The Routledge International Handbook of Autoethnography in Educational Research

Emilio A. Anteliz, Deborah L. Mulligan, Patrick Alan Danaher

Self, reflexivity and the crisis of “outsideness”

Publication details
Ashley Simpson
Published online on: 10 Nov 2022


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SELF, REFLEXIVITY AND THE CRISIS OF “OUTSIDENESS”

A dialogical approach to critical autoethnography in education?

Ashley Simpson

Introduction

Reflexivity is neither a new concept nor a new phenomenon, although it has become increasingly popular in recent times in language education, intercultural education and in education research methods (to name but a few research fields) (Byrd Clark, 2020). Inspired by different academic fields such as anthropology, sociology and philosophy reflexivity is transdisciplinary as it crosses different academic fields, approaches and bodies of knowledge (Byrd Clark & Dervin, 2014). The origins of reflexivity can be traced to the epistemological break away from positivism in social sciences research characterised, for example, through Castoriadis’ (1975) critique of Lévi-Strauss (e.g., Lévi-Strauss [1978]) for reducing language to a universal binary logic of oppositions. In this sense, reflexivity helps to uncover the instabilities, uncertainties, overlappings and complexities that challenge helpful conventional conceptions of writing as a stable representation of the world (Byrd Clark & Dervin, 2014). Reflexivity, through intersecting and multimodal practices, helps to move researchers and teachers away from dogmatic, essentialised truths about themselves and others (Simpson, 2020). Julie Byrd Clark and Fred Dervin (2014) articulate,

Drawing upon reflexivity through multimodality helps to make us aware that neither our representations (e.g., identities) nor our social and linguistic practices (as well as others’) are transparent, unidimensional entities sitting in isolation – that we are connected by more than simple words on a page.

(Byrd Clark & Dervin, 2014, p. 3)

Reflexivity shows the making and indexing of meaning (e.g., through gestures, voice, movement, music, online discussions, signing, texts, styles, recordings, drawings, etc.) – that is, the complex, overlapping, and multiple modes of representations that allow us to configure (and reconfigure) the social world (ibid.).

This growing body of research was simultaneously influenced by the reflexive turn in social sciences research and the academic disciplines within the social sciences (e.g., anthropology, education, politics and political theory, sociology, and so on). This is arguably one of the most
profound developments in ethnographic research in recent decades as scholars are drawing on
the use of the self to generate insights, establish patterns, and bring the voice of their research
subjects to light (Venkatesh, 2013). At this juncture it is important to note Russian philoso-
pher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981, 2012) influence in studies in education
and throughout the social sciences in terms of thinking (and rethinking) the role of language,
discourse and the relationality of self and other in interaction. Bakhtin’s influence in education
research is widespread and is well documented (see Simpson, 2018; Brandist et al., 2020). It
is nearly two decades since Camic and Joas (2003) published *The dialogical turn: New roles for
sociology in the postdisciplinary age* which although surprisingly does not make direct reference
to Bakhtin it does include scholars who were influenced by Bakhtin. Today, Bakhtin has
influenced qualitative research methods and tools such as dialogical interviews (Harvey, 2015),
semi-structured interviews (Brown & Danaher, 2019), focus groups (Haworth, 1999), and
ethnographic studies (Bauman, 2005), to name but a few. Central to Bakhtin’s thinking was
questioning the *I*, self and other in discourse (oral speech and written texts); here one can see
the synergies between Bakhtin’s thinking and the development of autoethnographic research.

### Autoethnography as research and practice

First, one must delineate historically how autoethnography developed as a research field and
in practice. Etymologically, ethnography is the writing (*grapho*, the ancient Greek verb to
write) of people (*ethnos*) (McCarty, 2015, p. 29). However, writing about people or writing
culture has never been neutral nor apolitical. Ethnography has its early roots in the descriptive
accounts of ‘missionaries, settlers, [and] colonial officials’ (Pratt, 1986, p. 27), and in common
with missionaries’ and colonizers’ accounts, ethnography centred – and arguably still, now
focuses on the predominance of – the ‘‘seeing man’’ he whose imperial eyes passively look
out and possess’ (Pratt, 2008, p. 9).

