Changing "I": Autoethnography and the Reflexive Self

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"He who is wise endeavors to learn how to understand the truth not less than that."
~African Proverb

So much to learn, how will I ever learn it all? As a newly appointed assistant professor, this was a popular refrain. Writing a course syllabus, managing time in the classroom space, acquiring new vocabulary to include words such as faculty governance and P & T, and developing skills as a researcher were all part of my weekly lessons as a junior faculty member. Between the Office of Professional Development that provided non-formal learning opportunities, and informal learning as I observed my peers, as well as proverbial trial and error, I gained knowledge about navigating my professorial role. However, the heart of the job, I discovered, was not in the tasks that were performed, though necessary, but in understanding who I was. This understanding of truth represented the metamorphosis of my "I" and was the unintended by-product of an autoethnographic inquiry project on mentoring conducted with a graduate student, Berta Morgan (Morgan & Merriweather, 2009). The study sought to understand the factors impacting mentorship when the protégé is older than the mentor. This project was the conduit

for non-procedural and tacit knowing that ultimately enhanced my understanding of self vis-à-vis my professorial roles as teacher and researcher.

Acknowledging "I": Autoethnography as Methodology

Polkinghorne (1988) wrote, "The purpose of social science research projects is to produce knowledge and understanding of the human condition" (p. 3). Qualitative researchers have developed, and implemented projects that have contributed to this understanding. Autoethnography is one qualitative research methodology that attempts to develop understanding of the human condition through autobiographical explorations of culture. Its emphasis on culture most closely aligns with ethnography. It can include a variety of methods: Interviewing, participant observation, and document analysis. Like other methodologies used in qualitative research it aims to provide rich description and robust understanding but does so through self-narration. Chang (2008) advised that autoenthographical self-narration "transcends mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation" (p. 43). Central to autoethnography, as well as other qualitative

inquiry projects, is the call to acknowledge self in research.

Being aware of one's subjectivities is commonplace in qualitative approaches to knowledge development and part and parcel to acknowledging self. Peshkin (1988) invokes the following definition of subjectivities from *Webster's* dictionary, "the quality of an investigator that affects the results of observational investigation" (p. 17). He goes on to say that subjectivities are "an amalgam of the persuasions that stem from the circumstances of one's class, statuses, and values interacting with the particulars of one's object of investigation" (p. 17). Researchers, both quantitative and qualitative, possess such persuasions and bring them to their research sites. Once there, quantitative researchers attempt to shed themselves of their persuasions whereas qualitative researchers seek to unearth them. Autoethnographers, as a function of the research genre, acknowledge self (e.g., background, perceptions, positionalities) as the first step in producing knowledge in the inquiry process.

Discovering "I": Autoethnography as Process

Peshkin reminds us of the importance of not just acknowledging the existence of self in our research but of having an acute awareness of it and how it influences research. He wrote, "Though social scientists claim in general that subjectivity is invariably present in their research, they are not necessarily conscious of it" (p. 17). Self-reflection results in raising the awareness of the researchers with respect to their particular persuasions, or what some might call biases. Biases have historically been characterized as factors harmful to the research enterprise and therefore in need of being eliminated. Quoting Agar (1980), Padgett (2008) writes, "the problem is not whether the ethnographer is biased; the problem is what kinds of biases exist and how can their operation be documented" (p. 18). Qualitative researchers are urged to continually discover their I's throughout the research study and "attend to their subjectivity in a meaningful way" (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17) or, as Rossman and

Rallis (2003) write, autoethnographers "try to be aware of and vigilant about the baggage we carry into the inquiry" (p. 51).

This consciousness is imperative when considering the process of autoethnographical work. In earlier times, autoethnography included studies conducted by researchers who were not part of the culture under investigation (Chang, 2008). Most contemporary autoethnographies, however, are predominately fashioned with the researchers as representative members of the culture under study (Chang, 2008; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The researcher participates as either the sole or primary subject or as one among other subjects (Chang, 2008; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The researcher is thus "involved" in the study in a manner unlike most other research methods—quantitative or qualitative and consequently requires a greater degree of self-reflection and critical self-consciousness. It is incumbent upon autoethnographers to have "the ability to examine one's self" (Padgett, 2008, p. 18) in order to attain the emic (insider) perspective (Merriam, 2009) in their research.

