

The unreliable omniscient narrator: Challenges of writing and being in autoethnographic higher education research (0248)

Emily Henderson

University of Warwick, UK

Abstract

What happens when the researcher and the research participant are one and the same? When the story that the researcher tells about their research participants includes an in-built characterisation of the researcher-as-participant? Autoethnographic research places the researcher in a complex position with regard to the knowledge that is produced from the research. Arguably autoethnographic higher education (HE) research heightens the complexity of the researcher position, as the boundaries are particularly blurred between the site of research and the sites of knowledge production and dissemination. This paper explores the complexity of the researcher position in autoethnographic HE research, using key concepts from narrative theory to explain the multi-faceted researcher position in this type of research. The paper presents a conceptual discussion of the researcher as narrator and engages with methodological issues at a theoretical level.

Paper

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Ethical considerations around the research process are often linked with early stages of research – the planning and design of research projects, the recruitment of participants, the collecting and recording of data. However, as Hughes (2003) has shown with her edited collection on the dissemination of research, ethical considerations extend into the dissemination of research findings – including the writing processes involved in knowledge production. Echoing this, Robinson-Pant and Singal (2013, p. 451) caution that 'the most difficult ethical dilemmas...may be encountered during write-up'. This is because, as Clegg (2012, p. 416) has asserted, 'writing is...not simply an expression of what one already knows'; in producing written dissemination of our research, we *produce* and *construct* our research sites and participants – we narrate our research. Britzman (2000, p. 30) refers to the 'narrative dilemmas' that are 'unleashed' during the writing process; she encourages ethnographic researchers not to conceal these dilemmas under an illusion of a smooth, unproblematic writing process, and asks us to give the readers of ethnographic texts access to 'the difference within the story' (p. 38). Inimical to this stance is the open recognition of 'the impossibility of telling everything' (ibid.). A major facet of the ethical dilemmas that arise during written dissemination is the fact that it is on the one hand impossible to 'tell everything', but that what is not written is de facto not known, not produced as knowledge.

In this paper, the position of researcher as both a narrator and a character in autoethnographic HE research is understood within this ‘dilemma’: the narrator is responsible for telling – and therefore appearing to know – the character, yet because of this the development of the character concomitantly determines the nature of the narrator. We can further explicate this dilemma using narrative theory, which is placed in the longstanding debate in literary theory around the construction of the author in texts, and the relationship between the author and the narrator (Barthes, 2008 [1968]; Hirsch, 1967). According to some theories, the narrator is a type of character who is more or less involved in the story. Rimmon-Kenan (1983, based on Genette, 1972), for example, theorises the narrator as belonging to different narrative levels as to the implication of the narrator in the story’s plot. The narrator who is most removed from the action of the plot is the extradiegetic narrator (also known as the omniscient narrator), who is placed at the level above the story, and thus able to observe all of the action and the thoughts within characters’ minds. This is traditionally the position that researchers take in writing up their research findings – the ‘[v]oice from nowhere’ (Richardson, 2000, p. 157) who is able to produce an ‘uncontaminated’ research narrative (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013, p. 3). This is also the position that many authors of autoethnographic texts take in writing about themselves as research participants – they engage in a separation process between the researcher/narrator and the researcher/character. However the narrator can only speak objectively of the character to the extent that this separation succeeds, and, as I argue in this paper, it is because of the impossibility of fully succeeding in this separation in autoethnographic HE research that autoethnographic research is not taken seriously by many social sciences researchers. Autoethnography is frequently rejected as ‘proper knowledge’, i.e. ‘credible and relevant knowledge’ (Pereira, 2012, p. 285); Pathak (2010, p. 5) expresses feeling ‘immeasurably let down’ by autoethnographic texts; Anderson (2006, p. 385) critiques some types of autoethnography as ‘self-absorbed digression.’

I argue that some of this rejection of autoethnography as ‘proper knowledge’ is connected to the ethics of dissemination that I referred to above, and the ‘narrative dilemma’ of constructing a researcher as both narrator and character. I name this construct an *unreliable omniscient narrator*. Usually an ‘unreliable narrator’ is an ‘invented character[] who [is] part of the stories they tell’ (Lodge, 1992, p. 154); this type of narrator is not normally an extradiegetic (omniscient) narrator who can see into the thoughts and plans of other characters, but a character who is playing a part within the story (see also Watson, 2006). However, as I have stated, in autoethnographic research the extradiegetic narrator is in fact nominally one and the same as the character who is playing a part in the research ‘story’. As such, the extradiegetic researcher-narrator is ‘contaminated’ with some of the ‘unreliability’ of the researcher-character. Lodge (1992, p. 154) suggests that ‘an unreliable “omniscient” narrator...could only occur in a very deviant, experimental text’. This is because ‘there must be some possibility of discriminating between truth and falsehood...for the story to engage our interest’ (ibid., p. 155). The extradiegetic narrator is the arbiter of ‘truth and falsehood’ who ensures that research is taken seriously as valid or reliable. In autoethnographic research, the position as arbiter of ‘truth and falsehood’ is undermined by the slippage between researcher as narrator and character.

In the final stage of my argument, I call into question the ethical position of disseminating research from the standpoint of an unreliable omniscient narrator. On the one hand, as critiques of autoethnographic research indirectly claim, this position does not allow for the construction and dissemination of valid – or ‘proper’ – knowledge. On the other hand, if we turn this argument on its head, we can consider that the autoethnographic interlinking of narrator and character is, ethically speaking, a more explicit or honest version of the position of narrator in all HE research. As Clegg and Stevenson (2013, p. 7) have observed, all HE research is conducted by ‘fish in the water’ who embed ‘tacit ethnographic’ research (p. 6) in their descriptions of participants and research sites, as a result of already knowing about and working within HE contexts. The paper therefore argues that, as an ethical issue concerning the construction of validity and authority in research, HE researchers

should be more explicit in their construction of what is made explicit (and what is left untold and unknown) in the researcher position in the dissemination stage of research.

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Emily F. Henderson recently joined the Centre for Education Studies at the University of Warwick as Assistant Professor of International Education and Development, after completing an ESRC-funded PhD studentship at the UCL Institute of Education. Her doctoral work focused on gender knowledge production in international academia, researching conferences as sites of embodied knowledge construction; she is now moving on to focus more broadly on international academic mobility. She is author of *Gender Pedagogy: Learning, Teaching and Tracing Gender in Higher Education* (Palgrave, 2015). She is co-convenor of the SRHE International Research and Researchers Network and has recently co-founded a Warwick Institute of Advanced Studies network, AMIN - Academic Mobilities and Immobilities Network.