



Culture e Studi del Sociale-CuSSoc

ISSN: 2531-3975

Editor-in-Chief: Emiliana Mangone

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Come citare / How to cite

CARLEO, M. (2021). Being a Subject Expert During Covid-Era: An Autoethnographic Experience. *Culture e Studi del Sociale*, 6(1), Special, 193-200.

Disponibile / Retrieved from <http://www.cussoc.it/index.php/journal/issue/archive>

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Articolo pubblicato online / Article first published online: October 2021



- Peer Reviewed Journal

INDEXED IN
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Being a Subject Expert During Covid-Era: An Autoethnographic Experience

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Abstract

This paper shows an autoethnographic research, based on the personal experience as a subject expert during Covid Era. Starting from an introductory paragraph about the diffusion and the application of the methodological autoethnographic approach, the paper will focus on the personal experience of the author as a subject expert in university environment. The student-teacher's relational dynamics will be the center of this paper, as these figures had to experience new approaching methods towards the research and the theoretical study.

Keywords: COVID-19, University of Salerno, Autoethnography.

Telling is a creative act, a subjective restitution of oneself and of the world. It is also always a social act - not only while telling "the world" - because a story is always in relation with someone, with an "other" to whom it is told.*
(Piaggio, 2013)

1. Autoethnography: research, experience, reflection

During the 1970s the encroaching of various research topics and styles was so relevant that led to the divulgation of research approaches and writing-modes «which seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno) [in which they are situated]» (Ellis *et al.*, 2011, p. 1). Basically, autoethnography differs from traditional ethnography, a social scientific research method employed by anthropologists and sociologists, in that autoethnography embraces and foregrounds the researcher's subjectivity rather than attempting to bound it, as in standard empirical research.

Therefore, resuming to the origins of autoethnography, we intend to analyze the style of postmodern papers. As a result, it appears that a reflexive approach is currently adopted in autoethnography research (Cardano, 2001, p. 200). Nevertheless, current ethnography tends to be in favour of empirical material built around the concerned topic and the consequent relationship between researchers and participant actors (Cardano, 2001, 2011; Gariglio, 2018).

If the ethnographer wants the conclusions he reaches through his study to be taken seriously by the scientific community, he cannot [...] rely solely on his own reputation as a serious and rigorous social scientist. In order for the scientific community

* In riferimento ai testi di autori italiani, la traduzione è opera propria.

to evaluate [...] the plausibility of the results he reaches, the researcher must accompany them with a detailed reflective account (Cardano, 2011, p. 142).

However, a small group of ethnographers who preferred to give value to reflection in field work started to take hold around the 1980s. They focused on the relevance of the subjective dimension, such as the writing's role, the importance of the protection measures towards the subjects of study and the overcoming of the boundaries between social sciences and literature (Bochner, Ellis, 2002).

The last and most radical form of ethnographic reflection is the one that goes so far until it can foresee a complete fusion between the researcher's life and the "field," that is, autoethnography [which today we would define evocative], or introspective ethnography. Although they're still relatively uncommon (with a number that has exponentially increased in recent years, though), these experimental ethnographies represent one of the most relevant (and discussed) innovations in the panorama of contemporary ethnography (Marzano, 2001a, p. 272).

Colombo (2001, p. 219) argues that «ethnography no longer requires field-work based on confrontation and experience with otherness, but focuses on the experience of the ethnographer. Life of one's own becomes an ethnographic material to analyze and narrate». In fact, most of the autoethnographs of that time rejected the conception of a diversity between the experience of the researcher and the «world outside».

Choosing an autoethnographic approach, before the analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2006, 2011), meant recognizing in the subject of study a sort of independence from the "observative relation". In a similar context, the intention to overcome the multidisciplinary perspective, which was popular in the ethnographic research, rose up and pointed out the imprecision of the disciplinary distinctions, especially in the academic field between *Social Sciences* and *Humanities*.

Practice of autoethnography started from a temporary tripartition of the time together within four main factors: 1) recognizing a social dimension within the scientific research¹ (Denzin, Giardina, 2008); 2) the relevance of aesthetic and literary value within the ethnographic field; 3) the attention towards the ethics within "doings" and "publishing"; 4) the weight of subjectivity within the research itself, in a historical period covered by pacifist movements, students' revolts and fighting for human rights (Adams *et al.*, 2015).

