Autoethnography in Leadership Studies

Past, Present, and Future

Qualitative research approaches had been embraced by leadership scholars since the 1980s when Boyle and Parry introduced autoethnography to the field of leadership studies in 2007.1 Despite the reality that autoethnography is grounded in the qualitative research tradition and shares its methodological strengths with other qualitative methods, acceptance was initially ambivalent due to its self-focused orientation.2 To draw upon the researcher’s personal experience as primary data, autoethnography utilizes *self-reflection*, meaning “reliving and rerendering [about self]: who said and did what, how, when, where, and why,” and *self-reflexivity*, meaning “finding strategies to question our own attitudes, thought processes, values, assumptions, prejudices and habitual actions, to strive to understand our complex roles in relation to others.”3 This initially “underexplored, undertheorised and, above all, undervalued” self-focused method is gaining attention among leadership scholars.4 Growing numbers of published autoethnographies attest to this rising trend in leadership scholarship. In this article, we will discuss autoethnography as a self-originated, dialogical, and contextual process, followed by a brief review of published leadership autoethnography and recommendations for its future use.

**AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS A RESEARCH PROCESS**

Autoethnography originated from the ethnographic research method of anthropology. Although original “auto-ethnography” was not intended for a researcher’s self-exploration,5 the contemporary use of autoethnography has spread as such in diverse social science disciplines. This self-focused autoethnography is characterized by its self-originated, dialogical, and contextual process leading to a qualitative research product. These characteristics are discussed separately here for conceptual clarity although they are often integrated in final products.
Autoethnography is “self-originated” because autoethnographers (i.e., autoethnography researchers) position themselves as initiators, subjects, and objects of their self-exploration. The blurred dichotomy between researchers and the researched is troublesome to some social scientists valuing “objectivity,” but it is a unique strength of autoethnography. Since the various backgrounds of researchers drive self-exploration and self-exposure, autoethnography achieves a new depth and breadth of sociocultural understanding based on the researchers’ personal experiences. Autoethnography can be conducted by individual researchers as a solo endeavor or by a group of autoethnographers as a collaborative project in which their collective autobiographic data are used for data analysis and interpretation. Whether individually or collaboratively engaged, however, the centrality of researchers as subjects and objects is critical in this self-originated process.

Additionally, autoethnography is dialogical because researchers’ personal experiences are created in social relationships and the meaning of such experiences is made through iterative interaction between the present self and the past self and between self and others. Assisted by self-reflection and self-reflexivity, autoethnography facilitates researchers’ internal dialogues with selves, their reconstruction of memories, and the analysis of meanings in relation to others who had influenced the researchers’ personal experiences. Autoethnographers also add voices of others through interviews or dialogical conversations with others to verify, correct, reconstruct, and revise, and thus expand the meaning of their past experiences. Such a dialogical process is not limited to co-constructed or collaborative autoethnographies in which other researchers are intentionally present and often results in intentional and purposeful inclusion or omission of data about selves and others. In the end, autoethnography, whether individual or collaborative, is shaped into an interpretive discourse vetted through this dialogical process.

Finally, autoethnography is contextual in that researchers’ personal experiences are interpreted within their sociocultural contexts. Autoethnographers’ attention to contextuality presumes that personal experiences are shared by their relationship with others and that contextual forces and sociocultural influences are embedded in personal experiences. Therefore, autoethnography connects the personal (experience) to the social (context). Autoethnographic attention to contextuality, combined with the central attention to researchers’ personal experiences and dialogical relationship to others, aligns well with leadership scholarship exploring leaders as individuals, leadership as relationship, and leadership in organizational contexts.

**Autoethnography Products in Leadership Studies**

Leadership autoethnographies can be grouped according to the research focus on leaders, leadership, and organizational contexts. These foci are not mutually exclusive as revealed in actual leadership autoethnographies. However, in this article we will discuss each research focus separately for conceptual clarity.

The first group of leadership autoethnographies focuses on researchers’ own leadership experiences and/or identity development. Leadership scholars argue that people become leaders by internalizing and expressing a leadership identity. Therefore, leaders are being
called to pay attention to how their individual identities are constructed through multilayered interactions in socially bounded systems.\textsuperscript{12} Self-reflection and self-reflexivity help leadership researchers answer their identity construction question.\textsuperscript{13} Leaders who are open to exploring their own identities are potentially more open to authentic leadership facilitating a transformative process\textsuperscript{14} and to ethical and socially responsible leadership responsive to others’ needs.\textsuperscript{15} Autoethnography is perfectly suited for leadership identity exploration as understanding leaders as individuals is a vital topic in leadership studies.\textsuperscript{16} For example, Garza\textsuperscript{17} explored his leadership development as a first-time superintendent, whereas Kempster and Stewart\textsuperscript{18} presented the leader-making of the second author as a chief operating officer. Bilgen\textsuperscript{19} also studied her identity as a social justice leader as a woman of faith through examining her multi-faith and cross-cultural experiences.

