

Paper session 2: Pioneering the path Armin Moehrle, Curator

Becoming the Subject: A Comparison of Ethnographic and Autoethnographic Data for New Product Development

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As companies become more interested in innovation, design, and the creation of experiences, they are increasingly utilizing ethnography as a way to understand their customers and potential customers. However, for most companies ethnography is still conducted in the classical sense, with researchers observing and talking to participants in order to draw out insights about the “other.” Few consider the use of autoethnography, that is, having people deeply and rigorously study themselves in order to produce a richer description of the problem space and of how new products might potentially solve those problems.

This paper draws on two research projects conducted by the author, compares the data collection methods and research results obtained with both approaches, and suggests some ways in which using an autoethnographic approach could lead to more insightful research results. It also raises questions about how we as researchers can increase our understanding of and respect for what it really means to be a research subject.

INTRODUCTION

Years ago, I conducted ethnographic research for a company that wanted to develop new products for breastfeeding mothers. Specifically, the company was interested in developing products that would help nursing mothers save, store, transport, and use pumped breast milk.

Last fall, I had my first child. I knew that I wanted to breastfeed and I knew I would be returning to work. When I first thought about pumping, I was reminded of the earlier research I had done, and I thought it would be interesting to re-examine the topic. As professional researchers, we are quite comfortable going into the field to study “real people” (Nafus, 2006) and what they want, but we less frequently engage in a deep process of self-examination, self-reflection, and self-study. In fact, we often explicitly step back and separate ourselves from the participants – we don’t want to taint what the participant does and we want to have empathy but remain objective, and so on. I was curious to learn what it would be like to experience a research project as a participant rather than as a researcher.

I decided to document my experiences, to do an autoethnography.¹ Would I see different problems and opportunities than I had seen when I did the earlier research? Would I modify how I

¹There is an ongoing, and unresolved, debate about the exact meaning, parameters and implications of the word “autoethnography.” Without getting drawn into the arguments of Ellis, Denzin, Anderson and others (see the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 2006:35), for purposes of this paper I use the term “autoethnography” to mean

conduct research in the future? Would there be any benefit to companies of using this autoethnographic approach, and if so, what would that benefit be? What are the key takeaways and insights for us as ethnographers about autoethnography? These were some of the questions I wanted to explore.

In this paper, I will share some details and learnings from the two research projects. I will also provide some food for thought for practicing ethnographers as we work with research participants and clients.

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH CONDUCTED

In both cases, the goal of the research study was to understand the daily life of mothers who wanted to provide their babies with pumped breast milk. The focus was not the pump itself, but rather the overall milk management process. In both cases, while the mother was the primary participant, data were also gathered from husbands² and caretakers. In both cases, I also explored mothers' emotions and beliefs in order to understand the deeper meanings around the milk management process. Finally, I tried to understand what influenced milk management-related purchases and decision-making.

The research protocol for the ethnographic study was designed to trace the behaviors of mothers from the end of their workday until they went to bed at night. Participants completed a photodiary assignment, in which they took pictures of people and things that they believed were important to the feeding process. We conducted ethnographies – starting at day care, when the mother first picked up the child, through the commute home and evening hours, and concluding when the mother indicated her day was “over.” We also interviewed both parents (mother and father) and did a home inventory of milk and feeding related products.

For the autoethnography, where I was the object of study, my research protocol was slightly different. I kept a diary about my experiences, capturing my behaviors and emotions in detail for a period of about six months. There was no fixed beginning and end point, nor did I have to complete a certain number of diary entries. For the first three months or so, I wrote something at least once a day (often more), and as time went by I wrote every other day or every few days. Because this was an autoethnography, I did not formally interview or observe other people, but I did reflect on and analyze

research conducted in a natural environment using oneself as the subject of study, i.e. the research participant. This is in contrast to research in which the researcher is explicitly recruiting and studying participants. In addition, for purposes of this paper, I limit my discussion of autoethnography to how it can be successfully employed as a research method in corporate settings, without going into broader implications for the fields of anthropology or sociology. My usage of the term “autoethnography” should not be construed as an endorsement or critique of any particular theory or philosophical viewpoint.