Between the 1970s and the end of the 1990s, autoethnography firstly sponsored the works of few protagonists or narrow groups (Hayano, 1979), which included scholars, activists in social movements and civil society (Holmes Jones *et al.*, 2013). It was just an experimental and avant-garde practice which flowed into a more widely self-reflective research, which was in its own way in favour of the hybridization among ethnographic, literary and aesthetic studies (Bochner, Ellis, 2002). Examples of this type of hybridization are Hayano's *auto-ethnography*, Ellis' *first-person accounts*, Denzin's *self-stories*, Van Maanen's *self-ethnography* and Reed-Danahay's *ethnic autobiography* (Adams *et al.*, 2015).

¹ In *Politics of Evidence*, there have been brought together all the contributions of an interdisciplinary group of scholars, who have addressed the problem of the sociology's presence in knowledge and sciences concerning the political and social dimension of the of collectively recognized knowledge constructions.

The first institutional recognition, due to the publication of *Autoethnography, Personal narrative, Reflexivity* (Ellis, Bochner, 2000) within the second edition of *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, published by «Sage»² (Ellis, Bochner, 1996; Denzin, Lincoln, 2010), contributed to the raising of the reputation of the new ways of research, gaining more interest among scholars and students in an academic environment inclined to differences and multidisciplinary. (Atkinson, Hammersley, 1994).

The last phase of interest into the developing of the autoethnographic practice dates back to 2006, when an argument in response to *Analytic Autoethnography*³ was published by Leon Anderson (2006) in *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. In the same year the institutionalising process of this particular type of approach reached high levels with the publication of several relevant papers, such as *Handbook of Autoethnography* (Holman Jones *et al.*, 2013). The proliferation of the contributions under the subject “autoethnography” is a bright proof of the reputational grow, as much as even methodologists not involved in this new type of research consider the autoethnography «one of the most interesting innovative forms of research in the fields of anthropology and sociology.» (Gobo, Molle, 2016, p. 66).

Doing a recapitulation, autoethnography can be considered as a research method which leads to a more comprehensive analysis of social and cultural studies, through the description of the researcher’s biographic experiences. In a wider perspective, autoethnography can represent a bunch of methods and specific practices which permits a sort of syntony with the biographic tradition (Holmes Jones *et al.*, 2013, p. 17). However, one should not assimilate autoethnography with autobiography because, as a social study, the former is always oriented towards an analytic approach of the «world outside». It is indeed said that this way of research’s peculiarity could be the interaction between both author’s personal and professional experiences, and practices of cultural and social formation. As Holman Jones (2013, p. 23) says:

However, autoethnographic texts typically feel more self and socially conscious than autobiographic works; the intent to describe cultural experience marks this difference (Holman Jones *et al.*, 2013, p. 23; Gariglio, 2017, p. 493).

Autoethnography therefore (re)produces the author’s autobiographic and subjective requests, including vulnerable states of mind, in order to increase the comprehension of social and cultural contests in which that specific experiences set up. The main argument related to this use of autoethnography is basically the contraposition between a more radical evocative part and a more analytic one (Reed-Danahay, 1997); the former tends to focus mostly on social worlds outside the academic space⁴ (Ellis, 2009), as it is generally more open-minded and inclusive to-

² In 1996, Ellis and Bochner organized a conference held at the *Society of Study of Symbolic Interaction*, in which several qualitative researchers participated. From there, the process of recognizing the legitimacy of autoethnography beyond self-referential boundaries began. One of the direct consequences was the publication of the book *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing* by Ellis and Bochner themselves.

³ Google Scholar indicates that this article garnered an impressive number of 2925 citations (30/10/2020).

⁴ In the work *Fighting Back or Moving on: An Autoethnographic Response to Critics* (2009), Ellis defends the practice of evocative autoethnography brilliantly and hilariously. Using the metaphor of three characters, Mr. Social Sciences, Mr. Aesthetics, and Mr. Literature, the author is able to set the

wards a pluralism of research methods (Ellis, Bochner, 2016; Ellis, 2004); the latter, on the other hand, is closer to analytic ethnography (Lofland, 1995) and theorization.

Autoethnography shows struggle, passion, embodied life, and the collaborative creation of sense-making in situations in which people have to cope with dire circumstances and loss of meaning. Autoethnography wants the reader to care, to feel, to empathize, and to do something, to act. [...]it shouldn't be used as a vehicle to produce distanced theorizing. What are we giving to the people with whom we are intimate [...]? (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 433)

The peculiarity of an evocative paper is this sort of rhetoric confession, which leans on a strong emotive profile dedicated to the author's personal experiences. In less critical terms, «[i]n evocative storytelling, the validity of the story must be evaluated in light of what it could arouse into the reader, what is their reaction towards a narrative, perceived as more or less authentic, credible, realistically interesting. The only residual generalization lies in the reflections the narrated story suggests to the reader for interpreting his own life, or the life of others who are close to them.» (Marzano, 2001, p. 274; Kafar, Ellis, 2014).

