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INDIGENOUS AUTOETHNOGRAPHY: FORMULATING OUR KNOWLEDGE, OUR WAY

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■ Abstract

This paper seeks to engage the cultural interface where Indigenous knowledge meets Western academia, by questioning the validity of traditional research methods. Firstly, it is a response to the challenges facing Indigenous people confronted with the ethical and methodological issues arising from academic research. Secondly, it is a journey *into* academia, where the researcher is all too often forced to remove the “self” from the “subject”; a difficult task for an Aboriginal person involved in research concerning Aboriginal people. Distancing oneself from research is even more difficult if the research is based closer to home, in one’s own community.

Therefore, a significant need exists for Indigenous people to conduct and present research in a manner respectful of Indigenous ways of understanding and reflective of the ways in which Indigenous peoples wish to be framed and understood. This need has fuelled the search for Indigenous methodologies, which challenge the imperial basis of Western knowledge and the images of the Indigenous “Other”. The search for appropriate methodologies is part of the process Linda Smith (1999) calls “decolonisation”.

The Indigenous researcher – burdened with the challenge to perform academically rigorous research and the desire to practice this research respectfully – is often overwhelmed with internal conflict. Indigenous autoethnography represents one methodological option to such researchers. Indigenous autoethnography seeks to establish itself as a legitimate and respectful means of acquiring and formulating knowledge, by combining the tradition of storytelling, with the practice of academic research.

■ Introduction

This paper explores autoethnography as a valid research frame for Indigenous researchers. Autoethnography is born of the “crisis in representation” motivated by a postmodern consciousness, that is now characteristic of much social science research. This is a crisis reflective of the discontentment with traditional research practices that for far too long have been viewed as the only way in which to understand and interpret human experience, behaviour and culture. Autoethnography is an alternative, another perspective. It is research from the inside-out; providing an authoritative voice that offers insight into otherwise unknowable worlds. This paper argues that Indigenous autoethnography in practice is a form of scholarly resistance; a challenge to the way in which Aboriginal people, particularly Aboriginal women, have been represented and depicted by others. The self as researcher: Aboriginal women as Aboriginal women speaking for themselves. It is both method and text; diverse and interdisciplinary. It is a discourse operating from the fringe of dominant culture; on the distant outskirts of academia, where the voices of the “Other” cry out to be heard. Autoethnography is also a journey in which the audience is drawn into the text and thus the experiences of the author.

The need for Indigenous people to undertake research is recognised by many Indigenous communities and academics. At the heart of this recognition is a belief in the need to challenge the established ways of acquiring knowledge, particularly knowledge that is collected, analysed, published and taught about the “Other”, the “colonised”, the Indigenous. There is also an understanding of the insight brought to research by the Indigenous researcher who has the capacity to write from the perspective of the “Other”, from a place Smith (1999, p. 1) aptly termed “the vantage point of the colonised”.

Historically, research produced knowledge about Indigenous peoples, it shaped popular perceptions of them, fed racist ideologies and stereotypes and created distorted images that were fed back to Indigenous people defining for them who they were and what attributes they should possess in order to be Indigenous (Smith, 1999, pp. 1-3). In short, research corrupted perceptions of the Indigenous Other. It is

therefore essential that Indigenous people find ways of knowing, of researching, of representation which is free from the constraints and biases of imperialist colonialism. The Indigenous researcher should break away from research practices that have devalued and misrepresented their peoples and subjugated their knowledges.

■ Epistemology

If knowledge is power then understanding is liberation (Meyer, 2001, p. 125).

