

An Autoethnography of my Journey through Autoethnography

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Autoethnography is a qualitative method which allows the researcher to incorporate one's professional and personal identities to share an aspect of their everyday experiences. Upon examining my experience of parental divorce, I discovered that my personal voice, one of a Chinese-Canadian woman, was missing from the dominant discourse within the divorce literature. Due to the incongruence between the literature and my experiences, I was drawn to autoethnography as a method which would allow me to add a personal voice to the body of literature on divorce. This project did not unfold as expected. My journey through autoethnography led me to re-engage with the emotional experience that originally inspired my research. This shifted the focus to how autoethnography can be used as a transformative tool which reconnects researchers to the personal and emotional experiences that initially motivated their interest in a specific topic. Therefore, autoethnography can be used as a method to answer questions in which researchers must move from cognitive to emotional domains of experiencing. As autoethnography is an important but under-used qualitative methodology, this study provided evidence for the utility of autoethnography in thickening the storyline of an experience, awakening and re-inspiring one's desire to explore research questions with a newfound passion.

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Autoethnography is an approach to qualitative research that has been used to depict elusive and complex feelings or experiences which cannot be tapped into conventionally, allowing researchers to tell stories and share personal experiences so that others may better understand them (Muncey, 2010). All autoethnographies start with a personal story as this provides purpose and direction for the research (Wall, 2008). I began this project as a part of a qualitative research course, in which my course instructor suggested autoethnography as a method for exploring my experience of parental divorce as a young child. This journey commenced with the primary aim of articulating my understanding of parental divorce, and how my status as a Chinese-Canadian woman influenced this experience.

To construct an understanding of this divorce experience, I sought to examine moments which significantly influenced the trajectory of my life. In the beginning, I assumed that I would be able to offer a narrative of how familial and cultural obligations distinctively shaped one such experience. My own experience of parental divorce contributed to my budding curiosity to study familial dynamics, pursue research in the realm of relationships and culture, and finally led me to a career in counselling psychology. I initiated this project because I felt as though the existing literature did not accurately represent my experience as a Chinese-Canadian woman, particularly

pertaining to how the consequences of parental divorce ultimately altered the trajectory of my life. I identify as belonging to a racial/ethnic and gender minority; therefore, I believed it was imperative for the literature to represent my story, knowing that there are others who share this experience. In essence, I felt that due to the underrepresentation of these intersections of identity (i.e., Chinese-Canadian woman) in the literature, this was a gap that I could help address.

I began with the question, “How do I, as a Chinese-Canadian woman, understand my experience of childhood parental divorce?” However, as I progressed through this project, it did not unfold as expected. The nature of qualitative research is “reflective, interpretive, descriptive, and usually reflexive” (Fischer, 2006, p. xvi); therefore, the final results of a study may look vastly different from what the researcher may have originally anticipated. Although the findings were unexpected, Morrow (2005) noted that this outcome is normative, with reflexivity as one of the strengths of qualitative research. My journey through autoethnography became a transformative process of re-engagement with the emotional experience that originally motivated my research question. The focus shifted to “How can autoethnography be used as a transformative tool to re-engage researchers in the personal emotional experiences that motivate their research questions?” In this article I outline how this unexpected process unfolded and what I learned from undertaking autoethnography as a method of qualitative research.

Deepening the Story: Tensions Arising Between the Existing Literature and My Experience

