

Michael Bennett and Allan Varghese
*To Seek and Know our Biases: Autoethnography in
Missiological Inquiry*

Abstract:

Today, Christian mission scholarship widely accepts the historical influence of colonialism on global mission and its impact on “colonizing” missiology as a scholarly discipline. Therefore, many scholars have been calling for the “decolonization” of Christian mission. This paper seeks to join the call of decolonization by offering a considerate discussion on integrating autoethnography as a research methodology in missiological inquiry. While the paper first highlights autoethnography as a research methodology in qualitative research, it later demonstrates how autoethnography can be an integral methodology for missiological inquiries, namely in the process of de-colonizing and de-westernizing contemporary mission research.

Key Words: autoethnography, qualitative research, missiology, missions, theology, post-colonial Studies

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Introduction

In a globalized world when the “differences” of others are increasingly being scrutinized or vilified under the western hegemony, the field of missiology is not spared from this reality despite its values of celebrating and promoting harmony and unity among the cultures of the kingdom. Without the practice of intentional self-reflection leading to self-transformation, Christian mission and missiological research will continue to be impaired by the biases perpetuating the western hegemony. In this paper, autoethnography is presented as an advantageous methodology by which researchers contributing to Christian mission and missiological inquiry might address the present impairment within the field. To accomplish this, the methodology of autoethnography will be introduced according to its use and development as a method of research followed with a description of how analytic autoethnography (established by Heewong Chang (2008) and Leon Anderson (2006)) can be effectively conducted within missiological inquiry. This paper ends with four points of missiological relevance promoting the use of autoethnography as an encouraged research method in missiology as it exemplifies the Postmodern turn of missiology; decolonization and de-Westernization of missiology; movement from experience-near to embodied missiological theologizing; and reduction of bias in mission practice.

What is Autoethnography?

Within the field of anthropology, as well as other social science fields, methods of self-narration have been utilized in scientific research writings. While not always a primary focus, anthropologists wrote 1) life histories in which informants provide a self-narrative; 2) native ethnographies in which the ethnographer studies their own people; 3) autobiographical writings in which anthropologists share their process notes, personal experiences, and feelings encountered in the field; and 4) memoir writing in which the anthropologist primarily writes about their own lives which reveal cultural insights (Chang 2008: 44-45).¹ These earlier methods of self-narrative writing offer the field of research examples in which researchers engaged the presence of their selves, though their engagement with self was not to intentionally analyze and provide a larger theoretical understanding of the social phenomena they experienced. However, the emergence of autoethnography presented researchers with a new methodology to engage self through a new lens of analysis and interpretation.

Autoethnography can be defined as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)” (Matthes, Davis, and Potter 2017:1). Although autoethnography is a form of self-narrative, it considers not just self but also others who are connected to the self. Heewon Chang writes, “As a relational being, the self is invariably connected to others in the family, local and national community, and the world, ‘a series of overlapping, concentric circles with others.’” (Chang 2008:33). In other words, the individual self cannot be separated from their social relationships for the self is in fact embedded within circles of relationships. As such, in the autoethnographic approach when one engages in studying others in a community, the process of studying the self occurs as the researcher engages and observes others. Autoethnography as a methodology advocates to see self as valid and objectively valuable to the scientific community as a source for understanding culture.

Historical Development

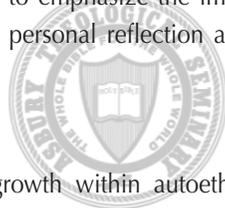
Historically, it was in the 1970s that the term autoethnography was used for the first time. Karl G. Heider, in the 1975 article “What Do People Do? Dani Auto-Ethnography,” utilized the term “autoethnography” to communicate the community members’ description on how the members of Grand Valley Dani of Indonesia understood themselves about their culture (Heider 1975). However, it was Walter Goldschmidt in 1977 who used the term to imply the personal involvement in the process of ethnographic research. Goldschmidt sees that “all ethnography is self-ethnography” (Goldschmidt 1977: 294), wherein the personal self of the researcher is deeply involved and impacted by the research subjects. Goldschmidt sees this process as “the great source of our intellectual strength, but it also makes us peculiarly vulnerable” (Goldschmidt 1977: 295). In 1979, David M. Hayano used the term to further understand autoethnography as a methodology in which the anthropologists “conduct and write ethnographies of ‘their own people’” (Hayano 1979: 99). Although there was an interest in the 1980s among social scientists to advocate for the use of personal narratives and reflexivity in research, the term autoethnography was not employed. However, in the 1990s, we see an emergence of emphasis on personal narratives and “the continuation of the autoethnographic movement that crossed many social scientific disciplines” (Ellis and Adams 2014: 255). Carolyn Ellis, who is the professor emerita of

communication and sociology at the University of South Florida, became one of the main proponents of autoethnography who emphasized the use of personal emotional introspection as part of sociological inquiries.² Later in the 1990s, numerous scholars from varied social science streams began to use personal stories and narrations which “helped carve out a special place for emotional and personal scholarship, and the term ‘auto-ethnography’ soon became the descriptor of choice”(Ellis and Adams 2014: 256).

