Paper: Representing Ourselves in Information Science: A Methodological Essay on Auto-ethnography

Abstract: While auto-ethnography offers an alternative methodology to illuminate information experiences through personal narratives, this form of inquiry is often relegated to the “edge” of information science. This paper will review significant examples, and notable critiques, of auto-ethnographic research and articulate the relevance of auto-ethnography for information science.

Résumé:

1. Introduction

In the midst of the postmodern movement, anthropologists and their colleagues in other social sciences began to explore narratives about personal experience as a viable research methodology for analyzing cultural phenomena. Renato Rosaldo’s *Culture and Truth* (1989) allowed the cultural anthropologist to reflect on his own grief over his wife’s death as a way to understand Ilongot ritual headhunting practices. Rosaldo illustrated that rather than diluting the valuable theories presented in his monograph, reflexivity enabled him to interpret a cultural phenomenon that eluded objective understanding. Auto-ethnographic work such as Rosaldo’s is not without its critics (e.g., Anderson 2006; Gans 1999; Madison 2006) and auto-ethnography remains a contested methodology. Scholars within and outside of cultural anthropology have pondered whether lines can be drawn between autobiography and ethnography if we are to incorporate our own stories into our research. Certainly, auto-ethnography presents challenges to conventional assumptions about removing bias from research, and about the criteria with which we evaluate research. As it develops as a methodology that creatively combines elements from autobiographical narrative and ethnography with an aim to understand the researcher’s own sociocultural context, auto-ethnography will continue to face criticism about its ability to inform rigorous research.

The auto-ethnographer’s intimate knowledge of the cultural and social setting in which he/she is situated can help the audience to “understand human group life” (Kleinknecht 2007, 243) through the lens of one individual’s experience. In information science, much time and effort is spent focusing on the information practices of users, but scarce literature is dedicated to our own information experiences. Narrative methodological approaches such as auto-ethnography can offer significant insights into the ways in which individuals interact with information, how such interactions are shaped by the norms and practices of the social, cultural, and professional groups to which people belong, and how information services and technologies might be improved by taking into account a wider range of user experiences – including the experiences of information scholars and practitioners. Although auto-ethnography offers an alternative methodology to illuminate information experiences and transcend artificial boundaries between the self, culture, and society, examples of this form of inquiry remain “tales from the edge” of Information Science, relegated to the sidelines of more conventional approaches.

In the pages to follow, I will review significant examples of auto-ethnographic research, including Barbara Myerhoff’s (1977, 1978) pioneering auto-ethnographic
studies of Jewish communities in southern California. Additionally, I will review notable critiques such as Leon Anderson’s (2006) arguments against “evocative” auto-ethnography in favour of a more “analytic” approach. Most importantly, I will articulate the relevance of auto-ethnography for information science. David H. Michels’ (2010) *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science* article, “The Place of the Person in LIS Research,” is presented as an exemplar auto-ethnographic study, which challenges widely held characterizations of library users by applying poetic, visual, and narrative devices to reflect upon his dual identity as graduate student and academic librarian. Possible avenues for the application of auto-ethnography in future information research will also be considered. While auto-ethnography is not without its limitations, it can serve as a useful methodological framework for information scholars who seek to understand information phenomena in various cultural, social, and political settings by emphasizing the lessons that personal stories can teach us about human experience.

2. What is ‘auto-ethnography’?

During the 1960s and 1970s in American anthropology, the terms “emic” and “etic” began to be used widely to distinguish between analyses of human cultural settings and their members based on indigenous worldviews (emic), and analyses of human cultural settings and their members based on criteria derived outside of particular cultural contexts (etic) (Barnard 2002, 275). This distinction was introduced by Kenneth L. Pike in *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior*, in which Pike linked the linguistic concepts of “phonemic” and “phonetic” to the analysis of cultural data (Barnard 2002, 275). The emic-etic distinction is noteworthy because it serves as a conceptual framework from which anthropologists and other social scientists have approached their fieldwork. While etic analysis tends to “imply a value judgment” (Barnard 2002, 276) by imposing certain “universal” definitions or classification systems upon the cultural group being studied, emic analysis strives to include culturally-specific ideological categories (Barnard 2002, 276). Nonetheless, emic models are not inherently “native model[s]” (Barnard 2002, 277); rather, they are constructed by the researcher based upon his/her interpretation of the cultural phenomena observed and/or experienced in the field (Barnard 2002, 277).