² For this study, the client's primary criteria were household income, education level of mother, current age of infant, and milk feeding practices. Although the screener did not include specific questions around household composition, all participants were in married, heterosexual relationships.

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how others were involved and what that meant. Throughout, I also documented my experiences through photos, videos, and audio recordings.

DATA COLLECTED AND INSIGHTS

For the original research project, we collected extensive data about the process of saving, storing, transporting, and using pumped milk. These data included information about the actors involved, the time and timing of different actions, the artifacts used and produced, and the needs, likes and dislikes related to each step of the process. As a deliverable, we produced a set of process maps showing all the steps in the end-to-end process, from when the milk was pumped to when it ended up in the baby. We also detailed what happened to the things that were used along the way, from pump parts to storage bags. In addition to the process maps, we created detailed profiles of each mother, with demographic notes, behavioral data, and notes about her worldview and likes, dislikes and pain points. These were presented to the client, along with our insights and ideas for future products.

Overall, I found that the data gathered during the two research projects was similar in nature. In both cases, I ended up with extensive data about the milk management process – what happened, the tools involved, the frustrations and pain points. For example, there was a consistent feeling among research participants that transporting milk was time-consuming and difficult, a feeling I observed in myself as well. Here is a sample entry from my diary:

“AAARGH! I can’t believe it. I forgot to bring bottle tops to work today! Now I have to pump and cover the bottles with something, then put them in the back of the fridge so nobody knocks them over, then make sure I don’t spill the milk on the way home. This happened once before – I was meeting [a friend] for lunch and first I forgot to bring the pump so I had to go back home. That made me late, so I was in a huge rush so I threw everything into my bag and ran out the door again. After lunch, I pumped and then looked in the bag for the bottle caps only to realize that I hadn’t packed them!! So I ended up improvising – I took some tin foil (which I happened to have because I had brought some carrots as a snack), covered the bottles with a clean part of the tin foil, wrapped a rubber band that I found in my knapsack around the tin foil, then put the bottles in my bag. Then I put the bag in the front passenger seat of the car, put the seatbelt around the bag, and drove home. I have to say, I felt very clever. Now I need to improvise again. Sigh.” (February 17, 2010)

I also found that the artifacts were similar – the tools I used for milk management were similar to the ones used by research participants in the earlier study. For example, I had a large number of bottles and parts. I generally labeled the bottles for day care in a similar way as other mothers did, and used freezer storage bags as they did.

However, I did gather some data that were different. I have multiple photos of myself, showing the various locations and pumping-friendly (or non-friendly) set-ups. I took photos of myself using the pump and taking care of the milk at home, at work, on airplanes, and in closets. Not surprisingly, these personal photos and environmental context was much easier to get and to document when I was

the participant. I also have multiple audio recordings, which I made as little snippets of conversations and random thoughts. Because I had a cell phone with a camera and an audio recording feature, I was able to capture a lot of data “in the moment,” when my actions and emotions were very fresh.

In terms of the insights, there were also many similarities between the two projects. In both cases it was clear that mothers were overwhelmed with information from multiple sources about the milk management process, baby bonding, nutrition, and about breastfeeding in general. A key insight in both cases was that mothers didn’t need more information, but they did need a way to check and trust the information they were receiving. I found that many of the comments I had previously heard from participants resonated as true for me as well. I had both positive and negative emotions around pumping and managing milk – it made me feel good about being a mother, confident about my ability to provide for my child, and independent. It was also a hassle, with lots of frustrations, anxiety, and room for improvement.