To tell an experience means willing to describe an intimate world of one's self, such as emotion or action of one's own. Using the autoethnography as a way to divulgate our own reflections, leads to a conversion of them into ethnographic "culture" or, in better terms, into an "analysis plan" of the needs.

What could be the meaning of telling the experience? It could be telling one's self by telling the context and vice versa, through reflection and narration: the former participates as each researcher "looks" at the «world outside» with different points of view; the latter reflects the form in which one chooses to expose themselves.

A tentative definition of autoethnography can be formulated as follows: the narration of a research's result, including documents, interviews, personal experiences and emotions. Besides, autoethnography could consist of an ethnographic experience's diary. We can affirm that the process of recognizing autoethnography is still a work in progress, though.

2. The participating observation of a pandemic

At the start of 2020s I was entering my second year as a Subject Expert in the Department of Humanities Studies at University of Salerno. I was aware of my tasks in everyday schedule, and I had a strong tendency towards getting close to students, especially the ones who were close to graduation.

My approach to "being a teacher" was always based on a confident relationship between me and my co-workers, my teachers, and above all my students. I've never stopped to be a student, after all. My formation might have influenced a lot my style of teaching, the same as my way of teaching could have influenced my further formation. The "face-to-face" contact activated a "mind-to-mind" connection, which led me to learn new things about the topic that I was teaching. This type of "educational hybrid" – or "hybridization of the education" – was the way

stage for the points of disagreement between evocative autoethnography and the three fields of study mentioned.

that I chose for putting into practice a totally innovative approach compared to my standards.

Suddenly, in March everything changed. On the 3th of March 2020 I was still used to walk through my university corridors, between tutoring hours and conversations with my colleagues. Instead, just a few days later, everyone was speaking about online distant learning, lessons online schedule, links, platforms, redistribution of “smart” working hours. This could have forged by now my comprehension of the meaning of my qualification. My own horizons were changed: it was no more about preparing a lesson or responding to standard questions, but everything was focused on “distance learning”.

Distance. Reflecting on this term and applying it to academic environment led me to realize that, in my entire academical experience, I was never requested to be “far” from that reality, which represented a notable part of my everyday life and impacted on my “doings” and my “beings”. Taking part of that new kind of environment so differently structured meant turning into diversified realities. Students, evidently, consider university a second home, a place of usual meetings and experiences; for professors and other teaching staff it is a working and studying place, which is worthy of respect in its institutional role. For Subject experts like me, it’s a curious place full of occasions of manifold investigation.

An investigation that, due to the present circumstances, has changed and is much colder than before. My researching field is now a screen, my researches flow through instable internet connections and gazes are now pixels. From direct connection – implying all the doubts and viewpoints concerning a variety of topics – from corrections of essays and consultation with the chief of the chair, I moved to a new researching field: digital problems resolving issues about lessons and exams due to a “face-to-screen” way of teaching and testing.

I am now a Subject Expert who had to study quite accurately Microsoft Teams’ platform and all its functions. I am now able to recognize the best cloud storage and backup services and the different extensions necessary for sharing files. I learnt new words belonging to sectorial languages and I have also improved my linguistics skills, I guess. I witness my adapting capacities in the context of a global pandemic, the same capacities which allowed me to survive between chaos and improvising, in a changing education style, unknown before. I had to conform the “doing teaching” to the “how can I teach while spending most of my time on problem solving?” overnight. It means that in only one month I had to organize the virtual classrooms and their timing, while sharing web accesses with faculty Councils, department meetings, graduating sessions, and the spooky online exams. Not to mention that, of course, I had to transmit some of these skills to senior professors.

Theory, research and methodology issues are now overcome by urgent practical skills, to the point of creating new relationships between who acts directly on the field and who assures from behind the good functioning of relevant facilities. Specifically, in my job I was accompanied with a now omnipresent figure always ready to exchange with me various confrontational opinions: the computer specialist.

The basic thought that has emerged is a continuous improvising, supported by various “but if?”. Confronting this new type of teaching, learning and testing, has created new perplexities about what strategies to employ according to specific situations, and the various solutions appear sometimes questionable. Experts themselves had to renew their competences, by “learning” to implement and coordinate informatic procedures with administrative rules and by “teaching the teachers” who, because of their age, were not supposed to have the necessary experience in

managing operative systems. Senior teachers experience is usually limited to a basic knowledge of word processing and internet navigation. Not to mention the major problematic involved in exploiting efficiently the opportunities offered by: smart working.