Auto-ethnography developed at a time when anthropologists and their colleagues in other social science disciplines called into question the relevance of the emic-etic distinction for analyzing cultural phenomena. Influenced by more reflexive approaches that became prominent during the postmodern movement of the 1980s, many anthropologists who employed ethnography as their primary methodology to study human cultures turned to other literary forms such as narrative to guide their work. As Leon Anderson describes, the turn by ethnographers towards narrative approaches was largely the result of a “crisis in representation” (Anderson 2006, 383) in the 1980s, which challenged conventional ethnographic approaches and their presentation of the ethnographer as an invisible, omniscient figure telling tales of exotic cultures (Anderson 2006, 383-384). Meanwhile, ethnography was being challenged for exploiting the lives of research participants by collecting cultural data to advance researchers’ careers, and for its questionable ability to accurately represent social realities (Hammersley 1990, 15). While ethnographers remained focused on writing about the ways in which “people see and talk about their everyday social activities and groupings, and the wider worlds they
live in” (Sanjek 2002, 299), the shift to reflexive research approaches enabled ethnographers to study and write about their own cultures.

In order to provide a working definition of auto-ethnography, it is necessary to outline some of the basic principles and assumptions of ethnography. Although definitions of ethnography are diverse, a useful description is that ethnography is a social research methodology, which typically studies human behaviour in small-scale “everyday contexts” (Hammersley 1990, 1), focuses on observation and unstructured conversations as primary data gathering techniques (Hammersley 1990, 2), collects as wide a range of data as possible without imposing fixed analytic categories at the beginning of fieldwork (Hammersley 1990, 2), and analyzes data by interpreting “the meanings and functions of human actions” (ibid.). Ethnography is primarily a qualitative methodology, although statistical analysis may play a “subordinate role” (Hammersley 1990, 2) in some studies. Adding to this description, sociologist Martyn Hammersley notes that ethnography is based on the following assumptions: social research should be conducted in “natural settings” (Hammersley 1990, 7) in order to appropriately represent human behaviour relative to the context in which it occurs; ethnographers must learn about and understand their research participants’ culture in order to explain their actions in a valid way (Hammersley 1990, 7-8); and theoretical explanations of observed cultural practices must develop over the course of the research process, rather than being set out in hypotheses before ethnographers enter the field setting (Hammersley 1990, 8).

Since human behaviour cannot be controlled in the same manner as can that of inanimate objects – or even other animals – ethnographic research is evaluated not on the basis of its ability to replicate findings, but based on its ability to examine “naturally occurring’ behaviour” (Hammersley 1990, 57) in a plausible and credible way (Hammersley 1990, 61-62) that has relevance to various practitioners, researchers, and the public (Hammersley 1990, 61). While plausibility, credibility, and relevance are limited in their capacity to assess the validity of ethnographic research, they remain the most appropriate criteria for assessing the validity of findings about small-scale cultural settings and the dynamic phenomena that occur within them.