However, there were some important insights that I gained from the autoethnography that had not been apparent during the original ethnographies. For example, when analyzing my data, I realized how much of my decision-making was based on chance or circumstance, rather than on any well-thought-out logic. Here is a sample entry from my diary:

“[Today] I bought another pump from the [mothers’ group] list. Not that I need the pump, since I have [my friend’s], but now I have lots of extra bottles. That makes it a lot easier, since I don’t have to “ration” the bottles as much. It’s a good thing I was reading the list today...” (April 2, 2010)

Through the autoethnography, I also realized how much pumping and milk management impact one’s mobility and productivity. While pumps are marketed as a product that increases a mother’s ability to work and to get around without her baby, during the autoethnography it also became clear that pumping imposes restrictions as well. (In hindsight, I wonder if we were less likely to see these problems because our client’s business was predicated on playing up the benefits and advantages of pumping, and of playing down the challenges.)

REFLECTIONS

About the Findings

As noted above, in general, much of the research data and insights from the autoethnography confirmed the research data and insights from the ethnography. But, without a doubt, I did see additional things, different nuances, or new connections. For example, in the ethnography, one of our team’s conclusions was that managing the pumped milk was not as hard as pumping. However, in my own experience, the actual pumping was quite simple (though boring and time-consuming) and it was the rest of the milk cycle (measuring, storing, project managing) that was very time-consuming and mentally taxing. With the benefit of my personal experience, I might have framed the original finding differently, with more emphasis on the post-pumping steps.

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As another example, while doing the autoethnography, it struck me how much more I thought about other principal actors in the milk ecosystem, such as the father/husband, or the day care provider. While these actors had been included in the ethnographic research, their participation was limited, and their behaviors and feelings were generally discussed in relation to the primary actor (the mother). It was only when I did the autoethnography that I realized exactly how large a role these actors truly played. Fathers/husbands and caretakers had a significant role in managing the milk and the milk-related artifacts (bottles, nipples, storage bags, etc.), providing opinions about the breastfeeding and pumping process (sometimes when asked and sometimes when not!), making rules (how to label the milk, how to take bottles home, when to feed), and gathering and providing information about breastfeeding and pumping (from books, from friends, from other mothers at day care). The original ethnographies had led us to believe that the mother is the primary actor in the milk management system and that other actors are subservient, whereas during the autoethnography I soon realized that the father has at least an equal say. And in the ethnographies, we rarely gave more than a short acknowledgement of the baby, whereas in the autoethnography, I realized that my son was a key actor.

Moreover, there were some secondary actors that didn't really surface in the ethnography, but who I identified as quite important in the autoethnography (e.g. pediatrician, employers, parents, etc.). Were we to do additional ethnographic research, I would strongly suggest that we explore these people and their roles in greater detail.

In an autoethnography, emotional states are easier to recognize and identify. For example, in the original ethnographies, we noted that mothers get lots of information from multiple sources. In the autoethnography, I had an additional observation; namely, that mothers with young infants are generally quite exhausted, and therefore they are being deluged with information at the exact moment when they are least likely to be systemically searching for it. Based on this insight, one recommendation I might make now to a client would be to provide educational materials with fewer scientific details and more step-by-step details, using short sentences, assuming that the reader is both tired and may be interrupted at any time by a crying baby.

About the Process

I was unprepared for how hard it would be to "research myself." Being the participant was fundamentally different than being the researcher, and it made me keenly aware of the burdens we may inadvertently place on our participants. We ask them to keep diaries, to recall minute details of their days, to share complicated behaviors and emotions in a concise manner that will give us "insights," and on and on. We believe that participants are as interested in our topic as we are, and we believe that in return for compensation and our thanks, they will be as engaged in our research as we are. Doing an autoethnography was difficult, and made me realize that perhaps we need to adjust our expectations of what our research participants can reasonably do.

On the other hand, doing the autoethnography was also a joy. I felt that I understood the topic more deeply than I had before. I noticed new things and had a deeper appreciation for things that I had previously seen but not understood. For example, the daily planning was more complicated than I

had originally believed. While it's one thing to create a process map, it's another to viscerally feel what it's like to be in a constant "project management" mental state. I found that I was thinking about milk all the time. It seemed like there were so many steps and things to consider at all points throughout the day, at times it felt like managing milk was a part-time job. The process maps surely did not do justice to this psychic weight.

