

## **Autophenomenography? Alternative uses of autobiographically based research.**

Maree Gruppetta  
School of Ecology and Lifelong Learning  
University of Western Sydney

### **Abstract**

*There has been an increase in autobiographical based research techniques recently, particularly those involving personal narratives. Autoethnography is usually the term of choice for studies connecting the personal to the cultural (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). However, other forms of autobiographical research are open to investigation. For instance, if one were to study a phenomenon rather than a 'cultural place' it would be autophenomenographical rather than autoethnographical. The use of the author as subject establishes researcher bias unequivocally. The author as first participant in a study becomes not only the key informant of their own experience but also extends empathy to the experiences of the other participants, increasing the in-depth nature of the study. This paper examines alternative uses of autobiographical study, passing beyond the basic necessity of establishing a researcher's bias.*

### **Introduction**

This is an exploratory paper, focused on investigating aspects of autobiographical qualitative research. Autoethnography is increasingly accepted as an established methodology (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), and other forms of autobiographical research are often used in anthropological studies. Phenomenology is usually not autobiographical, due largely to the researcher's goal of suspending their own perspective of the phenomenon under investigation whilst engaging in the study (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). However, the researcher's bias must be stated within qualitative studies, as it is integral to ethical research (Burns, 1997; Charles & Mertler, 2002). Equally, the researcher's interest in the phenomenon is quite often related to their own personal history.

Autobiographical data provided by the researcher enhances understanding not only of the subject matter covered, but often demonstrates the researcher's reason for investigating the topic. Thus the personal link between researcher and their subject matter is acknowledged, and this permits the researcher to explore changes in their own perceptions throughout the study, hence the trend for autobiographical studies in postmodern research representation.

### **Autobiographical studies**

*We are in the midst of a renewed interest in personal narrative, in life history  
and in autobiography (Reed-Danahay, 1997:1)*

Ellis (1997) refers to a crisis of postmodern representation which challenges the notions of scientific knowledge and truth. She contends we have lost faith in the usefulness of rigid disciplinary boundaries and language and that we question the value of social science research devoid of intuition and emotion (Ellis, 1997). Lincoln and Denzin (2003) attribute the changes to a challenge to the Western and masculine viewpoint of research, where indigenous, feminist, and border voices engaged in multiple discourses. They also referred to the challenge of a "god's-eye view of inquiry" (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003:3), with the emerging discourse surrounding the self-as-researcher and the researcher-as-self resulting in the new genre of autoethnography.

Autobiographical based studies are not new. There is a long history of anthropologists publishing their personal field notes as part of their research. Defined as "auto-anthropology" (Strathern, 1987, cited in

Reed-Danahay, 1997:5), these studies are not necessarily completely autobiographical, they simply refer to anthropologists interjecting “personal experience into ethnographic writing” (Reed-Danahay, 1997:2). Denzin (1989, cited in Reed-Danahay, 1997) defined several different forms of writing as ‘biographical method’: autobiography, ethnography, autoethnography, biography, ethnography story, oral history, case history, case study, life history, life story, self story, and personal experience story. Since then Denzin and Lincoln (2003) have defined ethnosociology, ethnoethnography, and autoanthropology as additional forms of biographical method.

For Denzin (1989, cited in Reed-Danahay, 1997) autoethnography is characterised by a blend of autobiography and ethnography, where the writer does not adopt an ‘objective outsider’ viewpoint. It differs from other research by incorporation of elements of the researcher’s own life experience when writing about others. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) cite as evidence Kenyatta (1938), Tung (1930), Nakeane (1970) and Yang (1972) as indigenous anthropologists writing ethnographically about their own cultural group. Yet, only Yang (1972) “wrote a self-reflexive essay about the experience of doing an autoethnography” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003: 184). Reed-Danahay (1997) differentiates between studies that are truly autobiographical and those that merely reflect the researcher’s responses to the research at hand, yet both are classified as autobiographical studies.

Reflexive ethnographies focus on a culture or sub-culture, and authors use their own experiences of the culture to investigate the self and self-other interactions (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Such ethnography is often written by researchers from the Third and Fourth Worlds, where native ethnographers construct their own stories and question the interpretations of outsiders who write about their culture. Ellis and Bochner (2000) maintain the autoethnographic researcher is a full ‘insider’ by virtue of being a ‘native’. Yet Reed-Danahay (1997:4) contends the autoethnographer is “not completely at home” within their cultural identity. Although linked by culture to the “phenomenon of displacement” (Reed-Danahay, 1997:4) that positions them outside the dominant Western masculine discourse, they maintain a dual identity. Neither insider nor outsider, the researcher is positioned both within the culture and as an external observer, which then raises the question of truth within their research. “The voice of the insider is assumed to be more ‘true’ than that of the outsider in current debate” (Reed-Danahay, 1997:4), hence the need for other researchers not linked to a specific culture or sub-culture to locate a ‘key-informant’ (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997).

