Travel-impressions – or reflections on auto ethnographic research

– from the 2nd International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry at University of Illinois, Champaign at Urbana, 5th - 6th May, 2006

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In May this year, I travelled to USA to join researchers from around the world, (55 nations in total and 1300 participants) at the 2nd International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry at University of Illinois, at Urbana-Champaign. Urbana-Champaign is situated a 3 hours’ drive southwest of Chicago. The University campus, students, teachers and researchers form the centre of life in the city whose surroundings consist of impressive fields and farmlands.

My travel-mates at the congress were Svend Brinkmann, Claus Elmholdt and Steinar Kvale. On the initiative of Svend and Claus, we had prepared a symposium on “Epistemic and ethical issues in active interviewing” to be presented at the Congress. An issue in our presentation was a discussion on the ethical dilemmas and knowledge generating potentials of active and confrontational interviews (see also Elmholdt, 2005; Brinkmann, 2006, in press; Tanggaard, 2006, in press).

The overall theme of this year’s Congress was “Ethics, Politics and Human Subject Research in the New Millennium”. Articles in this issue of the journal engage in discussions on this matter. Debate on evidence based practices; ethics and the impact of IRB-committees at American Universities in relation to academic freedom were really intense at the congress. IRB stands for Institutional Review Board. These boards are concerned with ethical, regulatory and policy aspects of human subject research and in the US, research proposals need to be formally approved by IRBs located at the university. One of the problems discussed at the congress was that many qualitative research proposals are rejected by the IRBs because they do not fit with ethical standards for research derived from other, often experimental research traditions. The long-lasting involvement of the researcher in the fields studied in ethnographic research is for example often considered psychologically harmful to the participants compared to the effects of more controlled conditions in a research laboratory. However, focusing on ethics and psychological harm, the epistemological potentials of involvement in the field by the researcher are often ignored by the IRB.

In this text I will allow myself the freedom to focus on a somewhat different but also related and well represented issue at the congress: Auto ethnographic research or as it was also termed in one session: Spotlight: Critical/Performatice/Reflective/Auto/Ethnography (or writing Through the Boundaries): New directions in Qualitative Inquiry”. My main question is what auto ethnographic research is, what are its historical roots and why is this branch of research a seemingly growing field of qualitative research?
Auto ethnographic research

Auto ethnographic research can be defined as descriptions and reflections on personal experiences as research. The prominent voice of the researcher’s self in this type of research can be traced when taking a look at a few titles of the numerous auto ethnographic research presentations in the congress programme: *My Brother’s Keeper: An Auto ethnography of AIDS and the Family*, Jodi Charlene Nettleton, University of South Florida. *The day That I Learned That I Am Not White. An Auto ethnographic Performance*, Meltem Yilmaz. *My (Other Than) Queer Classroom: A New Scholar’s Attempt to Understand Why (My) Sexuality in the Classroom is Taboo*, Andrea M. Davis, Bowling Green State University. Apart from the many creative and somewhat self-focused auto ethnographies as exemplified in the above, prominent performance- or auto ethnographic researchers presenting at the congress were Arthur P. Bochner, University of South Florida, Laurel Richardson from The Ohio State University, and Carolyn S. Ellis from University of South Florida. Bochner, Ellis and Richardson have all been advocating auto ethnographic research in different books (e.g. Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, Richardson, 2000, Ellis & Bochner, 1995, 2000).

A melting down of boundaries between the subject and the object

As argued in various details by the above researchers, auto ethnographic research can be considered one of the answers to the debate, beginning in the late 1970ies, on the possibility of representations of objective truths in the social sciences. During the last 35-40 years, it has been argued by many researchers that the social sciences may never be able to present exact, precise and objective pictures of human life and auto ethnography represent a turn towards melting down boundaries between the subject and the object in the research process. It sets focus on the researcher’s own experiences and reflections on important life events as the main content in research. Carolyn Ellis has been perhaps the most prominent advocate of this particular type of research. She has been critical of the impersonal style of writing, which is often sought for in academic texts and the neglect of the personal “I” in research reports (Tierny & Lincoln (eds.), 1997).

A renewed focus on the self

In the book on Auto/ethnography – rewriting the Self and the Social (1995), (edited by Deborah E. Reed-Danahay) it is stated that ethnographic research is in the midst of a renewed interest in personal narrative, in life history, and in autobiography among anthropologists. The term auto ethnography is described as having a double sense – referring either to the ethnography of one’s own group or to autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest. In practice, both forms are often combined. Reed-Danahay (1997, p. 2) argues that auto ethnography stands at the intersection of three genres of writing which are becoming increasingly visible (1) “native anthropology” in which people who were formerly the subjects of ethnography become the authors of studies of their own group; (2) “ethnic autobiography”, personal narratives written by members of ethnic minority groups; and (3) “autobiographical ethnography”, in which anthropologists interject personal experiences into ethnographic writing. In every respect, the auto ethnographer is a boundary crosser living the life of dual identity – simultaneously a researcher and a member of the culture studied. For
example, at the congress, many presentations considered the double position as teacher researching teaching, as homosexual gay studying homosexuality or as an academic studying academic culture. In this vein, auto-ethnographic research has often been considered more authentic than straight ethnography because the voice of the insider is considered more true than that of the outsider. However, these terms may be somewhat problematic because what is an outsider and can anyone be that? The position as auto-ethnographer may be rather considered one of constantly re-writing (one)-self and transcending the everyday assumptions of the community.