As another example, when we conducted the original ethnographies, I believe that we underestimated the importance of mothers' groups. While mothers' groups played a part in our recruiting protocol and they came up in discussion, because of our fieldwork protocol we didn't have the opportunity to see our participants in a mothers' group context. In the autoethnography, on the other hand, I was keenly aware of how often I asked people in my mothers' group for information or relied on them for support. After my husband and friends, the people in my mothers' group were probably the largest influence on my knowledge and decision-making. These social influences are one thing that a fixed research protocol may miss.

Interestingly, during the autoethnography, it was sometimes hard to remember whether I was playing the role of participant or of researcher. There were times that I felt very clinical, detached, and factual, as if I were observing myself from a distance or conducting a usability study. I took notes about what didn't work and what could be improved, sometimes even jotting down a potential workaround or new product idea. In that sense I clearly felt that I was playing the role of "researcher," and the subject just happened to be myself. At other times, however, I was completely the "participant," entirely absorbed in the moment. For example, there was one day when I realized that my body was actually producing nourishment for my son, and that struck me as quite amazing and remarkable. At that moment, I wanted to write down how I felt, not for the research, but for myself.

Why did I feel that I was able to get deeper, richer insights through the autoethnography? First, I had a different level of "access" – I wasn't limited to the photodiary and ethnographic data that I was able to capture during a scheduled "fieldwork" session during a particular part of the day. I had access to myself from the moment I woke up until the moment I went to sleep, something we rarely (if ever) truly get with participants. I was also able to explore the role of the husband and of the day care provider in more detail because I had regular access to, and had built rapport with, them.³

³ The importance of access should not be underestimated. One of the limitations we had during the original study was in our ability to enter day care facilities. For security and privacy reasons, access to day care facilities is tightly controlled, and "outsiders" are not permitted. So, during the original study, when we were in a day care facility we were always accompanied by our research participant. We could make observations while she was talking to her child and to the day care provider, but we couldn't wander around or open refrigerators or peek into storage spaces. Nor could we take photos or video. In contrast, when I was conducting the autoethnographic research, by dint of my status as the parent of an enrolled child, I had complete access to the day care facility, could look at the daily status sheets of my son and of other children, and could take photos of milk management related artifacts. Because I was a parent, I also had access to information about processes breaking down. For example, at one point I received a series of communications from the Director about a mix-up with two children's milk bottles and what remedial actions had been taken with staff members. For confidentiality and liability reasons, it is not likely that this information would have been shared with me as an "outsider."

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Second, in the autoethnography I engaged with the subject matter for many months rather than for a few weeks. (In fact, I still continue to write and capture data, nine months after I began. While I no longer write up my “field notes” every evening, my mind still refuses to declare that the fieldwork is “done.”) Many of the most interesting learnings emerged only over time, or months into the project. For example, about five months after I started, I had an “aha” moment when I realized that I could use one of the pump parts to transfer milk between the storage container and the bottle. In many corporate studies, I would have already ended my contact with the researcher by this time, and the insight would have been lost. This may argue for the increased use of longitudinal or long field studies in general. Unfortunately, this is not always possible in an applied research environment, given clients’ frequent need for quick insights and turnaround.⁴

Third, during the autoethnography I was more interested in the topic. As researchers, we tend to be curious, to find many things of interest and worthy of study. But in addition to being researchers, we are people too, and like most people, we tend to be most interested in those things that directly impact our lives. An autoethnographic study is inherently more “relevant” to us.

