Collaborative autoethnography: “self-reflection” as a timely alternative research approach during the global pandemic

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Abstract
Purpose – The authors’ aim in this commentary is to critically assess the potential benefits and limitations of collaborative autoethnography (CAE) as a research tool to be used by qualitative researchers during this unprecedented, methodologically challenging time when physical isolation and distancing are the best strategies to prevent spread of the virus.
Design/methodology/approach – The authors probe into the potential of collaborative reflection on self-narrative as an alternative and perhaps timely research approach.
Findings – The COVID-19 pandemic has altered our experiences of conventional teaching, learning and research. It is a scholarly challenging time, particularly for qualitative researchers in the social sciences whose research involves data collection methods that require face-to-face human interactions. Due to the worldwide lockdowns, self-isolation and social distancing, qualitative researchers are encountering methodological difficulties in continuing with their empirical fieldwork. In such circumstances, researchers are exploring alternative methodological approaches, taking advantage of telecommunication and digital tools for remote data collection. However, the authors argue that qualitative researchers should consider utilizing self-narratives of their experiences during the pandemic as a rich source of qualitative data for further delving into the socioeconomic, political and cultural impacts of the pandemic.
Originality/value – The authors’ focus might be secondary in the minds of many social scientists who are directly contributing to our understanding of how the pandemic has upended communities. However, despite some limitations and ethical concerns, we urge qualitative researchers to embrace the potentials of CAE to study society, especially, but not only, in this unprecedented time.

Keywords Collaborative autoethnography, COVID-19, Crisis research, Qualitative methods, Self-reflection

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction
The global pandemic of COVID-19 has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and triggered socio-economic and political paradigm shifts. Since the beginning of 2020, we have witnessed the suffering and trauma of millions of people who have lost family members, their jobs or been victims of any number of consequential social harms. This commentary does not seek to trivialize those hardships by considering the impact on scholars’ experiences of traditional forms of research. We are aware that our focus would be secondary in the minds of many

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social scientists who are directly contributing to our understanding of how the pandemic has upended communities. It is in relation to this pandemic, however, that we wish to discuss the scholarly challenges faced by social scientists exploring the social impact of the COVID-19 outbreak.

We decided to write this commentary in what many commentators have suggested as an unprecedented time. In March 2020, we completed a study using collaborative autoethnography (CAE) which involved exploring our migration and social mobility experiences as international scholars. On submission of that manuscript to a journal, we began to plan our next research project(s) involving empirical fieldwork. Like other researchers throughout the globe, almost immediately we were struck by the unfortunate reality of the pandemic: our long-established research practices were impeded. Universities moved operations online, international travel for research, fieldwork and conferences was called off, and research funding in many cases was curtailed. While teaching our social science research methods courses online, we started wondering: how has the pandemic impacted our capacity to carry out qualitative research?

In response to our contemplation about this question, we interrogated the potential of CAE as a timely methodological solution. We argue that qualitative researchers should consider using their own first-hand experiences of navigating the pandemic as a rich source of data. In this methodologically unique and challenging time, instead of relying on others to study social reality, we could study society through ourselves, delving further into the cultural and social impacts of the pandemic. CAE, in this regard, is deemed to be a useful, ethical and self-empowering research method. There are two central components of CAE – self-reflection and collaboration. The main aim of this commentary is to critically assess the potential benefits and limitations of CAE as a qualitative research method to be used by social scientists during the unprecedented time of lockdown, self-isolation and social distancing.

**Doing qualitative research during the pandemic**

While the pandemic has adversely affected our ability to conduct research, it has also provided researchers with a unique and unexpected opportunity to study topical social phenomena that would not have been available in a non-crisis situation. Rosenwald (2020) reported in *The Washington Times* that “bored” scholars in a locked down city, who were watching the entire Netflix inventory, found the current situation as a perfect opportunity to conduct a psychological study about boredom. Furthermore, as Cornwall (2020) noted:

> Unlike physicists or biologists, social scientists are frequently constrained from using controlled experiments to test hypotheses. No university, for instance, would approve an experiment that involved firing one group of workers and seeing how they fare compared with their still-employed colleagues. But interventions such as natural disasters – or a pandemic – can help create such experiments, if a researcher is ready to take advantage (p. 5).

Following Cornwall (2020), we assert that the COVID-19 pandemic is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity [1] to document people’s experiences and explore the social, economic, health, political, emotional and religious aspects of the current crisis if qualitative research can be somehow carried out.