However, scholars like Paul Atkinson and Sara Delamont began to question the “extreme enthusiasms” (Atkinson and Delamont 2006: 165) among their colleagues for privileging such a personal narrative approach of autoethnography and called for more analysis in such narrations. Atkinson and Delamont write, “One cannot but applaud the desire to foreground the personal craft work of fashioning field research and ethnographic texts But, as with all narratives, such accounts must be treated with analytic symmetry” (Atkinson and Delamont 2006: 170). The categories of personal experiences should not escape being subjected to analytic inspection. By the early 2000s, such a call for analytic scrutiny intensified as the term “autoethnography” became exclusively attached to the evocative nature of autoethnographic writings. Evocative autoethnographers wrote a “compelling description of subjective emotional experiences [to] create an emotional resonance with the reader” (Anderson 2006: 377). This resulted in producing more therapeutic autobiographical literature than analytical and research-based. Sara Delamont sees such an autoethnographic writing as being “intellectually lazy” and “lacking in analytic outcome” (Delamont 2007). More importantly, for Delamont, such a nature of knowledge production is antithetical to the progress of social science as it fails to study the social world. Therefore, as a response in 2006, Leon Anderson proposed *analytic* autoethnography to emphasize the importance of analysis while retaining the researcher’s personal reflection as an important element in social science research.³

Typologies

The historical growth within autoethnography during the 20th century has contributed to the rise of various kinds of autoethnographic writings. Such various typologies can be organized into four typology categories: descriptive-realistic, confessional-emotive, analytical-interpretive, and imaginative-creative.



The *descriptive-realistic* typology focuses on the task of writing a story and thereby seeks to objectively “depict places, people, experiences, and events as ‘accurately’ as possible with minimal character judgment and evaluation” (Chang 2008: 143). In this form, the self is present though interpretation is not typically inserted through the opinions and evaluations of the autoethnographer. The *confessional-emotive* typology provides the autoethnographer with the literary space to share their internal agonies that would otherwise be inaccessible for public consideration and seeks to connect their own confusion, problems, and dilemmas in life with their broader sociocultural community (Chang 2008: 145). The *imaginative-creative*, also known as *performative*, typology is a recent development demonstrating a bold departure of traditional academic writing while appearing in a variety of genres (e.g., poetry, spoken word, fiction, and drama) so that the text’s audience “can be actively engaged in interpreting [the author’s] creative expressions” (Chang 2008: 148).

While the other typologies briefly described above are acknowledged, this paper’s authors identify with the *analytical-interpretive* typology (also simply “*analytic*”) for promoting autoethnography in missiological research without delegitimizing the usefulness or value the typologies may offer to the field of missiology. An exemplar for understanding and guiding others in the use of analytic autoethnography, Leon Anderson (2006) offers five key features that every researcher should demonstrate within their writing to constitute effective analytic autoethnography: (1) complete member researcher (CMR) status; (2) analytic reflexivity; (3) narrative visibility of the researcher’s self; (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self; and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis (Anderson 2006: 378). These five key features will be clarified and interwoven below in the following sections, especially in the methodology section.

Here after in this paper, when the term “autoethnography” is used, it is the “analytic” autoethnographic typology that is assumed. Heewon Chang also referred to it as “analytical-interpretive” (Chang 2008: 113) for its emphasis on utilizing not only data collected directly from the researcher as a primary data source but also data collected directly from others and external data resources. The collection, analysis, and interpretation of self-sourced and other-sourced data increases the objectivity and reliability of the autoethnographic writing.

Utilization of Autoethnography

Doing autoethnography is multifaceted as it “combines characteristics of autobiography and ethnography” (see Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2010). As with any autobiography, this will involve the researcher retroactively writing about past personal experiences that was brought forth as “epiphanies” in the course of research by being part of the culture as any ethnographer. However, autoethnography is not merely an account of a researcher’s personal experiences, but as with any social science research, analysis is also part of the process. As Heather Walton notes,

Instead of the researcher being a disciplined observer of social processes taking place “out there,” the project is brought much closer to home. The focus in autoethnography is upon the analysis and communication of those experiences that have shaped the observer themselves. Personal experience becomes a data source for a “critically reflective methodology... [that provides a framework to critically reflect upon the ways in which our personal lives intersect, collide and commune with others in the body politic.” (Walton 2020: 6)

Therefore, on one side, the researcher conducts in all the data collection methods of ethnography. The researcher engages in “unobtrusive observation,” “participant observation,” conducts ethnographic interviews and consults archived materials- both primary and secondary data (Angrosino 2005: 37-39). At the same time on the other side, the personal experiences of the researcher are also given the status of data. Instead of separating the researcher from the “data,” the researcher becomes part of the data where their thoughts, feelings, and experiences will be considered along with other sources.

In the process of writing themselves into the research, people have used various methods. As Kitrina Douglas and David Carless note, “autoethnographers have drawn on systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall, ‘memory work,’ introspection, self-introspection, and interactive introspection, self-ethnography, diaries, free writing, and song writing... Autoethnographers have then used a variety of genres to share their experiences, including short stories, fiction, novels, layered accounts, poetry, memoirs, diaries, songs, dance, photos, and performances” (Douglas and Carless 2013: 98).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the researcher's personal experiences are not presented uncritically. Instead, they are analyzed, compared and contrasted within the body of research. In summation, an autoethnographer will, according to Mitch Allen,

Look at experience analytically. Otherwise [you're] telling [your] story--and that's nice--but people do that on Oprah every day. Why is your story more valid than anyone else's? What makes your story more valid is that you are a researcher. You have a set of theoretical and methodological tools and a research literature to use. That's your advantage. If you can't frame it around these tools and literature and just frame it as "my story," then what or how should I privilege your story over anyone else's I see 25 times a day on TV? (Ellis et al. 2010)

Therefore, to engage in autoethnography effectively, reflexivity- more specifically an *embodied* and *analytic* reflexivity- is vital.