Fourth, conducting autoethnographic research was less “restrictive.” When we engage in ethnographic work for clients, we almost always have a tightly scoped research question. This scope is driven by clients’ business needs and project budget. We know that we’ll likely be studying consumer attitudes and behaviors, product opportunities or barriers. We know that our output will be personas, design principles, or possibly new product ideas. We create a fixed research protocol, and modifying it requires client discussions and perhaps new statements of work. We have limited time, limited resources, and a team that is eagerly waiting for us to produce. We can’t come back with findings that are interesting and important, but not “on-point.” In other words, the purpose of a client-sponsored study is “confined to advancing client-driven interests rather than those of a disciplinary, societal, or industry focus.” (Mariampolski, 2006) On the other hand, when I was studying my own experience, I had the freedom to explore whatever path or idea seemed interesting. I was not constrained by a fixed research protocol or set of interview questions, so I could think about the economics of breastfeeding versus using formula or the politics of paid maternity leave, rather than limiting myself to the milk management process and potential new products. From that point of view, I found that doing autoethnographic research was “intellectually freeing,” as it both deepened and broadened my analysis, my insights, and my understanding.

Fifth, I was able to find useful information in places that we often overlook, such as my daily surroundings and my social circle. Even extremely private activities, such as pumping milk, are always embedded in a social context. Family, friends, and other social networks define what is acceptable and desirable behavior (Squires, 2002). In the autoethnography, these social relationships and influences were quite obvious and illuminating.

THE “PARTICIPANT-OBSERVER” EXPERIENCE

⁴ For an interesting discussion on the value of long fieldwork, see the discussion “The proverbial year of fieldwork: is it necessary?” (anthrodesign, 2010)

One area I briefly wanted to touch on was that of the famous “participant-observer.” One of the questions that applied researchers must often grapple with is the extent to which the researcher should be a participant in the study (or not). In many corporate research projects, there seems to be a bias towards observing rather than participating. The researcher may describe himself as a “fly on the wall” or express a desire not to “alter the circumstances” while he watches the “user/customer/consumer in her natural environment.” According to this view, by playing a completely spectating role, the researcher sees “what’s really happening” without disturbing the participant’s actions. These “impersonal standards of observation and ‘objective distance’” (Clifford, 1986) were followed by early ethnographers, and may have recently regained some currency as more ethnographic work is conducted by researchers who come from human-computer or human factors backgrounds, with their emphasis on observation rather than engagement.

On the other hand, since Malinowski emphasized the importance of engagement and participant-observation, there are those who believe that attempting to keep oneself out of the research process misses a key point, and in any case may be both naïve and unrealistic. Actions are always framed by the “cultural notions” of the researchers and of those being studied (Sunderland and Denny, 2007). We contrast quantitative and qualitative research by recognizing that in the latter, the moderator/researcher is an integral part of the data gathering process, and may even “embody” the research (Coffey, 2007). Stoller goes even further. He argues that the “depth of an ethnography is related directly to the nature of the author’s participation in society,” and says that “participant-observation” is “anthropology’s most famous oxymoron.” (Stoller, 1989).

Agar suggests that:

“People necessarily exist within a tradition, in terms of which they see themselves, their world, their past, and their future. An individual can never stand entirely apart and examine this tradition as an object, for without it there is nothing in terms of which understanding can take place.” (Agar, 1982)

But, he continues, “Being enmeshed in a tradition does not mean that a portion of it cannot be brought to consciousness and reflectively examined.” (ibid.) Anderson suggests the idea of “engaged reflexivity,” (Anderson, 2006) in which the researcher engages with other members of the culture under study in order to better understand ourselves and our place in the group and in the broader world. In this case, the researcher comes not as the expert, but as the learner (Jordan, 2009), noticing and analyzing her own behaviors and attitudes, and how they change over time.

From this perspective, it seems that autoethnography is a logical extension of true participant-observation. And for those who lament the loss of self-reflexivity (i.e., “the constant questioning of one’s own assumptions, reactions, and distractions”) (Denny, 2006) in the research process, autoethnography may offer an encouraging step forward.

IMPLICATIONS

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When considering the value and application of autoethnography, there are a number of things we should consider.