Within autoethnographic studies, the autobiographical notes of the author attempt to position the researcher within the role of ‘key-informant’. The key informant, the “consummate insider” (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997:27), is a full member of the culture or sub-cultures being studied, and as such is privy to information that may be withheld from the researcher. The key informant also understands cultural norms that may be misinterpreted by the researcher, and therefore is able to clarify and confirm the researcher’s interpretation (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). By these definitions, a researcher close enough to their native culture to understand the cultural norms, and be privy to culturally specific information is able to operate as their own key informant within the study.

It must be noted however, that these researchers, those operating as their own key informants, are not able to speak for every individual within that culture. One Asian cannot speak for all Asians, one Aboriginal cannot speak for all Aborigines, nor can one woman speak for all women (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Settelmaier & Taylor, 2002). Nevertheless, they provide an authoritative voice that permits an insightful glimpse of an otherwise hidden world. Denzin, (1997:87) concurs: “Ethnographers will continue to work outward from their own biographies to seek and produce works that speak clearly and powerfully about these worlds”.

Despite the insight provided within autobiographical studies, these new texts are often criticised as narcissism and self-indulgence (Nader, 1993 cited in Denzin, 1997). Bruner (1993, cited in Denzin, 1997: 218) cautioned that the writer must always “guard against putting the personal self so deeply back into the text that it completely dominates, so that the work becomes narcissistic and egotistical’. Authors still fret

about the potential contamination through subjectivity, that it is a blemish upon research that should be minimised (Settelmaier & Taylor, 2002). Many contend that autobiographical research is a form of arts based fictional writing which contributes to scientific dilettantism (Settelmaier & Taylor, 2002). That it is research only for the pleasure or benefit of the researcher. Only when the issue confronted by the self is shown to have relationship to, and bearing on, the context and ethos of a time, does the self-study become research (Bullough & Pinngar, 2001, cited in Settelmaier & Taylor, 2002).

## Ethnography

Within educational research, ethnography is often the method of choice as the “school is essentially a cultural entity” (Burns, 1997:297). Ethnography has a broader perspective, it “accepts that human behaviour occurs within a context” (Burns, 1997, p.298) and that this context will affect that behaviour. Therefore “ethnography studies the culturally shared, common sense perceptions of everyday experiences” (van Manen, 2000). An ethnographic design studies the behaviours of a culture-sharing group (Creswell, 1998). The ethnographer records human behaviour in cultural terms, whereas phenomenological study focuses on a concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). Specifically the phenomenological project focuses on the meaning of people’s life experience toward a phenomenon, describing the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). If these individuals do not exist within a single cultural group, ethnography is inappropriate. A study would not meet the ethnographic criteria due to the need for a ‘natural setting’. A concept Burns (1997) explains thusly:

**Ethnographers recognise that the things people say and do depend on the social context in which they find themselves. They urge, therefore, that social life be studied as it occurs, in natural settings rather than ‘artificial’ ones created only for the purposes of research (Burns, 1997:301).**

“The word ‘ethnography’ literally means writing about people” (Burns, 1997:297). However, this is a broad subjective use of the term and does not define it effectively in terms of qualitative research methodology. Technically the report of any study involving humans could be defined as ‘writing about people’. Nor does this simplistic definition explain the intricate link between ethnography and phenomenology, as the two are related but not interchangeable. It could be summed up as: where phenomenology is a singular viewpoint (Thibodeau & MacRae, 1997), ethnography is concerned with the shared viewpoint as “ethnographers are attempting to capture the social reality of a group” (Burns, 1997: 299-300). Because the phenomenological approach is primarily an attempt to understand empirical matters from the perspective of those being studied (Creswell, 1998:274) rather than from the perspective of the researcher, few would consider an autobiographical study appropriate.