For far too long Indigenous peoples have been described and defined through the lens of colonialism. The time has come to shatter that lens, to reject the colonisers' definitions of us, the Indigenous, and to honour our histories and our ancestors by seeking knowledge from within ourselves. To truly engage in postcolonialism we need to "affirm not only that Indigenous epistemologies are alive and well, but that they are relevant and useful to the societies and peoples to whom they belong" (Huffer & Qalo, 2004, p. 88). The only way to achieve this is to embrace ways of knowing that are relevant to what we as Indigenous academics are seeking to reveal through research and what we are trying to say and do. Perhaps the embracing of Indigenous ways of thinking begins by acknowledging the simple truth that Indigenous people "were never like the people who colonised us" or "like their representations of us" (Meyer, 2001, p. 125). Once we acknowledge this we have gone a long way to breaking the bonds of colonialism and its ongoing effects. We as Indigenous academics become liberated, free to work, to teach, to research within a new paradigm – one firmly embedded in continuing Indigenous traditions. This approach could develop "a body of knowledge encompassing the kaleidoscope of Indigenous cultures", and "tracing diverse and complex forms of knowledge – philosophies, cartographies, languages, genealogies", and subjugated knowledges (Subramani, 2001, p. 151). Conducting appropriate research is one way to facilitate such development. Imagine research that is based on Indigenous epistemologies, that focuses on our own ways of seeing, knowing and doing. There is real potential for research to be conducted that focuses on discovery, representation, reciprocity and recovery; research that acknowledges, benefits and enriches the communities from which it came.

A new paradigm is essential if we as Indigenous academics are going to challenge the way in which colonialism has suppressed our own epistemologies and disrupted our value systems. The battle with colonial ideologies can only end in a victory for the Indigenous if we first make the colonial framework visible, then set about dismantling it and reconstruct epistemology, methodology and knowledge in our own image and on our own terms.

The impact of colonisation on Australian Indigenous people cannot be stressed strongly enough. It disrupted an entire value system, altered the power and status of groups within Indigenous societies and rendered them all subordinate to the coloniser (Jebb & Haebich, 1992, p. 21). The impact of colonialism was especially devastating to the status of Indigenous women; the process of engendering descriptions of the Other has had very real consequences for Indigenous women leaving them degraded and even more marginalised than Indigenous men (Moreton-Robinson, 2000, p. 164; Smith, 1999, p. 46).

The extent to which representations of Indigenous women were shaped by imperialist ideologies becomes apparent in colonial discourse ripe with racist and sexist portrayal of native women in many colonies (Moreton-Robinson, 2000, pp. 168-169; Stoler, 1999, p. 173). This is nowhere more evident than in the manipulation of Indigenous women in the colonial imagination. An imagination fuelled by the artwork of the French explorers of the Australian continent, laced with romanticised images of curvaceous, bare-breasted women and encouraged by colonial accounts of Aboriginal women as "flirtatious" "promiscuous" and "undisciplined" (Jennings & Hollingsworth, 1988, p. 129). It was not just their lands that were colonised, the native female form became an object of fascination for colonial writers: "eroticised native bodies densely occupied the landscape of western literary production" (hooks, 1981, p. 16; see also Moreton-Robinson, 2000, pp. 25-29; Stoler, 1999, p. 174). The racist discourse used about and against Indigenous women across the globe served to remake them in the popular imagination as merely sexual object, both "exotic and erotic", rather than productive and dignified members of a society. The reality that colonial discourses "do not reduce to racial typologies alone suggests that the colonial order coupled sexuality, class and racial essence in defining what it meant to be productive ... successfully reproductive" and therefore a valuable and respectable member of a society (Stoler, 1999, p. 178; see also Moreton-Robinson, 2000, pp. 74, 169).

Colonisation saw native men lose land and often with it the ownership of the means of production. Indigenous women lost this and much more. Many representations depicted "native" women as nothing more than sexual objects, without power, autonomy or property, they were owned by their men and devalued by their society. The colonisers had made women, like "knowledge", a commodity, accessible, exploitable, and disposable (Moreton-Robinson, 2000, pp. 166, 169). All these factors have contributed to the inferior status of Indigenous women in society and in their communities. This "positioning of the feminine Other" effectively disempowered Indigenous women, and subjugated their wisdom (Smith, 1999, p. 90; Stoler, 1999, p. 74).

Historically, all that is known about “Others”, particularly Indigenous peoples, has been written from the perspective of the coloniser. This is certainly true of the discourse describing Indigenous women. There can be little doubt that Aboriginal women have been misrepresented, not just by colonial observers but by many commentators since. There therefore exists a need to challenge these representations, and surely this challenge should come from Aboriginal women themselves.