**Historical departure**
As described by Reed-Danahay (1997, p. 5f), the term auto ethnography can be traced to a short article by Karl Heider in Journal of Anthropological Research in 1975 and later to a text by David Hayano in Human Organization in 1979. More recent approaches to auto ethnography include John Van Maanen (1995). In a critique of realist tales of ethnography, he distinguishes four different types of alternatives; (1) Confessional ethnographies where the attention is on the researcher rather than the researched, (2) Dramatic ethnography, (3) Critical ethnographies like Willis’ “Learning to Labour” and (4) Self- or auto-ethnographies as a form of writing wherein the ethnographer is the native. The emphasis is not on life story but on ethnography of one’s own culture. Norman Denzin (1989) has characterised auto ethnography as a text which blends ethnography and autobiography, and he argues that the main characteristic of this genre is that the writer does not adopt the ‘objective outsider’ position and that the text which results from it carries traces of one’s own life experience.

Of interest to “qualitative psychologists” may be an important term in the field of auto ethnographic research: therapeutic ethnography. In therapeutic ethnography, researchers involved express their own experiences – for example of being a bulimic, a cancer patient, an alcoholic, an academic!, a marginalized ethnic or woman member of society etc. The idea is that nobody can give as precise a case-description of these phenomena as the ones living with and through these phenomena. Auto ethnography may be able to account for the many years of experience of the writer while for example the interview report may only represent reflections on two strangers’ one hour conversation, the interviewer and the interviewee.

**A like-wise glooming field of auto ethnographic research in Denmark?**
At the congress, I became rather surprised and also fascinated by the many auto ethnographic presentations. After having returned home, I decided to find out if I had missed or overlooked a correspondingly glooming field of auto ethnography in Denmark, I tried to “google” “autoetnografi” in Danish and found only six hits (on May 18th). In contrast to this, a search for the popular discourse analysis, “diskursanalyse”, resulted in 36,500 Danish web-pages. A search for narrative inquiry, “narrativ analyse”, which has also been prominent in a Danish context, resulted in 13,300 hits related to only Danish Web-pages. A conclusion to draw from this little “google-praxis” may be that auto ethnography is either rather unknown in the Danish research community or rejected as a suitable or preferred approach to research?
Giving support to the latter conclusion, the first hit on the six Danish web-pages on auto ethnography was a rather critical review by Karen Ellen Spannow of Carolyn Ellis & Arthur P. Bochner’s book from (1996). “Composing Ethnography. Alternative forms of qualitative writing” from Altamira Press (http://mit.psy.au.dk/ckm/newsletter/nb24/24-compethn.htm). The review is not exactly positive towards auto ethnographies. The genre is criticized for blurring the boundaries between research and literacy and for being too narrow-mindedly focused on personal aspects of the researchers’ own lives. The constant reflection on the researcher’s own self may be read as a disclosure of intimate details of the researcher’s life which the reader has not asked for – details which may seem irrelevant and too particular to have any common interest.

Traces of a self-focused and narrow-minded western culture?
One interpretation of the great emphasis on auto ethnography at the congress may be that it is evidence of not only an increased focus on the self and life stories in the anthropological research community as argued by Reed-Danahay (1997), but also as part of a massive focus in western culture on the self, supported by humanistic psychology and theories of self-actualisation and realization by Allport and Maslow (Brinkmann & Eriksen, 2005). The risk may be that we loose interest in others than ourselves and that common political, social and societal problems may be lost sight of in the research community. In my less critical point of view, every research study must be seen as incorporating aspects of the researcher’s life story – e.g. auto biographical elements. When Brinkmann & Eriksen for example engage in an important critique of the celebration of the self in post-modern society, they necessarily also reflect upon their own life-stories being part of this western community. This is and need not consist of private reflections on their own life, but can be seen as auto ethnography of their own community and culture if we follow John Van Maanen’s earlier mentioned version of auto ethnography.

No ‘nowhere’ positions
The auto ethnographic standpoint implies particular ontological and epistemological standpoints – e.g. a refusal of the idea of knowledge as a mirror of an external reality and the idea of the possibility of a neutral and objective position as ‘outsider’ researcher. This also implies the position that a decision to engage in a particular research project or in writing a book is never taken from nowhere – because the position of being nowhere is not considered possible. The motivation to engage in a particular research project is frequently also a reflection of a personal standpoint towards the problem - although this is often not considered legitimate to reflect upon in the research report. One may even go so far as to argue that engaged research or critique produces the most valuable research – because it reveals and is driven by personal engagement. The need to reflect upon the subject producing research is an important point emphasised by auto ethnographic researchers – although one may argue, as Spannow in the above, that its resulting texts sometimes seem as too much of a celebration of the private self.

However, summing up and considering the potentials of auto ethnographic research (inspired by a travel to the 2nd Congress of Qualitative research), I would argue that the field of
psychology could serve as an interesting case for auto ethnographic research. At the moment we envision a growing and ever-expanding therapeutic community. Psychologists would actually be the ones to reflect most consistently, engaged and fully on the position of being a therapist, a client and other relevant dimensions in therapy. As it is part of the official further education of psychologists to receive therapy and to train as a counsellor or therapist, the data could be potentially enormous. In this vein, and considering other possible, future examples, I think we have much to gain from focusing and gaining inspiration from auto ethnography as qualitative researchers and qualitative psychologists in Denmark.

References:


Brinkmann, S. (2006, in press). The Good Qualitative Researcher, Qualitative Research in Psychology


