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FRIENDSHIPS IN THE FIELD: METHODOLOGICAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT[1]

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Abstract: This autobiographically based article aims to consider the practical application of Anderson's conception of analytic autoethnography under particular circumstances and requirements for its use. It reflects on the friendships that developed between me and my key informants during ethnographic research. In this context I refer to autoethnography as a method that allows researchers to identify aspects of their lives that have relevance beyond the personal and deal analytically with friendships in the field. Moreover, I consider how the researcher can analytically handle friendships in the field using analytic autoethnography, even when he is not a complete member of the community under investigation.

Keywords: autoethnography; analytic autoethnography; friendship; reflexivity; ethnography.

Introduction

Autoethnography is most often defined as a method that offers researchers a way of articulating their personal connection to identities, experiences and even emotions (Adams et al., 2015). Researchers who do autoethnography use personal experience and an autobiographical approach to understand cultural expressions in ethnography as a type of qualitative research. Autoethnography is therefore not only a research method, but also an output. In "Analytic Autoethnography" (2006), Anderson notes that there has always been an autoethnographic element in qualitative sociological research[2]. The increased attention

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[2] The most frequently mentioned researchers who first used autoethnographic elements were members of the Chicago School. However, the ethnographers of the Chicago school were neither self-observational nor self-visible in their writing, Robert Ezra Park and The Hobo are an example. Ezra

paid to autoethnography as a social research[3] method in the last thirty years is related to three fundamental changes in social science discourse that took place in the second half of the 20th century. These include the shift to reflexivity, the realization that emotions play a role in social research and acknowledging that they are an important factor in analysis and the postmodern skepticism associated with the generalization of knowledge and theories (Anderson 2006, p. 373). Following the tendency to incorporate reflexivity into the research and deconstruction of subject–object relations, the number of autoethnographies increased in the 1970s and 1980s[4] (Finlay, 2002). Explaining the researcher's personality in the context of research, sharing the researcher's personal stories and experiences and the way these influence the social reality they research came to be seen as an integral part of ethnographic research (and other types as well). Nowadays there are several different definitions and views of autoethnography, including critique. Nonetheless, a growing number of experts have pointed out the usefulness of this method. Denzin and Lincoln view autoethnography as one of the products of methodological innovation in contemporary qualitative inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Despite the confusion and ambiguity associated with the definition of autoethnography (see Denzin, 2006) and the ideologically challenging genre of inquiry (Wall, 2006), I found this method very useful in my ethnographic research. Although the term autoethnography is wide-ranging, for the purposes of this article I will proceed from the view of autoethnography presented by Leon Anderson in 2006, which most experts have come to recognize in recent years. Anderson views autoethnography as a type of traditional sociological ethnography and distinguishes between analytic autoethnography and evocative autoethnography, considering the latter to be insufficiently analytical. Anderson characterizes analytic autoethnography as a complete member ship, reflexivity and narrative visibility. Anderson introduces five key features of analytic autoethnography: (1) the researcher has to have complete member research (CMR) status, (2) the autoethnography must contains analytic reflexivity, (3) the researcher's self must have narrative visibility, (4) there is dialogue with informants beyond the self, and a (5) commitment to theoretical analysis (Anderson, 2006, p. 387). In this paper, I will concentrate on Anderson's first requirement regarding the use of analytic autoethnography – CMR status.

Anderson further divides CMR status into two types – the opportunist and the convert. Whereas an opportunistic CMR may be born into a group or becomes a member of the group being studied for health, professional or recreational reasons (Anderson, 2006, p. 379), the convert CMR becomes a member of a social world with clear locales and a

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Park captured the autobiographical experience of researchers who lived in a given environment and had similar experiences to the locals. Even Park's students had personal relationships with the groups they studied, but only exceptionally did they engage in self-reflexive observation. Students of the Second Chicago School became ethnographically interested in their work environment and their approach was analytically superior to that of the first wave of the Chicago School; however, this did not enrich the researcher's role as social author in such settings (Anderson, 2006).

[3] Here, I use the term social research because autoethnography has been used in various social sciences.

