

Running head: THE VALUE OF INNER KNOWING IN INDIGENOUS RESEARCH

Autoethnography in Indigenous Research Contexts: The Value of Inner Knowing

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## Abstract

Indigenous researchers have focussed on decolonising conventional research methodologies by strongly asserting the validity of their own diverse and unique epistemologies and ontologies in the construction of knowledge. Advocating the value of epistemological and ontological grounding in research, this paper presents an epistemological rationale for the veracity of autoethnography as an Indigenous research method and how Indigenous researchers might work from an 'epistemology of insiderness' to construct and theorise knowledge. The paper examines an autoethnographic approach, where the researcher's life and understandings are assimilated into the research, by exploring how the embodiment of my own Aboriginal identity worked to influence my choices and experiences in my doctoral research, which examines the development and expression of self-identity for Aboriginal women.

### Autoethnography in Indigenous Research Contexts: The Value of Inner Knowing

In recent years, Indigenous researchers have focussed on decolonising conventional research methodologies by strongly asserting and testing the validity of their own diverse and unique epistemologies and ontologies in the construction of knowledge. In a general sense, this paper presents an epistemological rationale for the veracity of autoethnography as an Indigenist research method. The paper more specifically investigates how the inherent subjective nature and flexibility of autoethnography as a research tool has applicability to developing Indigenous research methods, by transforming the conditions of knowledge production. To achieve this aim, the paper explicates my choice of autoethnography as a method for my doctoral research, which examines the development and expression of self-identity for Aboriginal women in contemporary Australian society. In particular, I examine an autoethnographic approach, where the researcher's life and understandings are assimilated into the research, by exploring how the embodiment of my own Aboriginal identity worked to influence my research choices and experiences.

#### Claiming a space

In accordance with Aboriginal tradition and drawing on the flexible and creative standards available in autoethnographic writing, I claim a space both in a cultural context and as a researcher and author of this work with the following poem – Lacewood. The poem reveals abstractions of my personal narrative – who I am, and where I come from.

#### Lacewood

Oak-like rays and silky lustre  
 Caressing the past, present, the future  
 Once the epitome of elegance and grace  
 Now a raw beauty  
 A timeless creation  
 Resonant of tradition  
 Mirror for today, tomorrow  
 Memories of past ingrained in her being  
 Secrets forbidden, stories and dreams  
 Happiness overflowing heartbreak and sorrow

Soul of nature

Embracing my heart

Capturing my essence

Carving a space

Weaving the fabric of my life

Into self

Sensitive, spiritual, strong-willed

Multiple lives, one soul

Embodying spirit

Sensing, knowing, understanding

The hue of my skin

Contour of my nose

The grey in my eyes

Without the veil of colour

White, but Black as my Father's heart

She knows me that old girl

She grew me up

She knows my Wadjalang Ancestors

She knows how I came to be

My Grandmother's granddaughter, my Father's daughter

She knows my Mother, sisters and brother

Aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews, cousins and friends

She knows my children, and my grandchildren

Rituals and tradition

Etched in her scars

Descendent of Country

She knows my Grandmother's way

Narrating, singing, painting teaching

Reconstructing the past

Sculpting grand narratives

Shaping the future

Instilling knowledge and belonging

Power of being

Impassioned by life

She knows where I come from

Where I belong, where I'm going

Claiming, becoming, being

My story, my identity, my life.

Situating the paper

In the last two decades, the social sciences have witnessed a strong upsurge of interest in narrative inquiry relevant to human experience and social relationships (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Maori scholar, Russel Bishop draws attention to narrative inquiry as a valuable method for Indigenous research practices; Bishop (1996 as cited in Smith, 1999) suggests narrative methods are an apt means by which researchers may represent the “diversities of truth” (p. 145), whereby the narrator rather than the researcher retains control. Narrative methods, “narrative referring to the stories people tell – [that is], the way they organize their experiences into temporally meaningful episodes” (Ellis, 2004, p. 195), have proliferated in many disciplines as part of the challenge to Western and androcentric perspectives and practice of research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). Denzin and Lincoln (2003) indicate that this challenge has engendered the relatively new genre of autoethnography, which is concerned with the self-as-researcher and the researcher-as-self. Moustakas (1990), introduced the concept of using the ‘self’ as a powerful instrument in the research process, thus setting the stage for autoethnography to stake a larger claim in academic research.

What is autoethnography?

In autoethnography, stress is placed on knowing through participation and the reification of that participation to reveal a collaborative research practice. As a research method, autoethnography allows the particularities of research production to be embedded in our inner ways of knowing and being and our subjectivities to saturate the research. In this view, autoethnography not only has the potential to accommodate

inner group diversity amongst Indigenous researchers, but also to establish an Indigenous standpoint in the research project. The autoethnographic process avoids the assumption of epistemic unity, thus creating a space for positing Indigenous ways of knowing as valid knowledge. That is, according to Nakata (2004), a space “that is recognisably Indigenous” (p. 9).

