

Is it correct to speak of a sociological research method when using the autoethnographic approach?

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Abstract

What are the critical issues of using autoethnography in social research? Is it really a research method that enables sociologically grounded research? And what might be the reasons for such a pronounced interest of a section of social researchers in this type of tool? This paper highlights some marked critical issues with this approach, identifying it predominantly in the field of storytelling and literature rather than in the field of sociology. In addition to this, it points out the absence of the same basic assumptions for it to be considered a scientific research method.

Keywords: Autoethnography; Methodology, Research; Narrative.[†]

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1. Introduction

Autoethnography is often used in social research in the same way as other tools. Originating in opposition to a scientific view of social research (Corposanto and Barnao, 2016), it is, however, often used in exactly the same way as those tools it sets out to overcome. One of the first systematizations of this new way of doing research could be that “*autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)*” (Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams & Arthur P. Bochner, 2011). Thus, the goal is no longer to explain phenomena, but rather to try to know them through understanding and then return them through writing, pictures, videos, looking at the world as much as possible from the “native's point of view”. This method thus challenges the canonical ways through which research is done, viewing it as a political and socially conscious act. First, because the autoethnographer seeks not only to make personal experience meaningful and engage cultural experience, but also to produce meaningful, evocative, and accessible texts that can reach a wider and more diverse audience than traditional research usually ignores; a move that can make personal and social change possible for more people. Thus, we focus on raising awareness about forms of representation through co-constructed narratives that illustrate the meanings of relational experiences, particularly how people collaboratively deal with the ambiguities, uncertainties, and contradictions present in everyday life. While historically the claim was to create a space for science that was also open to the literary arts, storytelling and creativity, establishing research hypotheses at the start of autoethnographies--and then perhaps even corroborating them at the end of the narrative--in fact retraces the experimental approach of the formal sciences. To what is this (seemingly elementary) error due? Perhaps it depends on the attempt to still be admitted to the table of science? Or rather is it a research structure that is intimately tied to this phase of Western societies characterized by profound individualism?

2. Is it research? Is it Sociology?

“I had been eighteen years old for a few months the first time I crossed the threshold of the faculty of Sociology, in Trento. I remember as if it were today: it was one of the first days of November, right after the holidays, a cold day like so many others I would later experience in the city I had chosen to attend university. What had definitively convinced me of my choice of Trento, which in those years was at the top of Italian sociological studies, was Davide, whom I had met and gotten to know during the traditional Fiera del Levante in Bari in September. Davide was a few years older than me, was almost nearing the end of his course in Trento, and made me dissolve the last remaining doubt I had: choosing sociology, was it better to go to Rome or Trento? At the

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end of a very long, pleasant chat with him, I went home with the decision I had made; that was how Trento became, for more than 30 years, the city in which I lived and made some of the most important choices of my life”.

It could begin like this - and then continue with the detailed account of my life in Trentino-Italy, student, researcher, prof, volleyball referee, journalist, director of a TV station, a well-known proximity to the football affairs of the local team and many other things - the narration of the progression over the years that led me, later on, to choose another place where I could teach Sociology and Social Research Methodology, perhaps also because with time what is thought of Sociology as a science has changed, in general. A beginning in that way, discursive, narrative, all-first-person-and fundamentally self-centered-is now (at least, that's what a portion of researchers think) shaped up as a real research path: since narrative has officially entered the roster of cognitive/communicative tools, the terrain has gradually widened to incorporate also an approach that, borrowing from the ethnographic one so dear to anthropologists, has slowly slipped toward a self-referential ethnography, a narrative where researcher and research subject coincide, and often this leads to an “everything else is out” situation. In a historical period in which narratives have become very central to communicative debate, autoethnography as a research method places at the center the biographical experience of the researcher and the researcher from which it takes its starting point to arrive at an understanding--not an explanation--of a given social and cultural phenomenon. Without referring, among other things, to the very important topic on intrusive research methods and the (central) role that awareness of being the object of research plays (Corposanto, 2004). The knowledge thus produced is thus partial and situated.

What is it about, in more detail? The autoethnographic style is a form of self-reflection, based on the personal experience of the researcher, who critically analyzes his or her own autobiography and lived experiences. For some authors, autoethnography is a method of research and writing that seeks to trace and analyze personal experience for the simple purpose of deepening knowledge of cultures by comparing. Autoethnography is in fact a fusion of ethnography and autobiography: this approach processes and analyzes one's past experiences with the intention of making them a document in the public domain.