[4] One of the most famous and frequently cited works in which the researcher writes about her cultural context is *Facing Mount Kenya* by Kenyatta, Malinowski's student, in 1938.

subculture during the course of the research. Robert Merton referred to this as the *ultimate participant in a dual participant-observer role* (Merton, 1988). As Anderson states, researchers begin with a purely data-oriented research interest in the foreign setting but this is converted into complete immersion and membership during the course of the research (Merton, 1988, p. 379). The immersion process is crucial for becoming a CMR. Even though I developed close relationships in the community where I did my research, I was not a member of the community as defined by Anderson. I was not a CMR as I did not meet one of Anderson's key conditions for the use of autoethnography. Yet I am convinced that the use of autoethnography is justified in my case, essential even, and did not compromise the analytical and informative value of the data and writing. Moreover, I agree with Vryan, who states that the definition of analytic autoethnography must be capable of representing all analytic autoethnographic efforts (Vryan, 2006, p. 408), even those related to self-analyses regardless of whether the self-analysis is done as part of traditional ethnographic fieldwork.

I encountered situations in the field that significantly affected the outcome of the research. There were crucial aspects of my own life which had relevance beyond the personal level and which enabled me to get closer to my informants. These aspects related to friendships in the field and shared life experiences with my informants. In addition, personal events that influenced the subsequent final research process occurred soon after I returned from my fieldwork. I decided to choose autoethnography as a way of dealing with this scientifically and personally, and also to convey these aspects to readers, despite my not having become a member of the researched group, as Anderson insists upon. My intention here is to explore the space between myself and the people I studied and point out the research circumstances where the use of autoethnography or autobiographical personal narratives may be appropriate.

Background to my ethnographic research

Since this is partly an autoethnographic article, I consider it important to note at this point that the professors at my alma mater encouraged students (including me) to engage in reflexivity and to use autobiographical elements where appropriate[5]. I was influenced by Malinowski's conception of traditional ethnographic fieldwork (Firth, 1957) and therefore dedicated myself to my fieldwork. I did not have a chance to stay in the field for a longer period, such as one year; however, I undertook four successive fieldwork trips in 2014-2017 in Mexico City and spent a total of seven months in the field. The longest continuous field research trip lasted three months and the shortest three weeks. The ethnographic research

[5] The shift towards autoethnography was related to changes associated with the turns in ethnographic research in the second half of twenty century (Dourish, 2014). Two of these turns foreshadowed the growing use of autoethnography. Firstly, as Clifford states in *Writing Culture*, in the 1960s "ethnographers began to write about their field experience in ways that disturbed the prevailing subjective/objective balance" (Clifford & Marcus, 1986, p. 13). The second important shift took place in the 1980s, when interest in self-reflection began to grow among anthropologists. Autoethnography matured in the 1990s and required new thinking to assess the new style of ethnographic writing (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 253).

was focused on the analysis of collective representations of the perception of death in relation to the Mexican 'nationalization of death', manifested in ritual practices during the Day of the Dead feast. The interviews focused, among other things, on how the informants perceived death, whether they celebrated the Day of the Dead or whether they practiced other remembrance rituals. In 2012 and 2014, I was in Mexico during the celebrations, so I was familiar to some extent with Mexican culture and the Day of the Dead feast. However, in this article I discuss the research I conducted in 2016 and 2017. I used classical ethnographic research methods[6] and dealt a lot with reflexivity and the role of emotions in research.

Based on analyses of the field diaries, research data and other types of research materials, I can divide my fieldwork into two phases. The first phase took place from the end of September until mid-November. In September 2016 I arrived in Mexico City to conduct ethnographic research among middle-class Mexicans living there. Although I'd been to Mexico before, I still felt more like a stranger in the field. As Gobo notes, feeling that way can be very beneficial for research and is actually recommended "so the ethnographer continues to be surprised", and her thinking is still sharp and allows her to record things she wouldn't be able to in a state of non-alienation (Gobo, 2008, pp. 9–10). Because I was researching a sensitive topic I exploited this estrangement most of the time and combined it with *participant observation* and aimed to *immerse myself in the culture* as much as possible[7]. However, in the first three weeks of my research in 2016, I felt more or less like a *professional stranger* (Scheper-Hughes, 2004, p. 60) and my informants saw me as a white middle-class European woman with sufficient economic and symbolic capital. During this time, I met Ricardo and Sara, who became my key informants. My third key informant was Carlos, whom I knew from my field research in 2014. All my key informants introduced me to their acquaintances and my circle of informants expanded thanks to them. When I was leaving for the Czech Republic at the end of November 2016, I was on good terms with Ricardo, Sara and Carlos, but I would not call it friendship. That changed during the second phase of the research from February to May 2017. The second phase was defined by the friendship forming between me and my key informants and the associated reciprocity, trust and loyalty. Friendships and subsequent personal events fundamentally affected the course of the research, the final data and my role in the field. Below I describe the circumstances of the friendship and suggest that analytical autoethnography is one way to deal with the emergent friendship(s) between researcher and informant(s).