Embodied Analytic Reflexivity in Autoethnography

Broadly, in qualitative research, reflexivity "entails self-awareness" throughout the period of research (Palaganas et al. 2017: 427). In this sense, as Thomas A. Schwandt notes,

...reflexivity can be a means for critically inspecting the entire research process including reflecting on the ways in which a fieldworker establishes a social network of informants and participants in a study; and for examining one's personal and theoretical commitments to see how they serve as resources for generating particular data, for behaving in particular ways vis-à-vis respondents and participants, and for developing particular interpretations. (Schwandt 2007: 260)

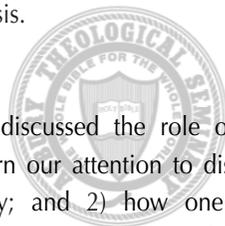
More specifically, it can be understood as a continuous process of self-reflection, "self-dialogue" (Ellis 1991: 29), by the researcher on their values and of recognizing, examining, and understanding their "biases, theoretical predispositions, [and] preferences" (Schwandt 2007: 260). However, proponents of autoethnography research intend to move "from ethnographers' use of self-observation as part of the situation studied to self-introspection or self-ethnography as a legitimate focus of study in and of itself" (Ellis 1991: 30). In other words, in addition to gathering observable data, autoethnographers also practice self-introspection of how they feel,

think and experience as they come in contact with the people and places they study. Such self-introspection becomes the research data. In order for the researcher to effectively engage in such an introspection of their own experience, embodied reflexivity is essential.

Embodiment usually “refers to how the body and its interactive processes, such as perception or cultural acquisition through the senses, aid, enhance or interfere with the development of the human condition” (Farr, Price, and Jewitt 2012: 6). In research, this means to consider the human bodies of both researchers and participants and their interactions (verbal, nonverbal, emotional, etc.) in pursuit of gathering knowledge. Here it is assumed that our human body is “the vehicle for human understanding of the world as well as other people” (Halling and Goldfarb 1991: 318). Subsequently, embodied reflexivity in research can be understood as the ability of the researcher to be self-aware of their bodies with its racial, gender, social and cultural facets, its various interactive aspects and how those elements relate and react as the researcher engages with the research participants. As a result, they are attuned to understanding what is happening to them and the participants in the process of research, which allows such a reflection to produce data for knowledge production. In addition, such a reflexivity is further scrutinized analytically by distinguishing between what the researcher is feeling, what the research subject is communicating and how the researcher is interpreting the subject. As a result, as Finlay puts it, “the reflexive ethnographer does not simply report ‘facts’ or ‘truths’ but actively constructs interpretations of his or her experiences in the field and then questions how those interpretations came about” (Finlay 2002: 532). Furthermore, during the later stages of research these findings are put in conversation with other published research within the field to ensure a rigorous process of analysis.

Methodology

Having briefly discussed the role of embodied reflexivity in autoethnography, let’s turn our attention to discuss 1) how one may do analytic autoethnography; and 2) how one may practice embodied reflexivity while conducting autoethnographic research, especially in understanding the context for mission research and practice. We shall incorporate these two aspects simultaneously in the following discussion as we present the methodology in three phases: preparation, data collection, and writing. As identified earlier, Leon Anderson’s five key features of



analytic autoethnography will additionally be referenced in this section for guides in the successful conducting of an analytic-focused methodology.

Preparation Phase

One may mistakenly assume that the first phase in conducting an autoethnography contains the steps of collecting, organizing, analyzing, and interpreting data. However, even before the autoethnographer begins collecting data, they must consider the relational location of their *self*, then their destination, and the steps involved in their autoethnographic journey by determining a research plan. This research plan includes their chosen research topic and the approach they believe most effective in studying and self-reflecting upon their topic. The chosen research topic is dependent upon the researcher's self, which Anderson elucidates by explaining that the autoethnographer is studying a topic that is an embedded reality of their own social world as a Complete Member Researcher (CMR) enabling them to dually inhabit the roles of participant and observer.⁴ The member-identity of the autoethnographer is particularly crucial to the success of their research because their own practice of embodied reflexivity considers both first order and second order constructs engaged in dialogue and activity by members of the community, including the autoethnographer.⁵ Thus, as the autoethnographer prepares for their research and is considering their research plan, they must be aware of their CMR role and its related activities. Anderson explains these activities by describing

...the autoethnographer [as] someone who helps to form and reform the constructs that she or he studies. The autoethnographer is a more analytic and self-conscious participant in the conversation than is the typical group member, who may seldom take a particularly abstract or introspective orientation to the conversation and activities. But the autoethnographer's understandings, both as a member and as a researcher, emerge not from detached discovery but from engaged dialogue. (Anderson 2006: 382)

Continuing in describing the research plan component within the preparation phase, Heewon Chang clarifies that an effective research plan "delineates why and how you want to explore your own life and what you want to explore in it" (Chang 2008: 61). This plan should indicate whether the autoethnographer intends to direct their research from specific-to-general or general-to-specific, which guides the collection, analysis and

interpretation of data between personal experiences and general research topics. As the CMR considers their motivations for research and how to direct their research, their embodied reflexivity experienced even in the preparation phase provides robust emotional understandings to the research soon to be conducted, which is a unique benefit to the analytic autoethnographic process that only a CMR can provide due to their close emotional proximity to the community in and of which they are researching (Anderson 2006: 380).

