



Feminist and Gender Studies Methodology: Introduction to Biographical Research and Autoethnography

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Introduction to biographical research

- Biography is created from self-observation and interpretation of own life, structurization of own life experience before and after certain event

Biographical method

Biographical method reveals one's personal „I”, construction of daily life and wider social structure context: individual experience *versus* collective experience.

Biographical method:

- it is a talk with himself/ herself, seeking to discover identity of self developing “who I am” and “what I am”.
- It is a dialog between self and society, between real “I” and ideal “I” – it is a dialog about being men or women in particular life way.

- Biographical research exposes individual lives within social context, scrutinizes connection between biography and social structure
- sociological imagination(C.W. Mills), uncovers how events in individual lives (social and geographic mobility, acquired skills and competences, interruption of work activity due to illness, maternity, unemployment etc.) intersect with social and economic structural changes and transformations



- Phenomenological, ethno methodological, interactionist and psychoanalytic theories created a framework to envisage biographical narrative as a form of subjective reality with subjective experiences and interpretations, meanings of personal life (motivations, accounts and situational definitions) (Roberts, 2002).

Theories and approaches

- Positivist tradition
- Psychoanalytic theory
- Phenomenological-hermeneutical approach
- Social-psychological approach
- Social phenomenology approach
- Critical theory (including feminist approach)

Positivist tradition

Positivist tradition of biographical research views a person's life as interplay of objective structures and consciousness.

- Biographical research explains the position of the person's agency in the context of social structures.
- Biographical narrative reflects connections between life journeys and larger social contexts, reveals public dimensions of private problems.

Psychoanalytic theory

social physics or social phenomenology?

objective structures or subjective reality?

Psychoanalytic theory and biography

- Freud on Leonardo da Vinci, Dostoyevsky, Mickelangelo biographies
- Biography of Freud

Psychobiography

Erickson about Luther

Alice Miller on Hitler, Virginia Woolf, Franz Kafka, Nietzsche, Picasso, Kollwitz, Buster Keaton, Dostoyevsky, Chechov, Schiller, Rimbaud, Mishimo, Proust, James Joyce psychobiographie

Podoroga on S. Eizenštein

Phenomenological-hermeneutical approach

Subjectivist perspective:

- **consciousness** of an individual is not only a reflection of the objective social reality and discourses, but is itself **a reality** and must be studied as such.
- sociology and other social sciences have been complemented by psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and hermeneutics.
- Biographical narrative is a particular reconstruction of the experience, by which, through a reflective process, meaning is given to what happened or was lived.



Interpretative phenomenological analysis

- Examination how people make sense of their major life experiences
- Experience
- The world as given in consciousness

Social-psychological approach

(Giddens, 1991, Chamberlayne, et al., 2008).

- Narrative reveals how external circumstances manifest themselves in internal world as the person reacts to the impact of social structures on him/her.
- society is a shared subjective reality, complexity of beliefs, norms and ways of thinking and set of material facts
- external social transformations (economic crisis, changes in economic and social structure, social cataclysms) as inner subjective reality fairly often emerge as feeling of loss, guilt about inability to overcome hardships and control own life, uncertainty, anxiety, fear and pity, etc.

Social phenomenology

- E.Husserl, A.Schutz, P. Berger and T. Luckmann.
- Intersubjectivity
- Other (the Other as representative of socially and culturally specific groups)
- Lebenswelt (lived world). Structures of Lebenswelt contain immanent relatedness to Other, are given in intersubjectivity, in being-with (Mit-Sein). Human experience is intersubjective. The experience involves experiences of others.
- Social world is constructed in meanings.
- Multiplicity of lived worlds.
- Interrelation between social structures and subjectivity (individual or collective consciousness)

Biographical narrative: Agency and Structures (Giddens)

- Autobiographical narrative becomes a space of deliberation and negotiation of transitions, turning-points, choices made and risks taken in the life
- Theory of structuration

Critical theory and biography: Foucault

Michel Foucault narrative becomes the act of rule and domination of discourses and practices.

individual subjectivity is inbeded into the structures of power and knowledge. Power defines and controls our subjectivity, knowledge, and narrative

biographical narrative and its interrelation with **dominant, normalizing** discourses .

The **normative biography** mandane appropriate behaviour and life trajectory

Critical theory and biographical narrative: feminist approach

- biographical method in women's awareness raising groups (Comerford & Fambrough, 2002).
- By telling her life history to a group, a woman begins to understand not only the uniqueness of her life history and trajectory, but also the commonness and similarity of her experience with the experience of others.
- Collective awareness raising in social work classrooms leads to common action, change of situation by uniting efforts both psychologically and politically.