Adams et al. (2017, p. 1) note that autoethnography is a research method which uses personal
experiences (“auto”) to interpret (“graphy”) experiences and beliefs, and practices (“ethno”).
Fundamentally, autoethnography interrogates the positionality of the self through reflexivity –
a form of critical reflection which continuously questions the intersections of self in relation
to the other and the social world. Although originally derived from the 1970s (e.g., Heider,
1975), autoethnography has become increasingly popular in recent decades due to academic
shifts in the field and also as a direct response to methodological deficiencies found within
traditional ethnographic approaches. For example, some ethnographers could no longer hide
behind the latent term of “objectivity” as ethnographic studies were becoming more and
more centred from the position of the ethnographer/researcher rather than the other (subject)
of the research (Adams et al., 2017).

One branch of autoethnography which informs this chapter is critical autoethnography
articulates that ‘theory is not a body of knowledge – a given, static, and autonomous set
of ideas, objects or practices’. Instead, theories, and theorising, is an on-going movement
which includes thinking, acting, criticising and performing which encapsulates ‘living bodies
of thought’ (Holman Jones, 2016, p. 229). In this sense, the stories and narratives contained
within the body of the self are inseparable from theory, as stories and narratives are produced
by bodies (spatial, material, physical, virtual) which influences, and shapes, how theories are
constructed. This interactive characteristic of critical autoethnography means that as a qualitative
research method it is able to capture and map the nuanced, the complex and the specific
in human lives and experiences (Holman Jones, 2018). In differentiating autoethnography
and critical autoethnography, the latter focuses on critically analysing the ways cultures and identities are ‘created and compromised through institutional, political, social and interpersonal relations of power’ (Holman Jones, 2018, p. 5). Critical autoethnography deals with the politics of positioning, how unequal power relations engenders social imbalances of marginalisation and discrimination for some, and privilege for others (Madison, 2012). Research, researchers, and the knowledge produced by research can engender unequal power relations which can be addressed through critical autoethnography (ibid.). A central concept in critical autoethnography is intersectionality – intersectionality means intersecting identity makers such as gender, profession, social class, and age when problematising culture and language (Dervin, 2016). Intersectionality disrupts normativity insofar that attitudes, beliefs and values are always questioned in relation to questions of social justice and equality (e.g., in challenging prevalent forms of racism, xenophobia, sexism, classism, linguism, ablism) (Holman Jones, 2018). In this sense, critical autoethnography involves both a material and an ethical praxis (Holman Jones, 2016).

For researchers doing critical autoethnography first and foremost the researcher must question and critically examine their own intersectional positions which means reflecting on the effects of hegemonic power relations (Spry, 2016). Critical autoethnography ‘asks authors and readers to examine systems, institutions, and discourses that privilege some people and marginalize others’ (Holman Jones, 2016, p. 5). Conceptually critical autoethnography aims to provide a sense of transformation by connecting the specific to the concrete in ways which put theory into action by moving away from totalising and prescriptive forms of theory and theoretical frameworks (ibid.). ‘In linking story and theory, the personal and the political, critical autoethnography is a particularly agile approach for understanding and transforming lived experiences’ (Boylorn & Orbe, 2013, p. 19).

**Critical autoethnography, culture and non-essentialism in education**

Critical autoethnography is founded upon, and functions through, social praxis as change. In the predominant field of research which I study, Intercultural Communication Education, critical autoethnographic studies have focused on a number of themes, from delving within narratives within higher education (Trahar, 2009), to critical autoethnography as a methodological approach which intersects cultural identities (Boylorn & Orbe, 2020), to critical autoethnography as a space for the development of critical pedagogies in intercultural education (Sobre, 2017), to critical autoethnography as a method to deconstruct and reconstruct (my own words) linguistic and cultural essentialisms (Stanley, 2016), and the decentring of culture through critical autoethnographic lenses (Stanley & Vass, 2018), amongst others.

