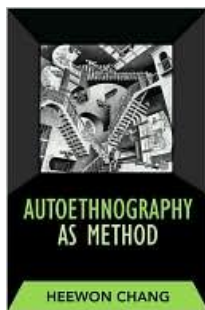


Professional Book Review

Chang, H. (2008). *Autoethnography as Method*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press. 229 pp., ISBN: 978-1598741230 (pbk). \$29.95.

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Beginning with the premise that “every piece of writing reflects the disposition of its author” (p. 14), Chang’s *Autoethnography as Method* offers readers a fresh take on the use of personal narratives in scholarly projects, especially as they support the self-analysis and reflection necessary to uncover one’s cultural assumptions and, in turn, the effects of these assumptions on the outcome of one’s research. Drawing on her experience as an educational anthropologist and ethnographic researcher, Chang provides both the conceptual underpinnings and the practical application of autoethnography as a research method.

The book is divided into three parts, the first of which is largely theoretical, providing a clearly written overview that explores the various ways in which *culture* has been conceptualized, as well as the value and variety of self-narratives, and “the self-transformative potential of autoethnography” to support a cultural understanding of self and others (p. 54). Parts II and III are practical, offering an extremely helpful and detailed presentation of the autoethnographic process. Even novice qualitative researchers will be able to follow the author’s step-by-step explication of the methodology involved in conducting an autoethnographic study. Included within chapters that cover the collection, management, analysis, and interpretation of data are writing exercises and examples drawn from the author’s own self-reflection and analysis. These exercises and examples add greatly to the usefulness of Chang’s text, providing many opportunities for the reader to engage in a hands-on experience of the strategies which the author presents. Further adding to the practical value of the book, the appendices offer a compilation of the writing exercises mentioned above, including additional writing samples by the author. One can easily imagine this text as a “workbook” to be used in introductory qualitative methods courses.

In her introduction to Part I, Chang underscores the book’s theoretical focus and invites readers who are primarily interested in methodology to begin their reading with Part II. However, I would urge those who are contemplating careers in qualitative research to begin at the beginning. The literature review presents a variety of viewpoints on the topics of culture, self, and others and provides an interesting overview of the range of writings that can be classified as personal or self-narratives. I particularly appreciated the chapter in which the author reviews the history of autobiographical narratives within the fields of anthropology and the social sciences and argues for an

understanding of autoethnography that is rigorous and grounded in ethnographic methodology. This conceptual viewpoint protects against narrative writing that is mainly descriptive, lacking in cultural analysis and interpretation and failing to reflect “the interconnectivity of self and others” (p. 54).

Another strength of Part I is the author’s attempt to arrive at what she calls a “work-in-progress concept of culture” (p. 21). After reviewing a variety of ways that anthropologists have attempted to define *culture*, Chang deviates from earlier models such as cultural determinism or cultural essentialism to one that identifies the individual as a “basic unit of culture” and that views culture as “a product of interactions between self and others.” These interactions, taking place within a “community of practice” position the “self” as an “extension of a community” rather than an “independent, self-sufficient being” (p. 26). This definition provides a rationale for the use of self-narratives in ethnographic research.

Before I began Chang’s eminently readable *Autoethnography as Method*, I wondered how autoethnography differed from journaling or crafting a memoir. I questioned the rigor, validity, and even usefulness of such a highly personal endeavor. I came away from the reading both stimulated and encouraged to consider the value of this methodology on a number of fronts: 1) in qualitative research courses to provide students an easily accessible starting point (self) through which to practice data collection, analysis, and interpretation; 2) as a means of self-transformation leading to increased awareness of self and others; 3) for practitioners of all stripes who want to understand their field more fully, especially with respect to why they were initially drawn to it and what sustains their involvement; and 4) for anthropologists and other researchers as they consider the connections between their personal experiences and the cultural lenses that filter how they approach their topic and conduct their research.

Richly nuanced and shedding new light on the varied and often quite fluid ways in which self and others connected to self interact, connect, and disconnect within the realm of culture, Chang’s text invites researchers to include themselves as a research focus and to consider autoethnography as a tool to explore their own perspectives and to arrive at a deeper understanding of others. Those who are willing to take the first step will find a treasure trove of writing exercises and specific strategies to choose from. The result might be a short reflection on a single topic or a book length study that interprets one’s life experiences from a cultural perspective. Autoethnography not only offers a way to make sense of one’s own life, but it also has the potential to illuminate key themes and common understandings that can lead to a deeper appreciation of the diversity and complexity of human interaction.

Autoethnography as Method is the first volume in the Developing Qualitative Inquiry series published by Left Coast Press (Janice M. Morse, series editor).