

Submission to Academia Letters

The body as site of academic consciousness. A methodological approach for embodied (auto)ethnography

Grit Kirstin Koeltzsch, UE-CISOR/CONICET-Universidad Nacional de Jujuy

At first glance, doing (auto)ethnography is often related to narrative and writing. According to a basic definition, and etymology, autoethnography is a qualitative approach of research and writing (graphy) that seeks to systematically describe and analyze personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno) (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). The first methodological obstacle arises, since describing-analyzing-writing are actions related to ‘intellectual’ work through the ‘head’, with the result expressed in words. However, beyond the verbal and factual, there is the researcher’s body and the self. Research involves emotions, bodily contact with others, and the perceptions of our own bodies. Doing embodied (auto)ethnography means using the body as a research tool recognizing subjective experiences and “reflexive embodiment” (Crossley, 2006).

This paper’s key proposition is to outline strategies to register bodily knowledge and experience based on my autoethnographic research in order to explore new ways of knowledge construction. Introspection, documentary data, and shared bodily experience are key elements for autoethnographic research emphasizing that knowledge is produced from lived bodies. This also contributes to recognize sensitive experiences in a certain context and revealing non-hegemonic ethnographic findings. I argue that autoethnographic research is also movement and bodily articulation, involving creative processes to reveal research results, in this way, emphasizing the body as an interface between the social environment, society, and scholarly work. I often apply experimentation beyond textuality together with systematic introspection, which can lead to a visual-performative result (Koeltzsch, 2020). As (auto)ethnographers, our body can be consid-

Academia Letters preprint.

©2021 by the author – Open Access – Distributed under CC BY 4.0

ered a first-hand research tool. Comprehending ourselves is a prerequisite to understanding others, and that includes the body. There are issues that all humans experience. In my case, I started autoethnography considering myself as an ordinary Eastern European dancing body. I analyzed movement, gravity, loneliness, migration, feelings, and bodily memories of my personal life, which include past and present times. In particular, I analyzed the impact of biopolitics and physical education during the state-socialism of the 20th century, and the consequences after the transition to a capitalist society post-1989.

Regarding methodological issues, I consider important the constitution of an ethnographic register, as data are necessary for in-depth work. An important decision is to choose techniques and strategies to obtain primary data. Introspection, research through oral or written personal narratives are one part. Autoethnography is about finding new ways to write about social life (Reed-Danahay, 1997), to better understand our society, and to promote self-reflective and critical research. Therefore, primary-bodily data are of utmost importance. Autoethnographic research includes methodological implications and raises the question of situating the body in relation to knowledge construction, “evidence and the evidence of knowledge” (Spry, 2009, p. 603). Based on movement and my bodily introspection, autoethnographic practice, and considering the existing literature (Adams, Jones & Ellis, 2015; Chang, 2016; Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011) I tried to outline a scheme (see Figure 1) that seeks to depict useful dimensions to consider when applying an autoethnographic strategy. Some of the categories are related to self-observation and reflexivity, furthermore, I added the temporal dimensions of past and present, bodily perceptions and experiences across time. I acknowledge that this is a basic model which can be further elaborated and extended. The main purpose is to discuss methodological approaches and continue developing categories for records related to bodily memory and perception, thus, facilitating data constitution. Undoubtedly, it is a challenge, as well as it implies a deep bodily awareness, recognition of movements, and perceptions by the autoethnographer.

