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Main Article:

Methodological and Analytical Dilemmas in Autoethnographic Research

Elena Maydell

Centre for Applied Cross-Cultural Research, School of Psychology,
Victoria University of Wellington, PO Box 600, Wellington 6012, NEW ZEALAND
elenamaydell@live.com

Abstract

This article presents an argument on the application of theoretical and methodological frameworks to the study of identity from an autoethnographic perspective. In order to guide the analysis process, the author employed social constructionism as the main theoretical foundation, whereas thematic analysis and positioning theory were deployed as the methodological frameworks. Further, in the process of using ethnographic methods to study the identity of Russian immigrants to New Zealand, the author found herself also needing to use autoethnography to interrogate and understand her own journey. The insider/outsider position of the author who belongs to the same minority group became the most vital tool in her identity construction. In this regard, it is impossible to engage fully with the autoethnographic research practice without understanding the impact of others on identity construction of self, and a strong theoretical and methodological scholarship can provide a valuable foundation for this process.

Keywords: autoethnography; insider/outsider dilemma; social constructionism; positioning theory; Russian immigrants

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1. Background for the Study

The title of the project I have been working on for the PhD programme for the last five years has been “The Construction of Identity of Russian Immigrants in New Zealand.” And though the main body of the data analysed for this project consisted of interviews with members of the Russian community in Wellington, New Zealand, the process of

continuous self-questioning and self-analysing has been running parallel for the whole duration of the research. Thus, autoethnography, in the way it is conceptualised by many scholars in the field (e.g., Anderson, 2006; Chang, 2008; Ellis & Bochner, 2000, 2006; Reed-Danahay, 1997), has become an invisible but inseparable part of my research undertakings, both theoretical and empirical.

Coming from a psychology background, I was taught to ground any research in theoretical assumptions, propositions, hypotheses, and justifications. Qualitative research, however, is sometimes deemed a-theoretical or too loosely connected to any theoretical foundation (Silverman, 1998). If looking at autoethnography from a perspective of a self-narrative or autobiography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), it is hard to imagine what place theory can have in personal stories. At the same time, it may come as only natural to employ various theoretical concepts and arguments in order to better understand the nature of self-engagement with a research topic. It seems that for an autoethnographic project, as an ultimate study of self, it is quite appropriate to engage with deep philosophical questions of the nature of self and the position of self in relation to others.

My autoethnographic study came to life as a “by-product” of my doctoral research on identity construction among Russian immigrants. I chose the topic--construction of migrant identity--because it is one of the major philosophical questions that have been bothering me throughout my life. Second, the issue of identity construction has become especially salient during my own migration and adaptation to new socio-cultural milieux. The requirements for PhD research in psychology dictated empirical data collection and analysis. Thus, in-depth interviews with people “like me” presented an opportunity to ask questions I could not find answers to on my own, and try the participants’ solutions on myself, choosing the ones that would fit.

I decided to conduct interviews with 20 Russian immigrants in Wellington. I selected participants who loosely matched my own characteristics, so that I could possibly consider us as belonging to the same migrant group. I fit all the selection criteria designed for the participants (e.g., less than 10 years since arrival, relative language fluency, active employment or tertiary study). In effect, I selected individuals who were very similar to me.

The questions I chose to ask participants were also the ones that interested me most, questions that I was continuously asking myself: How do you feel in New Zealand? How do you position yourself within New Zealand society? Has immigration made a difference to how you see yourself as a person? I felt that I had undergone crucial changes to my sense of self as a result of my migration experience, but I struggled to understand what those changes meant. I hoped that people who had come from the same cultural milieu and had gone through similar life events would be able to help me understand my personal struggles.

The rationale for selecting research participants from the same cultural group and interviewing them in their native language was also driven by the possibility to engage with them on a very deep, intimate level, where many things are not said but rather

implied and understood, as they remain “unspoken” on the premise of the shared cultural background for the members of the same group (Colic-Peisker, 2004). At the same time, this perspective posed more unsettling questions instead of producing easy answers, forcing me to engage with serious and complicated theoretical, methodological, and ethical issues.