Contemporary ethnographers have expressed their concern with the ways in which lived experience is represented in texts; inevitably, aspects of everyday life will be left out of the ethnographic record, and it is the researcher’s task to present the participants’ perspectives to the best of his/her abilities without imbuing the text with his/her own bias. Recently, however, some ethnographers have embraced auto-ethnography as a methodology that leaves space for their own ideas and experiences to be included. In essence, auto-ethnography is a methodology that blends elements from autobiography and ethnography – respectively, a literary genre and a research methodology, which share a central focus on narrative. Auto-ethnography encourages the researcher to be “both the author and focus of the story” (Ellis 2009, 13), and to “expand and deepen our understandings of the lives we have lived, and the work we have done” (ibid.). It is not a narcissistic methodology, but rather serves a simultaneous purpose to “expand scholarship about human experience” (Ellis 2009, 16) and to “provide companionship and coping strategies for dealing with personal disappointments, traumas, and losses; and help us understand, reframe, and live through collective natural and human-made disasters that increasingly seem to be part of our lives” (Ellis 2009, 17). As sociologist Carolyn Ellis eloquently writes in her “meta-autoethnography”1, Revision, “a
good story is one that others can take in and use for themselves” (Ellis 2009, 230). Indeed, auto-ethnography provides a methodological framework from which researchers can present personal narratives and reflect on broader cultural issues that have relevance outside of their immediate context.

3. Why auto-ethnography matters: Relevance to Information Science

In many ways, auto-ethnography has an advantage for researchers who, as sociologist Robert Prus describes in his interview with Steven Kleinknecht, “want to be as close to our subject matter as we can” (Kleinknecht 2007, 229). The auto-ethnographer’s intimate knowledge of the cultural and social setting in which he/she is situated can help the audience to “understand human group life” (Kleinknecht 2007, 243) through the lens of one individual’s experience. In Information Science, a lot of time and effort is spent focusing on the information practices of users, but scarce literature is dedicated to our own information experiences. Reflexive methodological approaches such as auto-ethnography can offer significant insights into the ways in which individuals interact with information, how such interactions are shaped by the norms and practices of the social, cultural, and professional groups to which people belong, and how information services and technologies might be improved by taking into account a wider range of user experiences – including the experiences of information scholars and practitioners.

Certainly, writing about personal experiences has not been the norm in Information Science. In recent years, scholars such as Paulette Rothbauer have taken more reflexive approaches to their research, but our field continues to be influenced by earlier attempts to justify studies of information systems, technologies, and practices as scientific endeavours. In this sense, Information Science is not dissimilar to other academic disciplines such as Political Science, which are rooted in traditions of positivism and empiricism. DeLysa Burnier’s (2006) examination of auto-ethnography from her perspective as a political scientist who is interested in interpretive and narrative approaches to policy research sheds light on the hegemonic discourses that regulate writing styles and genres in various academic disciplines. As Burnier notes, auto-ethnography can provide a “methodological justification” for including the self in scholarly writing (Burnier 2006, 414), since personal narratives can illuminate social scientific issues and cross artificial boundaries between the self, culture, politics, and society (Burnier 2006, 416). By crossing such boundaries, auto-ethnography can destabilize the “gendered dichotomies” that have proliferated in social science research, between “heart/mind, emotional/rational, literary-poetic/analytical, personal/scholarly, [and] descriptive/theoretical” (Burnier 2006, 416). Burnier’s reflections on auto-ethnography in Political Science make a compelling case for adopting auto-ethnography as a methodological framework in other fields of inquiry – not the least of which is Information Science.

Not only is auto-ethnography a relevant methodology for Information Science on the grounds of its capacity to cut across dichotomized territories of personal stories and social scientific scholarship, but it can also inform practice. As David H. Michels writes in his exploratory auto-ethnographic study about his information experience as a doctoral student using an academic library, data about the self can enable us to reflect on our own cultural assumptions (Michels 2010, 166). According to Michels, an increased awareness
of our cultural assumptions can help us to interpret and analyze such assumptions in the context of professional practice (Michels 2010, 166). In other words, the lessons we learn about our cultural and social contexts from reflexive approaches can assist in developing information technologies, programs, and services that help rather than hinder the information experiences of students, faculty, and other individuals who use – or have yet to use – resources and services provided by information institutions such as libraries and archives.