## Phenomenology

Phenomenology is the study of the lived experience from the unique perspective of the individual that is engaged in the experience (Thibodeau & MacRae, 1997). It is a theoretical perspective where the researcher is concerned with the way the participant views the world (van Manen, 2000) and their perceptions of it. Byrne (2001:2) citing Leonard (1993) refers to Husserl (1900), a German philosopher, as the ‘father’ of phenomenology. Husserl referred to phenomenology as a descriptive science that is concerned with universal essences rather than facts (Lovat, 1995). Yet Husserl warned of avoiding the temptation to speculate, hypothesize and judge, as with other research methods. In phenomenology, the researcher must suspend their own judgements in order to learn to see what stands before their eyes (Husserl, cited in Lovat, 1995). In spite of this directive, Lovat (1995) describes a method of teaching religious studies where the student is immersed within the phenomena of a particular religion for a short time. This would appear to be in contrast to the ideology of phenomenology, where an objective stance is perceived as the goal. However, immersion in a phenomenon does not necessarily taint the phenomenological methodology. The researcher assumes a subordinate position, channelling thoughts back through the participant to gather their essential lived experience (Shultz, 2002).

Husserl's work on phenomenology was reconceived by Heidegger (Leonard, 1993, cited by Byrne, 2001:2). Heidegger acknowledged that gender, culture, history, and related life experiences "prohibit an objective viewpoint" (Leonard, 1993 cited by Byrne, 2001:2) yet enable people to experience shared practices and common meanings. These common meanings are possible because "as human beings, our meanings are co-developed through the experience of being born human, our collective life experiences, our background, and the world in which we live" (Byrne, 2001:2). Thomas and Pollio (2002:11) criticise the current trend to describe participants' experiences within the "context of a culture". They assert that traditional phenomenology searches for universal essences divorced from cultural context (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

Phenomenology has also been criticised because the vast majority of phenomenological researchers have not participated in the processes that are the focus of their enquiries (Stockard 1987 cited by Richardson, 1999). These researchers "typically relied upon the secondhand accounts of distant correspondents" (Stockard, 1987 cited by Richardson, 1999, p.57), yet the point of phenomenological research is to 'borrow' other peoples' experiences and their reflections on their experiences "in order to better understand human experience, in the context of the whole of human experience" (van Manen, 1990 cited by Shultz, 2002:206). The goal of phenomenology is to provide 'voice' for the participant, not to interpret or subjugate meaning through the lenses of the researcher's perception (Shultz, 2002), and Richardson (1999) reiterates this point. He contends, "phenomenological researchers are different from contemporary ethnographers in this regard too, because they do not adopt a sceptical attitude towards the statements that are made by their interviewees" (Richardson, 1999:57).

Even so, all researchers interpret their data, that is the nature of research (Burns, 1997; Charles & Mertler, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Whilst phenomenology permits the researcher "to draw connections between the everyday ways in which people make sense of the world" (Thibodeau & MacRae, 1997:67), as individuals rather than through a collective cultural meaning, understanding is always an interpretation (van Manen, 2000). Thomas and Pollio (2002) insist the goal of phenomenology is to provide interpretation. The researcher must *interpret* the participants' experience, as the participants see it, rather than *infer* meaning through their own personal biases (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

Creswell (1998) again suggests the researcher must bracket his or her own preconceived ideas about the phenomenon to understand it through the voices of the informants. Yet contends that phenomenological analysis requires the researcher to state his or her assumptions regarding the phenomenon under investigation, and then bracket or suspend these preconceptions in order to fully understand the experience of the subject and not impose their own hypothesis on the experience of the participant (Creswell, 1998). Creswell (1998:55) also states "the researcher needs to decide how and in what way his or own personal experiences will be introduced into the study". This confirms the necessity of including the researcher's own perspectives and experiences within a phenomenological study.

Thomas and Pollio (2002) have developed an interesting method of bracketing their researchers' biases and perceptions prior to phenomenological interviewing. The researcher is interviewed by an experienced member of the research group concerning the phenomena under investigation. The researcher then transcribes their own interview whilst searching for biases and perspectives toward the phenomena. "The goal of the bracketing interview is to highlight to the researcher his/her pre-understandings about the topic of investigation" (Thomas & Pollio, 2002:33). Once noted, the researcher is then expected to ensure their pre-conceptions about the topic are set aside during the interviewing process. Thomas and Pollio (2002) also include ongoing discussion of the study with the phenomenological research team. This addresses changes to perceptions throughout the research process and permits reflection by the researcher. "Bracketing is not a one-time event" (Thomas & Pollio, 2002:33), a researcher's biases are only temporarily suspended whilst interviewing, the research demands and ongoing cycle of reflection throughout the study in order to maintain awareness of these issues.