As physical isolation and distancing are the best strategy to prevent spread of the virus, health and safety restrictions have made it difficult for researchers to continue using traditional qualitative data collection methods. While explanatory, positivist and deductive approaches still allow researchers to generate and test hypotheses using any available (quantitative) data (i.e. secondary data, official statistics, online surveys), the current situation is particularly dire for projects which embrace interactionist and constructivist perspectives. These require social interactions and observations of these interactions so often rely on
methods such as ethnography, participant observation, in-depth interviews and focus groups for data collection.

In these changing circumstances, we need to adapt swiftly to the unforeseeable new normal, instead of giving up our research activities. To overcome the obstacles to carrying out research, social scientists are using a variety of creative, innovative and unconventional strategies which explore “distance approaches to collecting qualitative data” (Taster, 2020, p. 8). Online conference interviews, nethnography and Internet content analysis have become popular alternative tools in continuing qualitative research. However, technological mediation in the collection of qualitative data does encounter some limitations. For example, compared to face-to-face interviews, online conference interviews do not offer the same opportunities to develop the rapport which enables interviewees to feel comfortable in opening up to researchers (King and Horrocks, 2010, p. 48). Indeed, with the intervention of information communication technology and digital platforms, we, as researchers, often risk losing our sensory engagement (e.g. observing non-verbal cues, observation by participation) with subjects and their social setting. For these reasons, discussing sensitive topics with unknown researchers through online conferencing platforms is difficult (Iacomo et al., 2016; Seitz, 2015).

The general goal of qualitative research is to give voice to others, especially the marginalized (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007, p. 10; Rothman, 2007, p. 12), but this research agenda needs to be carefully reconsidered in the context of crises. During the global pandemic and consequent lockdowns, we have limited sampling tools and are probably unable to reach out to the potential sample population because some may not have reliable Internet access. Even if we can reach out to research participants, there are some who may not be willing to speak out about their traumatic experiences, at least for now. Scholars involved in disaster, crisis and victimization research often deal with this ethical dilemma (Browne and Peek, 2014). For the collection of empirical data, researchers require locating participants as quickly as possible. However, from an ethical standpoint, it is difficult to justify conducting research into situations of extreme human suffering (Turton, 1996, p. 96). This is likely to apply to the current pandemic situation. Thus, in addition to the obvious methodological constraints related to health and safety, examining society through ourselves can avoid the unnecessary exploitation of the researched others.

We contend that, in the context of current challenges (e.g. stay-at-home orders, social distancing, limited research funding, the hiring freeze, and being self-motivated and productive), the use of self-reflexivity and dialogical analysis of our own narratives are deemed to be a pathway for productive qualitative research. Our individual connection to society beyond our own bubbles is limited to the Internet and telecommunication. Therefore, while everyone’s social reality in her/his bubble is believed to be different, we can only observe others’ social reality through these limited sampling and data collection methods in a study exploring the impact of COVID-19 crisis on our society in a true sense. CAE, in this regard, provides a methodological option as the “researcher is simultaneously the instrument and the data source” (Chang et al., 2013, p. 22) in a study exploring the impact. It allows groups of researchers to turn their collective self-narratives, observations and experiences into rich qualitative data. Instead of continuing to rely on limited data collection tools to study society by researching “others,” “self” can be a rich source of data.

Self-reflection: “turning our sociological eyes on our own lives”

CAE has its methodological and theoretical genesis in autoethnographic research, so we will first provide a brief overview of autoethnography (AE) and discuss the potential of self-reflection. AE is a qualitative research method where the researchers use autoethnographic data to gain an insightful and rigorous understanding of their socio-cultural experiences and

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issues (Ellis et al., 2011; Hernandez et al., 2017). AE is not merely a retelling of personal narratives; instead, it involves carefully organized research design and systematically collected and analyzed data. “In autoethnography, your life is data” (Rothman, 2007, p. 14). Although AE is a relatively new qualitative method of inquiry (Chang et al., 2013), there has always been some autoethnographic elements in qualitative research in disciplines such as sociology and anthropology. Anderson (2006) traced the use of biographical and self-observation to the early years of sociology in the United States, particularly the work of the Chicago School ethnographers (see Anderson, 1923; Davis, 1959; Roy, 1959; Turner, 1947). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, there were some notable examples of self-observation and analysis in anthropology, including Anthony Wallace’s (1965) study of the cognitive “maze way” used for driving to work and David Hayano’s (1979) work on poker clubs. More recently, Carolyn Ellis (2004, 2009) and Leon Anderson (2006) made significant contributions, developing robust methodological pathways for social scientists to use AE as a qualitative method of inquiry.

