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Abstract

There is paucity of counselling psychology literature which explores the experience of people coming from a mixed cultural background. The literature available focuses on developmental theories and cultural competencies of practitioners but all too often fails to capture the peculiarities and particularities of the mixed experience. It also has a tendency to focus on ethnic, racial and cultural labels which are not always useful or helpful for people.

This paper explores autoethnography as a methodology with which to research the mixed cultural experience. It aims to highlight the importance for the counselling psychology professions of reflexive and subjective research with regards to studying and understanding people's experiences of mixed culture.

It examines the methods and processes used by a researcher in the data gathering, analysis and explication of their own subjective research. It reveals some of the difficulties encountered and ethical decisions which had to be made during the research. In keeping with the ethnographic and creative approach it is written as a self dialogue and hopes to give the reader a sense of how the research was undertaken.

It concludes that autoethnography can highlight the complexities of the experience of people operating between or on the edge of cultures and can bring greater understanding and awareness to counselling professionals who will then hopefully be better enabled to help people.

Key Words: Autoethnography, Mixed Culture, Epistemology, Subjectivity, Counselling Psychology

Autoethnography - a methodological approach to exploring the individual experience of a mixed cultural heritage - a chat with self.

I'm finding it an interesting time to be from a mixed cultural background right now.

How so?

Politically, socially, the whole Brexit debate, the media paints it all as so black and white. How do I define my experience or describe myself? My father is Turkish and my mother English, yet the way I appear either in person, on the phone or on paper is not necessarily a reflection of my experience.

You look don't look Turkish

That is a reaction I often get from people.

Census data shows I am a part of a growing mixed demographic (Owen, 2007; Jivraj, 2012). Census's give us quantitative figures, but there are problems with self definition as there is a growing population of people who do not fit within cultural parameters as defined by them (Smith *et al.*, 2010; Fernando, 2012; Crane, 2013 and Flores-González *et al*, 2014). This research suggests that the complexity of experience cannot be captured in a label.

How about counselling literature?

McLeod (2009) highlighted that there are huge gaps in multicultural process literature. Much of the literature fails to address the complexities of the process for people such as myself who occupy multiple positions (Diamond & Gillis 2006). The literature is in many ways rooted in dichotomised thinking (Altman, 2006). I resonated with Bochner (1997, p.424) who wrote "The research literature offered me data, labels, categories and theoretical explanations... but it didn't invite engagement with the particularities of the experience."

So what has this got to do with methodology?

I knew I wanted to explore and share my experience in the form of autoethnography (Egeli, 2016). I was enthused by some of the literature, when I read Fouad (2001), Hector (2004) and Yomtoob (2014) I felt a surge of excitement as it was material that spoke to me. I think the methodology chose me as much as I chose it.

What is Autoethnography?

Ellis, (2004, p.xix) says it is “research, writing, story and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social and political.” I felt that this was what was missing from the literature. It seemed to fit with my epistemological understandings.

Can you explain?

Epistemology is concerned with the nature of knowledge and how to acquire it, (Cardinal *et al.*, 2004; Ritchie *et al.*, 2014). This is linked to Ontology which is concerned with the nature of being, what exists and how it exists (Ponterotto, 2005; Clough & Nutbrown 2007).

Robson (2011) outlines two main approaches to social research which come under quantitative and qualitative paradigms. The quantitative approach lends itself to positivist and post-positivist research and the qualitative approach broadly lends itself to social constructionalism or interpretivism.

The positivist approach assumes a single knowable truth or reality which can be understood. It is argued that it is scientific, free of bias and subjectivity (McLeod, 1999; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005); it is often numeric and seeking rules which apply uniformly (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The positivist approach separates the observer from the observed pursuing objectivity, whereas the constructionist view would be that there is not one single truth but rather numerous truths, sometimes embracing subjectivity with personally engaged research (Cohen *et al.*, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2013; Ritchie *et al.*, 2014). I situate myself as coming from a qualitative and epistemologically more interpretative and subjective viewpoint. This may be in part because of my mixed background. I don't personally feel as if I fit within a definable objective cultural category myself.

Sounds postmodern or poststructuralist even...