2. Insider/Outsider Dilemma

Conducting research within my own cultural group presented both advantages and dilemmas. The most important issue in this regard was the fact that I had a similar cultural background to my participants and a similar migration history to most of them. Therefore, it was possible for them to relate to me as a person who would be able to understand their deep feelings and motivations and the ideas they were ready to share. At the same time, though the participants acknowledged the fact that I could have had similar migratory experiences, for them, I also held a higher status within the local system of knowledge. Due to my postgraduate position, I could not evade representing the academic system of New Zealand, especially on the level of research and generation of knowledge.

The dilemma of dual membership has been exposed in cultural studies as an insider/outsider perspective (Hayano, 1979; Lewis, 1973; Reed-Danahay, 1997). The problematic issue of defining and demarcating the insider and outsider positions of a researcher in ethnographic studies has been raised by many scholars (e.g., Motzafi-Haller, 1997), especially in relation to the debates about the “crisis of representation” in social sciences (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003). In her critique of the methodological ideology of objectivity in psychology, Greenfield suggests that it is impossible to escape an insider’s position (which is sometimes labelled “bias”), because any knowledge created as a result of research in social sciences is not culture-free but bears the markers of culture-specific theorising of the author/s. She argues that a so-called observer-independent or objective perspective is unattainable, as:

When one studies behaviour in one’s own culture (as most psychologists do), one has *de facto* an insider’s cultural perspective . . . With reference to his or her own group, the insider understands the meanings and motives behind in-group behaviours. (Greenfield 2000, p. 233, italics in original).

At the same time, Greenfield points out a potential value of an outsider’s perspective as an out-group member who can identify interesting and important cultural meanings usually taken for granted or even neglected by insiders. In this sense, the best position is the combination of insider and outsider roles--what Greenfield terms “the culturally marginal person; these are people who have had important socializing experiences in more than one culture” (p. 233). Based on that, I could consider myself such a marginal person: an insider, by virtue of my culture of origin, native language, and migration experience, and an outsider, by doing my research from the perspective of the local systems of knowledge, that is, of New Zealand, as well as more generally of Western origin.

The insider/outsider position I embraced for interviewing Russian immigrants necessitated deeper engagement with the autoethnographic paradigm. While ethnography is aimed at providing descriptions and interpretations of cultures of different groups (Merriam, 2002), the researcher who comes from an insider perspective has an autoethnographic position by default. Some ethnographers have already argued about an unavoidable biographical dimension in ethnographic research (e.g., Coffey, 2002). In this regard, based on her research among Croatian immigrants in Australia, Colic-Peisker (2004) conceptualised what she called “insider’s ethnography,” with the inclusion of autobiographical content, as sharing the social position and migration circumstances with her research participants made her “autobiographical voice . . . inevitably mixed with their voices” (p. 91).

In relation to immigrant communities, if the researcher can be associated with the same ethnic group as the research participants, it is virtually impossible, as well as unethical, to deny this group membership while dealing with its members (Colic-Peisker, 2004; Lewis, 1973). Apart from being a linguistic insider by virtue of the same native language, there are always some pre-existing relationships and networks that link the researcher to other members from the same community. Colic-Peisker notes that an insider, especially the linguistic one, can give these minorities a voice that would be more authentic than the one produced by a non-native speaker. This may be especially important for those members of migrant groups for whom the host language functions only on the “survival” level (Colic-Peisker, 2004).

While for some migrant communities it is crucial for the researcher to speak the same language fluently and, even better, to belong to the same community (Siegel & Bovenkerk, 2000), simply having the same language and similar life circumstances does not produce trust among participants, as “the insider status . . . has to be granted by the community” (Colic-Peisker, 2004, p. 86); for example, through the researcher’s acceptance of the rules of conduct and hospitality. The very relationship between the researcher and the participant becomes an important mechanism of data production (Fielding, 2004), both in an ethnographic and an autoethnographic sense.