The key purpose of qualitative research is to give voice to others. As Rothman (2007) explained, “In qualitative work, we often strive to give voice to people who might not otherwise be heard. We quote, describe the person, the setting” (p. 12). However, our compass and professional training for investigating and knowing others often tend to obscure the fact that researchers and their daily, lived lives are part of the society explored (Francis and Hester, 2012, p. 35). It is, therefore, not arbitrary to start inquiring into our own activities and experiences. As Francis and Hester (2012) proposed, “If inquiry requires data – as we believe it does – then why not take our own experiences and actions as our data? All you need is ready to hand – your capacity for self-reflection” (p. 35). As researchers, we can turn our own everyday experience, actions, routines and emotions into the data relevant to the topic of analysis (Francis and Hester, 2012; Rothman, 2007).

In describing the potential of self-reflection as a systematic methodological approach, Francis and Hester (2012) pointed out:

... the researcher is as much a part of the social world as anyone else. In an important sense, therefore, the social world is as much “in here” as it is “out there”. Accordingly, it seems reasonable to us that the beginning of social inquiry can be the researcher’s own experiences and activities, and self-reflection upon these. After all, the first and most accessible thing for observation is yourself (p. 35).

Similarly, in a call for using researchers’ own lives and experiences as data, Rothman (2007) noted:

More and more sociologists are doing just that: mining our own lives, our own experiences. Just as the anthropologists have moved closer to home, losing some of their fascination with exotic and exploring their own locales, sociologists have moved in closer as well. But for us, it was never about sailing off to some island somewhere – we were always exploring closer to home. From the start, sociologists studied their own societies and brought their own values... Increasingly, though, we’ve come closer and closer, turning our sociological eyes on our own lives (p. 12).

While we contend that social scientists should take advantage of self-reflection during the pandemic, we by no means advocate the practice of “armchair theorizing” – that is, speculating on the social world based on the researcher’s own preconceived notions without having to investigate what members of the society actually do (Francis and Hester, 2012, p. 35). We, rather, urge researchers to utilize the privileges of a self-reflective approach, which allows the researchers to use their life stories and experiences to understand and interpret the “connectivity between self and others” (Chang et al., 2013, p. 18; see also Anderson, 2006; Ellis, 2004, 2009). We call, therefore, for social researchers to extend their sociological imagination to study the unique social reality of the current crisis. Researchers could do so by...
collaboratively and systematically collecting, organizing and analyzing their lived experiences and activities, instead of asking others.

The approach of self-reflection is particularly useful during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis as it presents an opportunity for us, social scientists, to collect a pool of unique data. A time of social and personal turmoil may be conducive to compiling new information about the society and its members. Social scientists often find “intellectually valuable” (Rothman, 2007, p. 14) elements from personal and public troubles (Mills, 1959). As Rothman (2007) reported:

Sometimes when I'm talking to a student about events that are happening in her or his life, like a relative’s dying, or a traumatic move, I say, “Take notes!” When the situation has been resolved, the student may find something intellectually valuable in the experience, something on which to do scholarly work, maybe even autoethnography (p. 14).

Following Rothman (2007), we argue that, during this global pandemic, researchers have the privilege of systematically and collaboratively gathering and analyzing autoethnographic and self-reflective data to build an archive that would be available for use in extended further research. This could fill the gap created by the period when, due to the lockdowns, certain qualitative works are unable to be carried out. In subsequent research projects, social scientists could draw on the CAE data in conjunction with that collected through mainstream qualitative and quantitative methods to study others – the mass population.