Along with identifying the approach to research, the autoethnographer must consider how their writing will communicate the relationship and location of the autoethnographer to other people included in their writing. For instance, the autoethnographer may be presented as the primary actor in the autoethnographer's life narrative with others appearing in supporting roles, or self and others can be presented within the writing as co-participants (Chang 2008: 65). The role of "others" is also important to identify within the preparation phase, because "others as similar," "others as different," and "others as opposition/enemy" are distinct roles carrying weighty and contradicting connotations which may be unintentionally communicated if the author does not discern in the beginning how the self relates to the other. For instance, if the author writes the self and others as co-participants or co-informants, and the language used to situate self with these co-actors signifies opposition, then the story loses effectiveness and there is a possibility of the nature of self or others being misconstrued.

The presence of the "other" within autoethnographic writing also requires ethical considerations surrounding the privacy and confidentiality of these individuals who are interwoven into the autoethnography. Chang advises that "Even while you are the primary source of data... it is advisable to check with the [Institutional Review Board] of your learning institution about its approval requirements for autoethnographic research" (Chang 2008: 68). Chang additionally suggests the utilization of pseudonyms, composite figures, or other voices to effectively tell your story while also protecting the privacy of others in your story.

Data Phase

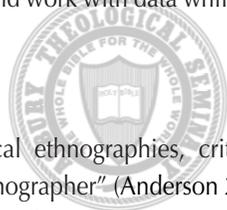
Having prepared to conduct the autoethnography, the autoethnographer enters the phase pertaining to data collection through participation, interaction, observation, recollection and reflection and also data management, analysis, and interpretation. By this point, the

CMR recognizes the vitality of embodied analytic reflexivity within the autoethnographic research and has committed themselves to practicing a heightened self-awareness that enables them to observe and distinguish the reciprocal influences of self and the studied community during the data phase. Pertaining to the practice of Anderson's second key feature, analytic reflexivity, autoethnographers practice a "self-conscious introspection guided by a desire to better understand both self and others through examining one's actions and perceptions in reference to and dialogue with those of others" (Anderson 2006: 382). In this way, autoethnographers understand that the data that they collect, manage, and analyze for later interpretation must include "reflexive views of the self" which insert themselves into the ethnographic data because not only are they part of the represented community being observed but they are also being influenced by the community (Anderson 2006: 382-383). These dynamics of the relationship between the CMR and the studied community are not only valid foci for research, but they also provide rich insight for understanding the community and the researcher's relationship and experiences tied to the research topic.

Chang wisely elucidates that the work the autoethnographer accomplishes with their data establishes the foundation of the autoethnographic writing itself and will either promote or prevent the author's successful delivery of their narrative in a way that is culturally meaningful (Chang 2008: 137). Cultural meaningfulness considers not only whether the studied community as a general group resonates with the delivered narrative, but also considers whether the delivered narrative resonates with the CMR and additionally with individuals of the community who may have divergent perspectives. Thus, to be effective, one must consider how to collect and work with data while practicing the key feature of analytic reflexivity.

Collecting Data

In many classical ethnographies, critics have pointed out the "invisible omniscient ethnographer" (Anderson 2006: 384) who appears as a behind-the-scenes agent influencing the research, data, and interpretation. Autoethnographies emphasize that the researcher is not just conducting the research but is also a necessary subject of the research. Leon Anderson explains that a third key feature of autoethnographies is that the researcher *must* appear visibly and actively where the researcher's "own feelings and



experiences are incorporated into the story and considered as vital data for understanding the social world being observed” (Anderson 2006: 384). Therefore, while collecting data pertinent to the research topic, in order to ensure that the researcher’s self is considered as a primary source, three types of data collection can be effective: memory data, self-observational/self-reflective data, and external data (Chang 2008: 88-112).

Memory data

During the process of collecting memory data, the autoethnographer may utilize chronicling, inventorying, and visualizing as techniques to ascertain, prioritize, and organize their personal memories (Chang 2008: 88). *Chronicling* is used to provide structure to the memories of events and experiences that the autoethnographer recollects and identifies as important data to collect for their focus. Such a chronological arrangement of events and experiences may appear in the form of a timeline description which outlines the order by which these events and experiences occurred in the life of the autoethnographer. *Inventorying* is utilized by the autoethnographer when they desire to list autobiographical information in order of importance based on their research focus, which may not necessarily reflect a chronological order but by a different variable (e.g., listing of important spiritual/religious life experiences, listing of most significant life celebrations). The autoethnographer would use *visualizing* to visually organize memory data through the use of images which depict the data more effectively for the autoethnographer and/or readers, so charts or figures presenting the data may be created through this technique.

Self-observational/self-reflective data

Other types of data the autoethnographer may collect that are also sourced from the autoethnographer’s self is self-observational data and self-reflective data. Self-observational data include observations of the self’s embodied experiences during the time of research and data collection. These experiences consist of the autoethnographer’s cognitive and affective experiences (thoughts and feelings) as well as their exhibited bodily behaviors which occur at that present moment. The data collection type of self-reflection collects introspective data which signify the autoethnographer’s perspectives at the time of research, so this particular data records “outcomes of... self-reflection, self-evaluation, and self-analysis” (Chang 2008: 102).