Aboriginal women's resistance through storytelling: A tradition reinvented

In some ways the battle for self-representation has been brewing for some time. There have been numerous Aboriginal writers drawing directly on their own experience and on stories from their family histories to “speak” to the broader audience through the medium of the written word. One of the factors that make such works so interesting and valuable is that the stories are told by the women themselves and thus offer great insight into the personal experiences of real people. Stories such as these also carry within them the stories of communities and societies. These are political, historical, sociological tales embedded in class, gender and identity struggles. Aboriginal women in particular write about personal struggles that are political battles. Their experiences of racism, sexism, disadvantage, violence and discrimination are as much about being a woman, a mother, an Aboriginal, working class, poor and Australian as they are about personal experience. As one is drawn into such stories it becomes apparent that all these attributes and identities are embodied in a single self that is expressed through the text. Though there are numerous examples of such works, the one that comes immediately to mind are the writings of Aunty Ruby Langford. While her writing is not written directly as “research”, it does produce knowledge and understanding and stands as testimony to the difficulty of “surviving between two cultures” (Langford, 1988, p. 269).

What is most important about the autobiographical writings of Aboriginal women is that they are “autobiographical/ethnographical”. They are the authentic voices of Aboriginal women as Aboriginal women speaking for themselves, and speaking about their culture. In this way they are truly representative. There are strong arguments in favour of this type of writing as research, particularly when it is the work of the marginalised within society and these will be examined throughout this paper.

While the autobiographical writing of Aboriginal women is generally held to be just that, much of the work borders on the ethnographic. As Russel (1998, p.2) notes, “Autobiography becomes ethnographic at the point where the ... author ... understands their personal history to be implicated in larger social

formations and historical processes”. Aboriginal authors, particularly those writing in the life history genre, are acutely aware that their personal histories have been shaped by social forces, and in particular a series of government policies and educational practices. This awareness is reflected in their writing; the identities of such women are played out among several cultural discourses, ethnic, sexual, racial, and class. While it could be argued that this literature invests more in personal experience and emotional consequences, it remains a valuable first step toward self-representation. Moreover, it is a common educational tool within many Indigenous societies. While the practice of storytelling as a means to educate and inform is respected and engrained in Aboriginal culture, it is yet to be accepted by the mainstream academy (Bin-Sallik, 2000, pp. 1-6). Change is slowly coming – autoethnography is the new ground where storytelling and research are merging on the borderlands of academia.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography holds appeal for Indigenous writers who often seek alternative ways of defining and representing themselves. As a research practice it resists “grand theorising” and drops the facade of “objective research” that takes subjects out of context in its search for a single truth (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 4; Spry, 2001, p. 712). Autoethnography differs from other research methods in several ways. It is one of a number of what Denzin (1989, pp. 27-28) refers to as “biographical methods” of research. It is a blend of ethnography and autobiography, in which the researcher does not take the conventional standpoint of the “objective outsider”. Instead it positions the researcher as “key informant”, “consummate insider” and as expert when writing on their own culture and experience. It also offers the opportunity for participants to be deeply involved in the research, becoming co-researchers, not mere subjects. The autoethnographic text emerges from within the self-as-researcher developing and evolving through a process of recognising and interpreting the imprint of culture on the self through interactions with others in various social contexts. In doing so, the autoethnographer rejects the notion that lived experience can only be understood indirectly, through traditional research practices such as observation, interviews or field studies. Instead they claim that autoethnography can be a means by which the researchers “voice becomes the dominant voice; speaking for themselves and their culture through their stories” (Denzin, 1989, p. 27; see also Gubrium & Holstien, 1997, p. 27; Spry, 2001, p. 714).

Autoethnography is a tool with which the researcher can study the social world from the “perspective of the interacting individual”. It is a “form of self-narrative” in which the self is placed within social, historical

and political context and it is “both a method and a text” of diverse interdisciplinary praxis (Denzin, 1997, p. xv; Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 9; Spry, 2001, p. 714). Autoethnography takes many forms. For Deck (1990, p. 239) autoethnography is the realm of the Indigenous researcher, the native ethnographer, whose unique inside knowledge of their culture is “sufficient to lend authority to the text” without the need to refer to outside scholarly sources. Pratt (1986) argues that autoethnography originates as a discourse from “the margins of dominant culture – in which academia is central – identifying the material, political, and transformational dimensions of representational politics”. Autoethnographic methods identify the interactions and representations of multiple selves in contexts that arguably transform the authorial “I” to an existential “We” (Pratt, 1986, p. 37). Therefore, autoethnography is an ideal research method/practice for those whose complex or fragmented identities give insight into the experiences of marginalised groups within dominant culture (Deck, 1990, p. 293).