As I initiated the literature review for this project, I noticed that despite the magnitude of divorce literature within the western context, the consequences of parental divorce on the adjustment of children from Chinese families, including the long-term impact, are largely unknown (Eldar-Avidan, Haj-Yahia, & Greenbaum, 2009). Indeed, most of this divorce literature focused on individualistic cultures, was largely quantitative in design, had limited generalizability, and, thereby, inadequately addressed the experience of divorce in collectivist cultures, such as the Chinese (Xu, Zhang, & Xia, 2008). In addition, the vast majority of research regarding the experience of parental divorce for women, in particular, primarily focused on implications for female development. However, results of such studies yielded conflicting results pertaining to the impact of divorce on girls (Kalter, Riemer, Brickman, & Chen, 1985). Specifically, Kalter and colleagues (1985) explained that several studies determined that parental divorce minimally or only temporarily affected daughters, while others demonstrated intensified difficulties in the areas of self-esteem, depression, and rebellious behaviours. Although the existing divorce research has considered gender, specifically that of being a woman, investigations into the intersections of identity (e.g., racial/ethnic and gender identities) are missing. I am uniquely situated to have insight in this area not only because of my experience of parental divorce, but also because of my identification with a particular racial/ethnic group (i.e., Chinese-Canadian) and my gender identity (i.e., cisgender woman).

Consider the following excerpts from the dominant literature which I viewed as incongruent to my own experience:

- 1) “Offspring from divorced families hold ambivalent views about intimate relationships and marriage” (Amato & Booth, 1997, p. 108).

Contrary to this, my experience of parental divorce has led me to seriously uphold the sanctity of marriage. This attitude is notably prevalent in Chinese societies, because marriage cuts to the core of the Chinese family value system: a focus on the centrality of family (Hung, 2008).

- 2) “Children with divorced parents, compared to children with continuously married parents, have more emotional problems, obtain lower academic scores, and have more problems with social relationships. Disadvantages persist into adulthood” (Amato, 2010, p. 653).

Following my parents’ divorce, I did not encounter these disadvantages. I remained hyper-conscientious of these issues and focused on building healthy relationships and achieving academic success.

- 3) “Adult children of divorce tend to look back on this period of their lives with some degree of negative affect” (Amato, 1988, p. 460).

Looking back, I believe divorce prompted positive, growth-inducing effects in my life. I had to mature quickly, fostering skills such as independence, decision making, empathy and compassion, all of which have contributed to my development as a person and a counsellor.

Due to the incongruence between the literature and my experience, I was drawn to autoethnography as a method which would allow me to add a personal voice to the body of literature on divorce. Researchers have used autoethnography as a method to depict elusive and complex feelings or experiences which cannot be tapped into conventionally, allowing researchers to tell stories that may have been neglected in the dominant literature (Muncey, 2010). In addition to exploring experiences which are missing in the dominant literature, autoethnography connects these personal experiences with the larger social realm, providing readers with a mechanism through which “personal experiences are explored as a window to the understanding of others in society” (Chang, 2016, p. 445). My original goal was to share my experience of parental divorce as a Chinese-Canadian woman and express this as a valid and credible lived experience (Peterson, 2014). I was curious as to why my experience starkly contrasted those which I had read about; therefore, I intended to weave a story of my parental divorce experience so that others could imagine or make sense of this life event. An additional goal for autoethnographers, and for my originally planned study, was to sensitize the reader to important client issues, which may be beneficial to researchers and clinicians alike.

However, secondary findings emerged from this study; specifically, that researchers may be able to utilize autoethnography as a tool to assist them in moving from cognitive to emotional domains of experience. Therefore, this article explicitly focused on how researchers may be able to personally reconnect to emotionally-rich experiences and enhance their description of their experience by engaging in autoethnography. Consequently, individuals pursuing autoethnography as a method of qualitative research may find value in the results of this study.

Methodology

Autoethnography produces meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Researchers hold twofold identities of academic and personal self to share stories about an aspect of themselves in their daily lives (Ellis et al., 2011). Therefore, researchers use themselves as their primary research subjects. The subjective nature of this methodology can enhance one’s work (Muncey, 2010). Emotions are placed in the foreground to acknowledge the subjective nature of knowledge (Butz & Besio, 2009), enabling authors to produce a thick description of an experience and serving to facilitate understanding for those who have or have not experienced a particular phenomenon (Peterson, 2014). My journey through autoethnography not only provided me with the opportunity to tell my story but it was also a transformative process that reminded me of the emotions that I had

previously experienced throughout my parents' divorce, thereby re-engaging me in the emotional experience that originally motivated my research question.