There is a problematique within critical autoethnographic scholarship which I find deeply problematic – the notion of culture. Take this excerpt, for example, ‘Critical autoethnography merges the practices of autobiography- writing about the self- and ethnography – the study of writing about culture’ (Holman Jones, 2018, p. 4–5). Based on my own research on Critical Intercultural Communication Education I argue that culture is not a ‘thing’, it has no agency, it is people who meet, interact and communicate (not culture) (Dervin & Simpson, 2021; Simpson & Dervin, 2019, 2020). Culture, as an analytical concept is often used, misused and abused in research and in society, generally speaking, marking the functioning of culturalism – culture as an omnipresent alibi and excuse for seemingly everything and nothing (Simpson, 2020). Whether or not culture is a ‘thing’ is not the point here; ‘culture’ is a seemingly endless construction of discourses and representations which are never neutral nor apolitical (Dervin & Simpson, 2021). Approach someone on the street in any context, in any language, in any part of the world, they will give you an interpretation and representation of what they (whoever
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‘they’ are) understand culture is (or what it is not). As Adrian Holliday has noted, this can mark the functioning simultaneously of big culture formation – the culturalist reduction of culture to the foreign other, and small culture formation – culture is attached to small groupings or activities where there is cohesion rather than culturalist stereotyping (Holliday, 2016). In a recent book I argued that even ‘critical’ approaches to Intercultural Communication Education can engender culturalist dichotomies through producing and reproducing othering (even when the researcher[s] may have ‘good intentions’ in their theoretical approaches and methods, e.g., in standing up for a particular cause in the name of social justice or equality); othering means turning the subject into an object through essentialist representations and/or discourses which hierarchises the world (Dervin & Simpson, 2021). In this sense, ‘critical’ scholarship, which can be illustrated by the postpositivist turn in applied linguistics, education and the social sciences generally, has resulted in the spoken or written word, whether from researcher or research participant, being taken ‘as a given’, at face value (Holliday & Macdonald, 2020). For example, a researcher using post-colonial or non-essentialist approaches in their study can other both the self and the other by not critically examining or analysing the discourses or representations uttered – in this sense, despite the analytic framework used, cultural stereotypes and essentialisms – reducing the self and/or other to a single narrative, an essence (Simpson, 2020).

When analysing relevant literature in constructing this book chapter I came across a number of publications which claimed to be informed by critical autoethnography and deal with questions about culture. When reading the publications, however, I found the author[s] on the one hand articulating the need for critical autoethnography but on the other hand they were (seemingly) quite happy to reproduce essentialisms in the forms of biases and stereotypes about particular contexts (based upon their assumed experiences). In one example the author[s] of a publication claimed they rejected the notion of ‘the West’, yet in China they found that the idea of ‘Westerners’ in China helped to construct a Chinese discourse of homogenised self-hood versus the foreign other. This representation and articulation of social and political complexities in China is somewhat naïve as it fails to take into many issues relating to the role of different identities, languages and cultures found within China, e.g., the role of Minzu education (see Yuan et al., 2020) and the vast intersectional diversities which construct the world’s largest population (see Simpson, 2020). I would really like to say to the author[s], does this really reflect a sense of critical autoethnography? Or is it merely ego self-centrism posturing as critical autoethnography? In effect, an overspill of self.