As a counsellor I find the qualitative approach particularly suited to me. It can also be seen as humanistic, drawing on therapeutic techniques (Moustakas, 1990; Madill & Gough, 2008; McLeod, 2011). Law (2014) writes that meaningful psychotherapy research needs to be consistent with a constructionist epistemology which demonstrates reflexivity and acknowledges subjectivity. I needed an appropriate methodological approach to capture my cultural fluidity and subjective experiences. Meerwald (2013) suggests the fluidity of the approach transgresses the binary divides in traditional paradigms. My choice of methodology was in part a reaction to the binary thinking I was experiencing in the counselling literature.

It sounds in some ways political?

Maybe it was about social justice, perhaps I wanted to subvert establishment truth or confront dominant forms of representation! (Neuman, 1996; Morrow, 2007; McLeod, 2011). It was a daunting prospect.

How so?

It seemed like an open book with no clear rules or systematic methods (Wall, 2006; Forber-Pratt, 2015). West (2013) poses a series of questions when choosing methodology and most of these went through my mind. Could I handle large amounts of data? Could I immerse and reveal myself? How will I analyse this? How was I going to get my data?

So what did you do?

The first step was gathering my data. My initial thought was to journal; I wanted to get down as much as possible but over a sustained amount of time. My particular focus was on being mixed and my experiences associated with that.

I kept my journal to hand and would scribble down any notes or ideas which came to me. Sometimes it would be conscious and sometimes I would have fleeting thoughts that I tried to capture, I called it butterfly catching.

Sounds serene

To start with it was. It went from a conscious exploration to a more unconscious one. Dreams came into play, daydreams too...

You're daydreaming now

... I began to feel that I was being heuristic in my approach. I read Moustakas (1990) and felt that I was in an immersion stage of research, I had defined my terms (initial engagement) and now I was living and breathing my question. Denzin & Lincoln (2005, p.4) may call me a "Bricoleur," drawing on different ideas. I was hitching a ride on heuristics...

Nice patchwork image....

I felt at times that I couldn't turn off the research and I would have moments of what I call data flooding, lots of racing thoughts and images popping up. I found that my data would be evoked in different ways,

For example?

I was teaching at a very multicultural school, the pupils were giving talks about themselves and I heard their stories of loss, travel, exile... powerful stuff. It was tapping into something in me...

Sounds intangible,

Yes, pressing unconscious buttons but drawing my own data. Accessing the tacit dimension (Polanyi, 1966) has been a part of the process for me too.

What do you mean?

Braud & Anderson (1998) describe the tacit as body based and intuitive knowings that are difficult to put into words. This was my view of tacit, the edge of awareness, a kind of peripheral vision. Douglas & Moustakas (1985) say that from this, intuition and inferences emerge. It perhaps relates to Gendlin's idea of the "felt sense" (2003, p.32). West (2010) writes, "within our bodies, we can potentially access a deeper sense of who we really are and what we know is an important contribution to our understanding of tacit knowledge." My body was telling me things, sometimes in my stomach or a shiver up the back of my neck. I do some martial practises and I think this helped.

Perhaps what my mind forgot my body remembered? (Rothschild, 2000). I'm also thinking it tapped into information that language could not and as I discovered, language became a theme for me. Sometimes I would stay with a feeling and explore what I think it meant; my feelings of grief were pretty apparent after a while. That lump in the throat. I also started to access my internal locus of evaluation (Rogers, 1951). I had opened something, something volcanic.

Volcanic?

Emotions, memories and feelings erupting at once, molten, from deep within my core. It was hot.

Dikkat çok sıcak! (Careful it's hot!)

That's what my Grandparents would say with hot drinks! You see I was dealing with a stream of consciousness, free associations too...I think I was consciously indwelling on my own memories and feelings which led to opening unconscious material that would appear unannounced, driving along, shopping, at work...

How else did you gather data?

Synchronous events, meetings with people, a nurse in hospital, a visit to the Turkish consulate, even discovering writers on Radio 4...

Synchronous?

Chance events, but meaningful ones. Everything became raw material (Braud & Anderson 1998). I was in an open state of awareness. One time watching my children play led to a realisation that I had played in different languages at different ages.

I also undertook a series of self interviews with my counselling colleagues, which I recorded.

Did that help?

I felt working with fellow counsellors was a safe way of testing and validating what what was going on for me.

Sounds like a form of triangulating your data?