I considered myself to be a faculty mentor to students. When I was approached by Berta Morgan about developing an autoethnographic study based on our experience, I agreed because I believe mentors have a responsibility to aid in the holistic development of their mentees, which includes development as a researcher. I was, however, initially reluctant. My reluctance was born from not having previously conducted research using autoethnography and from personally being a private person. The research process of discovering my "I" inherently entailed exposing my "I"- allowing strangers, including Berta, into my intimate space. Consistent with autoethnography we were both the researchers and the primary subjects of the inquiry and used the inquiry to investigate through our personal experiences the culture of upside-down mentorships – mentorships where the mentor is younger than the mentee. We were attempting to gain an emic perspective of the culture through the interrogation of our personal experiences.

In engaging this methodology, we first developed a list of questions designed to probe our perceptions and experiences within the mentoring relationship. Independently, we answered in written form the questions as if we were individually interviewing ourselves. We met regularly to discuss and challenge assumptions embedded in our responses and then we would recess to re-evaluate and revise our responses. This back and forth process was likened to peeling an artichoke. The removal of each layer moved us closer to the heart or, in our case, our "I's." Each successive round of dialogue removed outer shells of defensiveness, unacknowledged partiality to beliefs and fear of embarrassment which aided in the discovering of our "I's." This was a collaborative process that required that we view each other as equals to facilitate honest and critical feedback. Themes of communication, respect, and role ambiguity began to emerge as a result of the deep and meaningful analysis of our storied selves within the mentorship.

Changing "I": An Autoethnographic By-product

Researchers should appreciate that the character of the data is shaped by the method (instrument) chosen to collect it. Qualitative researchers acknowledge that they are the instruments of data collection and, therefore, play an active role in the construction of the data. But the heightened researcher involvement in autoethnography begs the question of how the methodology impacts what is under study. In other words, what is the influence of the methodological approach on the researcher as subject when the researcher is the instrument of data collection? I considered how my "I" changed as a result of studying myself in the context of a non-traditional, inter-generational mentorship. Beyond the themes, the data illuminated how the relationship itself changed as well as hinted at the subtle changes that were evident in me at the close of the study.

Peshkin insightfully writes that as researchers we exist "in the subjective underbrush of our own research experience" (p. 20). By virtue of the personal voyeurism engaged in by autoethnographers, we find ourselves continually in the underbrush but at times fail to consider the usefulness of that location. Most agree that reflexivity is more than just thinking about what you have done. It involves being introspective – a careful, ongoing examination of self but it is also inclusive of an additional dimension beyond acknowledgment and awareness–anticipated products of autoethnography. Reflexivity is somewhat metacognitive in function and is likened to looking at one's self through looking at one's self. That is, it is a sense of viewing one's image through a mirror that is reflecting the image of one's self through another mirror. Babcock (1980) refers to reflexivity as "turn[ing] or bend[ing] back upon itself, to become an object to itself, and to refer to itself" (p. 4). This constant interplay has an influence on the object, which in the case of autoethnography is the self. Much like the grammatical reference, reflexivity "constitutes an action . . . directed back at the agent" (Free Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2011).

The changing "I" is, therefore, a by-product of the reflexive self wrought by the metacognitive type function of directing thoughts about thoughts back onto the self. The "I" is affected by the process. For example, my researcher "I" gained considerable understanding of what it meant to truly engage reflexivity in the research process. Prior to this inquiry, I rather casually developed subjectivity statements and connections of self to my research. My approach reflected a one-time shot mentality. That is, I write it–acknowledge my "I"–and that was it. My obligation as a qualitative researcher was fulfilled. But the process of authethnographic research sensitized me to how much more deeply I can engage the subject of my inquiry through the process of reflexivity even when the subject is not me. This represented a change as this aspect of the qualitative endeavor was blind to me. I developed an appreciation for taking the time and devoting the energy to not just analyzing the data relative to the research purpose but also to analyzing the data with respect to self. This dual approach heightens the quality of the research design and analytical product. In short, I became a

more proficient qualitative researcher when I began to think about the process differently.