Reed-Danahay (1997) succinctly defines autoethnography as both a process and a product – “a method and a text” (p. 9). Ellis and Bochner (2000) interpret autoethnography as “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 739) and thus the researcher to the researched. However, as noted by Reed-Danahay (1997), autoethnography can hold a dual perspective in research and may signal both “the ethnography of one’s group” or “autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest” (p. 2). Either way, the distinguishing feature of autoethnography lies in the active presence, participation and acknowledgment of the self in the research and analysis. In this view, autoethnography connects to heuristic, organic, feminist and Indigenous approaches to research.

The purposeful use of self, inherent in autoethnography, works to understand and interpret lived experience in the lives of others. Neumann (1996) describes the manner in which autoethnographers not only transcend their world through a critical outward gaze toward culture, but also “gaze inward for a story of self” (p. 173). For instance, in my current research, my gaze is directed both inward toward my own negotiations of self-identity, and outward toward negotiations of self-identity for other Aboriginal women. Simultaneously, I explore how my experiences connect with those of my co-researchers. This unique position, Neumann claims, “ultimately retrieves a vantage point for interpreting culture” (p. 173). In this sense, the union of *auto* and *ethno* explicated in autoethnography reveals a story between self and culture; a retelling of the culture in which the self is located. Simply, I occupy “dual interactive roles of researcher and research participant” (Ellis, 1998, p. 49), and use my own experiences in conjunction with that of my co-researchers as primary data.

Autoethnography may be defined, not by its relationship to a prescribed theory governed discourse, but by its epistemological flexibility, which begins in people’s experiences and understandings of the world rather than in theory; in this sense, autoethnography provides an unspecified space from which to conduct research (D. E. Smith, 2005) to distinguish from (L. T. Smith, 1999). For my research purposes, an Aboriginal woman’s standpoint as a vantage point from which discoveries can be made was paramount. It was my goal that analysis of the

subsequent representations and the theories are secondary; I wanted to permit the reader to see and experience the worlds of my co-researchers first (S. McGinty, personal communication, March 30, 2006).

#### Characteristics of autoethnography

Ellis and Berger (2002) highlight four key features in autoethnographic approaches to research, which include:

- A rejection of objectivity;
- A valuing of subjectivity and researcher-participant intersubjectivity;
- The utility of personal and accessible writing; and
- The explication of the researcher's experiences and a shared humanity with research participants.

As evidenced by these features, in autoethnography, a heuristic dimension is added to research; a way of inner knowing through participation, what Moustakas (1990) terms "tacit knowledge" (p. 20). Tacit knowledge is a term originally coined by philosopher Polanyi (1967), who indicates that tacit knowing stems from the fact that "...we can know more than we can tell" (p. 4). Therefore, tacit knowledge represents a level of understanding that cannot be readily externalised because it commonly consists of beliefs, perspectives and skills that are so ingrained in ourselves that we have difficulty recognising and articulating that knowledge (Moustakas, 1990). Tacit knowledge emerges from the act of "indwelling" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 24). Indwelling, according to Moustakas (1990), refers to "...the heuristic process of turning inward to seek a deeper, more extended comprehension of the nature or meaning of a quality or theme of human experience...the indwelling process is conscious and deliberate..."(p. 24).

Douglass and Moustakas (1985) stress the unique role of the process of tacit knowing in heuristic research inquiries, stating that in the process of data generation, the tacit dimension precedes "inference and intuition, guiding the person to untapped aspects of awareness in nonlinear ways that elude analysis and explanation. In this sense, the tacit is visionary" (p. 49). The concepts of tacit knowledge and indwelling as adapted and elaborated by Moustakas (1990), and utilised in autoethnographic method are particularly relevant to researching accounts of human experience. Tacit knowledge and indwelling offer considerable foundational value and critical input into innovative Indigenous research methodologies based on individual epistemologies, ontologies and intuition.

### Articulating tacit knowledge

Like Moustakas, Schon (1987) acknowledges the difficulties in articulating this tacit knowledge, but also notes that it is possible, through reflection, to unveil these intuitive understandings. Through the utility of autoethnographic method in my research, I have available the option of drawing directly from an inner dialogue - my knowledge as an Aboriginal woman. In my research, intuitive understandings of the research phenomenon were brought to the surface through writing 'my story', which stimulated critical reflective thinking. What was important for me was how writing my own personal experience, 'my story', illuminated and connected me the culture under study. This process liberated me in that my (our) story, and not theoretical motivations, became the driving force behind my research, and showed that I had developed a sensitivity towards understanding the development and expression of self-identity for Aboriginal women. There was no longer a sense of detachment from my research, which not only allowed me to engage more deeply and dialogically with the research questions, but also facilitated and developed a deeper empathy for how my co-researchers would feel in telling their stories. At an academic level, writing my personal narrative enabled me to better articulate and organise my own thinking. I presented my personal narrative as both a traditional academic text and, using the creative license of autoethnography, as poetry.