Maybe, but that would have positivist overtones! I wanted to help make sense of things. I chose a mix of people (ages, genders and theoretical approaches) to help evoke different knowledge in me. One interview was tough,

It felt brutal and awful, I nearly ran away, I wanted to stop and leave it,...but I persisted (March 2015).

The conversations helped to draw out material even after the sessions had ended.

Like the counselling process?

Yes, it helped me to assess my major themes and explore any blind spots too using the Johari window idea (West, 2010).

Chats to my supervisor were important; they were quite heuristic for instance my supervisor's subtle self-disclosures would spark my own. Supervision facilitated the conditions for my own self discovery and kept my focus. I used a variety of techniques to gather data; listening to music, visiting the Turkish supermarket and consulate, drawing pictures with my non-dominant hand to access my inner child (Capacchione, 1991), e-mails...

E-mails?

There is something about emails or social media (Markham, 2005) which draws on unconscious process for me. I think that the absence of the physical presence of the other creates a space or vacuum into which thoughts can flow. In psychoanalysis it would be perhaps the idea of the therapist sitting behind the patient or the use of silence in person-centred therapy. E-mails (often to my supervisor and sometimes to myself) formed a part of my electronic journaling.

So what next?

Incubation. I needed time away from the research. I hoped I could re-visit the ideas with greater clarity. It was hard switching off from my study. There were news reports

about Turkey, reminders everywhere. I had some deadlines at work and focussed on them to let my subconscious percolate (Wall, 2006).

Then data analysis?

Yes, I had been processing my data all along and there was much analysis involved in the final writing (Braun and Clarke 2013). I had developed a self dialogue between an experiencing self and a reflexive self (McLeod 2011). Supervision helped me differentiate between the two and helped me to retain a critical edge. I was constantly moving in and out of my experience, viewing it, reviewing it, re-experiencing it from different angles and developing new insights (Ellis, 2004).

Sounds cyclical,

I created a spiral timeline to illustrate it. I used a variety of processes to gather the data, immersed myself and incubated. It was time to work out the themes. I drew a large mind map based on my notes, journals and interviews and placed my information on the floor in front of me to gain a birds-eye view of the data.

My supervisor asked me, “So what are the main headlines so far from this research in a nutshell?” The question helped me to see the stories as newspaper headlines. I started to categorise my data into various themes. I had previously researched for the BBC on a newspaper review show so I was able to visualise which stories would make the papers. I physically drew out the front pages and within those began to place my narratives – a form of creative coding. My stories and data fit within specific themes which became clear. I’d unblocked a plug, it was all about to come gushing out.

Ah, the writing...

Ellis (2004, p.135) writes “Good autoethnographic writing is truthful, vulnerable, evocative and therapeutic.” The quality of the writing is a part of its validity. Not only is my data important, but how it is presented and then received. The readers form a part of the validation.

That sounds like a challenge!

I thought, “How am I going to write this?” I needed to find my voice and approach to writing, (Ellis, 2004; Forber-Pratt, 2015).

I wanted to elicit the critical reflection and the empathy of the reader (Bond, 2002) or enable readers to recontextualise what they know about themselves in light of their encounter with my experience (Bochner, 1996).

How did you go about this?

I used emotional recall (Ellis, 2004) for much of what I wrote. I took the plunge and started to write. I was accessing intuition here as I was choosing what I felt compelled to write about. I could see the headlines. Something inside was guiding me. Ellis (2004) suggests reading on how to write fiction and I found myself inspired by some writers. Jack Kerouac for instance had a style of spontaneous prose which I tried for one chapter,

I woke up early and I began to type. I was revisiting childhood experiences, it was free flowing writing without censorship and was surprisingly lucid (Aug 2015).

Reliving it as it was written was difficult:

Time is a challenge...everything is crushed into the present...like a therapeutic process... 35 years ago is just as present as one minute ago and in this way those experiences are not dead, everything is still out there in the ether...the energy is still there. I have lost my bearings on where I am... (June 2015).

I figured that if I couldn't feel what I was writing, how would the reader feel anything? It had to be to be moving; to show what life can mean and feel like now (Bochner, 2000). I added in analysis to help shed light on aspects of my experience and connect it to the wider world, drawing on a range of literature and media.