Research Question

Immersing myself in the existing literature raised my awareness to the underrepresentation of my own experience in the dominant discourse around divorce. This prompted my desire to construct a narrative that could speak to others who experienced parental divorce similarly. My early intentions were to relay my own divorce story; one that had not yet been represented. In particular, I wanted to focus on how being a Chinese woman may have contributed to the differences I observed between my experience of parental divorce and those studies illustrating the experience within the dominant western culture. Therefore, my preliminary research question was: How do I, as a Chinese-Canadian woman, understand my experience of childhood parental divorce? This guiding question evolved, and although highly unanticipated, a second question emerged as a natural result of the qualitative process: How can autoethnography be used as a transformative tool to re-engage researchers in the personal emotional experiences that motivate their research questions? For the purposes of this paper I have chosen to concentrate my attention on the process of autoethnography and how it can act as a catalyst for researchers to reconnect to the experiences which may have originally led them to pursue autoethnography.

Data and Analysis

As per the autoethnographic tradition (Ellis et al., 2011), I began by writing journal entries specifically for this project. I chronicled details of my life, from 3–22 years old. As I wrote, I asked: How did I make sense of the divorce? How have I changed as a result of my parents' divorce? What were some of the typical situations I encountered through the process of parental divorce? How was my divorce experience similar to, or different from, those described in the literature, given my being raised in a Chinese-Canadian household? How did my gender role socialization as a female shape my experience of divorce? I analyzed my journal entries in an attempt to organize my experience, but I struggled to accurately depict and establish a coherent meaning regarding that experience. Although autoethnography is flexible in its approach, it is a complex method that does not proceed linearly. In fact, Ellis (2004) equated the undertaking of autoethnography to “being sent into the woods without a compass” (p. 120). My project had come to a standstill, and upon re-reading my detailed journals, I found that they sounded disconnected from the emotionally charged event that had originally compelled me to pursue parental divorce as a research topic.

Upon sharing this struggle with my father, he asked me if I would like to read the psychological assessment conducted on me and my family members, used during child custody proceedings in 1998. This document provoked a re-engagement with my personal emotional experience of the divorce event, breathing new life into a story that had, after numerous retellings, become overshadowed by my thoughts around the experience. My review of this document reminded me of the emotions I had associated with the divorce event (e.g., initial sadness, followed by relief, contentment, and motivation to grow) and also led me to better understand the thoughts I had connected to this experience.

I recalled and reconstructed conversations, following the example by Ellis and Bochner (2000) to substantiate my findings. These snippets of reconstructed narrative are not verbatim; rather, the intention was to capture the essence of each conversation.

Findings: A Movement Through Five Stages, from Inquiry to Inspiration

My involvement with autoethnography moved me through five key stages: inquiry, stagnation, re-engagement, transformation, and inspiration. These conversations illustrate how I developed and experienced a movement from inquiry to inspiration through this project. These key stages are briefly explained, with an example of each provided in the following diagram:

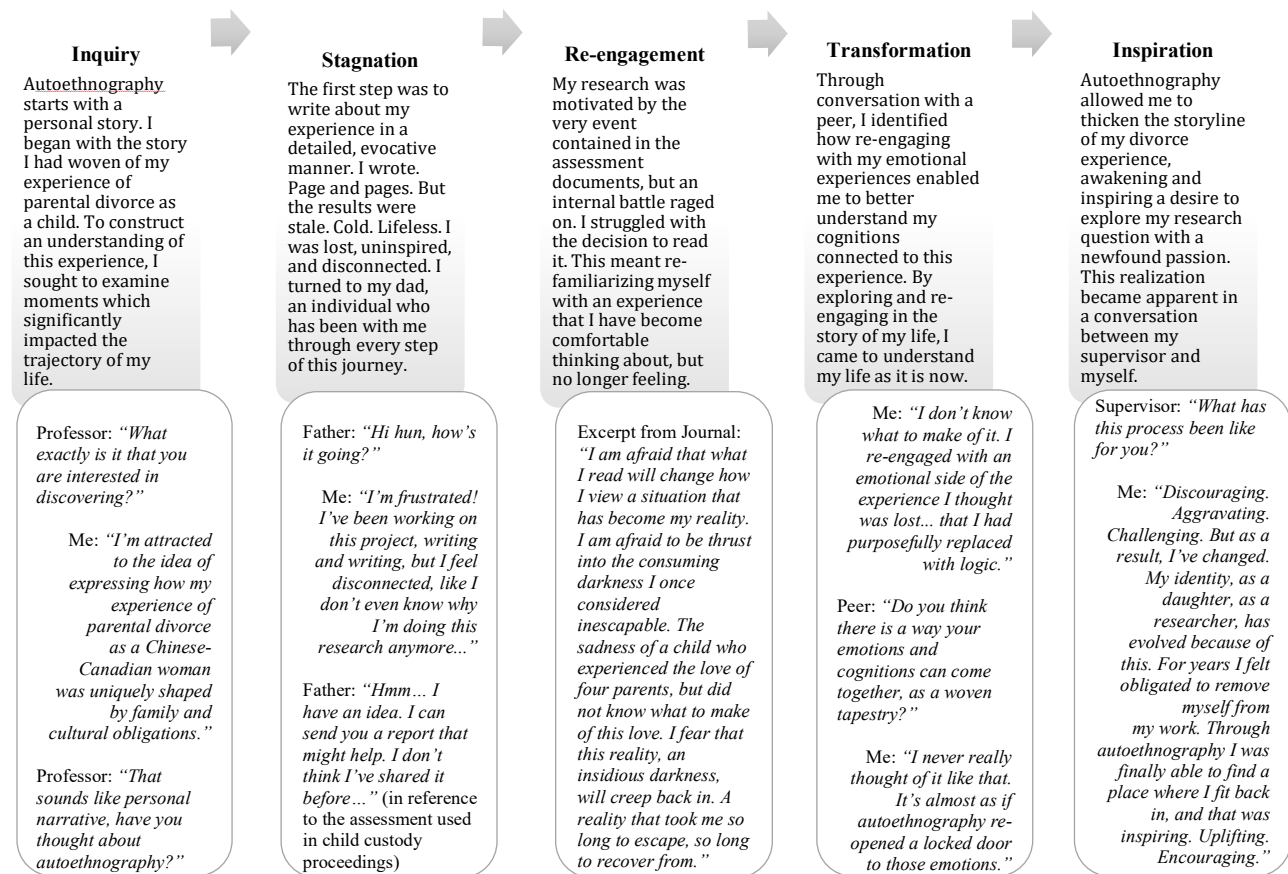


Figure 1. The Development of the Five Stages: A Movement from Inquiry to Inspiration

Inquiry

An experience or event which holds significant meaning to an individual is commonly the motivator that attracts researchers to particular areas of interest; this is the case with autoethnographies, which stem from deeply personal stories (Wall, 2008). At the commencement of this project, I wanted to find a way to express how my experience of parental divorce was uniquely shaped by family and cultural obligations. My instructor recommended I pursue autoethnography as this method would allow me to develop a personal narrative of my experience, integrating personal aspects of myself that are routinely siphoned out when using other qualitative methods. For example, as is intended through the practice of bracketing (i.e., identifying preconceived beliefs about the phenomenon being studied and “bracketing” them out in an attempt to approach one’s research from an unbiased perspective) in traditional phenomenological research (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Stagnation

The first steps of autoethnography are to write about the experience. Autoethnographers are challenged to present their experiences in a detailed, evocative manner (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Following this procedure, I wrote pages and pages, but the results were stale, cold, and lifeless. I was lost, uninspired, and disconnected from how the divorce had truly impacted me. Autoethnography is commonly used as a form of expressing self-narratives because it is adaptable. The lack of prescribed stages allows the user to adjust their next moves based on what best suits the given circumstance (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). However, as an emerging researcher attempting autoethnography for the first time, the lack of a “how-to” guide left me feeling overwhelmed. My depiction of parental divorce read as a mechanical story. Although this event was saturated with personal emotional turmoil, numerous reiterations and re-tellings of the divorce had allowed me to package and present it as a clean-cut process. Years of critically analyzing the paradigm of divorce in my life and in the lives of others led me to view this event through a clinical and objective lens, a far cry from my initial goal for this project.