■ Autoethnography in social research

Gatson (2003) describes the practice of sociological autoethnography as being connected to such concepts as “figural anthropology of the self”, “generative autobiography” and as a practice in which a discourse of resistance “between the auto (self), ethno (collective) and graphy (writing) can be formed, a site where the interacting individual speaks of social relationships”. The autoethnographer has a unique relationship to their “biographic facts” that are not equally accessible to all (Gatson, 2003, pp. 22-23). The fragments of their existence that piece together to formulate their “identity” within a social context, and the interpretive framework for understanding these facts are shaped by numerous interacting cultural, socio-historical forces and biological circumstances that are outside the grasp of an external researcher (Gatson, 2003, pp. 22-24). The researcher-self/self-researcher as such has a monopoly on this information, and thus can offer a unique insight into their otherwise unknowable world (Denzin & Lincoln, 1997, 1998, p. 87; Spry, 2001, pp. 722-727).

Gatson (2003) raises the debate as to whether academic endeavours should focus on “facts” or the “interpretation of those facts” as central to understanding “social effect”. To address issues of both “fact” finding in so far as that is possible and of interpreting the meaning within them “autoethnography” as academic research, should present particular events, establish when, where and how the knowledge of those events came about; and lastly and perhaps most importantly demonstrate how these “events” are indicative of larger social meanings and trends (Gatson, 2003, p. 2). Thus to be anthropological/sociological, autoethnography

draws on life experiences, and interpret the meaning of these experiences and requires that they be understood in relation to external social forces.

While some have identified early examples of autoethnography in historical texts such as W. E. B. Du Bois’s (1903) articulation of “double consciousness” (cited in Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 3; Gatson, 2003, p. 22), it is generally understood that most considerations of autoethnography grow out of the “crises in representation” motivated by a postmodern consciousness, that are now characteristic of much social science research. This would explain the trend towards autobiographical studies in postmodern research representation, a trend driven by a loss of faith in the usefulness of fixed “disciplinary boundaries and language” indicative of the discontentment with social science research devoid of “intuition and emotion” (Ellis, 1997, cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, pp. 2-4; Ellis & Bochner, 2000, cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 735).

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) attribute this trend to a philosophical shift within the Western and masculine viewpoint of research, “where the Indigenous, feminist” voices of the borderlands engage in “multiple discourses” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 3), with the emerging discourse surrounding the self-as-researcher and the researcher-as-self resulting in the new genre of autoethnography. In this sense autoethnography is a radical reaction to “realist agendas” in ethnography and sociology (Spry, 2001, p. 711) “which privilege”, writes Denzin (1992), “the researcher over the subject, method over subject matter, and maintain commitments to outmoded conceptions of validity, truth, and generalizability”(cited in Denzin, 1999, p. 20). In this context, autoethnography seeks to clarify the contradictory relationships between self and culture that so acutely marks the postmodern condition, while also exerting a very real influence on the politics of representation and scholarship.

Pratt (1994) links the concept of autoethnography to Indigenous researchers and particularly to the problematic research relationship between the colonised and the coloniser. Pratt describes autoethnography as a challenge to ways in which the marginalised have been depicted by others (1994, p. 28). In this sense, autoethnography as research, can be seen as a form of scholarly resistance – a method employed to challenge dominant forms of knowledge, meaning and power. It is also a tool with which Indigenous people can decolonise research practices and representations of themselves. This is possible with Indigenous autoethnography because the researcher is the subject, the key informant and the expert. The subject is transformed from a subjugated role into the “epistemological and ontological axis on which the entire research process revolves” (Spry, 2001, p. 706).