[6] Specifically: participant observation, semi-structured, ethnographic and informal interviews, content analysis of different types of documents and archival documents, self-reflection and some visual anthropology methods (photography, videos).

[7] In this regard I did not try to 'go native', since I knew it was impossible, mainly because of my appearance. I aimed to be a participant observer in the true sense of the word. To become sufficiently immersed in the culture, I decided to spend my time in Mexico alone (without my friends or family visiting me) and to stay with my informants. I lived in Mexico City for six months in total, mostly at Ricardo's apartment, which is situated in the historical center, and Carlos's apartment, situated on the border of *delegación* Xochimilco. I traveled by public transport between their homes every two weeks. Both became my key informants and I enjoyed staying with them very much.

Friendship(s) and trust

As I was interviewing people on potentially sensitive topics, the necessary trust had to be built between me and my informants. I knew that without creating mutual trust and a platform to support each other, it would be very difficult, even impossible, to create a suitable narrative space between me and my informants. I followed Hortense Powdermaker's advice, who emphasized the importance of building trust, especially when researching sensitive topics (Powdermaker, 1966). However, I did not have a guide or plan on how to build trust. Trust cannot be forced by the researcher. As Fetterman states, "Ethnographers need the trust of the people they work with to complete their task (…) trust can be an instant and spontaneous chemical reaction, but more often it is a long, steady process, like building a friendship." (Fetterman, 2010, p. 145). I'd read research accounts and ethnographies of how anthropologists succeeded in building trust with informants (Matoušek, 2004; Tobin, 2017) and I knew the basics of psychology, but I also wanted to be myself, so I followed my intuition on building trust (Stöckelová & Abu Ghosh, 2013). Also, I was aware of the pros and cons of different approaches to exploring sensitive topics, such as attitudes towards dying and perceptions of death (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008, pp- 15–23). However, in conducting ethnographic research, I could not remain anonymous or emotionally uninvolved, as some experts recommend when researching sensitive topics. On the contrary, my three key informants and I gradually became friends. Much has been written about the emergence of friendships between researchers and informants and about the methodological and other impacts of these friendships on the researchers and the data obtained (Hendry, 1992). Some experts consider friendship to be a method of qualitative inquiry (Adams et al., 2015; Tillmann-Healy, 2003; Castrodale & Zingaro, 2015), others, especially feminist anthropologists, include friendship as part of reciprocal ethnography (Gay y Blasco & Hernandez, 2020) or assume that friendship between informants and researchers facilitates conversations about sensitive topics (Lucia de Oliviera, 2009). Despite the differences in methodological views of friendship, there is a consensus that friendship requires equality on both sides. One could argue that there was little or no equality between me and my key informants because of my cultural and social background. At this point, I think it is important to state that the informants with whom I made friendships are members of the same social class, had the same level of education as me at the time I was doing the research, and there are status symmetries[8] between us. Moreover, the mutual interdependence, events in our lives and shared difficult situations helped to establish these friendships. The following section looks at the mutual interdependence, equality and shared emotions that were essential for the establishment and development of friendships and required a particular methodological perspective.

[8] Status symmetries include, for example, age group, social class and level of education (Ortner, 2010, pp. 211–233).

Shared neighborhood, shared fear, shared grief

The things that helped me develop friendships with my key informants and that also affected me personally were related to the research topic, the locality or borough where we all lived and the sharing of negative emotions, namely fear and sadness, and mutual support.