4. Social science research gets personal: Key examples of auto-ethnography

To understand auto-ethnography’s methodological relevance for Information Science, it is worth noting some of the key works about auto-ethnography and studies that have employed it as a guiding methodology. In her chapter on “Narrative Analysis” in The Qualitative Researcher’s Companion, Catherine Kohler Riessman discusses the use of personal narratives as data, the problematic nature of representing human experience through narrative analysis, and strategies for dealing with possible “non-truths” encountered when conducting ethnographic research (Riessman 2002, 217-270). With regard to personal narrative, Riessman argues that although “individuals become the autobiographical narratives by which they tell their lives” (Riessman 2002, 218), these individual stories become intertwined with stories of others in the community (ibid.). Thus, auto-ethnographic research, while presented from the perspective of the author’s experiences, can convey valuable insights about the broader culture/society/institution in which the researcher is situated.

Adding to this, Susan E. Chase’s chapter on “Narrative Inquiry” in The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research examines narrative inquiry (broadly) as a way of challenging hegemonic cultural discourses and fostering social change through in-depth reflections on alternative beliefs and practices. She describes auto-ethnography as a research approach in which the researcher places primary focus on producing an interpretive biography of his/her own stories. Researchers who use auto-ethnography as a methodological framework present their stories in a variety of literary and creative forms, including plays, poems, and novels (Chase 2005, 423). According to Chase, auto-ethnography aims to perform or illustrate cultural experiences, rather than merely describing them; as such, this methodology disrupts the power dynamics inherent in “traditional forms of representation, and traditional social science orientations to audiences” (ibid.). Chase credits the late anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff with pioneering the auto-ethnographic approach in her studies of Jewish communities in California (Chase 2005, 423). Myerhoff’s research illuminated valuable insights about elderly immigrant Jewish communities and Orthodox Jewish communities in southern California, and while Myerhoff did not fully immerse herself in the religious practices of her participants’ communities, auto-ethnography raises questions about the ethical implications of conducting social research through the lens of one’s own life experiences.

In response to auto-ethnographies such as Myerhoff’s in which the researcher uses narrative to reflect on emotional responses to sociocultural phenomena in the context of his/her own community, Anderson argues for social science researchers to adopt “analytic autoethnography” (Anderson 2006, 373-395). According to Anderson, “analytic autoethnography” is similar to “evocative autoethnography” in presenting
accounts by the researcher as a member of the group or community under study, but differs in its “commitment to theoretical analysis” (Anderson 2006, 378). From Anderson’s point of view, “evocative autoethnography”, with its emphasis on personal, emotional experiences in a social or cultural setting, is merely committed to conveying stories about the researcher’s subjectivity (Anderson 2006, 386). However, Anderson’s suggested approach has been challenged by scholars such as Burnier (2006), who argue that the separation between “evocative” and “analytic” auto-ethnography perpetuate the kind of gendered dichotomies mentioned earlier in this paper. Evidently, auto-ethnography, in spite of being invoked by anthropologists and other social science researchers as a methodology since at least the 1980s, is a diverse, creative, and contested approach to the study of human cultures and social relations.

Other notable works about auto-ethnography include anthropologist Deborah Reed-Danahay’s (2009) article about researchers – such as Sherry B. Ortner – who studied and wrote about academic settings in which they were participants or with which they were familiar and wanted to examine further; and Paul Atkinson, Amanda Coffey, and Sara Delamont’s (1999) article on the connection between past, present, and future in ethnographic research. Earlier works about auto-ethnography include anthropologist David M. Hayano’s (1979) article on auto-ethnography as method, methodology, and theoretical framework; Mary Louise Pratt’s (1986) chapter on the relationship between personal narrative and conventional ethnography in James Clifford and George E. Marcus’s Writing Culture; and Judith Okely’s (1992) chapter in Anthropology and Autobiography about the historical context of autobiographical writing in anthropology, and the promise that auto-ethnography holds for creatively connecting the anthropologist’s personal experiences in the field with his/her writing to frame cultural studies. In the edited volume of the 1985 Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA) conference proceedings, Anthropology at Home, Tamara Dragadze discusses the advantages of conducting fieldwork in a familiar context – with reference to auto-ethnographic research in the former Soviet Union – while Stella Mascarenhas-Keyes shares her experience in Goa as a so-called “native anthropologist” who shares the cultural heritage and kinship of her research participants.