The second category of leadership autoethnographies focuses on leadership happening in the relational space between leaders and others. Others refer to their followers, peers, and superiors. A shift of research focus from leaders as individuals to leadership as relationship is also occurring in leadership studies.\textsuperscript{20} The expansion of autoethnography research into this relational space thus reflects the disciplinary trend. Although this relational and dialogical exploration of leadership is not limited to collaborative autoethnography, we have more examples to offer among co-constructed autoethnographies. For example, Kempster and Gregory\textsuperscript{21} explored the second author’s leadership as relationship from the perspective of a middle manager; Kempster and Iszatt-White\textsuperscript{22} used collaborative autoethnography to examine how co-constructed executive coaching created opportunities for leadership development; and Malin and Hackman\textsuperscript{23} focused on the mentoring relationship between a doctoral student, who is an educational leader aspirant, and his professor. All three focused on the relational aspect of leadership.

The third category of leadership autoethnographies foregrounds organizational contexts when studying leader self-identity and/or leadership. Several autoethnographers made the case for “organizational autoethnography,” to bring autoethnography closer to ethnography in the context of organizations.\textsuperscript{24} Doloriert and Sambrook\textsuperscript{25} have incorporated autoethnography into their work on organizational development; Learmonth and Humphreys\textsuperscript{26} used autoethnography to critically and creatively explore their experiences with conflicting identity roles in a business school. A particular attention to organizational autoethnography was also noted in the special issue of the academic journal \textit{Organizational Ethnography}.\textsuperscript{27} Organizational autoethnographers highlight the importance of organizational forces, culture, membership, structure, and systems when researchers engage in self-reflexivity, self-critique, other-assessment, and relational evaluation. Considering that autoethnography is inherently context-sensitive, this contextual attention to leadership autoethnography is encouraging.

What these examples of individual (or single-authored) autoethnographic and collaborative autoethnographic studies have in common is a rigorous application of critical self-reflexivity, narrative construction, and meaning-making with respect to leaders’ experiences across disciplines, organizations, cultural contexts, and identity categories. In each case, the leaders’ personal experiences add a nuanced insider account and response to leadership issues and dilemmas to which other leaders will certainly relate. Through this
FURTHER POSSIBILITIES OF AUTOETHNOGRAPHY IN RESEARCH AND PRAXIS

As the previous examples of autoethnography demonstrate, autoethnography offers promising possibilities to leadership scholarship. In this concluding section, we recommend extended application to research process and production as well as to leadership development praxis.

We begin with our recommendations about autoethnography as a research tool. Autoethnography will continue to offer new possibilities of leadership understanding beyond the usual discourses that tend to replicate rather than produce new leadership theory and practice. Since autoethnographic research is designed to evoke a response, catalyze dialogue, build relationships, and change communities and institutions, autoethnography will contribute to generate relevant scholarship to leaders. In addition, it is expected to expand and liberate leadership scholarship by including multiple, alternative, and marginalized voices, an extension necessary to meet the challenges of our complex leadership contexts. The holistic, comprehensive, and critical processes of self-examination will help leaders bring their emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and bodily capabilities into their leadership practice through research. To enhance the understanding of contextualized leadership in this globalizing and complex world, therefore, we suggest that leadership autoethnography (1) pay a more rigorous and intentional attention to organizational contexts as leadership is extremely contextual; (2) include more diverse and marginalized voices either as interviewees or as partners in co-constructed autoethnographies; and (3) analyze more critically the injustice and leadership hegemony inherent in the power imbalance between leaders and followers.

In addition, we present autoethnography as a praxis tool, with which benefits from the autoethnographic process could be reaped, particularly for leadership development. Chang, Longman, and Franco discussed the tremendous benefits that leadership practitioners experienced in a collaborative autoethnographic process. They also identified the challenge with the autoethnography process when it was presented as a research tool assuming the production of a research report. As a praxis tool, we argue that the autoethnographic process does not need to lead to the production of a publishable research article. Instead, the self-initiated, dialogical, and contextual process may be utilized to help current and aspiring leaders analyze and interpret their leader identity and leadership development paths; their relationship with followers, peers, and superiors in the workplace; and the influence and impact of organizational contexts on their leadership effectiveness. This process may be implemented as a solo project by individuals or collaboratively by a group of participants. In the process, participants will sharpen their self-reflexivity and self-critiquing competence, their exploratory interview skills to draw out the stories of others in connection with their leadership, and their contextual analysis skills.
Whether used as a research or a praxis tool and whether implemented individually or collaboratively, autoethnography that engages leaders’ personal experience in self-reflective, self-reflexive, dialogical, and contextual analysis will offer fresh insights and possibilities to leadership scholarship and praxis.

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