The inception of autoethnography took place at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, and this first phase ended at about the beginning of the 1990s. The publication of an initial attempt to systematize autoethnography in 2000 in a qualitative research handbook sparked a substantial number of contributions, as is often the case at the beginning of any new perspective that might prove interesting. The third phase begins in 2006, with the publication of a book on Autoethnography published in a qualitative research series (Ellis and Bochner, 2010). Nevertheless, the boundaries with autobiographical narrative remain very blurred. Confirmation comes from the same, main handbook: indeed, an effort is made to clarify that autoethnographic contributions often (often?) appear to the reader to be more socially aware and show a greater degree of reflexivity than biographical ones; and that the intention to describe experiences by framing them in a cultural context is a

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clear indicator of this difference. This is the labile boundary, which however presents some not insignificant problems. The first that, in general, something that “often appears”, does not seem to be counted among the techniques belonging to scientific discourse, whatever the approach. Further problem: if in the declarations of intent autoethnography composes the author's subjective autobiographical instances, his vulnerability, to deepen the embedded understanding of the social and cultural context in which those experiences took place, in fact very often the attempt at incorporation appears very weak, to the advantage of the entirely researcher/subject of interest-centered treatment that ends up obscuring everything else. In short, it is not enough to state that you want to do things: contextualization must then be done, otherwise it is the equivalent of a novel. But even if the contextualization were done, there remains an additional, huge problem. It would be a narrative that attempts to contextualize the narrative, but of course it should not be forgotten that facts do not exist on their own, but are always used, in any research, in an inseparable interweaving with the point of view of the teller. So let us return to the starting point. The autoethnographic approach can almost never be considered a sociologically understood research approach; much more often, however, it can be usefully incorporated into the tools of care.

The appeal of sociology as a science has certainly suffered some hard knocks in the past four decades. Born with the ambition of being a “social physics”, set out on a spasmodic quest for uniformity of methodological approach with the tried-and-true experimental facilities of the traditional sciences, sociology has slowly had to metabolize that studying the collective behavior of people is quite different from studying the behavior of things. If analyzing the functioning and behavior of things can be very complicated from a technical point of view - as sciences such as physics, astronomy, engineering, and biology teach us - analyzing human behavior, on the other hand, is certainly complex; because, unlike things, inanimate, we are instead endowed with intellect, consciousness, culture, and reasoning, all of which decisively change the framework within which we move to understand and explain. How did sociology react to the realization that things were (somewhat) different (and, let me be clear, this is still an ongoing process, because nostalgias exist everywhere)? Broadening, slowly, the range of tools used in social research, incorporating and hybridizing with many other disciplines of the so-called human sciences, to find itself, and to be able to make that contribution to the understanding and explanation of complex social phenomena to which it is naturally called. Was this a wise, fruitful choice? Certainly yes, because in this way she got out of that bottleneck in which she seemed hopelessly headed to end up. However, the question arises: having ascertained that there can be no single scientific method, because there will never be a so-called theory of everything (as some physicists dream of instead), how far can we go in broadening the terrain of research methods so that the same can be considered as such (and thus useful first and foremost, but above all accepted by the majority of social scientists, who thus somehow certify their correctness and the possibility of resorting to them)? The risk, it must be said, is that of responding to the attempt to explain everything with a deterministic cause/effect approach, good for things

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but often not as effective with people, in which the researcher theoretically should not exist in terms of the influence exerted on the experiment (but never does), with an approach that instead puts the researcher exactly at the center, in a position where subject and object of research coincide, trying to understand oneself instead of trying to understand the how and why of things in the social world. The first consideration must take into account, in our view, the very value we attach to the concept of sample in sociological research. For while the assumption is true that there is a profound difference between statistical significance (which can be hypothesized, constructed and realized) and sociological representativeness (which, on the other hand, can only be verified *ex-post*) in this case the very concept of a sample is taken to extremes: starting from the assumption that, given a universe, a sample is nonetheless a part of the universe, in fact, the problem becomes one of understanding whether any part of the universe can be called a sample. In the present case, when it comes to autoethnography, the sample in fact is reduced to a single unit. What social representativeness can such a situation guarantee? With an additional risk. After the question, “Can such a method be considered a valid social research approach?” another question is immediately added: “Assuming it is acceptable as a method, are we talking about sociology, or is it something else?”. Both questions have, of course, a logic *strictu sensu*, if we want to remain in the realm of social science, because we are talking about the basics, that is, the things that the scientific community accepts by legitimizing, as a result, their effective use from the point of view of understanding and knowledge. So much so that one of the most frequent mistakes made by those who think that autoethnography can be equated with a scientific research method is to start where, generally, everyone starts: that is, with research hypotheses. But posing hypotheses is indispensable when one then has the possibility of verifying them or not: something not provided for by the autoethnographic path, which in this way also makes the mistake of an attempt to legitimize itself in a reality that, in fact, it rejects. To these logical questions, as a methodologist, I might add a further one: could there be a relationship between the adoption of an autoethnographic, self-centered research approach with the gradual slide of the value system toward unbridled individualism, which leads to considering more and more egos not in relation to anything else (Byung-Chul Han 2010)? That conceives of society as a mere summation of individuals without considering the “more” that a complex, communitarian, non-self-referential framework approach could naturally produce, to the benefit of all (Morin, 2017)?