Collaborative autoethnography: introduction

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Autoethnography

- a qualitative research method that is both autobiographical and ethnographic;
- self-inquiry as a way to research social environments;
- crosses the researcher-participant divide;
- researchers examine their self-world;
- researcher self-reflexivity, often the researcher/s and the researched are the same people (Ellis and Bochner 2000);



Autoethnography

- researcher subjectivity as a significant part of research process (Bochner and Ellis 2002; Chang 2008).
- related the narrative turn in the human and social sciences;
- "Thus, autoethnography, an approach as close to the arts and humanities as it is to the social and human sciences, celebrates and prizes subjectivity rather than viewing it as an irritant, and can be distinguished from biography or memoir by its commitment to rigorous cultural interrogation and analysis" (Ellis 2004, xix).

Autoethnography

- “Autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethno), and on self (auto)” (Ellis and Bochner 2000, 740);
- exploration of multiple ways of experiencing and representing lives;
- therefore, the experiences of people who feel they have been culturally excluded and marginalized (Short et al. 2013);
- challenging levels of personal, relational, cultural, theoretical and political reflexivity (Short et al. 2013, 5).

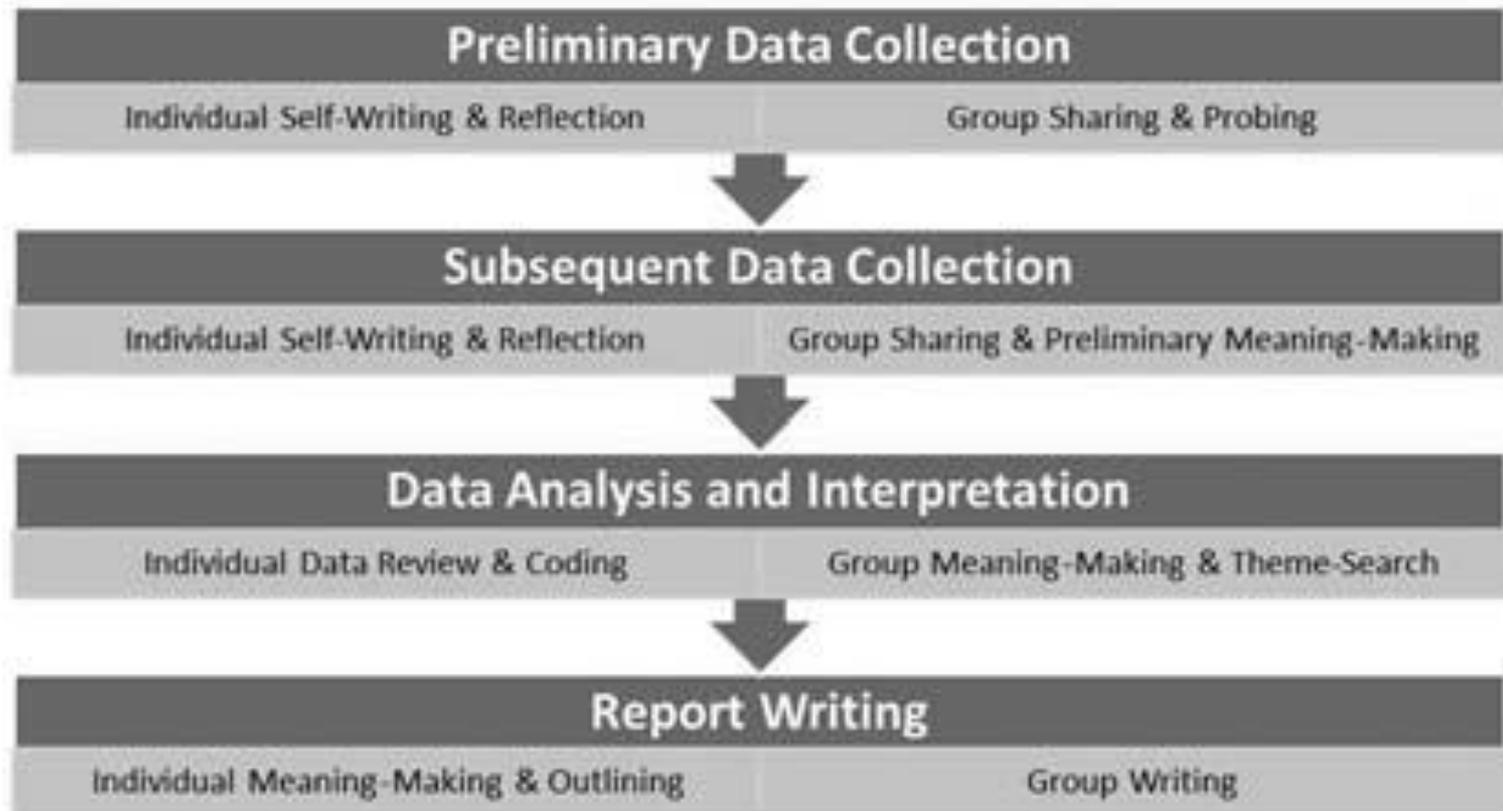


Collaborative autoethnography

- In a collaborative autoethnography, researchers share their personal stories and build on them together;
- researchers generate their autobiographical data to understand social phenomena;
- collaborative autoethnography promotes community building among research participants;
- usually, it is a prolonged process since like other ethnographic methods data collection continues until a point of saturation (Chang et al. 2013).

Collaborative autoethnography

(Figure 1 from Chang et al. 2013)



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Collaborative autoethnography

- Different possible sizes of research teams: two-person, three-or-more-person autoethnography;
- variations of collaborative autoethnography:
- *autoethnographic conversation*: researchers participate in conversations (face to face or email) on an agreed topic; they analyse them and come up with the main themes that comprise a coherent story about the phenomenon (for instance, being a woman in academia);

Collaborative autoethnography

- *community autoethnography*: “a relationship-making activity in which researchers co-construct each other’s realities” and dialogic process of back-and-forth writing or sharing process;
- *performance collaborative autoethnography*: created as theater scripts, a series of poetry, or performance narratives (Chang et al. 2013, 49-50).



Data collection

- personal memory data, self-memory and recollection and other autobiographical material
- as a complementary data, material collected from family, friends, colleagues, and documents, my experiences, others' experiences, mass-mediated representations, etc.

Data analysis

- 1) reviewing data; (2) categorizing, regrouping and coding data and (3) identifying themes and reconnecting them with data.
- However, data interpretation is also closely tied to writing. Thus, some autoethnographers turn their analysis into their narrative instead of the “invasive” process of data interpretation.