Re-engagement

In contrast to feeling “stuck” in the cognitive reiterations of my parents’ divorce, I could clearly identify emotionally reengaging with my experience of parental divorce the moment I read the psychological report conducted during the divorce and custody proceedings. This document opened with a description of my parents’ marriage and subsequent dissolution of their relationship. However, the excerpt that had the largest impact and elicited the strongest emotions was a description of myself as a young girl and an account of parental treatment prior to the divorce. This section of the document described specific scenarios I had encountered as a child facing parental divorce, serving as a vivid reminder of the emotions (e.g., initial feelings of grief and loss, followed by an increased desire to grow and learn from the experience) that I had previously felt.

Following exposure to this document, I moved from a phase of stagnation to re-engagement with the project, as the content detailed in this text revitalized feelings I had associated with a previously emotionally charged event. I was reminded of the sadness I felt upon realizing that I would never again live in a home with both of my biological parents. I remembered the guilt that possessed me when wondering if I had played a role in my parents’ divorce. I reminisced on the anxiety I experienced when I assumed the role of mediator between my parents. However, I also came to realize how this experience prompted growth, development, and maturity in myself. My own view of marriage was influenced by my parents’ divorce, in that I placed intense value on the sanctity of this relationship. My response to my parents’ divorce was also notably different than that which was portrayed in the dominant literature; specifically, I focused on excelling academically and building strong relationships. Overall, I am able to look back on this experience through a strengths-based lens – to see how my parents’ divorce positively impacted and changed the trajectory of my life. The process of autoethnography differs from one individual to the next; however, in my experience I was able to re-engage with strong emotions following exposure to a document containing emotionally explicit language and events.

Transformation

The act of reading the psychological assessment that was conducted on me as a child facing parental divorce was a transformative experience, especially pertaining to my view of the

event. Through conversation with a peer, I identified how assessment of this artifact allowed me to re-engage with my personal emotional experience of divorce, enabling me to better understand my cognitions connected to this experience. I was placed back into the shoes of my former self, which not only served as a transformative encounter, but also allowed me to understand how years of research in this particular area had moved me from emotional to cognitive domains of experiencing. Through the process of completing this autoethnography I was able to understand how this form of research has the potential to allow authors to personally reconnect to emotionally-rich experiences, in addition to enhancing one's detailed description of their experience.

Inspiration

Re-exploring previous parts of my life led to a greater understanding of the influence that the divorce had on me. Working through the process of autoethnography allowed me to thicken the storyline of my divorce experience, awakening and inspiring my desire to explore a particular research question with a newfound passion. A true gift can come from autoethnography in that the process of working through one's experience from start to finish is as much a reward as the finished product.

Discussion

I initially pursued autoethnography as a method which would allow me to share my own experience of parental divorce. However, as I progressed through this project, I came to realize that autoethnography can result in much more than sharing one's story and experience. In turn I recognized that the process, not solely the final product, can generate highly informative knowledge to the researcher. The following is a brief summary of what I came to learn through this experience; specifically, my personal discoveries, applicability of this study to researchers and clinicians, limitations of this study, and directions for future research.

What I Discovered Through Autoethnography

My initial interest in the topic of divorce was due to experiencing it first-hand as an emotionally salient event in childhood. However, after engaging in numerous years of research pertaining to the experience of divorce, I was detached from the emotionally significant aspects of my experience, giving way to an evaluation from a primarily cognitive perspective. At the onset of this project, I had difficulty recalling the affective aspects of my parents' divorce. My journey through autoethnography led me to rediscover a part of my family and personal history that would not have been made known to me had I not employed this method of research. Autoethnography allowed me to access and re-live the emotional experience that had formerly driven and inspired my research idea – the grieving and loss I felt as my family no longer remained a cohesive unit, followed by the subsequent motivation I felt to grow through this experience. In the process, an idea that had become stale was brought back to life. Autoethnography became a tool to not only share an authentic understanding of my experience, but by which a greater appreciation and use for this methodology was recognized.

