

## THE AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC METHOD – AN ALTERNATIVE IN COMMUNICATION

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to investigate the methodological framework in the communication sciences through a metadiscursive approach. The approach focuses on the qualitative research methods, especially the new ethnography. We identify the advantages of using the autoethnographic method, the subjectivity and the alternative options, which turn around life, texts, game or authenticity. In a narrative manner, the approach brings forward our critical view on the academic life. The paper also takes over the task of answering some classical methodological objections that may be raised against this pedagogical and research approach. It is impossible not to evaluate.

**Keywords:** autoethnographic method, qualitative methods, communication, rhetorical critique, culture.

### 1. Preamble. About chess openings and scientific research methods

We would like to start with an analogy between the chess opening theory and the research methods in communication sciences. From the very beginning we have to mention that this analogy seems a powerful one to us. The powerful “pole” is represented by the chess opening research rather than the one in the communication methodology field. At present there are plenty of specialized books analyzing the starting movement of one opening. Thus, we may find books of hundreds of pages dealing only with certain openings such as: the Spanish opening, the queen’s gambit accepted opening, etc. (if accent is laid on white) or the Sicilian defence, King Indian defence etc (if we want to highlight the movements of black)

In chess theory the dogma according to which you have to occupy the centre with the pawns and the pieces is well known. This positional advantage may transform in a decisive one as the chess pieces placed in front of the table may reach the desired direction more easily: the king’s side or the queen’s side. Furthermore, the control of the centre by one of the parties restrains the possibilities of the other, who has to be satisfied with a more “peaceful” position.

The opening laying the stress on control of the centre, with the very first movement (e.g. 1. e4 or 1. d4), may resemble the quantitative research methods. It is a well-known fact that the quantitative research methods follow measurements, statistics, and forecasts as exact as possible. As the openings counting on control of the centre fiercely dominate the researches in chess opening theory, the quantitative researches dominate the investigations in the field of communication sciences.

Altogether with the hypermodern movement in chess, the centre control dogma was disputed. The main idea was in the first phase of the game one does not have to aim at occupying the centre with pawns or pieces, but to control the centre from the distance. Most of the times this happened either by flanking one or both bishops, or by

actions on the flanks of the table. The aimed result was to destroy or deconstruct the centre of the opponent and then to occupy and use its advantages to strategically win the game.

The hypermodernist movement in chess through his well-know representatives (Alexander Alekhine, Richard Réti, Aaron Nimzovitsch, Ernst Grünfeld, Xavier Tartakover etc.) has initiated and popularized a series of openings, called “of flank”, among which we can mention: Alekhine’s defence (1. e4, Cf6), Reti opening (1. Cf3, d5 2. c4), Nimzovitch-Larsen opening (1. b3) etc. Although in the practice of contemporary great masters the flank openings (or defences) are rarely met in important tournaments, nobody could dispute their theoretical validity. In the end it is only a question of style. Similarly, in the field of research methods the two large types do not mutually exclude but supplement each other, being able to be part of somebody’s “repertoire” at a turn. Unavoidably some of them, namely the qualitative ones, are used by fewer researchers, although they are accepted as legitimate in the research methodology.

If we were to keep the analogy with chess, we may say that even in the reduced field of flank openings there are some that are used more often and others called “unorthodox” or “irregular” which are barely treated in the great books or encyclopaedias of openings theory. In this case we could mention the Mokele Mbembe variant of Alekhine’s defence, where after the movements 1. e4, Cf6 2. e5, the black instead of moving “classically” 2... Cd5, it chooses the unusual variant 2... Ce4; or Grob’s attack where the white begins with a “primitive” movement: 1. g4; or Myers defence where after the flank movement 1. c4 the black answers with 1... g5.

Within the qualitative research methods in the field of communication some are recognized, such as the long interview. Others are less used, such as the rhetorical critique. In its turn ethnography may have several variants. The one chosen by us to be dealt with is the autoethnographic method.

As Aron Nimzovitsch beautifully said: “Theory is the practice of grandmaster and without it we cannot go further”. As a result, if the communication methodology theory is the exercise of those in the field, then in order to be able to apply or overcome certain limits it is necessary to know every innovative “movement” in the field.

Although Grob’s attack in chess is rarely use in practice, it is also fundamental; questioning the chess theories, the autoethnographic method is rarely met in the research practice, it is to question the certain assumptions of research in social sciences in general and in communication sciences in particular. In other words the auto ethnographic method wishes to test the limits or to force the limits of research.

