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Series Foreword

Qualitative approaches have become accepted and indeed embraced as empirical methods within the social sciences, as scholars have realized that many of the phenomena in which we are interested are complex and require deep inner reflection and equally penetrating examination. Quantitative approaches often cannot capture such phenomena well through their standard methods (e.g., self-report measures), so qualitative designs using interviews and other in-depth data-gathering procedures offer exciting, nimble, and useful research approaches.

Indeed, the number and variety of qualitative approaches that have been developed is remarkable. We remember Bill Stiles saying (quoting Chairman Mao) at one meeting about methods, "Let a hundred flowers bloom," indicating that there are many appropriate methods for addressing research questions. In this series, we celebrate this diversity (hence, the cover design of flowers).

The question for many of us, though, has been how to decide among approaches and how to learn the different methods. Many prior descriptions of the various qualitative methods have not provided clear enough descriptions of the methods, making it difficult for novice researchers to learn how to use them. Thus, those interested in learning about and pursuing qualitative research need crisp and thorough descriptions of these approaches, with lots of examples to illustrate the method so that readers can grasp how to use the methods.

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The purpose of this series of books, then, is to present a range of different qualitative approaches that seemed most exciting and illustrative of the range of methods appropriate for social science research. We asked leading experts in qualitative methods to contribute to the series, and we were delighted that they accepted our invitation. Through this series, readers have the opportunity to learn qualitative research methods from those who developed the methods and/or who have been using them successfully for years.

We asked the authors of each book to provide context for the method, including a rationale, situating the method within the qualitative tradition, describing the method's philosophical and epistemological background, and noting the key features of the method. We then asked them to describe in detail the steps of the method, including the research team, sampling, biases and expectations, data collection, data analysis, and variations on the method. We also asked authors to provide tips for the research process and for writing a manuscript emerging from a study that used the method. Finally, we asked authors to reflect on the methodological integrity of the approach, along with the benefits and limitations of the particular method.

This series of books can be used in several different ways. Instructors teaching courses in qualitative research could use the whole series, presenting one method at a time as they expose students to a range of qualitative methods. Alternatively, instructors could choose to focus on just a few approaches, as depicted in specific books, supplementing the books with examples from studies that have been published using the approaches, and providing experiential exercises to help students get started using the approaches.

In this book, Christopher N. Poulos guides readers through the fundamentals of autoethnography. Autoethnography involves a researcher writing about a topic of great personal relevance (e.g., family secrets), situating their experiences within the social context. Autoethnography thus requires deep reflection on both one's unique experiences and the universal within oneself. Dr. Poulos presents an exciting, innovative method that can be used to examine topics that are difficult to understand using more traditional quantitative and qualitative methods.

—Clara E. Hill and Sarah Knox

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1 CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

When you first heard about autoethnography, you were skeptical. You are not alone. I have been reading and writing about autoethnography for over 25 years now, but for at least the first 5 years, I was skeptical. Then one day, I was hooked. Still, you might find yourself asking, "How could a researcher write about direct experience of the world, write reflectively, write from memory, write about social or cultural phenomena from a singular 'first-person' perspective, and call that research?" Can I really write about myself? Does that count?

But you keep hearing about it and wondering, and you have noticed that this way of writing qualitative research has spread widely, that this approach to social science research has caught on. There is even a 736-page *Handbook of Autoethnography* (Jones et al., 2013). So, you have become cautiously (or perhaps skeptically, optimistically, or enthusiastically) curious. To be sure, autoethnography is different than other kinds of qualitative research with which you may be familiar. Now you have picked up this book. You may even want to try your hand at this approach. My goal is to show you that autoethnography is a worthy endeavor. My hope is that this book will answer your questions about how to go about it and help you get started.

https://doi.org/10.1037/0000222-001
Essentials of Autoethnography, by C. N. Poulos
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So, what is this thing we call "autoethnography?" In this volume, I trace the history, foundations, applications, aspirations, practices, agreements, and divergences among qualitative researchers who write about autoethnography. In Chapter 1, I set up the historical, contextual, and philosophical foundations for the method. In later chapters, I offer a guide to doing autoethnography.

WHAT IS AUTOETHNOGRAPHY?

Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of academic writing that draws on and analyzes or interprets the lived experience of the author and connects researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues. According to Adams et al. (2015),

> autoethnography is a qualitative research method that: 1) uses a researcher's personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences; 2) acknowledges and values a researcher's relationships with others; 3) uses deep and careful self-reflection—typically referred to as "reflexivity"—to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political; 4) Shows people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles; 5) balances intellectual and methodological rigor, emotion, and creativity; and 6) strives for social justice and to make life better. (p. 2)

Autoethnography—sometimes rendered as auto/ethnography or (auto) ethnography (Greek roots: *autós* = self + *ethnos* = people + *graphia* = writing)—arose out of field ethnography as a way to include the researcher's experiences and insights more directly into accounts of the scene being studied. Practitioners of autoethnography actively use writing about the self in social and cultural contexts to illuminate the contours of human social–cultural life practices. Like autobiography, memoir, and creative nonfiction, autoethnography actively and reflexively uses writing as an integral part of research and as a primary method of inquiry. In other words, autoethnographers invoke and use the discovery available in the writing process, using writing as a research practice that drives inquiry rather than as a "mopping up" activity after research is conducted (Richardson, 2005).

Grounded in active self-reflexivity, which "refers to the careful consideration of the ways in which researchers' past experiences, points of view, and roles impact these same researchers' interactions with, and interpretations of, the research scene" (Tracy, 2020, p. 2), autoethnography is a method that attempts to recenter the researcher's experience as vital in and to the research process. Autoethnography, simply put, is an observational, participatory, and

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reflexive research method that uses writing about the self in contact with others to illuminate the many layers of human social, emotional, theoretical, political, and cultural praxis (i.e., action, performance, accomplishment). In other words, autoethnography is an observational data-driven phenomenological method of narrative research and writing that aims to offer tales of human social and cultural life that are compelling, striking, and evocative (showing or bringing forth strong images, memories, or feelings).

Autoethnography involves the writer or researcher in crafting creative narratives shaped out of a writer's personal experiences within a culture and addressed to varied (mostly academic) audiences. Autoethnography is not identical to memoir, autobiography, or fiction—though good writers of autoethnography use some of the methods of the memoirist, autobiographer, and novelist (e.g., description, setting and plot development, pacing, rhythm, character development, dialogue, action) to advance the story.

Autoethnographers often rely on various methods of data gathering and research tools common to other forms of qualitative social research, including participant observation, interviews, conversational engagement, focus groups, narrative analysis, artifact analysis, archival research, journaling, field notes, thematic analysis, description, context, interpretation, and storytelling. They then craft compelling narratives that attempt to evoke and capture the lived experiences of the researcher (and coparticipants, as applicable) in relation to the phenomena under study. Most autoethnographers take a multipronged, layered, hybrid approach—drawing on various methodological tools common in qualitative inquiry—as they research social phenomena and craft compelling narratives about human social or cultural phenomena.

For example, in my book, *Accidental Ethnography: An Inquiry Into Family Secrecy* (Poulos, 2019), I take up an autoethnographic study of an important communication phenomenon in families by studying secrecy from a symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective (Blumer, 1931/1969; Cooley, 1909/1998; Goffman, 1959, 1963, 1967; Mead, 1934). I raised these general questions: "What are secrets? Why do we have them? What purposes do they serve?" (Poulos, 2019, p. 127). To get at these questions, I interrogated and integrated my personal experience; the literature on secrets and secrecy; the narratives and experiences of others as they connect with, talk about, and practice secrecy; and the general cultural attitudes that drive the urge toward secrecy—all juxtaposed to a prevailing U.S. cultural ideology that generally at least pretends to value openness and directness in communication (Philipsen, 1992). The resulting narrative draws on years of participant observation in a highly secretive family, along with interviews, artifact analysis, and narrative inquiry. The aim, in the end, is to describe, evoke, interpret, and critique secrecy as a family communication practice.

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Similarly, in *Sweetwater: Black Women and Narratives of Resilience*, Boylorn (2012) wrote about the lifeworld struggles of Black women growing up poor in the rural South by weaving her life story into the multifaceted narratives of Black women of varying social statuses in her community. With her writing informed by close participant observation, interviews, participant narratives, and conversations, Boylorn developed a richly nuanced understanding of the resilience of Black women in her community of origin, offering an analysis grounded in Black feminist theory, critical theory, and narrative communication theory.