I developed this strategy during autoethnographic research for my master’s thesis in (Koeltzsch, 2019). I constituted several registers regarding bodily memory based on different experiences. A particular exercise was the comparison (past/present) of specific bodily activities. One of them was ice skating, a

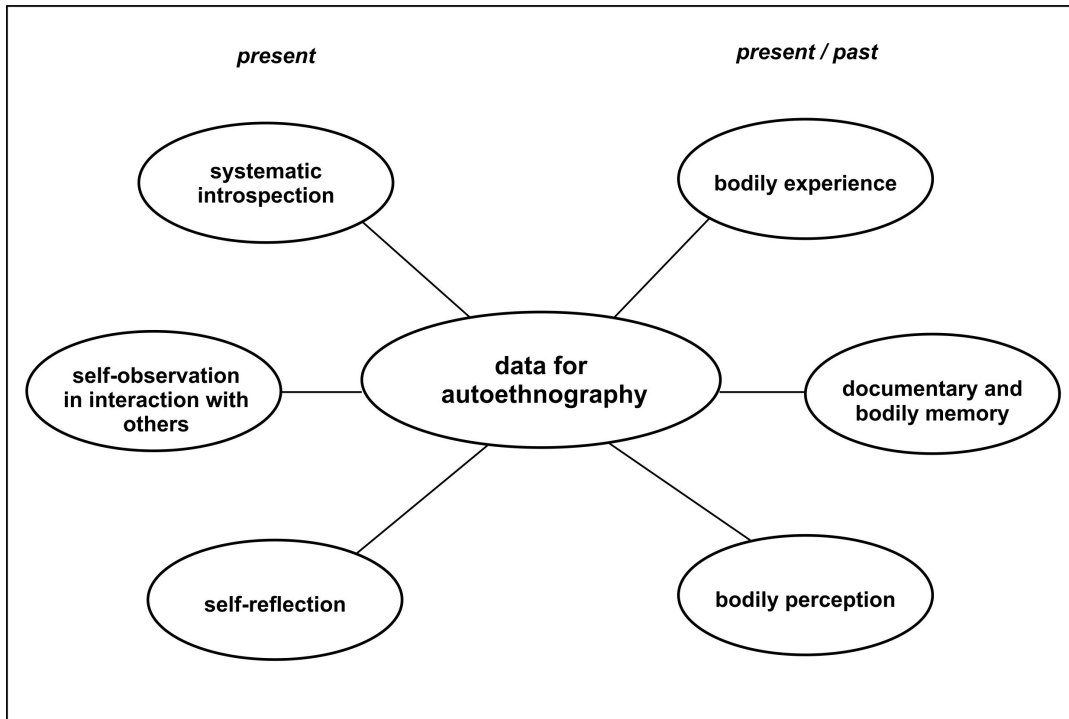


Figure 1. Strategies for obtaining primary data for autoethnography. Source: Own elaboration.

sport I practiced in my childhood. In my autoethnographic narrative, I related my skating practice to moments of certain bodily freedom. The background was a totalitarian society, state socialism in the 20th century in Eastern Europe. In this context, skating was a meaningful bodily activity in my past. Through autoethnography, I actively thought about sport as a significant practice beyond the physical aspects. In my case, I remembered appreciating these moments expressing with my body; the movement on the ice gave me a sensation of freedom, forgetting about the political, ideological, and normative pressure of the environment in which I grew up. The long laps on the ice, practicing to find out about techniques to make figures without falling, but also the experimenting with gravity, are engraved in my memory. I learned without a trainer. It was about observation and imitating athletes, and the co-construction of knowledge with my older sister. I skated every winter, on outdoor ponds or lakes, and on

indoor rinks in a stadium where ice is even smoother and more challenging. The latter had another advantage, music from giant speakers additionally inspired us for creating figures. Analyzing my perception and data, another aspect engaged me. The skating rink in a stadium is usually surrounded by a barrier, I argued that this not only marked a physical boundary, but also an imaginary one. At that time, when I entered the ice rink it was like entering another world. First, only people wearing skates could pass the barrier. Secondly, transcending this limit, I strongly felt my body had the power to articulate. Finally, the surface of the ice itself has something magical as it was challenging to move on it. Under these circumstances, I perceived a certain power by moving on the ice, which meant escaping from reality for a while. The speed and the sensation moving on this smooth surface is very difficult to describe in words.