External data

Though autoethnography emphasizes the role and validity of the self and self-reflexivity, it also emphasizes the utilization of external data to balance the writing's subjectivity. This is particularly important within the analytical-interpretive autoethnography typology. External data "provide additional perspectives and contextual information to help... investigate and examine... subjectivity"(Chang 2008: 103) that may otherwise skew the objective presentation of the story's cultural meaningfulness. The collection of external data is a necessary component of the data collection stage, because it undergirds the integrity of the autoethnographic writing and it promotes the reputability of the data's final contextualized and interpreted form for readers. "External data provide contextual information, validate or correct your personal data from the past as well as self-observational and self-reflective data from the present, help triangulation with other data sources, fill in gaps left by self-based data, and connect your private story with the outer world" (Chang 2008: 112). Sources from which external data can be collected include, though are not limited to, "photographs, trinkets in your memory box, memorabilia, family heirlooms, souvenirs, video tapes, CD collections, ... and literature" (Chang 2008: 103-112).

In the analytic-interpretative framework of autoethnographic data collection, Anderson warns researchers to not fall prey to "self-absorbed digression," and he expresses the necessity of the researcher also practicing "dialogue with informants beyond the self" (Anderson 2006: 385). Whether one is conducting ethnographic or autoethnographic research, the researcher must always understand the central tenet of self in relationship even though they have recollected memories, observed self, reflected upon self, and collected data from self-focused external sources. Even while the researcher's subjective reality is a valid source of information within research, the researcher is never detached from others, and so even autoethnographic research is based on relationships. Social knowledge within the studied community is only able to be studied, informed, and changed as a result of the dialogical interactions between self and other, whether the other is a co-informant, different from the researcher, or oppositional to the researcher (Anderson 2006: 386). Anderson's fourth feature of analytic autoethnography requires the subjective self-experience to be grounded in the experiences of others which can be accomplished through the inclusion of dialogical encounters within the autoethnography,

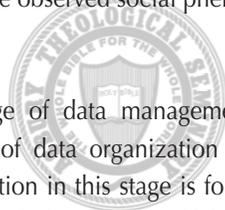
such as interviews or recording the activities and conversations of others (which may include the researcher).

Working with Data

When working with the collected data, the autoethnographer will first manage the data and later analyze and interpret the data. Data management is necessary to autoethnographic research and benefits the process by providing the research plan with a procedure for assessing the data for deficiency, redundancy, and irrelevancy while creating greater accessibility and comprehension of the data for later analysis and interpretation. Within this phase of working with the data, the autoethnographic researcher must commit to working with the data according to an analytical agenda. Anderson explains that analytic autoethnographies additionally contain the fifth feature of having an analytical agenda guide the researcher in a “[data-transcending goal] to gain insight into some broader set of social phenomena than those provided by the data themselves” (Anderson 2006: 387). Thus, as the researcher works with their data, they should consider whether the data they are managing and analyzing simply only represent attributes of the researched community and themselves or if they are providing insight beyond the data that speaks to the social phenomena which occur in that community. To this point, analytic autoethnography can contain the subjective embodied reflexivity of the researcher, but it must also involve “a broad set of data-transcending practices that are directed toward theoretical development, refinement, and extension” (Anderson 2006: 388). The conclusion of the autoethnography is not one to go unchallenged but is instead, understood as being a contribution to a broader conversation pertaining to and increasing knowledge concerning the observed social phenomena.

Managing Data

Within the stage of data management, the autoethnographer completes the activities of data organization and data refinement. The purpose of data organization in this stage is for the provision of structure to the collected data through the practice of labeling and classifying. These activities of labeling and classifying increase the logical structure of the data which assists the author in logically and effectively presenting the data in the final autoethnographic writing.



Labeling data pertains to identifying data sets (e.g., an interview, a journal entry, a photograph) and utilizing simple identifiers by which to label these sets for locating easily (Chang 2008: 116). Classifying data focuses upon sorting and grouping the data according to categories which may be structurally or topically based, and these categories then become foundational to analyzing the data (Chang 2008: 119). As the autoethnographer works with the collected data, they may notice during its organization that the data have gaps requiring more data collection, or that there might be overly sufficient amounts of similar/same or unnecessary data present indicating a need for trimming. Such weaknesses in data suggest the need for data refinement, the “process of narrowing the focus of data collection and furthering data analysis by trimming redundant and less important data and expanding more relevant and significant data”(Chang 2008: 119). For this reason, the autoethnographer is strongly encouraged to begin data management and refinement even in the earlier stages of data collection so as to create an efficient routine of organizing and evaluating the data which will decrease errors along the way and better promote the autoethnographer towards their research and writing goal.