In attempts to horizontalize power relations between researcher and research participant, or in attempts to represent research participants through ‘their authentic voice’ (so the research participant is not essentialised), researchers and the research produced inadvertently can essentialise and totalise the subject in research through the engendering of singular uncontested narratives (Holliday & Macdonald, 2020). This is what the Italian Philosopher Roberto Esposito (2010) refers to as an overspill of self – whereby the self’s pre-eminence totalises and violates the other (practically this can be done though reproducing stereotypes, essentialisms and discriminatory discourses). At this juncture it is important to note that the self never functions, or comes-into-being, in a vacuum. Here, one must delineate the self-other relationship through Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981, 2012) notion of dialogism and in relation to critical autoethnography.

**Dialogism as a site for critical autoethnography**

Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories and concepts about language, discourse, text and human interaction (Bakhtin, 1981, 2012) have inspired studies taking a critical autoethnographic approach. For example, in education McKnight and O’Mara (2017) show how a Bakhtinian lens can be
used to develop a critical autoethnographic approach which explores the political and ideological relationships in doctoral supervision. Bakhtin’s work has also inspired critical autoethnographic studies on Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, and ally (LGBTQQIAA) students in teacher education programs (Goodrich et al., 2016). Autoethnography has also been theoretically positioned as a dialogic method with the potential to bridge the gap between practice-based and academic learning in higher education by enabling postgraduate students to act out and critically reflect on everyday dilemmas (Nordentoft & Olesen, 2021). Dialogues with Bakhtin have also focused on the transdisciplinary analyses of theoretical debates of autoethnographic narratives in order to understand the creation of dialogic spaces as spaces that both subordinate and subvert (Haider, 2015).

But what do we mean by dialogism? Before defining and problematising what is meant by dialogism first one must problematise what is meant by language in a Bakhtinian sense. The Russian word slovo does not translate explicitly as ‘discourse’ in English. Slovo is more akin to meaning ‘word’ in English. So, the question remains: why (in a Bakhtinian sense) has slovo been translated as ‘discourse’ in English? To find this answer one must problematise the following passage:

Directed toward its object, a word [slovo] enters a dialogically agitated and tense medium of alien discourses [slovo], evaluations and accents, becoming intertwined in complex interrelations, merging with some, recoiling from others, intersecting with a third group; and all this may form a discourse essentially, leaving a trace in all its layers of meaning [smysl], complicating its expression and influencing its whole stylistic profile.

(Bakhtin, 1981, p. 276)

In this sense, words [slovo] are constantly interacting, metamorphosing, and antagonistically competing with other words within what can be defined as a dialogical apparatus of language. Dialogism is thus a chain of signification whereby all words are interrelated to all other words. As a result, within communication speaker utterances react to preceding utterances and anticipate further utterances within the overarching mode of heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1981, 2012; Simpson, 2018).

Raznorechie (Bakhtin, 2012), or what has been referend to as ‘heteroglossia’ (Bakhtin, 1981) in Bakhtin’s English-language translations, refers to the coexistence of a multiplicity of various struggling language-forms – e.g., social registers, professional discourses and so forth – associated with certain ideological points of view (Brandist & Lähteenmäki, 2011). Raznorechie explicitly refers to the diversity of speech characterised by the interplay of multiple voices found within the voice of the self (literally ‘multivoicedness’) (Bakhtin, 2012).

Through a Bakhtin approach to language (Simpson et al., 2020), I have argued that Bakhtin explicitly denies that the self can be understood in simple terms of self-identity – a human being never coincides with herself/himself (Simpson & Dervin, 2020; Simpson et al., 2020). The formula of identity ‘A is A’ is not applicable to problematise the construction of social phenomena (Simpson, 2018; Simpson & Dervin, 2020). For Bakhtin, the basis of being human (or human beings) is not self-identity but the opening of dialogue, an opening which always implies the simultaneous inter-animation of more than one voice (Simpson & Dervin, 2020). The voices contained within the self can be multiple and be ventriloquised when interacting with others whereby the self can imitate multiple voices (Cooren & Sandler, 2014). In this sense, s/he may say they are gay or lesbian or bisexual, speak multiple languages, have multiple cultures, and so on (which may or may not be true), but whether these things are true or not
is not the point Bakhtin is making here – these aspects of our being are constantly in processes of becoming (Simpson & Dervin, 2020).