### Why perform autoethnography?

Denzin (2003) discusses the performance aspect of autoethnography, arguing that it invites researchers to go further into the research through extreme personal commitment. Denzin suggests this personal act diminishes the exploitive nature of the researcher/subject relationship; indeed Denzin requests researchers to commit to a "critical performance pedagogy" (p. 222) in which they become one with their co-researchers to perform their culture. Jennaway (1990) states the specifics of what Denzin terms "critical performance pedagogy". She states:

The move toward egalitarian relations of textual production, dialogic, and polyphonic cultural scripts, collaborative authorship, the de-centring of self and the dis-alienation of the ethnographic other, the move away from the systems of representation which objectify and silence the ethnographic other, i.e. the general reflexive stance, are things to which feminist theory [and hence Indigenist theory]...has long been adverting (Jennaway, 1990, p. 171 as cited in Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont, 2003, p. 173).

Feminist theorists such as Jennaway have long been advocates of beginning research from personal experience (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). The move toward egalitarian relations in the feminist project is congruent with Indigenist epistemologies. Aboriginal scholar Lester Irabinna Rigney (1999) acknowledges a strong correlate between Indigenous ways of sharing knowledge and understanding, and feminist methodologies, thus endorsing feminist research methodologies as a suitable model for what he terms Indigenist research.

#### Performing autoethnography

The performance of autoethnography allowed me to become a ‘complete insider’ and informed my research in very distinct ways. I interrogated my own connection to the research phenomenon by writing memories of my life story, which allowed engagement with the research phenomenon on both an experiential and intellectual level. Performing this personal interrogation, positioned me as one of the participants in the study. My engagement with the research phenomenon became part of the story and complimented that of my co-researchers. This interactive process, described by Barbara Tedlock (1991) as “coparticipation within the ethnographic encounter” (p. 69), allowed me to work from an ‘epistemology of insiderness’, to construct and theorise knowledge relative to the research phenomenon.

Performing autoethnography exemplifies how researcher identities reverberate through the research process. For me, writing my personal narrative revealed a relationship between my biographical background and my interest in the research topic. My personal experiences illuminated and relived through writing my narrative, also raised my sensitivities towards the research phenomenon, thus culminating in a clearer and intuitive understanding of the topic under study. The writing further elucidated my socially and culturally situated values, which ultimately influenced the research design. These revelations enabled a repositioning of myself in the research, and empowered me by initiating my release from the “conceptual prisons” (Anderson, 2003, p. 51) that continue to constrain many Aboriginal people.

Just as I approached my co-researchers to elicit their autobiographies and personal opinions, I became part of the research story through a similar process; I devised a research space from which to elicit information and also participate. Autoethnographic method allowed me to explicitly attend the tensions between self and other and between the personal and the political (Reed-Danahay, 1997; Viswesaran, 1994) thus

allowing me to participate in the lifeworld of my co-researchers, and bring my co-researchers into my theorising.

#### Autoethnography in practice

The practice of autoethnography potentially opens up possibilities for innovative ways, in which researchers, who are ‘complete insiders’, may represent realities, themselves and their research participants in their texts. For me, the performance of autoethnography was therapeutic and took me on a journey of personal development by initiating an enhanced awareness of my knowledge as an Aboriginal woman and as a researcher; as feminist author Shulamit Reinharz (1997) claims, “we both bring the self to the field and create the self in the field” (p. 3).

As previously stated, in my own research, my first act of self-reflection was to write an introspective account of my personal life journey, ‘my story’. This reflective act enabled an exploration of elements of my own identity, its development and negotiation, that explains ‘who I am’ and ‘how I came to be’ as seen through the lens of identity theory. In my research, I offered (my)self as both researcher and subject. That is, I chose to explore my own subjective and cultural experiences to *complement* that of my co-researchers, and bring to the research insights that may have been otherwise silenced. The intention was to self-reflexively better understand my own self-identity development and expression, and the contradictions I encountered in that process to enhance the study. The study of self, initiated by the writing of a personal narrative, led to an enhancement of personal and practical knowledge; critical self-reflection and the assessment of such, and facilitated change in the way I view myself, others and the environment. The strong incorporation of self in the research project is evidenced by intense critical reflexivity characteristic of autoethnography. Reflexivity is crucially advocated by Quandamooa Noonuccal woman Karen Martin (2003) as integral to purpose of Indigenist research. Martin states:

Reflexivity in research design affords the ‘space’ to decolonise western research methodologies, then harmonise and articulate Indigenist research. Reflexivity is a process that allows us to work from Aboriginal centres and ensure we work with relatedness of self and Entities. Reflexivity challenges us to claim our shortcomings, misunderstandings, oversights and mistakes, to re-claim our lives and make strong changes to our current realities. Being reflexive ensures we do not compromise our identity whilst undertaking research (Martin, 2003, p. 212).