Analyzing & Interpreting Data

Once the autoethnographer has conducted their research and collected all data pertinent to their research topic, they then begin the stage of analyzing and interpreting their data. Within this stage, in analytically engaging with the data, the autoethnographer constantly shifts their attention between self and others as they consider how to best analyze and present their perspective of the data gathered from personal memories or autobiographical information, as well as from others and the social context in which self and others find themselves. Chang describes the analysis of autoethnographic data in comparison to ethnographic data, which consequently points out the importance of this type of analytical and self-reflexive writing to understanding culture and context:

The historical contexts that shape meanings of specific texts (data) for insiders (informants or habitants of a culture) are different from those of outsiders (researchers) who try to make sense of data. In a conventional ethnography, insiders and outsiders are different people; therefore, it takes outsiders a considerable number of border-crossing experiences to decipher the cultural meaning of data collected from insiders. In

autoethnography the insider and the outsider converge. Namely, you are a generator, collector, and interpreter of data. For this reason, you are familiar with two different contexts: the original context of data and the context of autoethnographic interpretation and writing. During data interpretation, you excavate meanings from two different contexts and wrestle with contradictions and similarities between them. (Chang 2008: 127-128)

Chang's identification of the autoethnographer in this way provides insight to understanding the unique and valid insight that the individual is able to offer towards a specific research topic from their own personal experiences and perspectives. As the autoethnographer grapples with the contradictions and similarities between the two different contexts, they are able to form interpretations of the data following their identification of connections and gaps that are impacting the broader sociocultural context. From this interpretative process, the autoethnographer is able to share in writing the important interpretations of the contexts that contain cultural meaning beneficial to more than just the autoethnographer. Because this process of analysis leads to interpretation is tedious and challenging, Chang offers guidance in the form of "10 Strategies for Data Analysis & Interpretation" (Chang 2008: 131):

1. Search for recurring topics, themes, and patterns;
2. Look for cultural themes;
3. Identify exceptional occurrences;
4. Analyze inclusion and omission;
5. Connect the present with the past;
6. Analyze relationships between self and others;
7. Compare yourself with other people's cases;
8. Contextualize broadly;
9. Compare with social science constructs and ideas; and,
10. Frame with theories.

Writing Phase

The writing phase contains the final stages in conducting and writing an autoethnography, and it is especially during this last phase that the self undergoes transformation as a result of the process of *constructive interpretation*. This process of constructive interpretation engages the autoethnographer from the beginning phase of the autoethnographic

journey until the end, though this work is heavily engaged following the data analysis and interpretation because the author is better able to see the research topic in relation to self and others more comprehensively. The constructive interpretation process is interpretative because of autoethnography's nature for the researcher to contribute their own perspectives throughout the research process.

However, it is through the self-analytical work accomplished within the research that enables the self to experience transformation. In this manner there is a necessity for the researcher to be highly visible in the text in order to optimize the usefulness of the insight available to readers through the researcher's dual roles as a researcher of their own community and being a full member of their community. Anderson explains that the researcher can be effective in sharing this insight through the following:

1) illustrate analytic insights through recounting [personal] experiences and thoughts as well as those of others; 2) openly discuss changes in [personal] beliefs and relationships over the course of fieldwork; 3) be involved in the construction of meaning and values in the social worlds they investigate; 4) should not necessarily shy away from participating in potentially divisive issues; and, 5) textually acknowledge and reflexively assess the ways in which their participation reproduces and/or transforms social understandings and relations. (Anderson 2006: 384-385)

When the researcher reveals themselves clearly as a visible and active agent within the research, the researcher avails themselves to their later readers as an example in which change, or *transformation*, occurred through the process of the researcher's embodied reflexivity that allowed them to utilize their own subjective experiences as a component of their research. This additionally further indicates that the community being researched, nor the researcher themselves, are static participants of research but are instead experiencing a dynamic research endeavor that prompts change within.

At the same time, the act of writing the autoethnography, and its final written form, represent not just a transformation of self but also the act of self-interpretation. Chang defines *self-interpretation* through autoethnographic writing as "a process of refiguring the past and in turn reconfiguring the self in a way that moves beyond what had existed previously. The backward movement of narrative therefore turns out to

be dialectically intertwined with the forward movement of development” (Chang 2008: 140-141).

In this section on the methodology of an embodied and analytical autoethnography, we considered how a researcher navigates the preparation, data, and writing phases. From Chang and Anderson’s guidance provided in the preparation phase, we realize the necessity of the researcher practicing reflexivity at the onset of their research project’s conceptualization in understanding their own connection to the research topic. As a Community Member Researcher (CMR), the autoethnographer continues the practice of reflexivity through an intentionally embodied and analytical process, particularly when entering the data phase. Whether the CMR is collecting, managing, or analyzing the data for later interpretation, the autoethnographer is not only aware of their own presence within the data but also clearly delineates self-sourced data through a process of reflexive dialogue with others-sourced data obtained through observations, participating in activities, interviews, and other external data. In the writing phase, insights from both Chang and Anderson indicate that the interpretations constructed from the data and presented in the writing should contribute new knowledge on the observed social phenomenon, which can only be accomplished effectively through theoretical analysis of the data. With this direction provided in conducting embodied and analytical research, the following section considers four areas in which this methodology is relevant in contributing to the field of missiology.

Missiological Relevance

As autoethnography stands as a critique of research methodologies that distance itself from experiences, it encourages researchers to broaden the missiological enquiries by considering their own personal experiences, feelings and thoughts. We have located four existing trends in the field of missiology where autoethnography would be apt to integrate. They are 1) the postmodern turn of missiology; 2) decolonizing and de-westernizing of missiology; 3) moving from experience-near missiological theologizing to embodied theologizing; and 4) avoiding biases in mission practice.