The importance of the place where my informants live and identify with first became apparent during our interviews. Although my interviews focused mainly on perceptions of death, The Day of the Dead feast and related subjects, the informal interviews in particular often turned to the city itself and specific localities. When I came to live in the center of Mexico City for the first time in 2016, on the very first day of my stay, Ricardo told me: "The Day of the Dead is every day here." After noticing my puzzled expression, he added: "Because someone is dying here all the time." I found his statement very interesting, but it wasn't until my second stay in Mexico City in 2017 that I slowly began to understand what he meant by it. I knew that Mexico City was one of the most dangerous cities in the world and I remembered that an average of 105 people were murdered every month there[9]. Cuahtémoc, with the oldest urban area in Mexico City, where I and my two key informants lived was among the boroughs with the highest crime rate. For this reason many Mexicans (like my key informant Carlos) choose to live outside the city center in quieter and relatively safe boroughs such as Coyoacán or Xochimilco. One of the outcomes of our interviews and observations was that I noticed the that the location they lived in was important to my informants and played an important role in their self-identification process. I soon found out that they also attached importance to the place in connection with death. As Sara once noted: "We live in a dangerous city. None of us actually know if we will live to see the next day. Death takes place every day here."

When I realized that the whole urban area was very important to my informants for various reasons, I tried to make my way around the city like them. That meant that I went either with them or alone to the parts of the city where only locals go usually. My key informants gave me a lot of advice on how to get around the city, what to look for, which *colonías* were dangerous. On my walks and when wandering through the city I had to be much more careful than in the Czech Republic. That led to a shift in my position from an outsider perspective to an insider perspective. I wasn't a member of the community in Anderson's sense, but I was an insider because we shared the locality and experience of danger. After a few weeks I realized I was more anxious, that it was difficult for me to relax and to feel safe in general. I tried to deal with that by writing a personal diary and sometimes I shared my feelings with my sister. Gradually I came to feel that it was too much. One day, a young man chased me into the house I lived in and the next day I noticed two strange men who were following me in the streets. Ricardo told me they probably wouldn't kill me, but that I should be careful. My perception of danger was changing. I was experiencing what it meant to live in a dangerous city. Besides documenting and analyzing actions, I

[9] In 2016, 1,263 people were murdered in Mexico City. Mexico City, alongside the northern Mexican states, is therefore one of the areas with the highest number of murders. In first place is Estado de México, where an average of 2,600 people are murdered each year (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática, 2016).

was also engaging with them. My own experience of the dangers in the locality where my informants lived allowed me to get closer to them. I was aware of the fact that I had to pay much more attention than in the Czech Republic. After approximately two months in the field, I found myself sharing my concerns about street safety and even my fears with some informants. When Ricardo told me that men had recently been shot near a street where I walked regularly, I couldn't help but feel emotional and frightened. I noticed that sharing this fear for our own lives brought me and my informants closer. One day when I told Ricardo that sometimes I felt like I couldn't live in Mexico City anymore, he told me: *"Now you are chilanga*[10]*, you belong here"*. Later I asked Ricardo what he meant about "me being *chilanga*". He told me that being aware of the danger on the streets and experiencing fear is typical of Mexico City residents, but not of tourists or visitors who have a theoretical knowledge of the city but cannot walk around. Thanks to my key informants, I was able to make my around the city and I saw it as it is. That strengthened our friendship, as well as the feeling that I belonged. I was not a complete research member, yet I felt the need to deal with this analytically.

Other circumstances that led to the strengthening of the friendship between me, Ricardo and Sara include sharing experiences of the death of loved ones. For several months I was interested in how my informants perceived death and how they coped with the deaths of loved ones. I listened to them, I was present, and some even told me that it had a therapeutic effect on them. When Ricardo cried because he dreamed of his friend's death, I was there to hug him and share his grief. We shared experiences of the death of a loved one in our conversations, which strengthened our friendship. I come very close to approximating the emotional stance of the people I was studying (Adler &Adler, 1987, p. 67), which raised ethical questions above all. An important moment in our friendships and in the development of my research was when my uncle and friend died within two weeks of one another. Until then, I had experienced only the deaths of my grandmother and grandfather, who both died a natural peaceful death. This time, it was a different experience that affected my personality and my perception of death and the roles were reversed – my key informants and friends helped me through the grieving process, they supported me as a friend does in this situation and as I had supported them before. One could say that the reciprocal circle was closed. However, I had to deal with these facts analytically and ethically.