More recently, social science scholars have elaborated on tacit notions of the self, which inform auto-ethnographic writing (de Freitas and Paton 2009) and have challenged the concept of auto-ethnography as self-indulgent (Sparkes 2002). Notably, cultural anthropologist Ruth Behar has discussed the notion of “blurred genres” – instances “when fiction bleeds into memoir and vice versa” (Behar 2007a, 145). Behar’s earlier work in Women Writing Culture (1995) set the groundwork for her reflections on the vulnerability of ethnographers (Behar 1996), and her own auto-ethnographic accounts of her connection to Cuba’s Jewish community (Behar 2007b). In An Island Called Home, Behar confronts the liminal identity of the auto-ethnographer: “I was accustomed to going to other places to do fieldwork. But could Cuba be a fieldsite? Cuba was my native land. How could I be an anthropologist there?” (Behar 2007b, 16). Behar’s work addresses the inevitable messiness of researching human cultures, and the complexities involved when researchers study their own.

Although auto-ethnography can inform emotionally powerful and thought-provoking cultural analysis, scholars such as Marilyn Strathern (1987) have drawn attention to the limitations of auto-ethnography, and the challenges that such a
methodology presents to conducting ethically responsible research. As mentioned above, auto-ethnography cannot be assessed on the basis of the same evaluation criteria used in other scientific disciplines; as a result, questions have been raised about the capacity for studies of one’s own community to produce valid, rigorous research. In *Revision*, Ellis notes some of the most recent examples of critiques of auto-ethnography, including Anderson (2006) and James Buzard’s (2003) arguments that auto-ethnography lacks the theoretical rigor of other methodologies; Kathy Charmaz’s (2006) critique of auto-ethnography’s preference for conveying the personal experiences of researchers over analysis about the cultural group being observed; Susanne Gannon’s (2006) poststructural critique of auto-ethnography’s claim that subjects can write about themselves; and Craig Gingrich-Philbrook’s (2005) expressed suspicion about auto-ethnography’s ability to effectively combine an aesthetic approach to narrative with a methodology that tries to produce and present scholarly knowledge (Ellis 2009, 359-360). Additionally, auto-ethnography has been critiqued for producing studies that claim to present “true” portrayals of cultures (Charmaz 2006, 399), in spite of the methodology’s intentions to empower groups whose voices were previously heard only through the accounts of colonial anthropologists (Moreira 2009, 652). In the contemporary postcolonial era, auto-ethnographers need to be careful not to promote their studies as authoritative sources about cultural groups, so as to avoid romanticizing “the Other” (Said 1978) or producing narratives that reduce the diversity within cultures to homogeneous, geographically- and temporally-bound groups.

Despite its critiques, auto-ethnography has enabled numerous scholars to examine culturally and emotionally sensitive topics such as illness, gender and sexual identity, and death. Examples of such studies include Myerhoff’s (1978) monograph and (1977) film, *Number Our Days*, about a community of elderly Jewish immigrants living in Venice, California, and the auto-ethnographic film, *In Her Own Time* (1985), which resulted from Myerhoff’s search for miracles through Orthodox Jewish rituals following her diagnosis with lung cancer two years into her research in the Fairfax neighbourhood of Los Angeles. Others, such as Edward M. Bruner (2010), have used auto-ethnography to reflect on personal relationships and their cultural implications, for “we can never know completely another’s experiences, even though we have many clues and make inferences all the time” (Bruner 1986, 5). Similarly, Paula Saukko’s (2008) auto-ethnography, *The Anorexic Self*, incorporates the author’s personal narrative about her clinical treatment for an eating disorder in early adolescence to offer an analysis about discourses on anorexia from a feminist social scientific perspective. Camilla Gibb’s (2005) chapter in *Auto-ethnographies: The Anthropology of Academic Practices* is also rooted in personal experience; here, Gibb poignantly articulates the emotional challenges of fieldwork and some practical implications, and discusses her transition from anthropologist to fiction writer.