I used a reflective style using vignettes and dialogues in my work which seemed natural,

A little bit like this paper?

Yes, showing and not simply telling (Ellis 2004). Anderson (2006) calls for autoethnography to be more analytical rather than evocative, Gingrich-Philbrook (2005) arguing for an aesthetic impulse. I hope it can do both, to be analytical and emotional (Ellis *et al.* 2011). I combined my findings and discussion and ended with a creative synthesis to help express the essence and “explicate” the meanings of my experience (Moustakas, 1990, p.31).

What about ethics?

According to Bond (2004) there are five broad considerations for ethical research; risk, relationships, trustworthiness, integrity and governance. My research was rigorous, with an audit trail and my original MA dissertation proposal was passed by ethics as low risk (Egeli, 2015). I have considered risk along the way. Vickers (2002) describes it as writing on the edge, I had moments of despair.

Emotionally it's tough. I feel up to my neck in shit and right now I'm thinking quantitative tables and charts would be great... It makes me anxious and I am not sure if it's the enormity of the task or I am grieving...I am feeling a huge loss (June 2015).

How did you manage this?

Regular supervision helped. It was important to remain grounded, doing regular physical stuff; cooking, exercise, teaching music, keeping contact with family and colleagues... Self care was important but I had to balance this with my urge to explore and visit those uncharted waters (Forber-Pratt, 2015).

How about others or relational ethics?

My main fear is in some ways upsetting others or “breaking hearts” (Ellis 2004, p.176). I aimed to be “lovingly honest” (Ellis 2004, p.177) and adopted an attitude of do no harm (West, 2002). As I returned to childhood experiences I sensed that it would be impossible not to implicate the presence of my family whether I wrote about them or not. Where necessary I changed identities and I had to be judicious in what I presented but I wanted to remain faithful to my experiences (Ellis & Bochner 1996) whilst taking into account others.

I spoke to my family about my study but I do not know how they may feel if they read it. Ellis (2009, p.13) asks “Don’t I have the right to write about myself?” I had to ask myself this: Do I write this or not? How ethical would my self censorship be? There is no simple answer.

Some people may not agree with my version of events or experience. It goes back to my epistemological stance; I am not claiming any truths or universal findings (Spry, 2001; Bond, 2002). I have tried to be as factually correct as possible and even if I slip on my version of accuracy of events I hope that there is a truth in conveying the emotional experience as I experienced it (Ellis, 2004).

Is there anything you would do differently?

I would have liked more time for incubation to let things percolate a little more. I wonder what it may have been like to visit the material with fresher eyes. I may have included other people in my study, perhaps using reflexive interviews (Ellis, 2004) where my own thoughts and feelings are considered along with other people’s stories.

Tell me about the criticisms of autoethnography.

McLeod (1999, 2011) highlights concerns about methodological rigour, critical distance, authenticity and the clarity of the kind of knowledge being generated. Shields (2000) disputes its epistemological standing. Gans (1999) describes it as avoiding hard work and being an ego trip. Atkinson (1997) argues that it can be overly romanticised and we need to put it in its place. It has been described as autoeroticism, banal, naval gazing, narcissistic and self-indulgent (Shields, 2000; Sparkes, 2002; Vickers 2002; Madison, 2006).

Banal, autoeroticism, narcissistic, indulgent, romantic, naval gazing, egotistical, avoiding hard work, needing to be put in place...

I think these criticisms miss the point. Sparkes (2002) suggests that it may be better to re-frame it as self-knowing or self-sacrificing rather than self-indulgent. Vickers (2002) comments it is more painful than narcissistic, it is not a cop out or for the faint

of heart (Forber-Pratt 2015). I would say it is self discovery. Similar criticisms are made about counselling too (Mearns & Thorne, 2000).

These arguments broadly come down to epistemological standpoints, objectivity versus subjectivity and may be unresolvable (Bochner, 2000). Perhaps we have to live with the difference (Ellis *et al.* 2011). I find it fascinating that autoethnography sparks what seems like a subjective, emotive response from many objective researchers.

Paradoxical stuff

It's a philosophical debate. There is a strong case for narrative and autobiographical approaches to be taken in order to study cultural experiences and identity (Erikson,1968; Katz, 1996; Spickard, 2001; Ponterotto et al 2001, Boylorn & Orbe 2014).