Collaborative autoethnography

- Despite possible contrasting interpretations of cultural phenomena, the objectives:
 - to achieve the “thick description” of one’s own life and sociocultural context
 - to produce creatively written, detailed, local and evocative first person accounts of the relationship between personal autobiography and culture (Short et al. 2013)
 - to build community for the purpose of collective action
- to achieve both personal and co-researchers’ empowerment.

Collaborative autoethnography

- Collaborative autoethnographic practice:
 - can be utilized as part of a professional development program
 - can turn into collaborative articles, books or book chapters or collaborative research programs based on autoethnography.

Simulated short-term collaborative autoethnography

- For instance, to explore the meaning of being a woman in academia world in relation to their superiors and their students and official scientific requirements characteristic of a specific country.
- How to collaborate:
 - a) to write down/tell (to each other) autoethnographic story on being a female academic (gender, age, ethnicity, etc. factors in becoming a female academic; The most meaningful moments in academic biography; relationships between work and home in their lives; changes noticed in how you define your academic identity during the different stages of your academic career);
 - b) to share the story with others
 - c) to discuss commonalities and differences of these stories
 - d) to connect them to the literature on gender studies or specific literature on female researchers/scientists
 - e) to find aspects of social critique in the stories compared to the scientific literature.

Collaborative autoethnography



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QUESTIONS RELATED TO BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH:

1. Please tell your story from the beginning what and how it happened in your life that you are a woman in academia?
2. Please single out important, significant, crucial life events, turning points, main decisions and choices made on your route/way to the point that you are now as a woman in academia)?
3. How changes and shifts in your environment, social cultural context and structures (family, labour market, historical and political events, economy) are linked to your choices and opportunities?
4. 4) What does it mean for you to be a woman in academia?



QUESTIONS RRELATED TO ETHNOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH:

1. Describe in detail and give critical reflection of practices and experiences of being woman in academia.
2. Interpret your personal experiences in a broader social cultural and political context (“the personal as political”).
3. Please tell one or few personal stories, which present the most memorable events, incidence in your life dealing with experiences of being woman in academia? Please apply “thick” description approach by providing concrete details on circumstances, participants, yours and others behaviour and emotions, important and related artefacts.
4. Try to identify more general and repetitive patterns (generalized descriptions of practices).
5. Try to look at yourself as outsider and observer.
6. Try to reveal strategies and ways of constructing your interpretative narrative. How those narratives were constructed and what strategies of telling stories and reconstruction of the past have been chosen by yourself and members of your team?