This relationship is built by negotiating different meanings between the insider and outsider identities which can be achieved (or at least attempted) through the processes of self-awareness and continuous reflexive self-evaluation (Colic-Peisker, 2004). This is a never-ending process throughout the duration of the research, both at the data collection and data interpretation stages, as each participant brings their own implicit rules of structuring a trusting relationship with the researcher. Thus, during my research I had to forge different versions of my own identity co-constructed with the help of my participants. The balance between the insider and outsider parts of my position would shift each time, depending on the understanding every participant had about my involvement in the two cultures. Some of the participants saw more similarities than differences between us, so they enhanced my insider position, often at the cost of the outsider one. For others, I was more of a representative of the host majority rather than a migrant minority, so these participants emphasised my outsider features while downplaying the insider ones.

The way each participant constructed my identity during our initial engagement and in the process of interviewing presented me with one of two choices. I could either accept a particular interplay of the insider and outsider positions and agree to the participant's construction by enacting it in conversation, or I could disagree and offer them my own construction, for example, by diminishing my outsider position and accentuating the insider one. This complicated process can be illustrated with the following example of an exchange that happened during one of my interviews. A young woman articulated my identity as an outsider with the phrase, "You, there, should know this better." This construction positioned me as a representative of a Western tertiary institution, possibly within the group of other researchers who could be considered as those who "know better" what may be happening to their research subjects. In my reply to her, "You would think that they should know, but they do not understand what people like us feel"; I tried to disagree with her construction of my outsider position and instead attempted to enhance my insider position locating it within the group of immigrants, siding with her and expressing my belonging and solidarity with her and others like "us," versus "them" who presented an out-group.

It is necessary to say that I did not always try to enhance my insider position, though it came as only natural that both the participant and I would ground the whole interview process on the shared premise that we had similar rather than different experiences and understandings. There were cases when I was held responsible for some official policies and decisions and participants requested that I explain or provide some justifications for them simply by virtue of belonging to the research community. I did not deny this responsibility and in such cases embraced my outsider status in order to educate, provide advice, and voice my opinions stemming out of my engagement with the New Zealand tertiary education system. All these intricate and complex negotiations of my ever-changing position during interactions with my participants added to my engagement with the research scholarship, with my supervisors, colleagues, and many other people, and contributed to the construction of my own identity. This self-realisation became especially tangible during the analytical process. The analysis of both the data for my doctoral research and my autoethnographic material presented a challenge which made me engage a combination of theoretical and methodological frameworks, including *social constructionism*, *positioning theory*, and *thematic analysis*.

3. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

To address the insider/outsider dilemma in autoethnography, the researcher ultimately has to undertake a profound study on self-identity. An application of an effective theoretical and methodological framework resonating with the concept of self can help in this scholarship, providing a useful "toolset" for the analysis. In this sense, *social constructionism* may be viewed as a relevant theoretical foundation for the study of self, while *thematic analysis* and *positioning theory* can be deployed as the methodological frameworks for guiding the analytical process.

Proponents of social constructionism argue that people are products of their interactions with each other and with the immediate environment, both physical and social (Burr,

1995; Shweder, 1990). We do not function independently; we are all deeply interconnected with each other (Gergen, 1991), and while we undergo social construction by others, at the same time, being part of this process, we construct others too (Much, 1995).

This means that, depending on various circumstances, identity will always be subject to change, and identity constructions will bear the traces of the ever changing life around, therefore making identity relational (Gergen, 1991; Iedema & Caldas-Coulthard, 2008). Through the variety and multiplicity of our interactions with each other, different aspects of our identities come to play, so that identity never reaches any fixed or stable manifestation. Based on that, autoethnography as a study of self always includes multiple reflections of others which elicit a variety of expressions of self.