Autoethnography: Its strengths, weaknesses, and appropriateness as a voice for Indigenous women

Autoethnographies often focus on a culture or subculture, and authors use their own experiences of the culture to investigate and interpret self and self-other interactions. Such research is often practiced by Indigenous scholars from the Third World, where native researchers construct their own stories and call into question the interpretations of outsiders who claim knowledge of their culture (Charmaz & Mitchell, 1996, p. 194; Ellis & Bochner, 2000, pp. 736-745). Ellis and Bochner (2000) advocate that the Indigenous autoethnographic researcher is a full "insider" by virtue of being the "native". This is beneficial because the voice of the insider is assumed to be more "true" than that of the outsider in current debate (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, pp. 733-736; Reed-Danahay, 1997, pp. 3-4), hence the common use of "key-informants" by researchers not linked to a specific culture or subculture. Of course researchers, operating as their own key informants, are not able to speak for every individual within that culture, nor though are other key-informants. One Aboriginal person cannot speak for all Aborigines, nor can one woman speak for all women (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Settlermaier & Taylor, 2002). Nevertheless, like the many Aboriginal women who put their lives in print, autoethnographers provide an authoritative voice that permits insight into an otherwise unknowable world. Denzin (1997, p. 87) advocates that autoethnographers "work outward from their own biographies to seek and produce works that speak clearly and powerfully about these worlds" and therefore this is a valid and useful research method.

Autoethnography also opens up opportunities for presenting research findings to the widest possible audience, in a variety of culturally and socially appropriate forms. These forms include the standard research reports, conference papers and publications, and the less typical forms of expression such as dramatisations of stories derived from research findings which can be acted out on film or on stage, translated into dance and song or even into art works. This opportunity makes research findings more accessible and useful to communities. An example of this application of research findings can be found in Olson's (2004) autoethnography on battered women, in which she is researcher, subject, and presenter. Olson presents her findings as a dramatisation performed on stage, she moves successfully between the role of narrator, storyteller and analyst. The result is that research findings reach an otherwise unreachable audience, informing them about the startling realities of battered women's lives. Other autoethnographic findings take the form of poetry, or semi-fictional stories such as Ellis's (1995) *Final negotiations* in order to reach the desired audience (Ellis, 1997, p. 126). The potential applications for such a research practice seem almost endless.

As with any research practice, this relatively new form of research is not without its critics. Bruner (1993) cautioned that such research risks becoming "narcissistic and egotistical" should the researcher become overly immersed in the research (cited in Denzin, 1997, p. 218). Thus the autoethnographer to be effective must be able to alternate between the roles of researcher and subject effectively, speaking within the text as subject and scholar alternatively. Reed-Danahay (1997) while acknowledging the value and contribution of insider knowledge, also suggests the native autoethnographer is "not completely at home" within their cultural identity. Although linked culturally to the "phenomenon of displacement", a condition she associates with rapid socio-cultural change that positions them outside the dominant Western discourse, they maintain a complex dual identity (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 4). This inability to fit entirely within one cultural identity is not however a flaw, but an asset when undertaking autoethnography. The autoethnographer must move between identities, not being quite "at home" in either. The multiple roles of native/insider/outsider/key informant/researcher and the ability to "transcend everyday conceptions of selfhood and social life" are essential to writing and doing autoethnography. "This is a postmodern condition" and it involves rewriting the "self and the social" (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 4). Especially among Indigenous researchers, there is a very real discontentment with imperialistic, Eurocentric, masculine forms of knowledge and research practice that make autoethnography an appealing research method from an Indigenous perspective, especially when writing about Indigenous women.

Indigenous theorist and researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith claims that traditional research practices are tainted by imperialism and colonialism. Smith (1999) works for the decolonisation of research methods, and calls for the researched to become the researcher. This challenge arises from the destructive effects of past research practices, misrepresentations of Indigenous peoples and the consequences of these for Indigenous communities. Autoethnography then is an opportunity to formulate knowledge of Indigenous peoples and experience from an Indigenous perspective, without intruding on the lives and experiences of others. It is also an opportunity for Aboriginal people to be not just the researched, the subject, but the co-researcher. Conducting autoethnographic research as the primary researcher could also be seen as a valuable lesson in empathy and a learning experience for one embarking on a research career. After all, one should never expect another to do what they would not do themselves. Thus, being the subject of research and experiencing the exposure and vulnerability that disclosure brings is a good prerequisite for any researcher, especially for one undertaking Indigenous research.

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