CAE: the strength of collaboration

As AE and the self-reflective approach gained popularity as a mode of social science inquiry, qualitative researchers started experimenting with different variations to fit the purpose of their study. These included duoethnography and CAE (Alvesson et al., 2011; Kinner; Ruggunan, 2019; Sawyer and Norris, 2015). As Chang et al. (2013) argued, “[u]nlike AE, collaborative autoethnographers combine their energy and data to create a richer pool of data from multiple sources” (p. 89). CAE involves a wide range of data collection methods. Researchers can collect personal memory data, interview each other, observe and analyze each other’s self-identities, or collect archival data about each other (Chang et al., 2013). Data collection for CAE is not a linear process; it rather requires multiple sessions of conversations and negotiations among the research team members (Chang et al., 2013, p. 73). Although there is no golden rule for the length of study, the duration of data gathering and analysis can be long (e.g. Kalmbach Phillips et al. (2009) spent ten months for individual writing and collective discussion/analysis; in our last CAE study, we spent over a year for collaborative data collection and analysis). Furthermore, since the data is coming from multiple different sources and in different forms, it is worthwhile developing a data labeling and structuring system collectively. For instance, in our last and current CAE, we have collectively and systematically stored and labelled electronic and text versions of our data in one shared place. This is important since the several different systems of data organization by the individual researcher may create confusion and loss of important materials.

CAE “invites community to investigate shared stories and balances the individual narrative with the greater collective experiences” (Blalock and Akehi, 2018, p. 94). Thus, the dialogue among the team is reflective of shared experiences on a topic (e.g. the authors were herein part of a research team who previously studied their shared experiences of migration and social mobility using CAE). CAE emerges as a “pragmatic application of the autoethnographic approach to social inquiry” (Chang et al., 2013, p. 21), and it focuses on self-interrogation but does so collectively within a team of researchers. Just like duoethnography, it is critically self-reflective and dialogic among the participating researchers. Collaboration among researchers helps to strengthen autoethnography as a method of qualitative inquiry.
Collaboration allows multiple voices and perspectives into the research, and it increases the source of data and information from a single researcher to multiple researchers; this contributes to a more in-depth understanding and learning of the self and others (Chang et al., 2013, pp. 23-24). A built-in process of internal peer-reviewing starts to form through data collection, analysis and interpretation sessions as the mutual scrutiny, interrogation and probing continue. In this phase, researchers in the team can expand, be affirmed and question each other’s reflective writing, recollection of memories and experiences (Chang et al., 2013).

Guyotte and Sochacka (2016) described this process as involving dialogic tensions: “embracing diverse perspectives can serve to strengthen the depth of engagement, quality, and potential impact of (collaborative) autoethnographic research” (p. 1). The dialogic tensions are productive because they force intellectual dialogues among the team and reminds the participating researchers that they must critically reflect on their own role in knowledge production (Alvesson et al., 2011; Sawyer and Norris, 2015).

At an interpersonal level, we should consider the significance of CAE in relation to our own empowerment (Chang et al., 2013; Dyson, 2007). When an unprecedented pandemic is causing people crippling feelings of stress, depression, anxiety, anger, boredom, uncertainty, loneliness and disconnection, researchers, like many others who may not have a strong support system, are in need of help and coping mechanisms. Hendrickson (2020) explains that, “Social distancing has encouraged isolation and seclusion. Researchers are now faced with many challenges associated with social distancing, such as a lack of daily interaction with peers and increased difficulty communicating with others” (p. 1). Having a research team to simply talk about what we personally go through, which is already part of the CAE research process, can be an important stress-coping mechanism and a driver for personal empowerment. Even in non-crisis situations, CAE promoters such as Lapadat (2017, p. 599) emphasize the secondary benefits of CAE: It can provide a supportive, trustworthy set of equally vulnerable colleagues with invaluable emotional support and a sense of empowerment when researching sensitive topics or when researchers are in unsafe situations. Thus, CAE can easily turn into a source of researcher empowerment as well as a collective means for researchers to cope with stress and build resilience.

Creating a research opportunity based on critical reflection of our personal experiences during this scholarly challenging time is a worthwhile endeavor. This is primarily significant for early-career academics and postgraduate students who may not have a strong voice in academia. Making explicit links between academic work and our personal experiences of going through the difficulties associated, for example, with the current pandemic can empower us and increase our self-esteem (Moriatry, 2018). Additionally, as a further training opportunity to develop our sociological imagination, CAE is exceptionally beneficial at the early career stage because this methodology “allows us to examine how the private troubles of individuals are connected to public issues and to public responses to these troubles” (Denzin, 2014, pp. 5-6).