These expressions of self can be achieved by engaging in the process of positioning self versus others. In this regard, positioning is grounded in the discourse analytical framework, where “discourses offer *subject positions*, which, when taken up, have implications for subjectivity and experience” (Willig, 2001, p. 107, emphasis in original). Harré and Van Langenhove (1999) conceptualised positioning theory in an attempt to outline the structure within which multiple articulations of identity can be organically combined into a holistic sense of self.

Harré and Van Langenhove (1999) suggest that two kinds of identity represent the concept of selfhood: *personal identity* and *social identity*. Personal identity is understood as the sense of embodiment and physical continuity of an individual in space and time. Social identity is the representation of an individual across various interactions with others, reflective of her/his place in different relationships.

Both kinds of identity create a sense of a holistic (as contrary to fragmented) self, allowing most people to take their identity for granted, unaware of how much it is influenced by the discursive practices they engage in. In order to unpack this taken-for-granted holistic self, positioning theory may be used by autoethnographers as an analytical framework providing the guidelines for analysing different aspects of identity enacted discursively through various subject positions (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999).

As an analytical tool, positioning theory helps with investigating how the self is constructed in discourse from the perspective of an individual (self-positioning) and of a wider society (other-positioning). While telling stories about their lives, people have to claim certain positions for themselves in relation to others and to life events, and negotiate these positions with the way they are positioned by others (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999).

In this regard, autoethnographers can engage the concepts of positioning theory to produce a holistic representation of self as articulated from inside and the identity construction as reflected by others. Through negotiating self- and other-positioning in interactions with others, the researcher crafts her own story from the data co-constructed with the help of others, by rearticulating created meanings and adding new ones (Lincoln

& Denzin, 2003). As autoethnography ultimately results in a particular choice of meanings on behalf of the researcher, it entails a subjective “reading” of self in relation to circumstance. For my study then, the process of the data analysis thus required picking such methodological and analytical techniques that would enable adequate interpretation and address the issues of subjectivity and complexity of the data.

4. Analytical Process

To analyse the data produced during my interviews with the research participants, I employed a combination of two analytical techniques: *thematic analysis* and *positioning theory*. Before engaging positioning theory in the analysis of self- and other-positioning, I used thematic analysis to identify the most interesting and representative patterns across interviews (Grbich, 2007). Thematic analysis aims at locating the most common and salient themes within the data, which are able to represent the whole dataset in the form of a thematic map of some phenomenon or process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Deploying this technique, I pursued an objective of making my dataset more manageable for further and more detailed analysis with the help of positioning theory.

The choice of thematic analysis in this study was determined largely by the nature of the data, the main feature of which was that they were translated. For this reason, the analysis had to deal, first and foremost, with the fact that the texts were the English version of the original, already representing the first stage of interpretation of the participants’ accounts. In this sense, such qualitative techniques, as *content analysis* or *grounded theory*, were not applicable to the data on the basis that both of them demand a thorough fragmentation of the data set into initial codes, sometimes represented by only a few words (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

4.1. Translation Issues

As I conducted the interviews in the Russian language, it was necessary to translate them into English before conducting any analysis. Many other methodological issues, no matter how complex they are, fade in the face of the dilemmas posed by translating the data into another language. It is never possible to produce the same version of a text in a different language (Cronin, 2006); unavoidably, any translation bears certain unfaithfulness to the original, “twisting” the meanings and altering constructions. Can we do it, then?

Inevitably, if there is no other way of representing particular groups of population, the translation has to be accepted as a necessary “evil,” or, as Benedict Anderson (2006) puts it, “a useful treason” (p. 228). Translation becomes the lesser of two evils—better transformed than not heard at all. In this regard, the role of a linguistic insider who does not need an interpreter to collect the data (Colic-Peisker, 2004), and therefore who can also function as a culturally competent translator of the data, may be considered the most beneficial for such kind of research.

