncey (2010) has also written an insightful text Creating Autoethnographies that is easy to follow. The journals that publish autoethnography work include Qualitative Inquiry, and Cultural Studies<=>Critical Methodologies, both by Sage.

Autoethnographic methods remain marginalized in leadership studies, we commend them to you to enhance your repertoire of appropriate research methods to use for research, teaching, building communities of practice, and engaging in activism towards leadership for social justice in your context. “CAE has the potential to be used in diverse ways, with many different audiences,
and can therefore generate co-created knowledge that is actionable, personally meaningful, and empowering for all involved” (Chang et al., 2013, p. 149). We welcome your questions and are available to offer advice as appropriate.

References


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