The aforementioned auto-ethnographies, in addition to other noteworthy studies such as Kris Paap’s (2006) *Working Construction*, examine familiar settings in an effort to produce sociocultural analyses that have relevance for the broader scholarly community and society at large. While there are many excellent studies that illustrate a reflexive and/or self-conscious approach to social science research (e.g., Behar 1996, 2007; Ellis 1995, 2002; Gatson 2003; Rosaldo 1989), one exemplar study for Information Science is Michels’ (2010) “The Place of the Person in LIS Research”. Michels’ exploratory study about his experience as a doctoral student at his university’s law library
not only represents a contemporary auto-ethnographic study, but it also demonstrates a relevant application of this methodology for information scholars. Michels’ study uses an auto-ethnographic methodology to critically examine the library system’s conceptualizations of individual users, and to raise awareness about the impact that such conceptualizations have on the information practices of library professionals and the people who use library resources and services (Michels 2010, 161). Michels’ decision to present data in the form of three two-minute video clips with accompanying poems8 was influenced by the use of narrative and poetry in interpretive ethnography, particularly Laurel Richardson’s “poetical reporting” (Richardson 2001), and Stephen Hester and David Francis’s (Hester and Francis 2003) reflexive study about scenes observed during a trip to the supermarket. Like Richardson,Michels includes “afterwords” to contextualize his poems and connect them to the study’s research objectives (Michels 2010, 172). The afterwords in Michels’ study frame the poems and the issues they address with narrative “vignettes”, which elaborate on the information experiences of Michels as a person with the dual identity of graduate student and academic librarian (Michels 2010, 176-180).

Through this study, Michels challenges widely held characterizations of library users: As he notes in Vignette #2, “I am a complex individual; we all are. I am not easily categorized as a library user unless I am prepared to compromise something” (Michels 2010, 177). In using auto-ethnographic poetry to reflect upon his role as a graduate student in the library, Michels invokes earlier critiques of the concept of “user” in LIS research, such as Heidi Julien’s (1999) claim that the term “user” automatically excludes those who do not use library services, and reflects a negative connotation of users as inferior dependents who exploit people and systems for their own gain (Michels 2010, 163-164, 178). This critical element emphasizes the value of auto-ethnography as a methodology that aims to understand human experience and lead to positive social change. Far from being self-indulgent, Michels adopts an auto-ethnographic approach in order to bring attention to the problematic nature of how “users” are perceived by professionals in the library system. Furthermore, Michels illustrates that auto-ethnography can be used as a viable methodology across disciplines, and not merely in anthropology.

5. From the edge to the horizon: Auto-ethnography in Information Science

As the above examples of auto-ethnographic research illustrate, auto-ethnography is a creative methodology with diverse and contested objectives, a narrative approach to research that enables scholars to be reflexive, engage in sociocultural analysis of their own communities, develop and share emotional coping strategies for personal loss and collective tragedy, and bridge the gendered divide between heart and mind. In particular, Michels’ (2010) exploratory study demonstrates that auto-ethnography is a useful methodology for information scholars who seek to examine, analyze, and interpret various information phenomena, and who aim to improve human information experiences. While Michels focuses on librarians’ conceptualizations of those who use (or have yet to use) academic library programs, resources and services, auto-ethnography could also be applied in future studies of public libraries; archival reference and documentation practices; human-computer interaction; games research; access to
corporate, non-profit, and government records centres; and information policy
development.