**Ethical concerns and limitations of CAE**

We cannot end this paper without a reminder of the ethical concerns and limitations of CAE. Lapadat (2017) explains that “collaborative autoethnography incorporates AE’s ethical praxis while offering some advantages over autoethnography” (p. 599). Despite the strength of collaboration, CAE has been criticized for its non-accountability, non-generalizability and non-representativeness. Although (collaborative) self-reflective investigation provides us with insightful data and insiders’ perspectives, the potential for narcissism and self-indulgence may still be unavoidable in CAE. Especially during a crisis (such as COVID-19) when researchers are more likely emotionally distressed, they can be highly selective and subjective in their analysis. Even though we often collaboratively arrive at “truth” of the social reality being investigated, there are certain “truth” that is only accessible to the
individual researcher (Schultz, 2017). Thus, the radical subjectivity of the individual researcher can still conflate self-narratives and storytelling (Dauphinee, 2010).

The other notable limitation is that, since autoethnographic research is often produced by scholars who are generally in a privileged situation, they are not always representative of the mass of the population (Philaretou and Allen, 2006). Even if all of us are affected by the pandemic, our experiences are most likely to be different from the experiences of the more vulnerable. In this sense, despite the CAE aim of connecting the private troubles of individuals to public issues, this approach may not be inclusive enough in the sense of achieving the main goal of qualitative research – to give voice to others, especially the marginalized.

Furthermore, while CAE’s strength lies in collaboration, it may suffer from the issues of having too many voices (if the research team is considerably big) and ideological differences. These create multiple challenges and complexities. Even if a research team develops a collective data storing and management system, the collection and analysis of data from a large group would be a monumental task due to “greater logistical challenges and growing demands for negotiation among researchers” (Chang et al., 2013, p. 39). Therefore, following Chang et al. (2013, p. 37) as well as from our own experiences, the most suitable size of CAE research teams in a CAE project is three to five researchers, who embrace diverse perspectives, the power of collaboration and ethical research practices.

While there are ethical challenges and methodological limitations, we argue that, to harness the potential contributions CAE can make to society, a team of researchers needs to accept full ethical responsibility for what and how they research. During the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis, careful research design and practice should minimize the potential ethical concerns and limitations of CAE discussed above. Although each researcher has subjective understanding of social reality in the context of the pandemic, the collaborative aspect of CAE research would introduce the intersubjectivity. The dialogical tensions would help researchers increase its accountability. Taking responsibility and following ethical standards are always critical because CAE research does not generally require institutional review boards (IRB) review. Qualitative researchers, therefore, may be on their own to make ethical, including respectful, decisions when conducting CAE research. From our experience of previous and current CAE projects, some strategies such as frequent and open communication among the members, collaborative interpretation and scrutiny of data can help minimizing the issues of subjectivity, ethics and biases. It is also useful to collectively maintain a research diary during the entire research period to keep the record of researchers’ “hunches, ideas, notes, reflection and actions” (Gibbs, 2007, p. 26). Keeping a diary would help researchers reflecting on any factors that influenced the direction of their data collection and analysis.

**Concluding notes**

We do not wish to have another research opportunity like this. However, as social scientists, it is our responsibility to keep producing knowledge that contributes to a sustainable and just society. As Taster (2020, p. 4) proposed, social science expertise and knowledge can be indispensable in understanding the delivery, effectiveness and impact of the intervention programs and policies associated with national economies, urban systems and social welfare in a time of crisis. There is little doubt that people have been unevenly affected by the current pandemic, and numerous social science research projects will be carried out in the next few years to empirically explore the specific forms which social vulnerability and resilience took during and after the lockdowns. Once qualitative researchers can go out to the field, there will be a research boom. We imagine that retrospective interviews will be the dominant means of qualitative inquiry. From these, we can learn from the stories and experiences of those who were and continue to be affected to better prepare ourselves for future crisis management. In
the past, social science knowledge has contributed in myriad ways to managing natural and
human-induced hazards and can do so again in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We encourage qualitative researchers to take advantage of CAE as a research method to
collect and analyze as much data as possible during the pandemic, when our social
interaction is extremely limited. We “should not let this crisis go to waste” (Zattler, 2020,
p. 4) while we can use our own experiences and stories as rich data. The pool of CAE data,
which we can collect immediately, will be extremely valuable to fill the gap caused by the
current health and safety regulations and restrictions on conducting some types of
qualitative research. We urge qualitative researchers to embrace the potentials of CAE to
study society, especially, but not only, in this unprecedented time. In other words, we do not
promote CAE just as a temporary methodological solution; rather, we appreciate the full
potential of CAE as a method of qualitative inquiry to be used to gain further insights into
social reality at any time.

Note
1. From an ethical standpoint, we sincerely do not hope for a future research opportunity like this.

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