A nuanced shift in my professional "I" occurred as I wrestled with the ambiguity in our roles – elder vs. professor. As a neophyte professor, I appreciated how much I did not know but felt a need to portray a sense of greater confidence and competence than I believed I possessed. After all, professors are expected to profess, to know, to be expert, but the imperative to engage the charade disappeared as my mentee and I explored the contours of how we related to each other and why. Consequently, the role expectations I held for myself underwent a makeover. Characteristics felt to be taboo such as vulnerability and inexperience were more easily incorporated into my professional identity and the role was redefined by virtue of the process of directing thoughts about my role back on to my conception of self.

The autoethnographic process also assisted in the development of a tacit understanding of how I understood concepts such as respect and communication. My initial thoughts were grounded in my upbringing and in some ways formed this invisible barrier between my mentee and me. For instance, respect for elders, defined by a generational age difference, was demonstrated by speech and behavior. Speech acts required the use of a title and behavior required acts of deference but both were strange bedfellows within an upside-down mentorship. Being 20 years junior to my mentee created ambiguity in our roles and thus in how we conveyed respect to each other. My cultural mores dictated that I refer to her as Miss Berta, and hers required that I was addressed as Dr. Lisa. A significant change was marked in my personal "I" and within our mentorship when we no longer felt compelled to use such titles. Through engaging reflexivity, turning my thoughts back onto themselves, respect was conceptually and behaviorally transfigured and made infinitely more complex. This stimulated a change in my personal "I." This was most apparent in the impact on the interpersonal relationship between my mentee and me. We transitioned from being a student (mentee)-teacher (mentor) to being friends. I do not know that either of us could pinpoint the day and time but through the conversations with each other, the ensuing analysis and the private moments with ourselves, we were able to see ourselves more fully through seeing ourselves. In the very act of attempting to understand the mentorship, the relationship changed.

Implications

This reflection on autoethnographic methodology holds three primary implications for researchers. First, it reminds researchers regardless of methodology to acknowledge the stake they have in the inquiry process. Researchers can never obtain complete objectivity regardless of how objectivity may be viewed. Acknowledging one's "I" diminishes the capacity of being lured into equating objectivity with neutrality. It also reduces the viability of "consensus reality" (Goswami, 1995, p. 143)–objectivity based on agreement, a view frequently forwarded by realists – as the final arbiter or ultimate authority when making truth claims. This form of objectivity is often the result of collective subjectivity fueled by hegemony. The autoethnographic methodology brings to our remembrance that we are always connected in some form or fashion to our research and reality is shaped by the social constructions we collectively, as well as individually, hold about the world (Crotty, 1996).

Second, it encourages researchers to hold themselves accountable to the inquiry project through their communities of practice (Wegner, 1999). Berta and I held each other accountable throughout the study, which netted a richer and more nuanced understanding of our mentoring relationship than if we had worked in isolation. The collaborative aspect of communities of practice can help researchers to see beyond themselves within the research design and analysis process, to redress blindspots, and to be more fully committed to developing rigorously informed understandings of the phenomenon under study. Communities of practice because of their familiarity with the area of inquiry help

researchers to discover their "I's" in the conduct of trustworthy and ethical research.

Third, researchers should expect to be impacted by their work. We do not just create knowledge to be disseminated through journals and conferences, but we change as a result of the work that we do. We are influenced by both the process of creating something new and the product of the process. Autoethnography reminds researchers that they will learn, grow, and evolve professionally and personally as a by-product of the process. Through that process, I realized that research methods produced more than just "data." Sure, I learned how to better mentor and profess, but more importantly the process was the pathway to acknowledging "I" and discovering "I" which laid the foundation for changing "I"–a change that resulted in the wisdom of understanding my own self truths relative to my teaching, service to students, and research–a change that we all must embrace when we conduct our research.

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