Goodall (2000, 194) in his book *Writing the new ethnography* is as trenchant as possible in this sense when he speaks about the new ethnography:

“Frankly, I don’t think messing with your head is a problem. I think messing with your head is what all scholarship should be and do. It should be dangerous. It should expand your mind. It should open locks, provide pathways; offer a language capable of inspiring personal, social, and institutional liberation. I think it should help people think and behave differently, if they choose to”.

## 2. Definition of autoethnography

Autoethnography came up as a consequence of some transformations in the field of ethnography. Norman Denzin (1997, p. 5) analyses the representation crisis in ethnography – a filtration of doubts on objectivity and neutrality in anthropology, sociology and related fields – as follows:

“Language and speech do not mirror experience: they create experience and in the process of creation constantly transform and defer that is being described. The meanings of a subject’s statements are, therefore, always in motion... There can never be a final, accurate representation of what was meant or said – only different textual representations of different experiences”.

In other words, if objectivity and truthfulness are problematic, and the factual representation is not the only legitimate one, then other objectives may be legitimated as well: to call up emotional responses to emblematic experiences through personal narrations, to narrate the social theory, to question the habits and limits of science and to “interconnect” the personal with the professional. The last objective, “the full accounting for and utilization of the researcher’s personal body and felt experience as research instrument” (Banks Stephen P. și Banks Anna, 2000, 233) was the nucleus of what we call today autoethnography.

We may briefly define in a few lines this approach issued from the reflection upon the specificity of social sciences, as follows:

“Deeply entrenched in this debate is the narrativebased method of *autoethnography*, a methodology of academic investigation that not only acknowledges the speaking, theorizing researcher but also centers him or her in an effort to illuminate how the experiences of that self are representative of (and in some cases constitutive of) larger social systems. Autoethnographers argue that some questions in communication can be answered only by careful, critical analysis of life experiences. To this end, they take their own self as an entry into culture. Such investigations inform communication theory as a method of *theorizing*, using the self as the location for that communicative work” (Warren, 2009, 68).

In order to best grasp the specificity of the autoethnographic method it is best to separate the two terms making it and describe their characteristics. The terminological binomial lying at the bottom of the method is made up of: „auto” and „ethnography”.

The first term „auto” refers to personal experiences. It sends to the subject, to the self authority or to the one who understands. “Auto” sends to the researcher’s autobiography, to the fact that any research originates in subjectivity:

“Autoethnography examines the lived experiences of the self in order to question and open up one’s experiences to communicative analysis. Stemming from a belief that new knowledge can be gained by communication scholars’ investigating their own communicative lives, autoethnography becomes a mode of scholarship that answers unique questions that deal with the mundane qualities of an individual’s life. Questions such as how one experiences racism or sexism, how minute moments of communication done by a self build larger systems of power, or how privilege or domination is experienced can be answered through autoethnography (Warren, 2009, 68).

It is necessary that the critical self should formulate such questions (about the race, gender, sexuality and/or class systems) and to be the one who answers as it is the one who can closely examine the constant repetitions and configurations within communication that make up culture.

The second term “ethnography” sends to the narration of culture. Any life story may take the form of an autobiography. Still, there is a certain exigency according to which autoethnography has to be explicitly or implicitly related to cultural systems. In other words: “A story of how a cultural member experiences his or her disability functions as autoethnography only if the singular story builds an understanding of how disability is understood on a larger cultural level” (Warren, 2009, 69).

We don't merely follow the simple story or joke, but the means in which the narrated personal experience supposes the reflection: „But using personal experience does not mean an autoethnographer can tell only her or his story. Rather, the autoethnographer must be able to distance her- or himself from and reflect on personal experience” (Adams, 2011, 158). Personal experiences should make sense for the others and speak about or motivate social change.

Autoethnography is closely related to critical theory as the self stories are told around power and culture, namely where the “narrator” is free or constrained. Consequently, “As a critical methodology, autoethnography ‘stories’ the self in order to resist dominant narratives, complicate taken-for-granted ways of thinking, and disrupt normative communication patterns” (Warren, 2009, 69).

If we realize the unification between auto and ethnography, that is between self and culture, then the sense of the autoethnography is to critical the condition of culture where the self is positioned: “In this sense, autoethnography is more than a telling of one's experience; it is a critical looking outward at power relations in a cultural space that contains the meaning available for understanding the writer's (i.e., one's own) life and text” (Banks Stephen P. și Banks Anna, 2000, 235).