Critically, as a research tool, introspective personal engagement with my own story offered an opportunity for me to extrapolate themes, patterns and relationships, prior to entering the field and was particularly useful in developing the interview schedule and determining issues to pursue during the interviews. As a case in point, I began to recognise the extent to which we, as Aboriginal women continue to be constrained by social and cultural forces, and the level at which we are engaged in a complex process of fluid movement, with identity always socially constituted and context dependent. Simultaneously, I engaged more and more with literature on identity development. Consequently, reflecting on my own narrative in conjunction with the literature on identity facilitated a dialogical interaction, which enabled me to develop an understanding of how we form, express and reflect on our identities. This interaction not only illuminated broader identity processes at hand, but also allowed me to experience an insightful comprehension of (my)self.

#### Autoethnography as a response to issues of representation and power

It is clear from my personal performance of autoethnography, that the 'inward gaze' adopted in autoethnography "becomes a means of constructing an image of self who has crossed and lived between borders" (Neumann, 1996, p. 187) in response to, and inspired by, "the epistemological doubt associated with the crisis of representation" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 741). For this reason, Reed-Danahay (1997) points out that the usefulness of autoethnography as a research method lies in the fact that it addresses and promotes understandings of the processes of representation and power. For Indigenous researchers, autoethnography provides the opportunity for "people who were formally the subjects of ethnography to become the authors of studies of their own group" (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 2). Therefore, as Reed-Danahay (1997), projecting the postmodern position states, autoethnography inherently involves "a rewriting of the self and the social" (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 4). African American feminist author bell hooks (1989) emphasises the significance of "rewriting the self and the social", and stresses the necessity of self representation as a means of consciously confronting dominant forms of representational spaces. hooks declares:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonised, the exploited and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and growth possible... It is that act of speech, of 'talking back', that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of moving from object to subject – the liberated voice (hooks, 1989, p. 9).

It is evident that autoethnography as a research method engages usefully with Indigenous research aims through questioning the politics of representation, and in particular that of voice and its authenticity. As Tierney (1998) states, “Autoethnography confronts dominant forms of representation and power in an attempt to reclaim, through self-reflective response, representational spaces that have marginalized those of us at the borders” (Tierney, 1998, p. 66). However, it is literary critic Pratt (1994), who powerfully acknowledges an association between the concept of autoethnography, and relations between the colonised and colonisers, and the resistance of the colonised toward dominant discourses (as cited in Reed-Danahay, 1997, pp. 7-8). Pratt succinctly expresses what I believe to be the relevance of autoethnography as a tool for Indigenous research approaches when she proposes that:

If ethnographic texts are those in which European metropolitan subjects represent to themselves their others (usually their conquered others), autoethnographic texts are representations that the so-defined others construct in response to or in those texts...Such texts often constitute a marginalised group’s entry point into the dominant circuits of print culture (as cited in Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 28).

The personal nature of the writing in autoethnography offers an opportunity for Indigenous researchers to reclaim voices that have previously existed at the boundaries of academic writing (Tierney, 1998). The use of subjective language, which is characteristic of autoethnography, is also intended to evoke emotional responses in both the reader and the author, as a way of engagement and reflection upon the meanings of human experience. Furthermore, according to Ellis and Bochner (2000), the use of personal writing in autoethnography serves as a provision of personal accountability in the researcher’s work; an owning of voice in the text. In this way, no attempt is made to surreptitiously empower the researcher within the text, and thus advances a challenge to the objectivity and authority of the researcher. In autoethnography, the explicit ownership of text upholds researcher responsibility in positioning the researcher in the broader cultural context of the study (Ellis and Bochner, 2000).

### Conclusion

In this paper, I have been particularly concerned with the use of self as a site for interpreting the cultural experience of one’s own group. I have attempted to stress the significance of maintaining and utilising Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies in the research process. I have proposed that the concepts of *tacit knowing* and *indwelling*, participation through knowing, as explicated through autoethnographic method, provide a foundational basis and key way from which to investigate Indigenous authenticity and work toward

new Indigenous methodologies. For those seeking representations of themselves through an articulation of self-interpretation, the art of autoethnography offers an invitation for researchers to investigate their reality more fully. Ultimately, autoethnography offers a means by which to break down previous textual authority of dominant discourses by promoting self-representation.

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