In order to understand the impact of autoethnography on research, all those bodily registers led me to analyze in more detail the topic of body and biopolitics related to political systems. Sports and bodily control were important issues under state socialism, however, in a broader sense, this also has to be related to the Cold War as background. What I try to show here is that particular bodily memory can be the starting point for research on diverse topics. I also realized that bodily practice such as skating can reveal various dimensions in relation to the body and emotions. A singular bodily experience, to move on a particular and extremely smooth surface such as ice, caused further introspection. The special dynamics of displacement, speed, maintaining the body axis, leaning in curves, and lifting my feet, made me think and experiment again with physical laws. The final component of my autoethnographic register was the re-practice of skating in present times, thus, comparing this with my experience from the past. Due to my migration process to South America, I was unable to skate for a long time. After more than 20 years I started to skate again during visits to my family in Europe. The aim was to re-experience and record data in order to compare sensations across time and space. In the beginning, I felt that I had lost the security of moving on the ice, but after several attempts, I experienced again this singularity related to the bodily freedom that this surface provides. I perceived the same joy of movement, although I skated with more caution. At a younger age, I dared to take on more challenges. However, my performance on the ice was still related to bodily experimentation and pleasure. The political

circumstances have changed, which does not mean the elimination of problems, as new challenges emerged during our transition from socialism to capitalism. During the experiment, the ice-rink barrier created the same separation between the outside world and my own bodily world. Personally, I still feel certain confidence and freedom moving on the ice as I did before, but with a wider vision, because new life and professional academic experiences were gained. I concluded that I converted from a worker's body with practical consciousness to a worker's intellectual body with academic consciousness. In this experiment, the constant has been the past/present bodily experience, the perception of feeling freedom in a specific environment and practice. Finally, this shows the importance of physical movement for the development of t personality, and that movement is an existential act. Aesthetic and artistic factors are also added since figure skating on ice is also an art form. Skating again and evidencing my performing body through academic analysis, led to personal and political reflections, which constitutes a kind of epistemic-aesthetic praxis (Spry, 2009).

Finally, the process made me think about the emancipatory potential of autoethnography, as an individual, but also within the framework of academic practice. There is no doubt that (auto)ethnographic research requires bodily awareness and a body perspective. Our bodies know much more because of the pre-objective component, this trajectory prior to articulation with language. Husserl (1949) used the term *Vorwelt* (pre-world), a concept from phenomenology that deals with the dynamics of conscious life, concerning both the generation of new meanings for consciousness and new dimensions. Back to the example of ice skating, my body registers memories from the age of 4 years, which is prior to verbal explanation. To interpret these experiences, autoethnographic data and its analysis are necessary, applying methodological strategies as suggested here. There is a dialectical relationship between ourselves and our bodies. This kind of problematization helps to understand that knowledge is also embodied. Our body is not only a surface or a closed object but in constant internal and external movement. We are our body and active introspection creates consciousness in a broad sense, above all, understanding of the self and others.

References

- Adams, T. E.; Holman Jones, S. y Ellis, C. (2015). *Autoethnography*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Chang, H. (2016). *Autoethnography as Method*. New York: Routledge.
- Crossley, N. (2006). *Reflexive Embodiment in Contemporary Society: The Body in Late Modern Society*. London: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E. y Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An Overview. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung*, 12(1), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-12.1.1589>
- Husserl, E. (1949). *Ideas relativas a una fenomenología pura y una filosofía fenomenológica*. México: FCE.
- Koeltzsch, G. K. (2019). *Biopolítica y educación corporal en el socialismo del siglo XX. Autoetnografía de un cuerpo danzante*. (Master thesis in Theory and Methodology of the Social Sciences). Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, National University of Jujuy, Argentina.
- Koeltzsch, G. K. (2020). Pachamama: Corporealities of an Andean-peasant woman. Video performance. Retrieved from: <https://vimeo.com/521995872>.
- Reed-Danahay, D. (ed.) (1997). *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the self and the social*. New York: Berg.
- Spry, T. (2009). Bodies of/as Evidence in Autoethnography. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 1(4), 603-610. <https://doi.org/10.1525/irqr.2009.1.4.603>