Boylorn's (2012) approach to autoethnography also highlights a rapidly growing interest in autoethnographic work that addresses identity politics. What she called "blackgirl feminist autoethnography" works from a particular identity standpoint to critique social structures that oppress Black women. Similarly, Adams (2011) wrote his story of coming out of the "closet," and Dunn (2018) wrote about lived experiences and representations of marginalized "White trash" (people of lower socioeconomic status) from her perspective as a member of that group. In recent years, autoethnographies focusing on the experiences of oppressed or marginalized cultural groups or individuals trying to make their way in the world have begun to emerge rapidly. Many of these texts are written as critical autoethnographies (see Chapter 6).

In sum, autoethnography is a qualitative research method used by researchers interested in narrative descriptions and evocations of the richly textured nature of lived experience. Autoethnographers seek to craft compelling tales that shed light on particular phenomena encountered in the research scene.

HISTORY

Beginning in the middle of the 19th century, anthropologists struck out into the world to study and write about "exotic" or "primitive" cultures. They pioneered the practice of *ethnography*—observing, writing about, and systematically analyzing people and their cultural practices—in the hope of constructing a systematic account or interpretation of culture that deepens understanding of the subject's lifeworld. Early ethnographers offered naturalistic "realist tales" (Van Maanen, 1988) that emphasized objectivity. These pioneers recognized and wrestled with questions of how to render textual accounts that would provide clear, accurate, rich descriptions of cultural practices of others.

The common approach among early ethnographers was to observe events from the perspective of an outsider looking in on the scene. But the project of becoming a "fly on the wall" was destined for problems because it quickly

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became clear that the locals were cognizant of—and adapting to—the presence of these "outsiders." Gradually, the idea of writing about the researcher's experience in situ (in position, as part of the scene) emerged as serious questions arose about the possibility and legitimacy of offering purely objective accounts of cultural practices, traditions, symbols, meanings, premises, rituals, rules, and other social engagements. After all, qualitative researchers are human actors—inexorably impacted and influenced by their responses to unfolding events and their cultural and historical premises, rules, and backgrounds—and yet they were expected somehow to be neutral or objective "scientific" observers. Many began keeping personal journals that were kept distinct from their research reports but were, on occasion, published as personal monographs or memoirs (Geertz, 1973; Lévi-Strauss, 1963; Malinowski, 1967).

As ethnographic research, pioneered by anthropologists, caught on and spread to sociology (and later communication studies and many other fields), practitioners of the method began to play around with what philosopher Gilbert Ryle (1949/1990) called *thick description*—a way of observing and describing human action and interaction that dug beneath the surface-level observation of human actors' behaviors (or thin description) and inserted commentary on, context for, and interpretation of these behaviors into the text. The idea was to delve into the deeper contours of meaning and context that animate that action or behavior. Of course, examining meaning making is a tricky and contingent business. In thick description, the author attempts to evoke a cultural scene vividly, in detail, and with care.

When the anthropologist Clifford Geertz visited Bali to study the cultural phenomenon of cockfighting, he found himself swept up in events in the village. He was clearly no "fly on the wall," dispassionately observing events unfolding around him. His account, published as an essay titled "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" (Geertz, 1973), begins with a direct acknowledgment of how his presence was not only noticed by the islanders but also actually shaped how he could observe and participate in village life and what he was privy to. He immediately chronicled how he felt as an actively ignored participant–observer:

> We were intruders, professional ones, and the villagers dealt with us as Balinese seem always to deal with people not part of their life who yet press themselves upon them: as though we were not there . . . everyone ignored us in a way only a Balinese can do. (pp. 435–436)

As he gradually gained the villagers' trust (through shared hardship), however, his status suddenly shifted to a vibrant, engaged part of the interacting community, even as he was set somewhat apart by his "researcher" identity and "outsider" status. He also discovered (intuitively) that he had little choice

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but to use thick description to decipher what was "really" going on in the village. The villagers, of course, were knowledgeable human agents acting within their cultural milieu (Giddens, 1984) and were well aware—perhaps even more aware than Geertz—of how his presence impacted and even activated certain turns of events. Geertz and his wife (who was his research partner) were thrust into the middle of the action and were unable to ignore themselves.