The process of writing personal stories can be therapeutic for authors, as we write to make sense of ourselves and our experiences (Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnography allowed me to re-engage with a personal emotional experience as a researcher and a daughter. This process forced me to look at who I was in the past and integrate that into the person I am now. Further, this study enabled me to better understand who I am and the roles I hold within the context of the

cultures I am situated in. This is not limited to the cultural understanding I have gained through examining the intersection between Chinese and Canadian cultures, but also the sub-culture within my own family, within my relationships with my parents, and with other women who experienced parental divorce in childhood.

How can Re-Engagement be Useful to Researchers and Clinicians?

Autoethnography not only sensitizes researchers and clinicians to important client issues but goes further in that it adds a personal voice to the existing body of research. This is significant when working with clients from specific populations as their concerns may differ from those in the dominant literature. Philaretou and Allen (2006) noted that the knowledge obtained through this methodology is academically valuable as it provides an insider's perspective into sensitive topics that may not be readily approached by recruited participants. This study explicitly focused on engaging researchers in moving from cognitive to emotional domains of experiencing, particularly in regard to the topic they have chosen to investigate. Autoethnography prompted me to re-engage in the personal emotional experience that originally motivated my question. By engaging in the emotional aspects of my experience, I was able to provide a comprehensive description of this experience, which may differ from the knowledge obtained through using alternative qualitative methods.

Limitations

When taking into consideration the self-selecting nature of what I chose to speak to, a potential limitation of this research is the quality of the information I obtained. That is, this study was highly dependent on my ability to self-reflect and communicate my experiences. Specifically, the depth of the data I was able to obtain may have been limited by the fact that I was reflecting on the emotions I experienced in childhood. Therefore, this renders it impossible to fully access the exact emotions I felt as a child, emotions which led me to develop my current beliefs and values around marriage and divorce. Critics of autoethnography have judged it as narcissistic, excessively focused on the individual, and self-indulgent (Coffey, 1999). However, Bochner and Ellis (1996) countered that the subjective stance taken by the researcher "allow[s] another person's world of experience to inspire critical reflection on your own" (p. 22). Therefore, autoethnographic research not only provides readers with a fuller understanding of a particular experience, but also challenges them to consider and reflect on their own experiences. The basis of qualitative research is humanistic in nature and therefore, the experience is considered through the eyes of the individual (Creswell, 2009). With this approach in mind, qualitative researchers consider personal stories and narratives to be valid and credible data by which researchers can answer the questions they have asked. Therefore, one of the main strengths of autoethnography is that it provides personal narratives and provides rich data pertaining to a particular experience (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Future Research

Exposure to an artifact prompted my movement from cognitive to emotional domains of experiencing; specifically, the psychological assessment which was conducted during the divorce and custody proceedings. Future studies could extend beyond a one-person sample and examine how other researchers engaging in autoethnography experience the introduction of an artifact. In

this case, it would be interesting to note whether or not researchers outside of this particular study also experience a movement from cognitive to emotional domains of experiencing.

Conclusion

My initial aim for this study was to enhance my understanding of divorce within a collective culture, with the colossal hopes of one day furthering the development of theory pertaining to divorce and identity; thereby, enabling researchers and clinicians alike to provide more effective counselling services for young Chinese-Canadians. I intended to explore how family and cultural obligations uniquely shaped my experience of divorce and construct an understanding of this experience by examining how my parents' divorce significantly influenced the trajectory of my life. Unexpectedly, the process of autoethnography moved me from a specific topic of exploration to better understanding how engagement with this methodology can allow researchers to access underlying emotions associated with particular research topics. I came to understand that, through autoethnography, it is possible for a researcher to not only thicken the storyline of their experiences, but also reawaken a desire to explore their research question with a newfound passion.

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