Here, let us return to the incipit of this contribution, the one in which I recount my life starting from the encounter - fundamental for me - with sociology, an encounter that in fact then shaped my future. I could go on and on in the narrative, pushing myself to relive moments that were not easy - and who has not had them during their lives? - recount how I felt when faced with blatant injustices I witnessed - and who has not witnessed blatant injustices? - I might even have to pause sometimes in the narrative because some painful episodes maybe are not yet fully metabolized, I might... I might do many things, but in the end the question is one: have I done social research? Is that sociology? Here, I am convinced that the path chosen by some, that of considering autoethnography, whether

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analytical or evocative, a scientific approach (albeit in a broader sense than the traditional one) that brings knowledge and understanding of social facts, is at least weak, if not fallacious. Well, it may be a self-therapeutic approach, certainly useful in some cases, especially if it helps someone to better understand some episode of life he or she has experienced. And to overcome it, hopefully, especially if it was painful. In short, a tool for (self-)healing of the individual, single, unique, unrepeatable person. With a well-etched mark of unrepeatability, if it is true as it is that we are all different. But what does this have to do with sociology? Nothing.

The impression, in short, is that the weakness of those who would have wanted to explain, with a macro approach, social action exclusively through models with a total statistical basis, is now attempted to be countered by a totally opposite approach, in which the narrative of the self is so micro that it is, inevitably, self-referential, not going beyond our own bodies. A wrong approach as a response to a wrong approach.

Furthermore, this is a very risky approach: in the absence of references situated in the context surrounding the researcher-and this is often the reality-you remain in the realm of narrative and cannot speak of social research. Moreover, a first, major problem from the scientific point of view lies in the fact that all research is culturally determined, in the sense that the position of the researcher certainly has an influence on the mode of action in the path of knowledge, which therefore results - playfully - partly determined by it. But in this case, the total absence of confrontation - since researcher and subject of interest are the same person - can lead to a dangerous short-circuit, which can even be harmful rather than “curative”.

3 Conclusions

Writing is therapeutic for both the writer and the reader whatever the circumstance, writing is a method of investigation, a way to know oneself and consequently writing about one's personal experiences becomes a kind of therapy when one tries to externalize all that one has inside. But as said doing research is more: it is situating one's story within contexts and re-experiencing it comparatively with others, otherwise it is, more simply, autobiography. Without any claim to scientific requirement.

One of the situations that have recently seen the use of the autoethnographic approach, for example, is that which re-evokes personal paths that have characterized deviant social behaviors, including those that have also led to serious judicial sentences. Let's take for example the case of people in prison serving very long sentences due to affiliation with the mafia, camorra or 'Ndrangheta. Some recently published studies allow us to re-evoke the personal journey of some prisoners (Curatolo, 2022) which however provide a completely personal and particular reading of the situation, which precisely because it is culturally and socially determined within a specific family condition, certainly not they are able not only to explain but not even to understand why some lives have taken a particular direction. The reading of the personally experienced re-enactment barely

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manages to cover the vast range of motivations that determined its path and intensity. What sociological knowledge is this? What can it be useful for, if not, in fact, for a sort of self-care, beneficial, certainly, but still distant from the noble purposes of social research?

The suspicion is that rather than trying to understand the things that happen around us, in the relationships we build, in our interaction with norms and value systems (all of which it is possible to do with a healthy and balanced mix of qualitative and quantitative), interest has shifted to an approach that is mostly literary, narrative, a-scientific, perhaps aesthetically valuable, but devoted exclusively to self-affirmation, to self-aggrandizement. Perfectly in line with what has become the society of individualism.

Narratives and words, told but also written, certainly cross the project of overcoming many problematic issues, sometimes with excellent results. Psychologists teach us this very well.

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