The opening scene of "Deep Play" is often lauded—and used in courses on qualitative methods—as an exemplar of thick description. The writing is remarkable in that, unlike previous tales of the field, it reads in a visual-interactive "evocative" way, like a scene out of a movie. The notion is that carrying the reader into the scene through thick descriptive and evocative writing will lead to deeper understanding. Geertz (1973) went on to further champion and popularize this method of thick description for ethnographers in his essay "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." Here, Geertz took issue with the minimalist and "menial" observations of his fellow anthropologists and argued that, at minimum, ethnographers owed their readers something more than mere "thin descriptions." As the story of Balinese cockfighting unfolded through Geertz's thick description, he turned his attention to the elaborate gambling ritual structures that animate the scene; his analysis makes sense of the cockfighting scene as a reflection of broader Balinese culture by parsing out how it animates social status.

Following Geertz, in *Tales of the Field*, Van Maanen (1988) cataloged three prevailing ways of crafting ethnographic narratives: (a) realist tales, which are attempts to offer an "accurate" and "objective" account of social action, "written in a dispassionate, third-person voice" (p. 45) and offering little in the way of researcher response to events in the field; (b) confessional tales, in which the ethnographer explores, in a personalized voice, his or her responses—so-called "self-data" (p. 73)—to whatever is at play in the field; and (c) impressionist tales, in which the ethnographer attempts a more figurative or metaphorical rendering of his or her participation-observation, with the crafting of "striking stories" as the primary goal (p. 101). In the 1980s, authors of ethnographic texts began experimenting with these more confessional and impressionist textual forms by crafting more evocative tales of research in the field, texts that soon came to be known as "autoethnography" (Behar, 1996; Ellis, 1995; Ellis & Bochner, 1991; Goodall, 1989, 1991, 1996). Most autoethnographers today write a kind of hybrid form of confessional-impressionist tale, generally crafting their stories in more performative, poetic, impressionistic, symbolic, and lyrical language than their predecessors in field ethnography but always focusing closely on the self-data inherent in confessional writing.

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Driving the emergence of new forms of subjective (confessional, impressionist) autoethnographic writing, then, is the insight that the richness of cultural lives and life practices of others cannot be fully captured or evoked in purely objective or descriptive language. The researcher is both observer and participant in the scene. So, as ethnography continued to evolve, autoethnography—which dealt with the problem of researcher presence by inserting the researcher as the primary character and author of a story—emerged out of a need (driven by researchers' intuition of something missing) to capture deeper, richer, fuller evocations of cultural scenes. The exigencies of representation and evocation drove researchers. The need to "show forth" the world inhabited by the researcher as participant–observer—including the external social actions of cultural actors being studied and the inner emotional life and social responses of the researcher—drive the project of autoethnography.

Evocative autoethnographic writing (Poulos, 2016b, 2019) extends thick description to allow the author to construct research texts that conjure, arouse, or elicit vivid images, deep meanings, and sometimes intense emotions and thus shows the world and its actors in a richer, "thicker" way than simple realist tales can accomplish. As the autoethnographer digs through layers of symbol, action, imagery, ritual, meaning, and emotion, evocative autoethnographic writing evokes images, meanings, symbols, and emotions and explores the subjective positions and perspectives of the author as events, encounters, memories, actions, stories, and cultural practices emerge or unfold in the life of the researcher.

For example, a few years ago, I wrote about a suppressed traumatic childhood memory I had just recovered in a therapy session:

> That afternoon, I stroll out toward the sidewalk with my friend Howard. He's a smart kid, but a little lazy. He's one of those slow walkers. We amble up the street toward his house. Suddenly, a kid in front of us darts across the street.
>
> I look up, and hear the sick "thump!" as a car shatters his young body. There is blood everywhere. He lies in a twisted heap. His skull is oddly misshapen. One leg is askew, his foot sitting next to his head. So much blood! Then: Screams. The purest sound of misery I have ever heard. And then I see what—or really, who—he was darting toward. His Mom, who had been standing across the street, is now in the middle of the road, kneeling over his broken body, wailing. (Poulos, 2016a, p. 555)

In the article, titled "An Autoethnography of Memory and Connection," I interrogated and analyzed how suppressed and recovered memory functions and can impact daily communicative engagements. Making sense of traumatic memory recovered during writing and building clarity about its impacts in everyday life points the way toward a deeper understanding of the impacts of