So what differentiates autoethnography from other qualitative approaches?

The researcher's use of self is a factor. Siddique (2011, p315) writes that most qualitative research data using methods such as Grounded Theory (Glazer and Strauss,1968) or Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith , Flowers and Larkin, 2009) is gained by interviews with participants which is in a sense at "arms-length" . Autoethnography is closer to the action or "inside emotional experience" (Ellis and Bochner, 2003, p230). Denzin (1997, p227) describes traditional reflexive social science as turning "everyone into the object of an analytic gaze". He suggests autoethnography turns the gaze inward on self whilst looking at the broader context where experiences of self occur. The subjective nature of it separates it from traditional ethnography too (Hanley et al 2013). I was the "researcher researched" Meervald (2013); it breaks the conventional separation of researcher and subject (Ellis & Bochner 2003).

If you are a researcher then why not research yourself?

Quite! Vickers (2002) argues that the personal voice can explore experiences that otherwise may be difficult to capture. Wall (2006) suggests the researcher's self research could be truer than any outsider's. I wonder how my mixed cultural experiences could have been captured and conveyed in the same way by anyone other than myself? Boylorn & Orbe (2014) write that autoethnography is a powerful

method for working with identity suggesting it challenges cultural assumptions. It can open our awareness to the complexities of lived experience and can give a voice to marginalised standpoints and multiple perspectives (Ellis & Bocher 2003). I felt it gave an appropriate voice to mine (Egeli, 2016).

The final presentation has to be engaging and this arguably makes it more interesting to read than traditional academic texts (Vickers, 2002; Mcleod 2011).

I guess that is a matter of taste,

Perhaps. The reader becomes a co-participant in the research and this has implications for generalization. Unlike within traditional approaches, generalization moves from across cases, to within the case itself - the focus is the reader and their interpretative space (Ellis & Bochner, 2003). Stake (2005 p254) writing about case studies calls it "naturalistic generalization."

How might case studies compare with autoethnography?

It depends on the approach taken. If a case study means a study of one individual or group (Coolican, 1994), then my study could be described as an autoethnographic case study of self. I can see some similarities with narrative case study approaches in data collection and writing whereas pragmatic studies tend to lose the voice of the author and are perhaps more prescriptive (Stake, 2005; McLeod, 2010; Hanley 2012). McLeod (2010) suggests that approaches to case study could be methodologically advanced by including more reflexivity, client perspectives and contextual factors. He makes a point that autoethnographic methods have not yet filtered through to counselling case studies.

Perhaps this could be a future development?

Maybe. As Stake (2005) suggests, the same case is different if seen from different world views.

So how can this fit with counselling psychology?

The British Psychological Society (2016) state that counselling psychologists understand the medical context of psychological problems and work with the unique subjective psychological experience of the individual to alleviate distress. Jones

Nielson and Nicholas (2016) outline the core values of counselling psychology which include a humanistic and relational value base, reflexivity and an understanding of differing world views. There are tensions and debates between the technical/medical versus humanistic/relational aspects of counselling psychology (Strawbridge and Woolfe 2010) but as McIlveen (2007) argues, autoethnography could lay the practitioner as a metaphorical bridge between science and practice, helping to bridge the divides. Autoethnography is by its nature reflexive and subjective and so its research lends itself to these aspects of counselling psychology practice.

Concluding thoughts?

The mixed cultural experience is as significant as ever. Look at the current global refugee crisis, millions of displaced people are moving and integrating with other cultures. Working in schools, I often see young culturally mixed people struggling to define themselves within the discourses heard in media and politics.

I invited readers to see my experience through my eyes (Humphries, 2005) and to remain open to how I made sense of my world (Diamond & Gillis, 2006). I hope my writing evokes readers to feel something, to empathise, connect, reflect critically or even rebel! (Ellis & Bochner 1996, 2006; Bond 2002).

Counselling is in part a social process where people can find a place in society and culture (McCleod, 2009) and research can alleviate suffering through increased understanding (Henton, 2016). Autoethnographic research can highlight the complexities of the experience of people operating between or on the edge of cultures. Our clients may experience these tensions too. This will bring greater understanding and awareness to counselling professionals who will then hopefully be better enabled to help people.

Thank you

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