As previously stated, phenomenology is concerned with the way people perceive their world (van Manen, 2000), yet as researchers we also have perceptions of our world, and these are shaped and/or restricted by our own experiences. We must acknowledge these biases in order to become effective researchers.

## Researcher Bias

*We're sighted, but blind like those men in that our knowledge is limited:  
We seek the perceptions of other people from different circumstances,  
In order to discover the limitations of our own (Myers, 2004)*

The quote above refers to Buddha's well known tale about the 'Blind men and the elephant', turned into a poem by John Godfrey Saxe (1816-1887). While noting the politically incorrect use of the term 'blind', the concepts relating to perception contained within this tale/poem relate to many fields beyond the theological debate of initial reference. As an example, Tavis and Wade (2004) also use the tale as a metaphor for interpreting psychology.

The tale in summary discusses six visually impaired men, who each tried to discover what an elephant looked like by touch. The first experienced only the elephant's side, and thought it felt like a wall; the second felt only the tusk and thought it was a spear; the third touched only the trunk and thought it was a snake; the fourth investigated the leg and thought it a tree; the fifth stroked the ear and thought it a fan; and the sixth grasped the tail and thought it a rope. The men argued amongst themselves and could not agree, for each was sure their sense of the elephant was correct. Technically each was right, for the elephant was as they saw it, from the limited perspective of their own investigation. Even if they had collaborated and combined their views, the elephant they constructed would be very different from an elephant as it really exists.

Thomas and Pollio (2002) use similar metaphors in relation to phenomenology. They put forward the case of 'ginger' a cartoon dog who only hears his own name within the full sentences that his master speaks. Equally, they state that "if a lion could talk, we could not understand him" (Wittgenstein, cited in Thomas & Pollio, 2002:22). Their point relates to the issue of interpretation, that we each interpret others on the basis of our own understandings, and only when the researcher is open to new ideas is phenomenological interviewing possible (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

Interviewers are generally expected to keep their 'selves' out of the interview process. "Neutrality is the byword" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003:31). However, it is also argued that all research is ideologically driven. "There is no value-free or bias-free design" (Janesick, 2003:56). Denzin and Lincoln (1998:23) confirm that behind every interpretive study stands the biographically, multiculturally situated researcher, "who speaks from a particular class, racial, cultural, and ethnic community perspective". Within that multi-situated researcher there are layers. Settelmaier and Taylor (2002) refer to a 'top-layer' of self-knowledge that is always present, a layer constructed and never really questioned. Yet beneath this layer are other issues that have been hidden from sight, these come to the surface when one engages in critical self-reflectivity in combination with the act of writing (Settelmaier & Taylor, 2002). "The research self is not separable from the lived self. Who we are and what we can be, what we can study, and how we can write about what we study are all tied" (Richardson, 2003:197). Dealing with one's own biases before interpreting and representing others becomes an important question of research ethics, we need to ask the question 'who is the self that does the research?' (Settelmaier & Taylor, 2002) How does my life history, experiences, issues and stories from my life affect my research and my attitude toward what I hear from the participants? (Settelmaier & Taylor, 2002)

Many researchers now acknowledge that they are not disinterested but rather deeply invested in their studies, personally and profoundly (Bullough & Pinngar, 2001, cited in Settelmaier & Taylor, 2002). Tolich and Davidson (1999) suggest that a researcher should sort through their random collection of clippings and categorise them, analysing what topics attracted their attention and why. "If you are what you eat, then researchers must be what they collect" (Tolich & Davidson, 1999:11). Tolich and Davidson (1999) suggest the best place to start your research is with your 'personal biography', an explanation of

who and where *you* are. They also discuss the need get “out of our own way” (Tolich & Davidson, 1999:183), to overcome ourselves, our own prior knowledge when crossing the boundaries into qualitative research.

Qualitative researchers identify their biases and ideology as part of their conceptual frame for the study, within qualitative research “there is no attempt to pretend that research is value free” (Janesick, 2003:56). The idea that research should be ‘objective’ and free from emotive influence (Tolich & Davidson, 1999) is common. Quantitative studies call for a more objective view (Janesick, 2003), and few include the researcher’s bias (Settelmaier & Taylor, 2002). But, “how can your experiences in the field not have a profound influence on what and how you write?” (Tolich and Davidson, 1999:62) Rather than an invisible author, where the author’s voice is presumed absent from the truth of the context, we “see the author’s hand there, albeit in carefully disguised form” (Lincoln, 1997:39). It is impossible to set aside our own biases completely, and indeed not desirable (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). We cannot lose ourselves and become the other person, the best we can do is mediate between the two of us within meaningful and empathic dialogue (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