### 3. Critiques of autoethnography

The autoethnographical method may be reservedly looked at by a part of the researchers. Maybe the main objection refers to eliminating the value of truth as purpose of the scientific research. In other words, an autoethnographer may falsify, imagine or transform his experiences into fiction in order to be in agreement with the view he wants to support. To this objection the answer is that the autoethnographer does not look for the truth, but to reflect at his experiences and their connection to the cultural systems. The main objective is understanding communication not discovering the truth. In social sciences in general and in communication sciences in particular it is “contagion” or persuasion which determines the faith and role of a theory, not validity. The latter rather determines the faith of natural sciences theories. We propose alternative expressions of truth such as “literary value” or “trust narration”.

Unlike others qualitative methods in the field of social sciences, of communication (as ethnography, discourse and conversation analysis and rhetorical critique), autoethnography cannot be classically evaluated, as it cannot answers questions such as “Is the used method among the most useful in approaching the interest problem?” or “Was the relevant literature adequately included and used to justify and interpret this paper?”. In other words, as Sandra L. Ragan notices, autoethnography provokes us to meditate and eventually to change the concept of communication “method”:

“It is neither methodical nor systematic, purposefully, and thus it cannot be evaluated by our mainstream paradigm criteria. This poses a dilemma when, as editors and reviewers, we receive a manuscript that clearly has merit but that cannot be assessed by the standards we

believe we must impose. A number of questions get raised: should all communications journals adopt criteria that permit assessment of this and other non-mainstream approaches? What would such criteria look like? How do we measure the goodness of an autoethnography? Should autoethnographies only be welcomed and published in particular journals such as *Text and Performance Quarterly*? Or in special issues devoted to this peculiar, even embarrassingly personal approach, as a nod to the political correctness of methodological and theoretical pluralism?" (Ragan, 2000, 230).

A possible answer would be the use of some non-methodological assessment criteria: is this article written in an interesting and correct manner? Is its fundamental problem important? Will the readers learn something by reading it? Does it (possibly) bring a contribution to academic research in general? There are "pan-disciplinary" standards that correlate what we are doing as scholars of communication with what the entire academic environment should do - contribute to knowledge, we spend much time as communication scholars and professors teaching and focusing on the idea that the used method is or not appropriate, that the claims are warranted or not by the data analysis and so on. While others in the field wrote more eloquently than we about our methodology obsession, we claim that we do not spend enough time thinking at the more important factors for the quality of our academic work. Our standard assessment criteria try to avoid subjectivity, as the method of our social sciences pretend to do. But knowledge - including academic critique - is an inherently subjective exercise (Ragan, 2000, 232).

Another critique is the use of the first person expression instead of the scientific and impersonal "they" or third person, that exclusively send to the narrator's voice. A compromise version was used by Pelias (2000, 220), who prevalingly used the second person expression in his article with the aim of attracting readers to identify with his own point of view. For example, in supporting the idea that no researcher can circumvent evaluations:

"You understand that everything and everybody is judged in a market economy. Whether it is from the corporate executive's dictates, the academic's scrutiny, or a grandparent's gentle reminder, no one escapes appraisal. Everything and everybody is given a price, an established worth. And you know that with every critical remark you make, you are participating in the commodification of everything and everybody. You are marking value, sticking on a price tag with each assesement, turning some things and some people into damaged goods. You see too how criticism itself is commodified as it colonizes social life. Your assessments, your glorifications and condemnations, become only something else to buy or discard, something else that moves people to the auction block. You do not see a way to escape criticism's ceaseless production. But, you do not want to let go of your standards" (Pelias, 2000, 223).

Whether the autoethnographer remains a writer or he may be a scholar remains an open question.

#### **4. Advantages and openings**

The autoethnographical writing has the rare quality of being inspirational, of making you speak the same, at the first person about your own experiences. It is exactly what happened to M. Heather Carver (2007), who writes in his article "Methodology of the Heart: A Performative Writing Response" :

“In sum, if you continue reading, you won’t find in this essay definitions of either the autoethnographic or performative writing, and you won’t find a traditional book review that outlines or judges another’s work, and you won’t even find the author apologizing for her form or content. But what you will find is a journey of self-discovery as I interacted with Pelias’s autoethnographic performance pieces.

I have written this essay in the way in which I was inspired, beckoned, and challenged by Pelias’s work. *A Methodology of the Heart* is not a guidebook, but it has beckoned me to travel the highways and byways of academic performance, freedom, expression, and daily life.