While, for my doctoral thesis, I wrestled with the dilemma of the representation of my participants' voices in a language foreign to them, my autoethnographic research on my own identity seemed even more complicated due to translation dilemmas. Whatever constructions were achieved and negotiated during the interviews, they were created in my native language. Analysing them in English circumscribed re-constructing them again, now in a different linguistic domain.

Being bilingual and seeing myself as a culturally marginal researcher (Greenfield, 2000), I did the translation of the interview data myself, followed by the verification of the English version by two research assistants. From an autoethnographic perspective, such "self-translation" may be seen to be quite natural and even expected. However, this does not make the analysis easier or more straightforward. On the contrary, self-translation should lead to more self-scrutiny and result in heightened reflexivity and evaluation of the product of research. The insider/outsider dilemma re-surfaced at this stage of my research, again posing difficult questions about how to conduct the analysis on myself.

The theoretical position behind the analysis of the translated data may be grounded in the concept of a *double interpretation*--"The participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world" (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 51). The process of interpretation begins with transcription, where the researcher already has to arrive at subjective "reading," making decisions about how to alter the data and transform the oral data into the transcript format. The translation that follows becomes an essential part of the analysis, as the ideas, concepts, and meanings that were co-constructed by the researcher and the participants during the interviews have to be re-interpreted within a different linguistic system. As any researcher will see in the data only what she can see, from her position, any interpretation of the data, whether in the native language of the participants or in a translated version, will always remain the unique understanding of this researcher and her knowledge of the field.

In the end, as any translation cannot be considered adequate enough to reflect the original meaning in full (Cronin, 2006), especially within the smaller units of speech, the analysis of the translated data should always aim at the broader meanings and concepts. Thematic analysis, for that reason, was sufficiently flexible and functional in relation to whole concepts and general meanings which can be interpreted from the larger speech units, such as phrases, sentences, or paragraphs. The interview data were taken as a whole single text, with themes and sub-themes identified across it, mixing and matching parts of different interviews under the same themes. To achieve this, it was necessary to simultaneously apply thematic analysis together with a deeper level of analysis of the meanings behind the themes. For this latter objective, I employed positioning theory to analyse the discursive constructions of identity within each theme as reflected in various self- and other-positions.

4.2. Selection of Themes

The themes I developed on the basis of the interview data represented several main patterns of identity construction among my participants. At the same time, those themes virtually mapped my own journey in search of self on the basis of my immigration experiences. With only minor exceptions, I could relate nearly all the themes to myself. The six themes I derived on the basis of the interview data were: Identity Loss, Negative Labels, Claim for Agency, Claim for Belonging, Hybrid Identity, and Cosmopolitan Identity.

I presented and interpreted the themes in the order which made sense to me in terms of transformations to my own identity, though several participants also articulated similar transitions from some concepts (themes) to others. The order of presenting the themes was based on both the temporal and dialectic principles, so that the themes could illustrate the development of particular stages in identity construction across time and locations. This means that, for example, the theme Identity Loss reflected the experiences common for the initial stage of immigrants' settlement in a new country, which was also true for me, while the themes Claim for Agency and Claim for Belonging presented a higher level of adaptation to the host society, usually after a number of years since arrival. Ultimately, the theme that I labelled Cosmopolitan Identity became most important for me personally, because it reflected my current state of mind in understanding my sense of self.

It is necessary to note that not all the participants articulated the meanings which contributed to this theme. Out of 20 participants, 11 of them gave descriptions of certain qualities which became the foundation for the theme Cosmopolitan Identity. None of them actually used the term "cosmopolitan" in relation to their sense of self; this was the label I derived for the theme, which was originally titled New Breed of People, close to the words of one of the participants. I constructed the label for the theme Cosmopolitan Identity on the premise of my own understanding of the immigration experience that I had gone through, as well as on the basis of the extensive literature on globalisation, transnationalism, and cosmopolitanism that I studied during my research. While reading the interview material and trying to make sense of my participants' accounts of their vision of identity, I realised that what was common between their experiences and my own ideas could be succinctly encompassed by the concept of "a citizen of the world" as understood from the perspective of global developments in contemporary society (Cronin, 2006; el-Ojeili & Hayden, 2006). The meanings articulated by my participants fitted in with the concept of a cosmopolitan self, the identity I was so happy to "discover" and embrace at the end of my research journey.