### **Empathy**

Ellis and Bochner (2000) contend that qualitative research is characterised by empathetic understanding and personal involvement. Rather than narcissism Ellis and Bochner (2000) assert that the self-questioning required of autoethnography is extremely difficult. Honest autobiographical exploration generates a lot of fear and doubt. There is emotional pain and the vulnerability of revealing yourself, and having no control over how readers interpret what you have written, nor are you able to take it back. “It’s hard not to feel your life is being critiqued as well as your work. It can be humiliating” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000:738). Despite this researchers are “willing to take more risks and write about personal experiences, which many conventional ethnographers object to” (de Laine, 2000:98). However, research practitioners are warned about becoming over-involved with those in their care (Tolich & Davidson, 1999:16). The worst sin is to be ‘too personal’ (Behar, 1996:13, cited in de Laine, 2000:98).

De Laine (2000) contends that the trend in contemporary fieldwork is for more participation and less detachment. The gap between researcher and participant has closed (De Laine, 2000) although she warns of the resulting ethical dilemmas. “The researcher who demonstrates empathy and care and engages on an emotional level with subjects can enter the ground of the therapist, but without the same training” (de Laine, 2000:2). This situation creates a dilemma where the researcher may inadvertently ‘do harm’ due to lack of training. It also raises ethical dilemmas where the relationship between the researcher and participant becomes personal. A friendship between researcher and participant may facilitate access to confidences that are private and secret, which can “make problematic disclosure and publication of personal information” (de Laine, 2000:2). However, Ellis and Berger (2003) dispute this, they contend that “researcher involvement can help subjects feel more comfortable sharing information and close the hierarchical gap between researchers and respondents that traditional interviewing encourages” (159). Thomas and Pollio (2002) agree, they refer to interviews as cathartic, and cite incidents of participants sending cards and flowers to the interviewers to thank them for the beneficial release of emotions.

It is assumed that first person narratives are valuable, that individuals have access to their own experiences, and these are the site of personal meaning. Epiphanies, in the form of particular experiences, are assumed to leave great marks or scars on a person (Denzin, 2001), and individuals are assumed to have public and private authentic selves, where the private self is the real self. Yet, “there is no essential self or private, or real self behind the public self. There are only different selves, different performances, different ways of being” (Denzin, 2001:28) in a social situation. Indeed, in our “interview society” (Denzin, 2001: 28) the confessional mode of discourse is often used as entertainment.

Researchers are directed to the study and collection of the personal experience and self-stories people tell one another about the important events in their lives (Denzin, 1989:43, cited in Denzin, 1997:47). These

narratives work outward from the researcher's biography, entangling his or her tales of the self with the stories told by others and "how our subjectivity becomes entangled in the lives of others is and has always been our topic" (Denzin, 1997:27). Ellis and Berger (2003) agree, explaining a 'double subjectivity' abounds in interviewing, where each participant's feelings, thoughts and attitudes are affected by the reciprocity between the participants, so too can the personal and social identities of the interviewer and the interviewee become important factors and change the relationship.

Academia calls for an impartial observer, yet we search for the epiphanies of our subjects but fail to acknowledge our own. Intelligence breaks through, the 'ah ha' experience is acknowledged, provided it *is* related to intelligence not to emotion. But what of our emotions, these are meant to be buried – at what cost?

**Investigators seek ways of demonstrating to their audiences their historical and geographic situatedness, their personal investments in the research, various biases they bring to the work, their surprises and undoings in the process of the research endeavour, the ways in which their choices of literary tropes lend rhetorical force to the research report and/or the ways in which they have avoided or suppressed certain points of view (Gergen & Gergen, 2000:1027).**

But do they include their feelings?

Kvale (1996, cited in Thomas & Pollio, 2002) suggests the success of phenomenological interviewing depends on the sensitivity of the interviewer. Thomas and Pollio (2002) again discuss the necessity of caring for participants as we witness the essences of their experiences. However, Leith (2004) discusses the consequences of such witnessing in regard to journalists recording events in the field. Her reference to "compassion fatigue" (Leith, 2004:xix) relates to Behar's '(1996) notion of the 'vulnerable observer'. Behar (1996:5) refers to anthropology as "the most fascinating, bizarre, disturbing, and necessary form of witnessing left", and also one that breaks your heart. Yet, this could be true of any research. Jaded as the public has become to constant bombardment of war and atrocity in the media, journalists need to go to extremes to find something new to entrance viewers (Leith, 2004). In the process they risk burning themselves out emotionally, and some have even committed suicide as a result of their experiences (Leith, 2004).