Working from home, as a technician, a teacher, or an assistant, has in certain cases involved a feeling of demeaning in struggling to overcoming lots of problems in shortage of time, disregarding daily apt schedules and holydays. According to several studies, methodology and research has become the gimmick through which a person can be considered always available and ready. It has to be said that, indeed, such a variable experience cannot be considered as a simple participant of the creation and realization of events never employed before. This new experience should become available to every individual that is supposed to benefit from it like never before, students in particular.

Conclusions

It may be necessary to pay more attention towards students, because they try to do and to give their best even in unsure circumstances. According to several opinions, it is clear that students have concern about the complex time we are now living, which brings distress and anxiety and negatively marks the relationship teacher-student in particular. The most evident paradox is the occurring of a completely opposite dynamic: the relationship teacher-student is becoming more concrete by weaving it with the stay-at-home daily life.

The “faces of theory” may accidentally lose their credibility: roles are unmasking, every divergence is being left behind and the “enemy” is being more and more accepted. Students are amused by “live” small hitches; for example, users may be distracted by the customary relaxed atmosphere of their own home and could accidentally forget to switch off the webcam, showing themselves in “inappropriate clothing” in front of a perplexed invisible audience. Students can indeed identify in the blundering of the figure they’re referring to; at the same time, they regain consciousness of reality and personal experiences. This process of recognising one’s self admits, on the other hand, a perception’s variation of “theory”, “method” and “research”, as it is easier to face improbable episodes, which trigger spontaneous reactions, such as laughing or incredulity, and it is possible to let go feelings of creativity or sensations of domestic daily life.

My first-person living experience is full of (un)comforting sudden anecdotes, which lightened my studying and the tiredness resulting from the adapting effort. I had the chance to assist to a live familiar debacle, to interrupt the quick lunch of the students waiting for their turn to be evaluated or even to give advice about what to eat for dinner, after exams taken at an improper “evening” time. Every day is challenging: rationality, rapidity, efficiency, practicality are skills devoutly required. Circumstances automatize everyone’s habits, duties take the place of free time, reflection may be the sole way out one is aiming to reach. This will not only be the telling of an experience, but it has to be considered as a further perspective about standard theoretical methods, as it is evident that theory is being left behind the practicing of interpersonal relationship on which to shape methodologies and non-traditional researches.

It is undoubtedly necessary to solve the problems born from institutions and students, while trying to set an efficient and long-lasting collaboration, which may conduce to personal and collective improvement and to a reshape of usual systems.

Aiming to a legitimate and beneficial metamorphosis, able to revolution the concept itself of “experience”, may not be an unthinkable hypothesis. Even considering socio-politic problematics, unrevealed from a so much complex period as Covid-Era, the opportunity of renovation in research, through reflections regarding the «world outside», can’t be ignored.

However, researches about experience based tales had demonstrated that there’s still a lot of work to do for the involvement of the student’s community. Data collected from whom was not directly involved in my own experience are red flags showing the urgency to become better. The research involved almost twenty students from three different universities, such as Polytechnic Institute of Milan, University of Bologna and University of Salerno.

Most of interviewed are “in course students”, which experienced a university past life outside the merely institutional environment too, building positive interpersonal relationships with their referring teacher’s group. However, the passage from “face-to-face” lessons to “distance learning” influenced various aspects of these bonds: students clearly felt the relational detachment and the difficulty to adaptation, sadly becoming more insecure and diffident towards changing and collective improvement.

I can therefore confirm that, to the present day, I’ve never stopped to be active in my field nor I will do. As a personal witness of the illness, with brokenness, anxiety and all other hustles involved, I had to learn to allow it sometime; concretely speaking: studying, researching, distance learning, unexpected breakthroughs, first times, trains, teaching, comprehension and realisation were affected by this accident. A bunch of unceasing and fast events. In short, a frenetic lifestyle which has to be lived in firm and constant pace. My own lifestyle.

Finally, I introduce a homemade anthropological observation: qualification is not role. Recently, I had the chance to live a teaching experience in a secondary school, which is something completely different from what I was doing in university environment. This gave me also the chance to reflect on the job I was assigned to. I don’t really like when someone defines me a “subject expert”, because I don’t think I am competent only because I have a role in a specific system and “it’s how it works”. I am a Subject Expert, an “assistant” like most students say, because I understand through experience the subject I study. I understand it so deeply that I apply it in my daily human relationships and vice versa I shape my subject on reflections born from experiencing such relationship.

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