Ethical, methodological and analytical considerations

My friendships with my key informants influenced me considerably especially at the beginning. When I had to record events and conversations and be myself as a non-researcher at the same time, I felt almost schizophrenic sometimes. When I felt tension between the demands of my fieldwork and of being a friend, I dealt with it through my reflective personal diary. The diary also helped me to deal with the research topic and grieving process. When researching sensitive topics it is important for me to keep a reflective diary and not forget to relax and rest regularly.

[10] Chilango/chilanga is a slang term for a Mexico City resident.

The advantage of our friendship was that it introduced more authenticity into the relationship between me and my key informants and thanks to that I learned important things about their lives, perceptions and about Mexican culture. Despite the undeniable advantages, the emergence of friendships also brought ethical questions to the surface. I was aware that informants might perceive me as someone who was exploiting them, who needed something (information, their time, their knowledge) from them and who was not therefore being honest with them. I found myself in a situation where our friendship was directly intertwined with the research and the boundaries between the personal and professional were very thin. Carolyn Ellis' recommendation helped me the most in this regard. In her writing she points out that when a friendship forms between the researcher and informants, it is appropriate to look at it as a method and approach the relationship as the researcher would a friendship (Ellis, 2015, p. 61). For me, this meant inviting friends to lunch, sharing fieldnotes and photos with them, giving them presents, not making inappropriate demands on their time, resources and emotions (ibid.) and above all maintaining the relationships after the research was finished. I invited them to visit me at my home.

Given that friendship involves two parties and has a significant impact on the researcher, it is appropriate to analyze it properly and the results of the analysis should be included in the final manuscript. For the purposes of the analysis, researchers could ask themselves the following:

- How do I perceive friendship?
- How do my informants perceive friendship in general and how do they perceive our friendship?
- What are the cultural differences in perceptions of the friendship between me and my informants?
- What differences are there in the way I and my informants perceive our friendships?
- Do I have the resources and time to maintain this friendship now and after the research is over?
- Am I neglecting my own research and professional responsibilities for friendship?
- Am I sufficiently addressing any conflicts in the friendship and their possible impact on the research?

Conclusion

In this article, I have considered friendship as a circumstance suitable for the use of analytical autoethnography. Using the examples, I wanted to show that analytical autoethnography can be used by researchers who are not full members of the group or community, despite Anderson proposing the opposite. Friendships in the field influence researchers' identity, immersion and inclusion in the group or community and allow them to gain a different type of information from their informants. Friendship does not equal complete member researcher status but provides strong bonds that are often similar to CMR status and provides a similar level of insight into the community as CMR status. In this context, I agree with Denzin, who states that "the goal of autoethnography (…) is to show rather than to tell and, thus, disrupt the politics of traditional research relationships, traditional forms of representation, and traditional social science orientations to audiences" (Denzin, 2003, p. 203).

Fully immersive self-observation and self-analysis is unnecessary when researchers establish friendships in the field and when they share situations and circumstances that require a deepening of trust between them and their informants. Autoethnography or the autoethnographic approach that is based on profound self-analysis can be used when the researcher is emotionally involved in the research with the informants or when personal events influence the course of the research, which may involve changes in the researcher's attitudes to the research topic, as in my case. In order for this to happen, the researcher does not have to be a member of the community. Autoethnographic approach is especially worth considering when researching taboos or sensitive topics and when the researcher is not looking for emotional and opinion neutrality. Good, well written analytical autoethnography can therefore be both a suitable complement to such research and a tool enabling the researcher to come to terms with personal beliefs and opinions on a given sensitive topic. The value of autoethnographic writing should then be judged on its usefulness. It should be judged on whether it helps us to understand the people, culture, society and the researchers themselves. Simply put, researching ourselves should be related to researching others and vice versa.

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