The Self as the Data: Autoethnographic Approaches

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The Self as the Data: Autoethnographic Approaches

While qualitative researchers have criticised the over-reliance on the positivist, quantitative paradigm in many fields of endeavour, it remains a dominant approach in many disciplines, including tourism. Holbrook finds himself 'often musing over what rampant lack of self-confidence would encourage a mechanical reliance on such self-imprisoning safeguards and such vision-restricting formulas' (Holbrook, 2005: 48). Among others, Hall (2004) claims that this is due to the fact that much of the tourism research is embedded within the cultures of many management or business based departments, along with the increasing reliance on measuring research 'quality' through quantitative assessments. This is also reflected in the previous model of Knowledge Development.

In the past, I have found participant-observation to be a powerful research method, especially when the researcher is immersed in the study. What is interesting though, is that in many so-called participant-observation studies, the 'participatory' element is ignored, with the researcher referring more to what he/she observed, with very little about what he/she personally experienced, rendering many of these studies to be more of an outside observation than participant-observation. However, when the study is written from a deep level of immersion, the results can be very powerful. Such a deep level of immersion, where the personal experiences of the researcher are part of the study itself, leads us to consider the autoethnographic approach, which Noy (2007: 351) considers to be 'a critical and reflexive method of inquiry'.

Autoethnography

According to Jamal and Hollingshead (2005), notions of seeing, being, meaning, knowing and identity are central to the tourism experience, which in turns leads us into areas that are personal and even private. In order to research the more internal, deeply personal reactions to and subsequent constructions, the process must be approached differently. One such approach may be autoethnography. However, tourism researchers from the interpretive paradigm are not immune to a reliance on using the same research methods again and again, with Westwood (2005) claiming that they are not necessarily open to the newer qualitative techniques in tourism research. This can limit attempts to uncover deeper, more personal issues that are not simple to uncover. As evidence of this occurring in other fields not dissimilar to tourism in terms of knowledge development, Holt (2003) relates his attempts to get an autoethnographic piece of research related to teaching (Holt, 2001) published in qualitative journals through presenting a further autoethnographic story.

As an educator, often when travelling I stand outside myself and examine my emotions and experiences as a tourist, bringing such reflections back to the classroom to illustrate a point as well as to develop an empathetic relationship with my students. Often my reflections revolve around the pervasive power of the popular culture I grew up in and live in, particularly in relation to television, cinema and music. Such a reflexive approach is also a valid form of academic research – one where the researcher becomes the researched. Supporting my personal musings, Mick (2005) sees self-observation as a valid autoethnographic research approach, with Denzin commenting that, by turning the ethnographic gaze inwards while maintaining an outward, critical perspective, we are able to understand ‘...the larger context where self experiences occur’ (Denzin, 1997: 227). Furthermore, as Hackley notes, ‘self-observation and reflexive accounts of
experience cannot easily be disentangled, since, like sense and representation, they are mutually dependent’ (Hackley, 2007: 102).

While not easy to differentiate this form of research from autobiography (or memoir), autobiographies tend to have a strong emphasis on literary style, whereas autoethnography focuses more on the self-reflexive content, often with the aim of exploring a singular aspect of the subject’s life. As Hackley affirms, ‘[t]he notion of reflexivity ... intrinsic to the interpretive approach, would seem to represent the point where style and substance coalesce (Hackley, 2007:102).

Despite the fact that this is a relatively under-used approach in tourism research, there are those who have successfully applied autoethnography to tourism and support its inclusion into the tourism research mix, including Noy (2003, 2004, 2006, 2007), Westwood (2005), Miller (2008) and Beeton (2008). Noy nicely articulates the synergy between the autoethnographic approach and the tourist experience, noting that ‘exploring tourists’ experiences autoethnographically ... illuminates the fuzzy and liminal space that lies between tourism experiences and everyday experiences’ (Noy, 2007: 352).

**Autoethnography as Personal Narrative**

At times the ‘critical’ aspect of autoethnography appears to be lacking in tourism studies, including some that I present in this publication, however exposing oneself to the reader opens up various avenues of critical reflection. I take an autoethnographic approach in this book when relating many personal experiences, all with implicit as well as explicit critical reflection and exposure. The degree of explicit reflection is dependent upon the point being illustrated or studied. However, as Noy explains,

… autoethnography enables one to communicate experience and reconstruct it in vivid, lively and sometimes even painful ways, in ways that are not “purely” academic or that result in an over-intellectualization of the sense of having an experience. (Noy, 2007: 350)

Certainly, self-reflexive, personal studies cannot be treated in the same way as the more positivist studies in terms of applying the results, however they can provide insight into a complex area. By understanding how individuals respond to film, we are in a position to provide a stronger, more flexible and personal tourism experience for others.

*Full reference list will follow!*