My heart thumps as I realize I am not alone. Not alone in the way I constantly critique the world, nor alone in my fervor and passion for performance, literature, and autoethnographic expression”.

Pelias (2004, 2) notes in the introduction to his book *A Methodology of the Heart: Evoking Academic and Daily Life* that he writes as he senses an emptiness or lack in the academic environment “a scholarship that fosters connections, opens spaces for dialogue, heals”. The autoethnographic writing is a means of resistance, an attempt to change the power relations. Pelias is the one underlying the impossibility of any researcher or scholar to be an autoethnographer to the extent he observes the standards, namely in the extent he does not infringe them or in the extent he succeeds to convince his colleagues that it can be done differently:

“You drift off thinking that no moment passes without a critical eye. No moment escapes. Your day is nothing more than a series of pleasures and displeasures, a series of stances, object lessons in attitude. You are right; you are wrong. You are gracious; you are cruel. You are a critic. You are who you are because you exist in a critical life. You have no choice. You speak from your white, middle class, male body. You speak from academy, perpetuating its logic, its strands, perpetuating the system. You speak from your vested interests. You speak out of belief.

Having tracked your day, you examine what you have done. You sense you have a better feel for what is at stake in the ongoing scitical process. You say to yourself: It isn’t about demonstraing critical faculties, showing critical superiority, or even striving to become better; it is about how people feel living under its power. You read each passage-some you like and some you don’t. You do some editing, changing a sentence here, a word there, and dropping a paragraph that you think is too disclosive. You are open to criticism. You recieve revise to get at the heart of the matter. You think the piece is better than it was. You will continue to evaluate it. You will continue to evaluate yourself. And when all is said and done, you will know that you are not critical. Others can and will take your place” (Pelias, 2000, 228).

Following the steps taken by Goodal, Pelias and others, Oana Gabor introduced a method with rhetorical accents. The method proposed for the research in the field of communication is called ethno-textuality and it turns around the game concept, being defined as a “self-reflexive interpretation method of life, languages and texts of the world” (Gabor, 2004, 5) or a “critical method of life-in/through-text, (ethno-)textualiy, that performs the (exhaustive?) interpretive act(ion) of deliberate inquiry with regard to (the possibility of) cultural innovation, on a presumption (of existence) of contingent constraints expended upon all participants to such a project” (Gabor, 2004, 27).

The autoethnographic writing is confession or avowal. Its epistemological value does not lie in proving or certifying, but in infirming a rule or theory, in testing the limits of the science game. Although an autoethnographic writing may be apparently accused of being just an anecdotic proof in supporting a point of view, in fact such writing does not aim to generalize but to offer a voice: “Autoethnography requires a researcher to

make personal experience meaningful for others, and, consequently, say something about cultural experience and/or motivate cultural change” (Adams, 2011, 158).

Either intentional or accidental, any autoethnographer judges, values or evaluates reality by expressing his life story. This story unavoidably impacts the critical judgements, values and evaluations of the other participants. In this sense we may say the autoethnographic method opposes axiological neutrality and continues the Western rhetorical tradition that turns around the persuasion act.

Autoethnography is an immanent critique; it is a form of self-therapy. The world cannot be changed but if you change yourself (in singular), only then the world can change by means of your own change. Moreover, “the heart learns that stories are the truths that won’t keep still” (Pelias, 2004, 171).

Autoethnography erases the distinction between public and private, between science and ethics, between professional and personal. The problems of scientific research and daily life meet in the human being as a whole.

## 5. Conclusion

Autoethnography as research method can be conceived as a theory process coming to life from the personal experiences of the researcher. As self-narration, it examines the means in which someone’s experiences are relevant for culture. It constantly evaluates.

For the researchers in the field of communication, autoethnography may be an alternative and viable way of following if they do not believe in the sobriety of the quantitative methods, in the rational –objective models or in other scientific platonic manifestations. It is the way of the one knowing himself to be a social animal, but who prefers to lay the stress on the singularity and subjectivity of Aristotle.

Similar to the Grob opening (1.e4) which is not just a simple chess opening about which the theorizers of this first phase may write several analyses, the autoethnographic method is not a simple method among many qualitative others. Likewise the opening was first played by Grob and then by others, equally the stake of autoethnography is the self of the researcher, of the scholar, of the one who has to evaluate, to self-evaluate.

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