In research, it is perhaps seductive to equate Bakhtin’s approaches to the formula of ‘A is A’, this can give illusions of concrete ‘objectivity’, ‘truth’ and ‘answers’ in order to understand complex social constructs (Dervin & Simpson, 2021). Yet it is important to remember that a (truly) Bakhtinian approach will show multiple layers of meaning through the coexistence of varying struggling language forms (i.e., voices). This can be shown through, for example, refractions in the ways interlocutors perform different speech acts in oral discourse, or, in written discourse (e.g., in self reflexive diaries or logs), this can be shown through the construction of different cohesive or intertextual genres (Simpson, 2018). In applying Bakhtin’s approaches to the narratives found in critical autoethnographic studies, narratives cannot (and should not) be analysed, interpreted nor represented in the singular – because this would run contrary to a dialogical approach to language. Representing narratives in the singular can lead to the self violating the other or through othering the other. The latter can be engendered through infatuating or exoticising the other (when perhaps the self wants to give agency or voice to the other) and instead the self totalises and essentialises the other. But the important question one must ask is: Why does the self other the other? In order to problematise this question, one must now turn the Bakhtinian concept of outsideness.

Crises of outsideness as a site for critical autoethnography

Outsideness (or *vnenakhodimost*) is understood as the intersubjective co-experience of an event of being (Brandist, 2002). The notion of outsideness denotes the processes in which the self returns to her/his own position outside of the other in relation to the wholeness to what is being perceived (Brandist, 2002). The crisis of outsideness refers to the positions of self and the other in that there is ‘no stable evaluative position from which a consistent outsideness can be maintained’ (Brandist, 2002, p. 49). To put this simply, the self can never know absolutely what the other demands from it as one can never know what the other is thinking/feeling or how they have been constructed. Dialogues therefore consist of jumping into the deep end as one can never know with certainty what interlocutors will say, how their utterances have been influenced by prior discourses, or to what extent the addressees’ utterances function as mere lip service for what the addressee wants to hear (Bakhtin, 2012). In this sense, the discourses contained within reflexive co-constructed dialogues, can still be interpreted and manipulated as something *other* than what is being represented as these processes are still influenced and shaped by many ideologies and voices. The never-ending interplay between self and other can often be haphazard and can result in misinterpretations, misunderstandings and outright discrimination (marked by stereotypes, biases and essentialisms in the interaction between self and other). In this sense, the self can be grappling several different interdiscourses (shown though the refraction of the speakers’ utterances) about self and other at a given time, thus marking a Janusian (double-faced) conceptualisation of both the self and other (R’boul, 2020).

What does the crises of outsideness mean for critical autoethnography? First, in a Bakhtinian sense the self and other relationship should be characterised as self-other. The hyphen between self and other means that both the self and other are mutually dependent upon on another, the self–other co–exist in a state of permanent symbiosis. For critical autoethnography, the pre–eminence cannot be conceptualised exclusively from the position of self. The self never functions in isolation nor does it function in a vacuum (e.g., human beings are constantly interacting co-creating, negotiating and performing language, identities and constructing social meanings). Instead, one’s narratives, biographies, the intersectionalities which make us who we are to be
constantly (and permanently) problematised from the dialogical relationality of the self-other (Bakhtin, 2012). This means that critical autoethnography, and the narratives contained within autoethnography, are always in the making. The crises of outsideness demands that there is never a normative, fixed nor static conceptualisation of discourse (written text or oral speech), of a critical autoethnographical narrative, due to the fact that the self–other relationship is inherently vulnerable, unstable and incomplete (Bakhtin, 2012). The self should not be fearful of this overture and instead should attempt to engage in this positionality in order to construct and reconstruct places and spaces for critical dialogue (Denshire, 2014). In tracing and mapping reflexive stances, behaviour, attitudes, and values critical autoethnographers should uncover multiple voices in how the self represents itself through its relationship with others.