For Our Clients

Based on my experience conducting this project, I believe that autoethnography is an excellent research method to employ in product design and new product development work. Companies are increasingly trying to differentiate themselves through emotionally and situationally meaningful products and services, and autoethnography is a methodologically sound way to understand behaviors and beliefs. While companies often say they love their customers, and they may indeed do significant customer research, there is often a dividing line between us (the company, the product development team, the marketers) and them (the customers, the prospects). Autoethnography is a way to help bridge that gap.

While autoethnography can be used at a tactical level to learn how people use existing products, it seems equally if not more valuable when used to answer broad, exploratory, culturally-based questions about people's behaviors, beliefs, desires, and daily lives. It also works well when we are trying to understand important or life-changing issues – having a child, dealing with a disease, buying a house, starting a business; in sum, any issue that has a major emotional impact on the person experiencing it.

I believe that autoethnography works best, and perhaps only, when the person conducting the autoethnography actually bears some relation to the target customer and can provide information that is authentic. One heuristic we might employ is to ask ourselves “would I be accepted as a participant in this study based on the recruiting specifications?” If the answer is yes, then autoethnography may be useful. If the answer is no, then autoethnography risks becoming nothing more than a shortcut where the researcher is merely used as a proxy for “the customer.” We’ve all been in situations where somebody said, “well, this is how I’d do it” or “this is how my spouse/friend/child/[insert other person] does it.” Autoethnographic research runs that risk as well, and in fact may increase the risk, because it provides actual data that can be used to “support” an opinion or point of view. Moreover, I believe there is a limit to what we can understand about an experience that we have not lived ourselves. In the case study I used above, I was clearly the company’s target customer and would have easily qualified for the study based on demographic and behavioral screening questions. This is not to say that we can only conduct research on issues that we can experience first-hand; but it does mean that we might not be able to consider such research to be autoethnographic. And should we choose to conduct autoethnographic research as a way to understand the non-typical subject, we should be careful to note that fact.

Autoethnographic research is also an excellent way to do some due diligence and to “get up to speed” before we develop a full-blown research plan. Because autoethnography helps us better understand the issue we will study, we can have more productive, interesting, and impactful discussions with our clients in the research design phase. We can think about different research protocols and field methods. We can finesse the research objectives and questions to ask. This makes our ethnographic research more fruitful and effective.

There are of course objections to autoethnography.⁵ I could not disagree with these criticisms more. As noted above, autoethnography is a highly complementary research method to other methods. If we are able to add to the understanding of a problem through rigorously studying our own experience, then we owe it to our clients to do so.

For Us as Research Practitioners

The use of autoethnography brings up interesting questions for us as practitioners. Can we truly understand the experiences of customers if we don't use the products ourselves? How sensitive are we when we conduct research on topics that may be very personal and/or emotionally laden? What should corporate ethnographers realize when they ask participants to keep diaries or collect other research data?

For me, conducting this autoethnography highlighted the importance of, and the potential difficulty of getting, truly deep empathy for our customers and their challenges. It's one thing to hear somebody say "breast milk is liquid gold" and another to feel your heart sink as you knock over a bottle of pumped milk and 3 ounces and 40 minutes of effort splashes on the kitchen floor. I had no idea how disruptive it would be to pump, how much I would need to re-arrange my schedule, and make multiple scheduling decisions about my day, every day. I had no idea how much stuff I would need to bring with me when I went out, or how frustrating and stressful it would be to forget a part at home. I had no idea what kind of commitment it entails to pump month after month – I only really understood these things when they were happening to me. Moreover, there are times that we are asked to research topics that we have not or cannot experience first-hand. When a researcher rides a hospital gurney to "understand" the patient experience, can he really get the same level of fear, the same level of emotion and insight, knowing that he isn't really sick and can get up and walk away at any time? I am all for experiential learning, for wholeheartedly engaging in our research, but now I feel more humble and aware of the limits of my abilities.