Researchers too search for new ideas, new fields to study, new cultures and sub-cultures to explore, and new ways to explore them. Disenchanted with the results of quantitative research (Thomas & Pollio, 2002), postmodern researchers experiment with qualitative methods without acknowledgement of the affect on themselves. Some level of mutually negotiated self-disclosure is fundamental to the research relationship (Church, 1995). However, self-disclosure requires an emotional commitment from the researcher. This may be difficult for some. Church (1995) refers to her own experience of research training, where subjectivity and emotion was schooled into hiding. Whilst being educated into the necessary skills to undertake a research project she found the process had simultaneously stripped her of the emotional attachments which would actually make it possible (Church, 1995).

Personal narratives have long been tradition in anthropology, and human history (Behar, 1995). It seems we are turning full circle, removing ourselves from the objective viewpoint and returning to the story telling of long ago. Gergen and Gergen (2000:217) agree, accounts of experience seem more adequately understood as the outcome of a particular textual/cultural history in which people learn "to tell stories of their lives to themselves and others". We connect with each other in past and present contexts (Thomas & Pollio, 2002) and researchers must confirm this connection, not only with their participants but with themselves. Poststructuralism asserts "There is no such thing as removing the observers from the knowledge acquisition process, since to do so would be like trying to see without eyes" (Stivers, 1993:311, cited in Church, 1995:5). The researcher must acknowledge the self, not just the academic self, but also the emotional self. Subjectivity is not possible without emotional connection and there is a place in academe for the emotional voice (Church, 1995).

## Autophenomenology

*Knowing that any new form of writing that goes beyond autoethnography  
can always be undone (Denzin, 1997:28)*

Theoretically autophenomenology is not only achievable, it can be justified. The phenomenological researcher is required to promote an “air of equality” (Thomas & Pollio, 2002: 24) rather than an air of superiority due to age, position, power or prior knowledge, and the participant is the real authority. Yet how can the researcher be ‘equal’ if they are not willing to share the participant’s position by becoming a participant themselves? It is not until “we begin to talk from our own dark recesses can we fully appreciate the risk for others...to open up to us” (Rockhill, 1987:13, cited in Church, 1995:67). Thomas and Pollio (2002:4) assert participants must be “co-researchers not subjects” in successful phenomenological studies. A point that can be taken one step further to include the researcher as a participant.

The technique used by Thomas and Pollio (2002) to bracket the researcher’s perspectives and biases can be adapted effectively to an autobiographical study. The researcher simply begins by analysing their own perspective of the phenomenon prior to beginning interviewing. This analysis can be also used to fine tune the questions or prompts the researcher intends to use in interviews. The researcher either writes or tapes their own responses to the topic and then analyses them for traces of bias. Once identified, the bias can be suspended (bracketed) during interviews with participants in order to fulfil the requirements of a phenomenological study. In addition, the researcher’s journal can serve a similar purpose to the ongoing reflective discussion with the research team, identifying shifts in viewpoints throughout the study. Thus the criteria for phenomenology can be met and researcher bias clearly identified.

## Conclusion

The researcher is the instrument and qualitative research is always from someone’s perspective (Tolich & Davidson, 1999). The affect of researcher ‘assumptions and biases’, and the “value judgements of the researcher are an important (and often overlooked) ingredient” (Tolich & Davison, 1999: 42) in research. Therefore that perspective, those values, assumptions and biases should be stated from the outset. Autobiographical research allows us to explore aspects of our interpretive horizons (Roth, 2000 cited in Settelaar & Taylor, 2002) and thus of our biases. These forms of self-exposure have recently led to the flourishing of autoethnography where “investigators explore in depth the ways in which their personal histories saturate the ethnographic inquiry” (Gergen & Gergen, 2000:1028). But our personal histories and biases saturate all research inquiry. Inclusion of the researcher’s autobiography, their prior history and interest in the topic, as well as changes to their thoughts and feelings throughout the research journey, will enrich the study. The researcher as first participant is able to increase the trust between researcher and participant, and equalise their relationship. Researcher bias is established, and yet the results are further enhanced because readers are given a contextual frame for the research interpretation. This paper examined the possibility of autophenomenological studies, however, further investigation toward including autobiographical information about the researcher in other forms of qualitative studies is recommended.

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