The Postmodern Turn of Missiology

One of the features of postmodernity is in what David Bosch called the “expansion of rationality” (Bosch 2011: 360). Postmodernity challenged

the elevation of reason and deconstructed “the narrow Enlightenment perception of rationality” (Bosch 2011: 361). However, it would be naïve to think that by the emergence of postmodernity, rationality has been altogether abandoned. Instead, “metaphor, symbol, ritual, sign, and myth” are revived as various “expressions of rationality” along with experience (Bosch 2011:361). Bosch continues,

They “not only touch the mind and its conceptions, and evoke action with a purpose, but compel the heart” (Stackhouse 1988:104). So, we see an upsurge of interest, especially in Third-World churches, in “narrative theology,” “theology as story,” and other nonconceptual forms of theologizing. (Bosch 2011:361)

In missiological inquiry, such a postmodern narrative turn opened doors for identifying biographies for missiological inputs. Ruth Tucker called for considering “Biography as Missiology” where the lives of missionaries can be a resource for cross-cultural missionary effectiveness (Tucker 1999). More importantly, the emphasis on missionary biographies for knowledge production emerged as lives and their entailed lived experiences became recognized as valid sources for knowledge creation along with the thoughts and writings of the missionaries. Such a narrative influence in missiological inquiry helps us to see autoethnography as a next step forward in advancing theological and missiological inquiries.

Autoethnography as a qualitative research methodology uses personal experiences at its center of knowledge production. Hence, by its nature, it challenges the western epistemology that tended to “emphasize reason at the expense of emotion, [and regards] reason as the indispensable faculty for acquiring knowledge” (Schwandt 2007: 82). Therefore, proponents of autoethnography consider holistic aspects of human life experience with the social, emotional, and spiritual in addition to reason as a way of knowing. Such an approach to writing, as Walton puts it, “is one of the reason[s] why it has proved so attractive... that it has sought to communicate these ‘pains and privileges’ in strong, evocative ways that provoke empathetic responses” (Walton 2014: 4). For missiological writing, autoethnography becomes a vital tool precisely because it provides an ample scope for the researcher to write their own story as they interact with others within their own context. Such an approach provides the

freedom to write the personal experiences and felt reactions one may have encountered while engaging in mission or in contextualizing a particular scripture.

Decolonizing and De-Westernizing of Missiology

Autoethnography as methodology can be understood as a tool to practice both decolonization and de-westernization. Historically, the impact of western colonial enterprise is not only seen in the acquisition of the geographical landscape by the colonizer, but it was also established by the “positional superiority of Western knowledge” (Smith 2012: 62). Although colonized or indigenous peoples were ranked in terms of “nearly human, almost human or subhuman,” they were always seen below westerners who were fully human and “civilized” (Smith 2012: 63). Within such a framework the colonized were always “expected to be studied [and were] not expected to theorize on their own behalf” (Smith 2010: 572). However, in opposition to that, the turn of postmodernity and various political independence movements around the world, has led to decolonization. We see autoethnography as one of the decolonizing missiological research methods within such a broad spectrum. Autoethnography helps to decolonize research as it enables the “process of conducting research with indigenous communities that places indigenous voices and epistemologies in the center of the research process” (Datta 2018: 11). The communicator, researcher and the subjects are indigenous people who can communicate in a way that is meaningful to the community. Moreover, it seeks, as Andrea Smith notes, “to avoid the colonial ‘ethnographic imperative’ that would strive to make Native communities more knowable to non-natives. Rather, [it] seek[s] to identify resistance strategies with Native communities that will be helpful in promoting Native sovereignty struggles in particular and social justice in general” (Smith 2010: 572).

It is also important to speak of de-westernization as we speak of decolonization. While speaking on Christianity’s shift from the global north to south, missiologist Tite Tienou used the term “de-westernized” to describe the nature of Christianity. He writes, “if Christianity is ‘de-westernized’, Christians in Africa, Asia and Latin America, indeed indigenous Christians everywhere, are able to defend themselves when accused of being agents of westernization and puppets in the hands of foreigners whose intention is the destruction of local cultures and religions” (Tienou 2005: 14). Today as Christianity has been finding its indigenous voices all over the

world, Christians in the Majority world are shaking away the shackles of westernized Christianity that was once introduced to them along with western colonialism. Autoethnography as a methodology aids in such a de-westernization process as non-western researchers may write their own experiences in their own literary style not having to adapt into the western way of communicating.

Towards an Embodied Theologizing Process

Along with the call of postmodernity, decolonization and de-westernization, autoethnography also enriches the call for an “experience-near theologizing” for effective contextual missiology (Priest 2006). Anthropologist Clifford Geertz defines the *experience-near* concept as “one which an individual- a patient, a subject, in our case an informant- might himself naturally and effortlessly use to define what he or his fellows see, think, imagine, and so on” (Geertz 1974: 28). For Geertz, the natural and effortless forms of a person’s communication indicate their proximity to the lived cultural experience. The manner in which they communicate stipulates how distant or near they are to their cultural experience. Christian missiologist-anthropologist, Robert Priest (2006) adopts this Geertzian concept of experience-near to emphasize the need for a contextual form of theologizing that capitalizes on the lived experiences and exegetes local human realities in order to bring the gospel. Priest promotes this concept in contrast to a “experience-distant” theologizing process which is rooted in methodologies that are exclusively created through engagement with ideas and dogmas.