Varying levels of reflexivity may need to be included in such studies, as certain
topics may engage with more or less autobiographical data than others. (For example,
auto-ethnographic studies about researchers who participate in developing games
software or archival reference services may be more reflexive than researchers who have
experienced playing games or visiting an archive but are less involved with developing
software or reference service policies.) To remain a viable methodology for information
scholarship, auto-ethnography must balance reflections about personal experience with a
primary focus on the people and phenomena being studied. As A.V. Sokolov suggests,
methodology is “the route for [the] curious researcher. A methodologist is unable to
predict the adventures that a traveler has to face and what remarkable sights he will
discover” (Sokolov 2009, 66). In this spirit of adventure, I encourage information
scholars to be open to exploring narrative methodologies “on the edge” such as auto-
ethnography as a way to creatively frame the research process, and discover insights that
may not be as easily identified using other methodological frameworks.
References


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Ellis describes “meta-autoethnography” as a “story of the stories” (Ellis 2009, 12), a reflexive approach that re-interprets existing narratives about one’s own cultural experiences, and uses hindsight to revisit original stories, “consider responses, and write an autoethnographic account about autoethnography” (Ellis 2009, 13).

2 Paulette Rothbauer’s (2004) dissertation, Finding and Creating Possibility: Reading in the Lives of Lesbian, Bisexual and Queer Young Women, represents the shift within Library and Information Science from quantitative methods to qualitative methods by representing the use of personal narrative and reflexive voice in a scholarly text (Howarth, INF3003 Seminar, October 2, 2012). By focusing on readers’ perspectives rather than attempting to prove a pre-formulated hypothesis and incorporating her own personal research diary, Rothbauer illustrates the value of exploratory, qualitative and interpretivist inquiry (Rothbauer 2004, 18) for examining information phenomena that cannot be separated from the very personal, social, and cultural contexts in which they occur.

3 Harold Borko’s (1968) article, “Information science: What is it?” and its reflections on the name change of the American Documentation Institute to the American Society for Information Science bring attention to earlier attempts to situate the information disciplines in the scientific domain. Evidence of more recent arguments in favour of empirical, positivist approaches to the information disciplines includes Birger Hjørland’s (2004) article, “Arguments for Philosophical Realism in Library and Information Science”, which calls information scholars to strive towards the ideal of objectivity in order to evaluate knowledge claims based on evidence presented, and to more effectively articulate their positions. The theme of information research as a scientifically rigorous discipline is further demonstrated in Hjørland’s (2005) article, “Empiricism, rationalism and positivism in library and information science”, in which the author proposes that empirical, rational, and positivist approaches can contextualize information scholarship and inform the ways in which “objects of research… are constituted” (Hjørland 2005, 131).


5 See also Norman K. Denzin’s (2006) article, “Analytic Autoethnography, or Déjà Vu all Over Again”, which discusses evocative and analytical autoethnography in response to Anderson’s article in the same issue of the Journal of Contemporary Ethnography.

6 Women Writing Culture (1995), co-edited by Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon, is a collection of essays by feminist anthropologists such as Lila Abu-Lughod and Gelya Frank, which explores the intersections between feminism, identity, ethnography, multiculturalism, and creative writing.

7 Although Charmaz has critiqued auto-ethnography for positioning the researcher at the centre of cultural analysis (2006), and for imposing a narrative approach to interpreting experiences that may not be appropriately articulated in stories (Charmaz 2002, 303), the emphasis placed by constructivist grounded theorists (such as Charmaz) on the need for researchers to acknowledge their biases and identify their background suggests that auto-ethnography shares notable similarities with contemporary approaches to grounded theory. As Charmaz and her colleague, Richard G. Mitchell, explain in an earlier article, “we do not pretend that our stories report autonomous truths, but neither do we share the cynic’s nihilism that ethnography is a biased irrelevancy. We hold a modest faith in middle ground” (Charmaz and Mitchell 1996, 86).

8 The video clips, narrated by Michels’ poems, can be accessed at www.iamproject.ca.

9 See Norman K. Denzin’s chapter on “Ethnographic Poetics and Narratives of the Self” in Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century (1997) for a detailed discussion of the history of poetry in interpretive ethnography, including examples of its uses in anthropology and sociology, and notable critiques of poetic narrative in social science texts.