Conducting this autoethnography also helped me understand more about the challenge of being a research participant, something we may think about only superficially. We ask participants to share (and clearly articulate) their most personal thoughts with us. We ask them to keep detailed diaries of small events. We ask them to stay engaged with the fieldwork as long as we need them to. Sometimes we forget (especially in these days of blogs, text messages, Facebook and camera phones) that capturing (and producing!) data is time-consuming. I think that now I'm much more attuned to the

⁵ In her pointed critique of autoethnography, Delamont objects to it because (among other things), "[i]t cannot fight familiarity... [i]t is experiential not analytic... [i]t abrogates our duty to go out and collect data... and 'we' are not interesting enough to write about..." She says that autoethnography is mostly "about anguish," and is both "literally and intellectually lazy" (Delamont, 2007).

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actual “workload” we are placing on research participants when we ask them to participate in our studies.⁶

I also believe that engaging in autoethnographic work helps us expand, sharpen, and refine our research skills. Historically, in anthropological fieldwork the researcher entered an entirely new setting, where everything was unknown, and it required a very open mind and deep curiosity to figure out what “mattered.” Entering and studying a completely unfamiliar culture is quite different than conducting research in a familiar one. But the latter provides an excellent opportunity for us. Using ethnography to understand the familiar enables us to learn anew, to challenge our assumptions, and delve below the obvious cultural familiarities (Jordan, 2003). Doing autoethnographic work takes this one step further.

For Us Personally

Finally, I believe that doing autoethnographic research provides a way for us to grow personally as well. When I initially decided to do the autoethnography, I was approaching it solely as an experiment in “research thinking” and as a way to compare different research protocols. However, along the way it became quite clear to me that I was benefiting on a personal level too. My field notes became a way for me to document an important part of my life, and to record it for the future. I noted my hopes and dreams, my failures and successes. I was able to see personal growth as I mastered different processes and learned new things about how to be a mother. From this point of view, the autoethnography was unlike any other research I had conducted, and it will have significant value well after the “research” is done.

CONCLUSION

Ethnographic research is based on the concept of studying participants in order to draw out information and insights about the “other.” In this paper, I suggest that the use of autoethnography – that is, studying ourselves in a deep, meaningful way – leads to new and more nuanced insights.

Autoethnography can enrich our data and our analysis for a number of reasons. It enables us to gather data that are not easily accessible with typical research protocols. We can engage with the subject matter over a longer time period, and are not required to stop getting information when the

⁶ For the autoethnography, I used a number of tools to collect data – a laptop with MSWord (for my diary and to transcribe audio files), a digital camera (for photos), a phone camera (for photos), and an audio recorder that happened to be an app on my phone (for recording audio data, for in-the-moment reflections, for in-the-moment analysis). Right now, diary and “self-ethnographic” studies frequently require the participants to capture both text and visual data, and to access a particular, usually proprietary password-protected website to answer questions or to upload photos. Other diary studies require the participants to send emails or text messages to a certain person or phone number. These logistical requirements become a barrier that participants need to overcome, and data quality and quantity can suffer as a result. Given the ubiquity of mobile phones and the rise in smart phone ownership, we may want to consider how the mobile phone can ease the data collection burden on participants at some point in the future. This is an interesting area for us to follow as researchers as technology and usage models evolve.

fieldwork is “done.” We naturally relate to the subject of an autoethnography, and can go both deeper and broader in our lines of inquiry than is normally possible. And autoethnography lends itself well to examination of one’s daily life and the social networks that shape it. For these reasons, autoethnography is a valuable research method for new product development. At the same time, we should recognize that autoethnography is a complement to, not a substitute for, other customer-centered research methods.

Autoethnography also has benefits for us as ethnographers. Engaging in autoethnographic research builds empathy for participants, and gives us some sense of what it’s like to be on the “other side” of the field guide. Autoethnography helps us better understand the “workload” we put on participants when we ask them to keep diaries or to produce other data. Doing autoethnographic research provides a way for us to grow personally too. Rather than trying to remove the self from our work – something that is difficult if not impossible – autoethnography lets us embrace the tenets of participant-observation and self-reflection. It expands our methods repertoire, and enables us to become even better practitioners of our research craft.

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