My second point is that critical autoethnography should be accompanied by dialogical analyses (e.g., a form of dialogical discourse analysis) as a truly critical and reflexive process which uncovers multiple meanings, multiple voices, and multiple forms of being and becoming (see Linell, 2011; Sullivan, 2011). Gillespie and Cornish (2010) in developing dialogical research methods argue,

Intersubjectivity is situated in everyday life contexts, and everyday life does not conform to such a separation. Lived life has reflective aspects (amenable to self-report), entails actions and practices (amenable to observation), and usually lots of talk (amenable to conversation analysis).

(Gillespie & Cornish, 2010, p. 31)

Such research, often going by the name of ethnography, ethnomethodology or participant observation, tends to combine the observation of practices and interactions with an analysis of talk (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010). In this sense, critical autoethnography can incorporate several simultaneous research methodologies to illuminate the construction and functioning of intersubjectivity, shifting I-positions, uncertainty, ambiguity, internal dialogues and dialogical tensions (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007). Knowledge, society and subjectivity are produced through dialogue and are dialogical in their structure and dynamics (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010). At this juncture it is important to remember interpretation entails dialoguing with alternative interpretations (which includes the other) (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000).

Conclusion

This chapter has proposed an alternative trajectory for critical autoethnographic research and practice in education based on the dialogical approach of Mikhail Bakhtin (2012). In this sense, the author argues the merits of combining dialogism (and different dialogical analyses) when conducting critical autoethnographic research. Bakhtinian approaches to autoethnography have been developed in the field (see Choi, 2016) and this movement should be embraced in terms of situating critical autoethnography through problematising and critically examining the self-other in relation to pertinent topics (e.g., issues of social justice and equality) which can be used as an overture for social change in education. Bakhtin’s multivocal self is illustrated through the overarching mode of dialogism and though the concept of outsideness which can be used as an ethical praxis in line with the aims and goals of critical autoethnography (Holman Jones, 2016, 2018).

Some criticisms and limitations were illustrated of critical autoethnographic studies to highlight the fact that critical autoethnographic research in education should avoid falling into an
overspill of self (Esposito, 2010) which can reproduce and engender essentialisms about both the self and/or the other. Dialogism, and dialogical analyses, can prevent an overspill of self by giving agency and voice to both the self and other in critical autoethnographic research in education by focusing on the interplay of multiple voices and multiple identities in interaction (Bloom et al., 2021; Lowe et al., 2021).

For researchers doing critical autoethnography in relation to Bakhtin’s dialogism and the crises of outsideness, the following questions can be considered for researchers conducting critical autoethnographic studies in education (it is not my intention to pose these questions in a dogmatic or prescriptive manner, instead, the questions can be used as an entry point for further dialogue, critical reflection and for further questioning):

- Dialogism raises the question of ethics in education research. Critical autoethnographic studies should question: Am I imposing my values/beliefs onto the other? Am I letting the other impose their values/beliefs onto me?
- Critical autoethnography in education should reveal a sense of co-being and co-existence with the other contained within the speech of the self or within written text: If the other is not present, has the self violated the other? Is the other present in my discourse? If not, why not?
- If the other is not present (through multiple voices in my discourse) in the critical autoethnographic account: Can the researcher use different methodological tools and analyses to show the intersections between self and other?
- Researchers need to be aware of how their own research can reproduce political, social and economic forms of symbolic violence by the decisions they make in their research. Critical autoethnographic researchers should ask: Am I reproducing or engendering essentialist discourses or representations in my research? If not, how do I guard against stereotypes and essentialisms?
- Does my critical autoethnographic approach in education enable multiple voices, multiple perspectives and multiple identities in line with the overarching mode of dialogism?

References


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