5. Conclusion

Autoethnographic research presents many methodological challenges, with the insider/outsider dilemma being one of them. While engagement with autoethnography as a research practice is a deeply personal and idiosyncratic affair, application of theoretical and methodological frameworks may provide guidance in tackling the variety of

challenges and dilemmas. As an example of a theoretical approach, *social constructionism* can function as a schematic map that represents a complex picture of the interplay between the self and others. For autoethnographic scholarship, social constructionism can be used as a means to understand the nature of the knowledge production and therefore can provide a researcher with philosophical scaffolding in the process of making sense of the research enterprise.

Social constructionism emphasises the significance of others' involvement in the construction of the sense of self, as the data are considered to be co-created by both the researcher and the research participant (Cromby & Nightingale, 1999). In other words, the story is told by both of them together (Denzin, 2002). At the same time, it is the privilege of the researcher(s) to choose how to interpret the data, especially when argued from the constructionist position. In the process of interpretation, every researcher is bound to influence the data (Tuffin, 2005) and understand them in her own way (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003), thus producing a subjective reading of self reflected by a particular context.

If theory is necessary to create a heuristic explanation and gain understanding of how research data should be approached by attempting to answer the "why" questions, methodology is needed to answer the "how" questions--the ways the data should be read and interpreted. Autoethnographic research may yield very rich but seemingly unmanageable data, in their unstructured richness and multiplicity of perspectives. *Thematic analysis* is the very tool that can structure this "stream of consciousness" and allow seeing certain patterns across the data. These patterns, in turn, can be subjected to analysis with the help of *positioning theory*. As a result, the positions accepted, rejected, and negotiated by the author that are identified during analysis will serve to illustrate an issue or phenomenon of the autoethnographic research. An example of such analysis can be traced in the discussion of the insider/outsider dilemma at the beginning of this study. In my defence, I can firmly state that I have applied all my theories and all my methods to myself and have come to conclusion that they do work. While discussing the identity issues with other Russian immigrants, I positioned myself and was positioned by them, while my insider/outsider status was co-constructed with the participants' input.

In conclusion, my autoethnographic project was made possible only with the help of others, primarily my participants, whose impact on my identity formation I could not envisage in the very beginning. As articulated by Chang (2008), "Given that culture is a web of self and others, autoethnography is not a study of self alone" (p. 65). The use of others as a gateway into one's own world may be employed for studying oneself through autoethnography (Chang, 2008). My own search of self has been inseparable from my research on other people's identity. Ethnographic, in-depth interviews presented the best strategy to gain the data from others which provided an abundance of meanings and enabled the process of self-exploration. The final product in the form of a doctoral thesis comprised two narratives--my participants' stories and my autoethnography, sometimes openly articulated in the text and at times hidden between the lines but invisibly following my participants' words.

Through the first-hand experience, I realised with precise clarity what other writers in qualitative research meant by insisting on an inevitable biographic dimension in ethnographic work (Colic-Peisker, 2004; Silverman, 2006). If “weaving the self into the ethnography is a journey” (Coffey, 2002, p. 324), I have taken the same road with my participants, continuously trying their identity constructions on myself. As they engaged in the process of meaning-making, I tried hard to be their psychological twin and observation became intertwined with introspection. At some of the initial stages of my research, I suddenly saw myself as a case of “missing data,” as my own identity dilemmas did not seem to materialise in any tangible data. It was only by the end of this journey and through engaging closely with the whole story that I realised that my participants have helped me to articulate my own place in the world and understand who I am here, ultimately, as a citizen of the world, in an endless search for the meaning of life.

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