While Priest does not totally reject the importance of systematic theologians’ contribution to missiology, he insists that missional theologizing requires understanding human experiences and realities. Autoethnography exemplifies such an idea of “experience-near theologizing,” but also invites the theologian or the missiologist to use their own personal experience for the theologizing process. In that manner, autoethnography calls to move from experience-near theologizing to an embodied theologizing process. In other words, autoethnographic work helps to unearth the implicit theology that is embedded within the experience of the theologian or the missiologist. So far, in the popular theologizing process as Courtney Goto observes, minority scholars tend to only use their own experience, as “an identity descriptor, or a symbol” (Goto 2016: 26). But, for Goto, such use of experience in knowledge production is not enough, especially writing

about themes that have been part of the scholar's life. Therefore, Goto identifies the need of "the embodied theologies of... communities that require theorists to stay close to lived experiences and theologically rich practices rather than hastening to theory and abstraction" (Goto 2010: 28). The methodology of autoethnography takes upon such a task which enables the researcher (who is the theorist) to stay close to their own experiences and also with others in the process of theologizing or drafting a contextual missiology.

Autoethnography as an Embodied Mission Practice Helps Avoid Biases

Finally, if one takes analytic autoethnography as a mission practice (as opposed to a research methodology), it exemplifies the importance of understanding our identity and our past experiences before engaging with others, for instance with the religious other in mission practice. Missiologists Terry Muck and Frances Adeney emphasize such a self-understanding as a necessary first stage in the "spiral of knowledge acquisition"⁶ for engaging in missions with other religious adherents. According to Muck and Adeney, the danger of engaging in mission without knowing oneself is to come across as ethnocentric as one may mistakenly communicate their "own cultural views as the true and only way to understand the world or present the story of Jesus" (Muck and Adeney 2009: 231). Therefore, in using autoethnography as an embodied reflective practice, one may be able to better understand and avoid unexamined biases in order to communicate the Gospel in a more faithful and accommodating manner.

Conclusion

In the above discussion on autoethnography, we have argued that the practice of embodied reflexivity and analytic autoethnography can be considered as a social science methodology containing great relevance for missiological enquiry, specifically pertaining to postmodernity, decolonization/de-westernization, the embodied theologizing process and missiological practice. Despite critique garnered by other forms of autoethnographic methodologies, analytic autoethnography provides objective interpretations to the self, which is the primary source of data that leads to new cultural understanding. It also offers researchers the priceless opportunity to practice embodied reflexivity which would lead to self-transformation as they identify, challenge, and rectify personal biases which may otherwise promote the western hegemony within missiological practice

and research. This paper reveals the significance of this methodology and seeks to promote its use within missiology so that through the use of autoethnography one may not only produce new knowledge but may see and accept their own subjectivity, biases and preferences in the process of research. Additionally, for western Christian theologians, missiologists and scholars, autoethnography may also be a formational methodology for exploring themselves and others. It also presents an opportunity to join in David's prayer in Psalm 139: 23, "Search me, God, and know my heart;" so that God may examine our hearts and thoughts, to reveal to us our biases that which are repulsive and unholy in our missiological and theologizing processes.

End Notes

¹ For an early thoughtful discussion on the use of self in ethnography, see Barbara Tedlock, "From Participant Observation to the Observation of Participation: The Emergence of Narrative Ethnography," *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 47:1 (1991), 69-94.

² For more on this topic from Carolyn Ellis, see Carolyn Ellis, "Sociological Introspection and Emotional Experience," *Symbolic Interaction* 14, no. 1 (February 1991): 23-50.

³ There has also been further reform in the autoethnographic research world to establish a more objective way of doing analysis while maintaining the importance of self-narrative. One of the latest developments is in the introduction of collaborative autoethnography. Collaborative autoethnography can be defined, "as a qualitative research method in which researchers work in the community to collect their autobiographical materials and to analyze and interpret their data collectively to gain a meaningful understanding of sociocultural phenomena reflected in their autobiographical data" (Heewon Chang, Kathy-Ann C. Hernandez, and Faith Wambura Ngunjiri, *Collaborative Autoethnography*, California: Routledge, 2012, 23-24).

⁴ CMRs may be an "opportunistic" member of a community of which they are innately a member and are focusing on a research topic innately related to their own experiences that are shared by the community, or the CMR may be considered a "convert" member who initially entered the community for the purpose of researching the topic but discovered themselves becoming fully immersed and accepted by the community as a welcomed member of their community. For more details, see Anderson 2006: 379.

⁵ When discussing the "first order" and "second order" thinking that a CMR engages and observes in the field, this pertains to their

intentional identification of thinking processes supporting and surrounding the content of dialogue. First order thinking primarily focuses on what one may identify as obvious information or conclusions, e.g., what is “common sense.” This may relate specifically to the decision-making process in which one makes a decision based on what appears to be obvious, or it could be viewed as relating only to what one may think is common knowledge within a system. In the decision-making process, second order thinking considers multiple levels of information that seem pertinent for making an informed decision, especially information revealing the impact of decisions. Relating to issues surrounding sociocultural matters within a community, second order thinking contends with the process of tracking the levels of sociocultural assumptions that are present in the process that automatically guides a community member to that conclusion which appears obvious to the community. Second order thinking can additionally involve deeper reflection into the future consequences of an action when it aligns or diverges with the held sociocultural values.

⁶ Terry C. Muck and Frances S. Adeney proposed the “spiral of knowledge acquisition” (2009: 224) as a necessary factor for missions when engaging cross-culturally or with other religious adherents. The spiral has five stages, 1) Recognizing and understanding our past experience, 2) Bracketing our convictions, 3) Encountering the other with openness, 4) Evaluating through reengaging one’s convictions, 5) Integrating our horizon of meaning. For a comprehensive discussion see, Muck and Adeney (2009: 221-299).

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